

ITALY

Tee time in Tuscany

The Ryder Cup hits Italy next year. Rookie golfer Orla Thomas gets in the swing — on the fairway and in the spa



Orla aims for a hole in one at the Toscana Resort Castelfalfi

DARIO GAROFALO

Orla Thomas

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In 2008 my beloved grandfather died, leaving me a set of golf clubs that he had carefully collected since taking up the game in the Fifties. During childhood visits to his bungalow in Bognor Regis, we would spend hours together at the local putting green, but 29-year-old me was baffled by the bequest. Real golf was for old people, I thought; I was not — and never would be — old. For more than ten years the heavy set of irons sat ignored in my attic.

However, it turns out that Grandad knew better. When I turned 40 the dusty Slazenger bag began to whisper invitingly, promising hours spent strolling manicured lawns and drinks in the clubhouse. After a decade of child-rearing, the prospect of a hobby conducted in a peaceful, adults-only space was suddenly alluring.

I told friends that I wanted to learn how to play, and they reacted with incredulity. Similarly, [Italy](#) is not ordinarily thought of as a golfing powerhouse. But with the country gearing up to host the 2023 Ryder Cup, that's about to change.



Orla decided to learn how to play golf after she turned 40

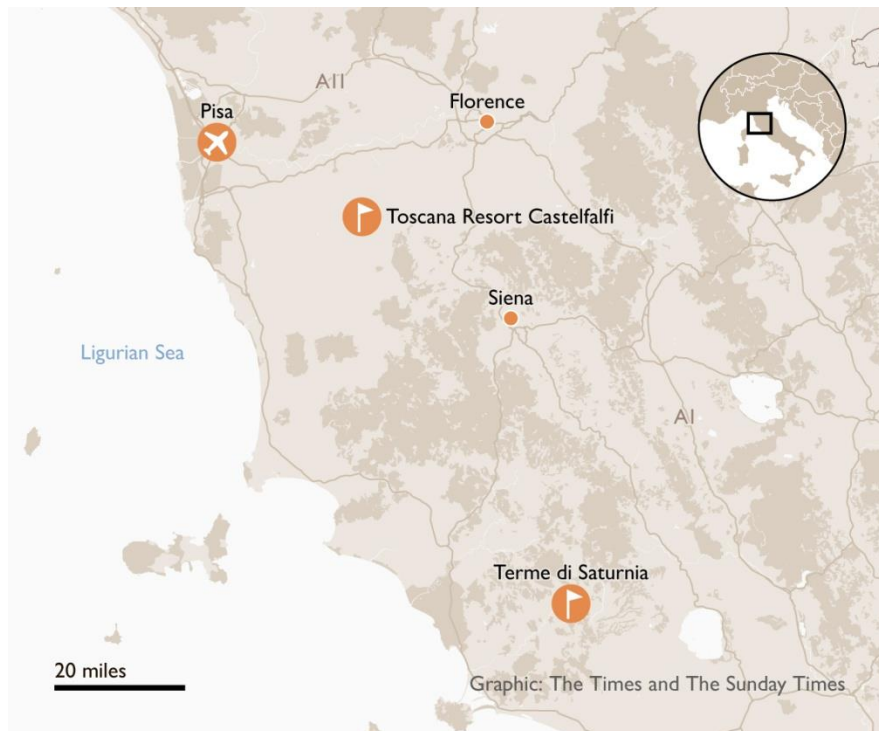
DARIO GAROFALO

The European and US teams will compete at the Marco Simone Golf and Country Club near Rome, but I had something different in mind for my golfing debut and sought out scenic courses attached to some of Italy's loveliest hotels.

The Toscana Resort Castelfalfi, near Pisa, has Tuscany's largest course. From the property's panoramic terrace I try to count its 27 holes, scattered among rolling hills, rows of cypress trees and lakes glinting in the spring sunshine. The view is almost impossibly perfect, like the backdrop of a Renaissance masterpiece. Ten full-time greenkeepers are employed to maintain this tidied-up version of the Tuscan wilderness.

"Being in nature brings a different perspective," says Manola Alberti, director of Castelfalfi's golf club. "Out there it's just you and the course." She readily admits, though, that golf has a bit of a recruitment problem, with "today's players getting older and fewer young people taking it up". Embracing the trend towards inclusivity, Castelfalfi offers lessons for all ages and levels of ability — including beginners such as me.

After a decadent golfer's breakfast at the clubhouse I borrow a buggy and use its GPS to navigate to the driving range. Pedal to the metal, I cruise the curves of the course at 15mph, watching veteran players tee off. Among those uniformly attired in sombre, sporty black, my outfit stands out: a colourful homage to vintage golfing style, complete with floral sun visor.



I'm just one rookie among many, says Andrea Perrino, the pro instructor at Castelfalfi. "The pandemic has been really good for golf," he says. "In Italy it was one of the few games that people were still allowed to play."

He devotes the first part of our lesson to getting my stance right, and within an hour I manage to curb my inelegant thumping at the turf and start sending ball after ball sailing satisfyingly skyward. "Learning golf requires a lot of time, discipline and respect for the rules; at first there's a lot of information to take in," Perrino says. "But it's also important for new players, through practice, to find their own instinct within the game."

