

Val d'Orcia in southeastern Tuscany



The Tuscany of your dreams

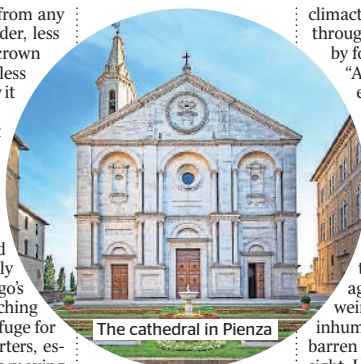
Val d'Orcia has the scenery, the cuisine (it's famous for pecorino) and chic places to stay, but none of the crowds, says **Matthew Bell**

Picture a Tuscan landscape and what do you see? If it's a chalky white track dotted with feather-shaped cypress trees zigzagging up a hill, then congratulations, you have transported yourself to the Val d'Orcia. This staggeringly beautiful area of vast open hillsides is located in deepest southeastern Tuscany, between Siena and the Umbrian border. This is where postcard-makers come to photograph the rolling mists at dawn. It's probably already on your screensaver.

Tuscany's popularity with the Ingleses is so notorious that at one point it was labelled Chiantishire, an extension of the home counties. But this is not the Chianti, those tight-knit hills just south of

Florence. The Val d'Orcia is far from any airport and the landscape is wilder, less populated. The farmhouses that crown each hill are more likely to be roofless than to have a pool. Until recently it was very poor.

The person who did most to put the Val d'Orcia on the map was herself half-English. Iris Origo, granddaughter of Lord Desart, wrote one of the great wartime diaries, *War in Val d'Orcia*, which captures the quotidian fears and deprivations of life in the early 1940s. The book tells how Origo's home, La Foce, a one-time coaching inn on a crossroads, became a refuge for the displaced — partisans, deserters, escaped prisoners and orphans. In a moving



The cathedral in Pienza

climactic scene, as the Allies push north through Tuscany, Origo leads 32 children by foot to the safety of Montepulciano. "Are the Germans really coming to eat us up?" asks one.

Today the effects of the war are still in evidence. Many farmhouses are ruins because they were shelled, and the *contadini* (farmers) couldn't afford to restore them. But the peace and tranquility that Origo loved when she first moved here in 1924 have returned. Arriving as a newlywed, aged 22, she was entranced by the weirdness, "a lunar landscape, pale and inhuman". Old photographs show how barren it was back then, with not a tree in sight. Having bought an estate of some ▶