

EXPLORE

BOOT SOLDIER

When walking went from hobby to way of life, Rudston Steward embarked on a new venture leading small groups of like-minded travellers on expeditions through unspoilt regions of Italy – and all on foot



By Marella Caracciolo Chia

2 June 2024



One thing that struck Bruce Chatwin while writing his *Songlines*, an exploration of Australian walking routes outlined in ancestral aboriginal songs, is that migratory creatures, whether human or not, tend to be less aggressive than sedentary ones. ‘The “dictators” of the animal kingdom,’ Chatwin wrote, ‘are those who live in an ambience of plenty. The anarchists, as always, are the “gentlemen of the road”’. One such gentleman, and a very human one at that, is Rudston Steward. The South African polyglot (he speaks five languages fluently) has a literary turn of mind and is a connoisseur of, among other things, Chatwin’s oeuvre. Every year, from early spring to late autumn, Rudston – who is based in southern Tuscany with his wife, Helene, and their young

daughter Calypso – leads little groups of enthusiasts on walking expeditions through the more untouched regions of Italy. In the process, he makes sure they get acquainted with each area’s distinctive culture and, Italy being Italy, that includes local food and wine. He named this venture Maremma Safari Club and this is its story.



Monte Paterno and Rifugio Locatelli in the Dolomites

When Rudston was a teenager and living in Rome with his family, he was sent off – ‘very much against my wishes,’ he points out – to a prestigious boarding school on a game reserve in South Africa. No longer able to pursue his favourite sport, football, and unwilling to learn cricket or rugby, he found solace on long daily walks. Later as a student in New York City, studying literature and philosophy at Columbia, he traded rambling for rollerblading, but not for long. Drawing inspiration from his favourite author, he was back on his feet exploring various parts of Central and Southern America. ‘In time, walking became more than a hobby,’ he says. ‘It was a way of life. One that had a strong philosophical appeal.’ That draw inspired Rudston to transform his long-honed passion into a career.

After choosing Tuscany as a home base, he began taking travellers on walking trips all over the globe, from the Middle East to India, Bhutan and Nepal, and from South America to Europe. It was a success, and for several years he was on the move incessantly – unsustainably, in fact, as he was spending so much time on long-haul flights. ‘I didn’t like the environmental impact of that,’ he recalls. Loneliness was another issue. ‘It’s hard to build a lasting relationship if you are on the

