

Bric-a-Brac 9

Going deep from Piedmont to Puglia—on foot!



**Yolanda
Edwards**

THE NAVIGATOR

Rudston Steward, founder, Maremma Safari Club

Tell us about you/your company. What do you do and what do you specialize in?

My company, Maremma Safari Club, offers guided walking trips to unexplored corners of Italy. I grew up between Cape Town, Rome and New York, so travel is in my blood; my love of walking comes from a lot of ambling about the bush with the wild beasts in South Africa and Botswana as a child. I learned fluent Italian at age 7 and always dreamed of returning to Italy one day as an adult. After college in NYC in the '90s, I had an opportunity to move to a farm near Siena, and I've been based in Tuscany ever since. My farming career was short-lived (I soon discovered it's much better to have friends who make wine—living near Montalcino helps—than trying to do so yourself), so I started guiding walking trips instead. Initially, I worked for others, guiding all over the world—India and Bhutan, Jordan and Costa Rica, South Africa and Botswana, Italy, France, Spain and Greece. I set up my own company in 2016, opting to focus on Italy—this is where my deep expertise lies, and the variety is astonishing. Each region feels like a different country in terms of landscape, gastronomy, language, history and culture, so the travel experiences on offer are extraordinary—and all the more so if you travel on foot to areas where few other tourists go.

In 2016 I walked across Italy, spending one month each in nine different Italian regions, researching the routes that today form the core of our off-the-beaten-track itineraries—from the Aspromonte Safari in Calabria and Aeolian Safari in Sicily at the southern tip of the Italian boot, to the Dolomites Safari in the Val Casies right on the Austrian border in the far north. We offer both high-end bespoke private trips and more affordable small group trips with set departure dates. I guide all the trips in person myself, so there's a low ceiling on how many trips we can do in a year—it's a pretty unusual way to run a travel company these days, but it means I keep close control over both the planning and the delivery of the trip on the ground; our focus is very much on quality rather than quantity.

What's the entry level to talk to you?

The planning process starts when someone emails us (info@maremmasafari.com) or contacts us through our website, and we set up an initial phone call to get to know each other, dig down deeper into the details of the desired trip, and establish whether or not it's a good fit. There is no cost for the initial call and no fixed planning fee for the bespoke private trips, because they vary greatly in scope and budget. A high degree of self-selection happens, because only a fraction of travelers wanting to go to Italy are considering a walking trip as part of their experience, but most who do become loyal repeat clients.

What is the sweet spot of your expertise?

Where walking and Italy intersect. Italy is one of the most popular travel destinations in the world, but the great outdoors tends to feature low on the list of Italian motivations. I call our trips walking safaris as opposed to trekking or hiking trips, partly because our itineraries don't fit into the industry category of "active travel." Yes, we walk up mountains and through vineyards and into the sea, the walks are challenging (to varying degrees, but not overly so) and adventurous. But that aspect is secondary to the deeper goal of immersion in a landscape and culture, of discovering a place in all its

multifaceted aspects slowly on foot over the course of a continuous multi-day route. So there's a narrative element to our trips, a walked trajectory—each trip tells a story. Those stories draw on the elements we encounter as we make our way across a terrain on foot—art and architecture, natural history and landscape, fashion and design, archaeology and artisans, style and lifestyle as the case may be. And of course it doesn't hurt that wherever you walk in Italy you inevitably end up at an obscure little trattoria serving up the best food and wine on the planet.

Your favorite trip or one you feel represents you and your philosophy the best...

I'm pretty excited about a trip I'm currently planning for this October, a customized Aeolian Safari in Sicily, where, after circumambulating the island of Salina over 6 days, we'll sail to neighbouring Filicudi for a 3-night trail-blazing coda (read: strolling off-piste where the trail-marked paths end, eating loads of granitas, drinking plenty of malvasia wine and hanging out with the colony of Eleanora's Falcons that choose to overwinter on the wild northwestern flank of the island instead of migrating to Madagascar).

Our travel philosophy is summed up pretty well by our motto: "Offbeat, on foot". We do things a bit differently because we have a different set of priorities. The basic way most companies think about planning a trip starts with booking the hotels, and then building their itineraries around those hotels. We start, instead, with finding the best and most beautiful walking routes; everything, including hotels, follows from the walks. For us, the start and end points of a journey are less important than everything that lies in between—that's where the nuance and magic is, where meaningful exchanges and experiences happen. Something wonderful happens to people, both as individuals and groups, when they walk. I see it on our trips all the time. There is something about the rhythm of it, of walking for a few consecutive days, the simplicity of the physical act, that frees up the mind. As if your thoughts become unhooked from their usual patterns and habits, they are allowed to wander—to travel.

A favorite hotel that you love and go back to again and again...

When travelers want to extend before or after our Monte Amiata Safari in Tuscany, I book [La Bandita Townhouse](#) in Pienza and [Hotel Il Pellicano](#) on the coast for them—fantastic bookends to the 5-day walking trip in between.

A not-to-be-missed favorite experience...

Seeing the sun rise from the summit of Mount Pfannhorn on our Dolomites Safari; dinner and Brunello Riserva in the candle-lit chapel at Castello di Argiano on our Monte Amiata Safari; roast piglet and Sardinian polyphonic song around the campfire in the Gorropu Gorge on our Supramonte Safari; sunset from the ruins of Amendolea Castle overlooking the *fiumara* on our Aspromonte Safari in Calabria.

Underrated location, overrated location, personal favorite, recent discovery?

Abruzzo, Cinque Terre, Linosa, Ischia

How can we become better travelers?

By being receptive to the unexpected, the accidental, the unknown, the other. By venturing far beyond our comfort zones on the road. By coming up with a more sustainable concept of luxury for the travel industry of the future. By urgently re-examining why and how we travel in our climate-emergency world. By thinking of travel as a privilege, not a right. And last but not least: by doing a walking safari in Italy soon—I am convinced that walking will save the post-Covid traveling world!