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# ITALY'S RICH CANVAS

Life imitates art on exclusive painting retreats in Tuscany and on the shores of Lake Como, as Richard Rosebery discovers.

The views are a masterpiece of natural and man-made beauty. Patchwork fields of sunflowers, olive groves and vineyards; historic medieval hilltop towns built of stone; and stately villas and *palazzo* painted peach and lemon-yellow, standing proudly amid dark green poplars.

At other times, a turquoise lake framed by steep mountains with soaring craggy peaks; white-sailed yachts and ferries plying across wind-rippled waters; and chic waterfront cafés and restaurants filled with patrons enjoying balmy summer evenings. Welcome to Italy's dream destinations of Tuscany and Lake Como – the locations of two wonderful art retreats I undertook in the northern summer of 2019.

The demand for activity-based travel has been on the increase for many years, but this is my first time as a participant in a series of exclusive creative retreats, each held in postcard-perfect locations.

I sit utterly mesmerised by the exquisite vistas while dabbling and stroking paint onto a canvas, my passion for painting inflamed like never before. But instead of staring out at ever-changing scenery from a bus, ship or car, I have the luxury of sitting in peaceful contemplation while I sketch and paint *en plein air*.

I'm in the company of like-minded and fascinating people who share my love of all things art. At Villa Nobile in the Tuscan

town of Cortona, there are equal numbers of laidback Australians and (even louder) New Yorkers who make for much hilarity over dinner and often well into the night.

Then in the village Bellagio on Lake Como, a small, cohesive group of artists from Massachusetts, England and Australia prove a tad more restrained, but equally eager to paint.

## Daily diversions

While the nights are relaxed and filled with conversation, fine food and wine, the days are often quiet as we fully immerse ourselves in our artworks, occasionally taking a well-deserved break to see what the others are up to or to share a few words of banter.

Some fellow artists are relatively new to painting, each stroke a discovery of their emerging talents. Others, like myself, are more seasoned artists who relish the opportunity to paint outdoors, enveloped by the alluring beauty of the Italian countryside.

Each retreat features an experienced artist as an independent tutor. Many of these accomplished creatives have a following; indeed, I chose both retreats based not only on the superb locations, but also for the tutors themselves.

Our tutor in Tuscany is Melbourne-based Janet Knight. A former graphic designer, she now offers an illustrative style and is highly competent in oils, acrylics and pastels.



At Lake Como, Caleb Stone is our mentor, a celebrated Massachusetts landscape painter specialising in watercolours and oils. I love his work, so painting with Stone is an easy decision.

Both tutors hold morning painting demonstrations on colour mixing, perspective and tonal values, before each of us go our own creative ways. Stone's additional end-of-day critiques with wine and nibbles are insightful, supportive and fun.

For the participants, there's plenty of scheduled time off. In Tuscany, I spend a day with several of our American companions, exploring nearby medieval Siena with its iconic cathedral and impressive Palazzo Pubblico murals.

*"I sit utterly mesmerised by exquisite vistas while dabbling and stroking paint onto a canvas, my passion for painting inflamed like never before"*

Others head to bustling Renaissance-era Florence or choose to lounge around Villa Nobile's flower-scented gardens and 13-metre pool.

In Lake Como, I take a ferry to another gorgeous lakeside village, while others head for Como or simply enjoy the delights of our enchanting Bellagio base.

An organised art retreat is an excellent choice, especially when travelling overseas, and I am well pleased with our hosts, Tuscany in the Frame. Everything is taken care of, from the moment Raffaele Nobile greets his guests at Rome-Flumicino International Airport for the transfers, to the accommodation, meals, beverages and most of the art equipment including easels, chairs and art mediums. All you need to bring is your own paints and pastels, brushes and canvases.

A painter himself, Nobile offers local knowledge of some of the most inspirational painting locations, so every day is an artist's delight.





01 Sketching the Tuscan countryside © Raffaele Nobile  
 02 Villa Nobile © Stephen Baker 03 The author painting  
 © Raffaele Nobile 04 Lake Como inspires © Richard  
 Rosebery 05 Painting in Cortona © Stephen Baker



### Home away from home

Though Villa Nobile and Tuscany are at the heart of an annual calendar of art retreats, Tuscany in the Frame also offers week-long and 10-day workshops in other top Italian destinations, such as the one I attended at Lake Como, on the Amalfi Coast and in Sicily.

Accommodation is not five star, but it is upmarket nonetheless. In Bellagio, for instance, my fourth-floor room at the waterfront Hotel Metropole offers a spectacular and ever-changing view of Lake Como.

Villa Nobile's ensuite guest rooms, meanwhile, display copies of famous Italian Renaissance paintings, boast very comfortable beds, have all the expected amenities, and enjoy delightful garden aspects.

In true Italian tradition, we savour bountiful dinners from several talented chefs specialising in local Tuscan, Italian and even Asian cuisine.

Diversity is the hallmark. Every alternate night we drive to a restaurant in one of the many surrounding scenic hilltop towns for a choice of local cuisines, while more casual lunches in nearby cafés and tavernas offer sustenance and respite.

In Como, a different restaurant features every night, the highlight being a panoramic sunset meal from 500 metres above the lake at Trattoria Balta Belvedere, a specialist in 'slow food'. Even an organised underground tour and wine tasting at the Ercolani family cellar in famous Montepulciano features in our Tuscan itinerary.

Now I have paintings to be proud of, artistic flops to learn from, friendships made, new knowledge gained, and destinations once dreamed of explored in Italy's true art and soul. ♦

### Art File

Tuscany in the Frame  
[tuscanyintheframe.com](http://tuscanyintheframe.com)

## OTHER ITALIAN ART RETREATS

### Art Escape Italy

Attracting a younger crowd with a choice of accommodation, these workshops and retreats are more focused on art instruction at a variety of locations.

[artescapeitaly.com](http://artescapeitaly.com)

### Artist in Italy - Easel & Lens

Artist and teacher Julian Hyzler offers personalised art instruction and hospitality from his country house in Pieve, near the Tuscan and Umbrian border.

[easelandlens.com](http://easelandlens.com)