



On holiday *with* Debbie Travis

*Tuscan sun shines brighter than ever
when guests are pampered by a celebrity*

Whether lounging by the pool or drawing inspiration from some early morning yoga, guests at Villa Reniella are surrounded by spectacular vistas.



Above: Villa Reniella is Debbie Travis' home in Italy.

Right: Debbie Travis makes limoncello for guests.

Opposite page: This dining area is just one of the property's places for al fresco meals.



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Villa Reniella comes majestically into view 2½ hours after we leave the frenetic pace and oppressive heat of Rome.

My adult daughter, Kelly, and I will be in Tuscany for a week, experiencing la dolce vita, Debbie Travis style, with the international powerhouse herself.

Along with 16 other gobsmacked women, we spill out of the travel vans. The entire staff of Villa Reniella has gathered in the driveway to greet us, Travis front and centre.

Some travellers are so overcome with emotion tears flow. They have obsessively followed Travis' journey through her documentaries, television series, blogs and

numerous magazine profiles. These are hardcore Debbie Travis fans, and we have all waited up to two years to actually take part in her eponymous women's retreat.

Hugs and introductions follow. She has clearly studied our mug shots because she easily greets everyone by name – an early insight into her masterful command of her orbit.

We follow a stone path, and a Tuscan vista unfolds before us from one of the property's many al fresco dining areas. Chatter has suddenly ceased and, miraculously, 18 women are silent, overcome by the view. It is quintessential Tuscany – rolling hills, olive trees and medieval hillside villages, the air fresh with the scent of rosemary and lavender.

Before us, there is a welcome feast of

local cheeses and meats, artfully laid out, and chilled glasses of Prosecco are offered. It may be our first of the day, but most certainly not our last.

Travis welcomes us with words that seem neither canned nor rehearsed, even though this is not her first rodeo. Eventually, she personally escorts us to our rooms, each a marvel of simple design and comfort. Kelly and I are in a two-storey loft dominated by an oversized portrait of Sophia Loren.

La dolce vita has begun.

The initials NHO adorn our waiting water bottles and are stitched elegantly onto the pocket of our robes hanging in the bathroom. NHO represents the mantra of the villa – non ho orario – which means: I don't have a schedule.



Above: Cypress pines zigzag across a hillside in a quintessential view of Tuscany.

Far right: The villa's chef lends a hand during a cooking class.

Right: An organic breakfast feast is laid out in the kitchen.



Our welcome package includes a Debbie Travis apron, a leather-bound journal and, ironically, seven individual cards detailing the schedule of activities for each day and life at the villa in general. The no-schedule schedule includes guided design tours of the villa, including Travis' private residence, and hikes around the property, both led by Travis. As well, there are massages, village tours, yoga, sessions with a life coach, cooking lessons, shopping excursions, bike trips and other activities.

Participation is encouraged but not mandatory, and nowhere does it mention the spontaneous outbreak of late night dance parties that occur on a regular basis.

A sachet made with organic lavender harvested from nearby fields sits atop bedding so white and crisp it actually crackles when pulled back. Every welcoming detail is finely curated.

Villa Reniella is a stunning testament to what Travis envisioned and then created from abandoned pigsties and animal barns. Google Debbie Travis and it's easy to see why she and her villa are the new "it" profiles of every design magazine on several continents. Every element, start to finish, has been documented. Even when things went horribly out of control – and they inevitably did – Travis always found a way around obstacles. This is her lesson about next chapters: "Dream it, do it, live it."

Eighteen women, all shapes and ages, play follow-the-leader through a tangle of hills and woods. We hike through fragrant fields of lavender, laser-straight rows of vineyard grapes and terrain dotted with olive trees, their silvery green leaves sparkling in the sun. Olive oil is one of Travis' passions and some of the trees are more than 700 years old. We learn it takes an entire tree to produce one bottle of the organic liquid gold that we enjoy at our meals.

For an hour, Travis talks. Pointing and gesturing wildly, she regales us with local stories. We hear about the truffle farmers that forage on the property and about the



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cinghiale (wild boar) that roam freely, and one night end up in a sumptuous stew. Suddenly, a fawn bounces across our path as if on cue; Travis' face lights up.

