



STORY **MARIA SHOLLENBARGER**

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

From the Dolomites to Sardinia, one guide is opening up new perspectives on Italy with his off-the-beaten-path walking tours



About a third of the way up the eastern slope of Monte Amiata in southern Tuscany is the largest intact *faggeta*, or beech wood, in Europe. It's also one of the oldest, and was considered sacred, like Amiata itself, by the Etruscans, the tribes that ranged across central Italy for centuries before the Romans ascended to primacy. Among the towering trees are dozens of centenarians, and probably a few that are older still. Venture in via one of the several walking paths and you enter a world – silent, cool on the hottest day, its moss-covered boulders and sinuous, towering trees dappled in trick-playing light – that has nothing to do with the picturesque Tuscany of vineyards and hill towns that fills the Val d'Orcia far below. They are, by comparison, recent history. This feels primeval.

Rudston Steward, with whom I spent a blazing July morning in the *faggeta*, is not Italian by birth, but he has lived on Amiata's slopes for 20 years, and probably knows its byways and trails better than most of the

Tuscans who grew up in its shadow. We were doing what Steward does by profession: walking – slowly, amiably, alternating conversation and stretches of easy silence as we progress. The subtle lilt of his native South Africa in his voice, he weaves together small ecology tutorials with a bit of Etruscan history, describes how the mountain changes with the seasons, identifies a raptor glimpsed through the canopy. We stop at regular intervals to feel as well as listen to the silence. Then we walk on again, side by side – easy pace, easy chatting and comfortable lulls, every step connecting us a bit more to one of mankind's oldest and purest traditions.

It was a mere taster, but enough to convince me that to walk across a lot more of Italy in his company, and for a lot longer, could only be a marvellous and salutary thing. Six years ago, Steward turned his passion for ambulatory exploration into an Italian business; called the Maremma Safari Club, it offers intimate guided walking excursions up and down the peninsula and over several of its islands. His group tours never exceed 15 people; private walks, for families, couples, friends are

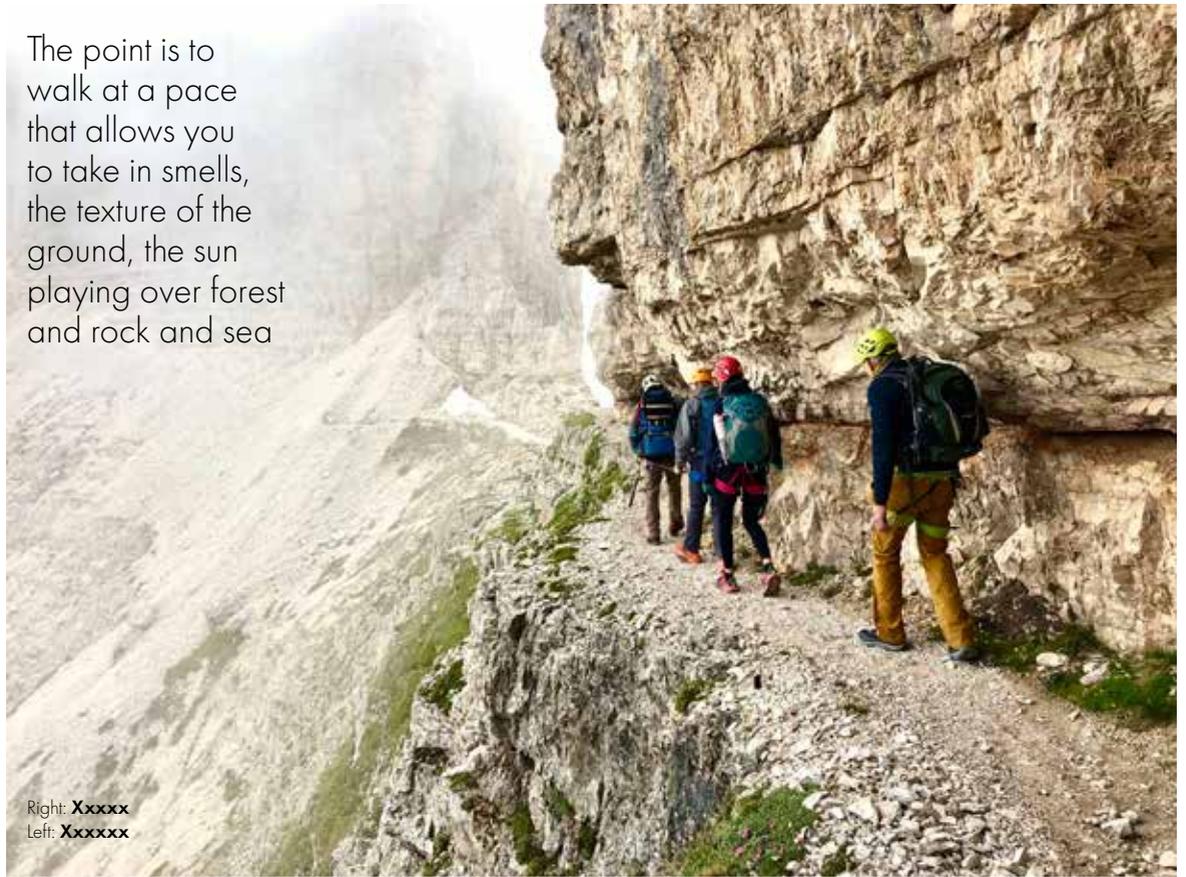
a booming part of his business. The itineraries range in length from four to seven nights, though most are five; they vary not just in terms of the geography they cover – the Dolomites; Calabria's severely beautiful Aspromonte mountains; the low rolling hills of Tuscany's Maremma, whence the outfit's name, are just a few of the regions he's expert in – but also the style they adopt.