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Castelfalfi's lake course is the most beginner-friendly, but I can't resist putting my newfound skills to use on the more challenging mountain course. Its topography is perhaps more accurately described as hilly, and the tee for the scenic 9th hole is especially vertiginous. My ball soars over the fairway, landing a few feet shy of the green. Not bad for a first-timer.

My new hobby is clearly employing hitherto undiscovered muscle groups, because the next morning I wake up with the sort of soreness I'd ordinarily expect to follow a particularly strenuous gym session. Nevertheless, after a few hours at the spa and a complimentary stretching class, I'm sufficiently restored for a tour of the estate.

Strolling through olive groves and among miles of vineyards, grapes just in bud, I'm reminded that this is a working landscape — Castelfalfi produces its own excellent wine and olive oil, both of which I sample liberally at lunch.

Further south, the Terme di Saturnia resort offers a very different Tuscan experience. Situated in the less-visited Maremma region, the 100-year-old hotel grew up around an ancient thermal spring.



Terme di Saturnia

ROBERTO BONARDI

Sought out for its therapeutic properties since Roman times, it's still popular with weekenders from the capital. They congregate around the sulphurous pools wearing fluffy white bath robes — a uniform of relaxation that stays on from morning espresso until the sociable aperitivo hour.

Arriving for an early morning bathe, I find the pools a milky blue, with steam coming off the water. As the sun rises they clear, and peering down it seems as though I'm floating in the caldera of a volcano. From the depths emerge streams of bubbles and the odd blob of algae, adding to the elemental experience.

Around me, people are supported in the water by chic, grey versions of the “noodles” usually used for children's swimming lessons. Few bother doing laps; instead the temperature encourages stillness and surrender — it's as though all the tension has been leached out of my body.

“Ten minutes in the pools really improves your game,” says Procolo Sabatino, the resort's golf course manager, who is also my teacher for the day. “The more relaxed you are, the better you play.” My swing isn't the only beneficiary — the mineral-rich waters are also used to irrigate the 173-acre course, helping to earn its GEO-certified status and sustain local wildlife.

A flock of gulls observe my efforts on the green, but after failing to score anything remotely close to an eagle I'm ready for another break. The wisteria-clad Trattoria La Stellata happily obliges, serving stuffed courgette flowers and cured meats at a tucked-away spot between the 6th and 16th holes.

My coveted hole in one arrives not on the course, but in the resort's enormous, 53-room spa. Designed with golfers in mind, the signature treatment involves a slathering with Saturnia's anti-oxidising mud, followed by a full-body massage. After 80 minutes I return to the warmth of the pools feeling like a baby — albeit a 42-year-old baby who has recently taken up golf.

Orla Thomas was a guest of Toscana Resort Castelfalfi, which has B&B doubles from £245 and one-hour golf lessons for two from £43pp (castelfalfi.com), and the private travel consultant and Italian specialists Merrion Charles (merrioncharles.com). Two nights' B&B at Terme di Saturnia, including flights, a golf lesson and Hole in One treatment, from £1,309pp (termedisaturnia.it).

Six more top Italian golfing hotels



The pool and grounds at the Sheraton Parco de' Medici, Rome

Sheraton Parco de' Medici, Rome

This huge 782-room property is a half-hour drive from the Ryder Cup venue and has a 27-hole championship course, set among acres of greenery. Rome's historic centre is a 25-minute cab ride away, so it's perfectly possible to fit in some sightseeing too.

Details B&B doubles from £99 (marriott.com)



Argentario Golf & Wellness Resort, Tuscany

Argentario Golf & Wellness Resort, Tuscany

A dragonfly-shaped design hotel in the Tuscan Maremma, this sprawling complex combines cutting-edge interiors with a golf course overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea. Guests can also make use of the extensive wellness centre and medi-spa.

Details B&B doubles from £315 (argentarioresort.it)



Villa d'Este, Lake Como

FANI KURTI

Villa d'Este, Lake Como

Perched over Italy's most illustrious shoreline, guests at this historic grande dame can make use of its nearby course, considered one of the most challenging in Europe. Afterwards, recover in the hotel's floating swimming pool or terraced gardens.

Details B&B doubles from £640 (villadeste.com)



Verdura Resort, Sicily

ROCCO FORTE

Verdura Resort, Sicily

Italy's best-loved island is also home to one of the Med's most prestigious golfing destinations. This Rocco Forte hotel has recently opened its redesigned second course and launched a new coaching programme, Green to Tee. Mix things up with some time on the tennis courts or in the 60m infinity pool.

Details B&B doubles from £405 (roccofortehotels.com)



Borgo Egnazia, Puglia

Borgo Egnazia, Puglia

An appealing reconstruction of a fortified village, this resort combines an old-school look with high-end facilities, including two private beaches, three outdoor pools and a Michelin-starred restaurant. Its championship San Domenico golf course sits right beside the Adriatic. **Details** B&B doubles from £262 (borgoegnazia.com)



Palazzo di Varignana, Bologna

Palazzo di Varignana, Bologna

Redolent with heritage charm, this 18th-century property looms over rolling countryside outside one of northern Italy's loveliest cities. As well as the chipping green and brand-new driving range on site, guests can make use of the nearby Le Fonti golf course. **Details** B&B doubles from £196 (palazzodivarignana.com)