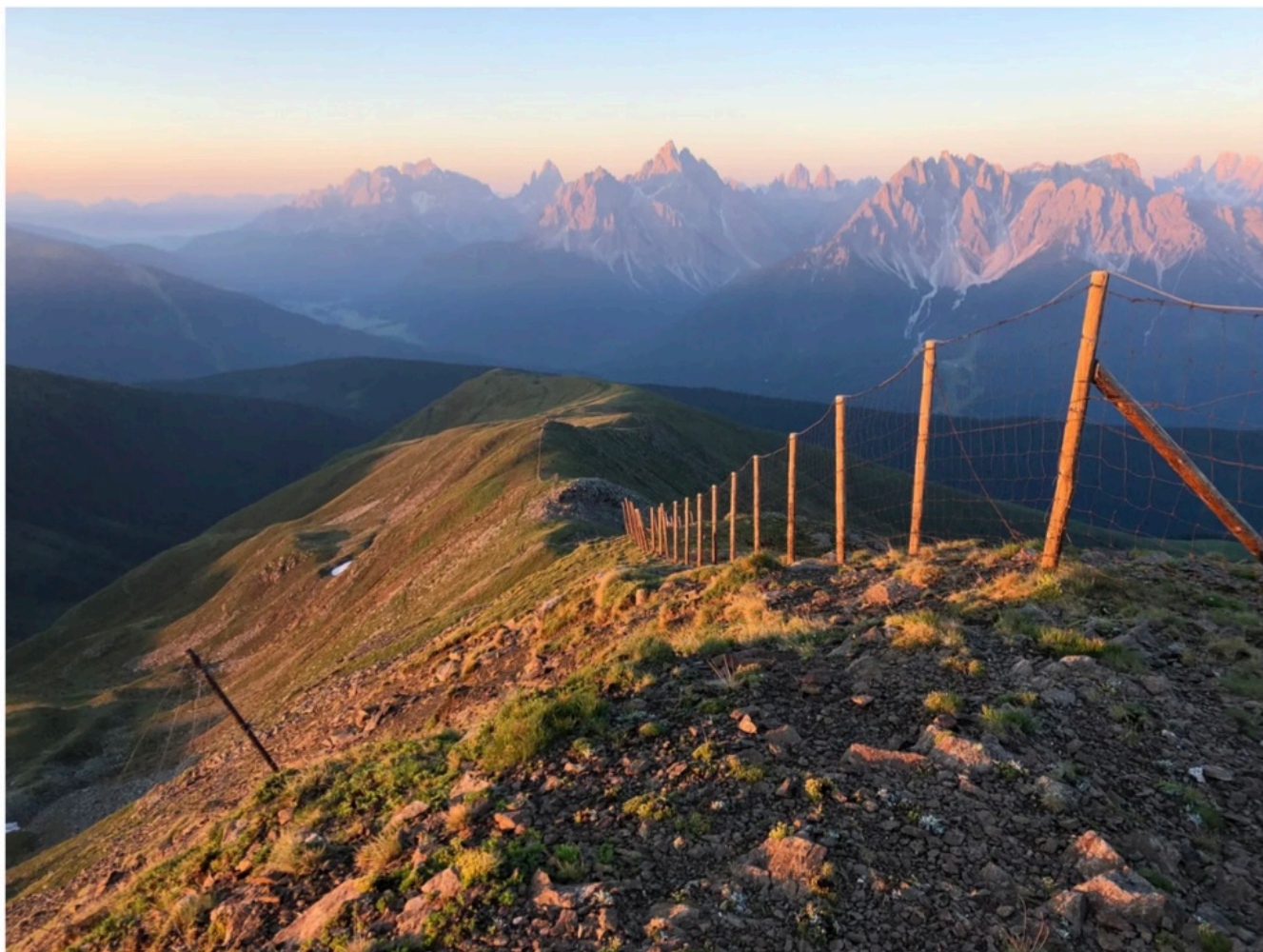
road most of the time.' Eager to take stock, to redefine his life and work, he took a nine-month sabbatical, hiking to some of the most remote areas in Italy. The seed of the idea for Maremma Safari Club germinated during those wanderings. 'These days, most people plan their trips around a hotel,' he says. 'For me it's the opposite: I start out with a fabulous walking itinerary and then I look for places to stay along the way.' Which is why accommodations on his safaris vary. A night in an exquisite private villa or a charming hotel is often followed by one spent in a rustic farmhouse. 'The constant in all my trips,' says Rudston, 'is the quality of the meals at the end of each walk. We are in Italy, after all, and great food and wines are part of the narrative.' So if in Calabria MSC travellers get to stay on a bergamot farm and indulge in spicy Calabrian banquets, in the Langhe region in Piedmont they will enjoy the luxuries of a four-star hotel, feasting on fresh truffles and a prized Barolo.



Castello di Argiano in Tuscany

Though made-to-measure trips for family groups or friends are a trademark of Maremma Safari Club, Rudston has also put together a list of seasonal trips open to anyone who loves to walk.

Singles and people travelling solo jump at the opportunity to explore areas so remote they might not venture there on their own. All of these trips are led by Rudston himself. 'Nationalities and demographics vary,' he concludes, 'but experience has taught me that people who love walking are likely to have lots in common and get along well, no matter their age or where they come from.' Which is why conversations that take place around the table or on hikes often lead to lasting friendships. If life, as Chatwin wrote, is a journey through the wilderness, why not take the most beautiful route, and in good company?



The summit of Pfannhorn in the Dolomites

For more information about Maremma Safari Club, visit maremmasafari.com

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