Accommodation might be a boutique hotel, a private wine estate, a *rifugio* (alpine hut), or a tent you pitch yourself next to a riverbed. Gastronomy and viticulture, ecological conservation, botany, even historical linguistics might variously – or all – feature in the itinerary, and in the conversations that punctuate the days and evenings. Steward guides every trip himself, and corresponds directly with every one of his clients, most of whom find him by word of mouth and personal recommendations. A friend who did a trip with him in 2020 described him as “the premier cru of slow travel”, which as endorsements go is hard to best.

Originally, Steward and I had planned to meet for a five-day walk in early June, on the Aeolian island of



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Right: Xxxxxx
Left: Xxxxxx

Salina, which I'd been delighted to discover we share a deep love for. Fate (and a bum knee – mine) conspired to scuttle that agenda, but I had sufficient experience of Salina's beaches, towns, landscape and hiking trails to be able to wholly imagine what he creates. The island is one of the first places Steward began leading safaris, and along with Monte Amiata, it remains close to his heart.

"The question I get often is, is it strange doing the same places, the same trails, walks, over again each year? Don't you get bored? The answer is no – not even slightly. I'm always trying to find nuance and variation, refining and adding; but the fact is that it's always different in any case, because of the clients you're with all day. They change the experience completely, you find you're talking about different aspects of the island because of their interests, and it all comes alive differently. And every time I go, my relationships with the people on the ground get deeper. So now it's basically like hanging out with my friends – who then, because of that friendship, welcome my clients in very special ways."

Salina's 10sq m are marked by two volcanic peaks – the highest point on the island, the Fossa delle Felci, is just under 1000m – and dramatic cliffs facing sigh-worthy views. You can only arrive by boat; Steward asks everyone to take a ferry to the smaller port of Rinella rather than the main one of Santa Maria Salina, on the afternoon of the first day. Rinella is the closest town to the entrance of the Val di Chiesa, the lush valley than runs between Salina's two conical volcanoes, with trails leading up and over in all directions; so everyone walks out of town, and into the narrative, together. Capers – the best in the world are said to come from here – play a part of that story; so does wine (there is a handful of exceptional Malvasia producers on Salina, one of the most established of whom, Fenech, does a private tasting for MSC clients). So, of course, does ancient mythology. The Aeolians are in general, Steward says, "liminal terrain ... in that murky threshold were myth overlaps with reality". The apocryphal island of Aeolia is associated with present-day Lipari; Aeolus, in Homer's



epic, was a peripatetic king or a minor god, the "keeper of the wind" (someone good for a mountain-trail walker to keep on side, Steward jokes).

There are early starts and full mornings, ascending to stunning vistas at Pizzo Corvo and the two volcanoes, and culminating in descents to the coast – at Malfa, at Pollara – where cerulean seas and mulberry granita and *pan cunzatu*, the moreish Sicilian flatbread sandwiches, await. The going is occasionally steep, though not necessarily arduous. And not fast; on this, Steward is clear. MSC safaris are not fitness challenges, or indeed even fitness oriented. The Americans, he notes with a grin, tend to be the ones rushing ahead. But the point, he maintains, is to walk at a pace that allows you to take in everything: smells, the texture of the ground beneath your boots, the sun playing over forest and rock and sea. In the evenings there's the joy of communal eating and drinking; in Pollara, Steward hosts an aperitivo at the utterly no-frills (but very cool) Snack-Bar L'Oasi; in Malfa, there are abundant, honest, delicious dinners at the Principe di Salina, the chic little hotel where MSC guests stay – where the owner's mother, a retired surgeon and accredited nutritionist, is now the stellar chef.

Born in New York, the son of a roving diplomat father, Steward came early to a love of walking. He spent part of his childhood in Rome (whence his flawless Italian) and part in South Africa, where he would sometimes

pass days on end, on foot and alone, in the bush. In his early adulthood he worked as a freelance private guide in India, Jordan and Bhutan, and at home across southern Africa. When he relocated to Tuscany 20 years ago, it was intuitive to learn the land inside and out the same way.

Today, MSC's Monte Amiata safari is one of the most requested. "His" southern Tuscany is a less-trod one, a place you can walk all day – crossing the Orcia river, climbing through chestnut and olive groves – and not see another hiker. (Meanwhile a few miles to the east, Steward notes, you can't get away from the humanity that floods the Via Francigena pilgrim route in summer). His clients stay two nights at Castello di Argiano, one of the finest wine estates in Montalcino. They dine with its owners, the Sesti family, legends of the art of fine winemaking and long-time friends of Steward's, who usually host a bucket-list dinner or two, perhaps in the castle's candle-lit chapel.

Steward's passion for his itineraries, and the various regions he guides in, is uniform; but not all of them are for every walker, and one of his greatest skills is helping his clients understand which trip is best for them. The Aspromonte in Calabria, for instance, is both more physically challenging than Salina and far less conventionally luxurious: walkers are essentially staying in local villagers' houses. But culturally it is extraordinary; they visit a near-forgotten corner of Southern Italy where somehow a piece of *magna graecia* has survived. "We pass through this town, Galliciano, where all the signs are in Greek; people are still speaking it." In the Dolomites, some stretches of the route involve *vie ferrate* – but also delicious cuisine, and a brief crossover into Austria.

What's on the horizon? "Barolo. Piedmont. You can get into late October, even the beginning of November, there, and it's ideal." He's re-creating new itinerary that's specifically designed to go easier on the walking – gentler terrain, and he's thinking 15, and no more than 20, kilometres a day – with the focus on more of a deep dive around history, gastronomy and viticulture. Definitely one to lace up the boots for. (w)