Her knowledge of the local history and her respect for the land is unexpected; she is no dilettante. After coming to Tuscany for more than 15 years, first filming episodes of her successful "Painted House" TV series, and then renting vacation villas, she is one of the locals.

Her sense of belonging to the neighbouring medieval village of Montefollonico, and its community of Tuscan farmers, is undeniable.

At breakfast she introduced us to a neighbouring farmer who was born in her villa decades ago. Every morning he picks the vegetables from her garden and leaves them in a basket outside her kitchen door. She admits she initially had a typical North American reaction to this: "Well what does his want?" The answer was and still

remains, nothing. He simply comes out of a love for the land and respect for his neighbour. Travis jokes that perhaps it's a passive-aggressive critique of her gardening skills.

Her garden has nine kinds of tomatoes thriving beside bulging eggplant the colour of Grape Crush and an abundance of verdant zucchini and lettuces. Fragrant herbs prosper in century-old stone urns basking in the sun. This is the organic bounty from which our meals are prepared all week.

Whatever isn't sourced from her garden comes from neighbouring farms and local markets. We are in the heart of pecorino country, a cheese made from sheep's milk. It can be hard and salty, or delicate and soft depending on how it is aged.

Breakfasts include organic yogurt, local pastries, pears, watermelon, pomegranates, Travis' own homemade fig jam and prosciutto, the other iconic culinary specialties

of the region.

Surprises abound around the property. Villa Reniella was a watchtower dating back to the 13th century; then it became a rambling farm. Its 100 acres are part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, overlooking the picturesque Val d'Orcia. Napoleon marched through these very hills. In fact, during excavation, an ancient prison-like chamber was discovered below her living room. Determined to honour and conserve this piece of history, Travis installed a circular plexiglass viewing window in the floor where we literally look into history.

Travis says that when she and her husband, Hans Rosenstein, came across Reniella, "It was a dump." After five years of sweat, including a year of endless permit challenges and a language barrier, it has been painstakingly renovated.

Lavender and oleander bushes border ancient stone walkways. Cypress trees line the driveway. A yoga platform perches on

a grassy knoll overlooking the early mist rising above the valley.

Travis handpicked the pebbles from local quarries for the gravel paths around the villa. The floor in her kitchen showcases individually chosen tiles that are about 600 years old. Every design detail is spectacular.

Her girls' getaway is advertised as a place to, "... connect, recharge and plot your next chapter." Frankly, I find it difficult to think of anything but the present given the sensory overload from fragrant lemon trees to true design porn at every turn.

Travis' team includes her best friend and business partners, Jacky Brown, and her husband, Steve. Besides being a successful music producer, he is the resident bon vivant. This may be the Debbie Travis getaway, but it's certainly not a diva show.

The couples and the rest of the team

play off each other, creating a casual and comfortable atmosphere. Travis also subtly slips away during meals to let the guests find conversation with each other.

Each of us is offered time with a certified life coach and a massage from a reiki master and masseuse. Yoga is with a doctor of acupuncture and a shaman, but all we are really interested in is that she is Sting's yoga teacher. What can I say: it will take more than a week to rid ourselves of shallow celebrity worship.

There are also two young women from the local village who pretty much run the show in the kitchen, happily catering to everyone's needs. Another cappuccino, more wine, fennel tea?

A local chef comes in and explains each delectable dish he presents. My seminal "Eat Pray Love" moment is not finding self-awareness and inner peace on the yoga platform; it is the one where Julia Roberts is rolling on the floor trying to zip up her jeans after eating her

way through Italy.

Villa Reniella is Debbie Travis' home, and she is as hands-on as any host. She and Jacky take over cooking and preparing a meal one evening. Hans and Steve act as chauffeurs, and in my case as translator during an unexpected overnight hospital stay after a losing battle with a Tuscan gravel road on our bike trip.

I'm truly mesmerized watching the Tuscan sun bounce off the blue infinity pool, Montepulciano in the distance. I'm no art aficionado, but I think I now understand why watercolour is often used to represent dreams. It all seems unreal.

Tuscany is like psychological botox. It can smooth out a wrinkled spirit with its smells, colours and general rejuvenation properties. Here, under the Tuscan sun, even the salty sweat on my face tastes good; or maybe it's reminding me I need to curb my intake of prosciutto.

Nah... I'm in Italy with my daughter. 



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