

The Key To Tuscany's Future Tourism May Be Rooted In The Past



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Aerial view of Borgo San Felice and vineyards BORGO SAN FELICE

The future of high-end Tuscan tourism may be rooted in the past.

This year's hotel lodging patterns in Europe, as a result of Covid-19, have dramatically changed. According to [data from STR Global](#), European hotel occupancy rates in September of 2020 decreased 52% from those of September, 2019.

Reasons include not only lockdowns, but uncertainties associated with travel.

During this current era of constantly modified travel restrictions, the prospect of taking a multi-destination vacation trip—due to unpredictabilities—may become impractical, frustrating and also expensive (depending on cancellation fees).

One alternative is choosing a base location that offers not only accommodation, amenities, food and activities on site, but is also a base from where visitors can foray out on day trips—depending on local movement restrictions.

For example, [Borgo San Felice](#) is a five-star Relais & Châteaux hotel and winery located between the cities of Arezzo and Siena within Tuscany. Although few Americans arrived there this year due to travel restrictions, the Europeans who visited Borgo San Felice exhibited an unexpected lodging pattern: they tended to stay for longer than during previous years.

Borgo San Felice Director Danilo Guerrini summarized this trend. During previous years, he explained, typically guests stayed for an average of 2.5 nights; this year, the average stay was for five nights.

This may partially be because Borgo San Felice is based on the Italian *diffuso* concept of hospitality, which is also increasingly attractive in light of recent travel restrictions. The *diffuso* concept means that a hotel is not a simple physical building, but

an actual renovated village where separate buildings with rooms are distributed around a central square or reception area, and the enclave is part of an existing community. A central management structure takes care of providing 24-hour services to guests.

In the case of Borgo San Felice, the location includes usual top-tier amenities such as two excellent restaurants, a pool, spa and fitness center. It also incorporates a village and its surroundings, including an ancient chapel, a vegetable garden that supplies their kitchens, a traditional square—*piazza*—as well as a bell tower, vineyards and ample olive groves. In addition to rooms and suites, the site includes independent villas where larger groups such as families can stay for extended periods. Guests can drive from this chirping countryside locale with relative ease to visit towns and cities such as Montalcino, San Gimignano, Arezzo, Siena and Florence.



L'Orto Felice garden at Borgo San Felice, Tuscany BORGIO SAN FELICE

This *diffuso* concept was developed in Italy after a 1976 earthquake in the northeastern town of Friuli, when many abandoned structures were renovated using this principle. Professor Giancarlo Dall'Ara—specializing in tourism marketing—was the initial proponent behind this notion. It has since [spread throughout Italy](#) as well as to such countries as Switzerland and Croatia.

Many of Tuscany's ancient boroughs, or 'borgos' that were once protected by adjacent powerful city-states can be ideal locations for modern *diffuso* sites. This is because they include an array of buildings, agricultural properties, a central square, connecting roads/alleys and existing communities. Some that have been transformed to hospitality sites during past decades include five-star comfort, but also retain the charm of ancient stone structures, landscaped hillsides and the rhythms of village life.

They also include two aspects that make them particularly attractive to visitors at this time: inclusion of all dining and relaxation facilities so there is little need to travel outside, as well as many separate buildings and ample open space.

Because a *diffuso* essentially places past into present, its current attractions become clearer when we peer into Italy's history.



Poggio Rosso Restaurant at Borgo San Felice, Tuscany GIOVANNI RINALDI

Between the 13th and 16th centuries in Tuscany, two factors pressured individuals to reside (and revel) in one location, minimizing unnecessary travel. The first was the rise of the city-states. The second was illness.

After the fall of the Roman Empire and before the concept of nations emerged, northern Italy saw the rise of ‘city-states,’ much of this during the 14th and 15th centuries. Populated urban centers—remnants of the Roman Empire—declared independence from either the Church or the Holy Roman Empire. These city-states (such as Milan, Florence, Pisa and Siena) grew into thriving economic hubs, though they often vied against each other for power.

Residents within these semi-autonomous medieval city-states, or in villages within their orbits of influence, were close to security and sustenance: they had a degree of military protection from attacks by other city-states or mercenaries, and the chance to farm, or purchase agricultural goods.



Cathedral in the city of Siena, Tuscany GETTY

Borgo San Felice is located about three-fourths of the driving distance (heading north) between Rome and Florence. During the 12th to the 14th centuries its two neighboring city-states of Arezzo and Siena were powerful and independent. While Arezzo sided with a political group called ‘Ghibellines’—allegiant to the Holy Roman Emperor—Siena aligned with ‘Guelphs’—dedicated to the Pope. San Felice, therefore, was constantly tugged at between the two. However, in 1385, soon after Florence purchased Arezzo, Siena fought with Florence to ensure that it could not take away such properties as Borgo San Felice. During these times of city-state skirmishes, it was advantageous for

residents to choose an allegiance—and a geographical home—and stick with it.

The second impetus for medieval Tuscan dwellers to reduce extraneous travel emerged from sickness.

Beginning in 1347 and lasting sporadically for three centuries, Europe's Black Death ravaged cities and towns in northern Italy. By the early to mid 17th century it had reduced populations in locations such as Parma and Verona by as much as half. Yet some locales, such as the town of Ferrara, escaped heavy impacts due to a combination of border controls, sanitary laws and education about personal hygiene. Visitors to Ferrara had to supply keepers at two entrance gates with 'fedi,' or written proofs that they had arrived from a zone free of illness. During these times of uncertainty, staying at one safe location was advantageous.



Premium Suite at Borgo San Felice, Tuscany BORGIO SAN FELICE

Today, warring city-states and plagues no longer exist in Italy. Overall, societal impacts from Covid-19 are incomparably less significant than from illnesses that once rippled throughout Medieval Tuscany. However, today's constantly changing travel requirements in Europe resuscitate the attractions of 'staying put' in one locale for vacation. The *diffuso* concept harkens back to an era when villages, or borgos, successfully weathered city-state skirmishes and epidemics. Locations such as Borgo San Felice provide food, services and amenities on site, are

located away from other cities and provide ample grounds and open space. Multiple separate residence buildings may be attractive to guests who feel comfortable distancing themselves from others.

Another advantage to staying within a *diffuso* is being within the quiet countryside. Birdsong, trundling tractors and scents of greenery replace honks and the whiff of diesel from city streets. At San Felice many vegetables, herbs and spices—including oregano, mint, onions, beetroot and cabbage—are picked from the borgo's garden. Breads are made in the kitchen daily and wine originates from an on-site winery. The main square of Piazza San Felice is the peaceful heart of the borgo, surrounded

by stone planters and terra cotta vases, roses and oleander, towering pine trees, rosemary bushes and an ivy coated church. Visitors can picnic in an adjacent olive grove or walk past rows of cypress trees to visit vineyards.



Cellar at Borgo San Felice, Tuscany BORGO SAN FELICE

Tuscan food and wine, of course, will continue to attract visitors during this era of revised tourism. Many *diffuso* locations traditionally included vineyards. During the Middle Ages wine was the common drink for both nobility [as well as for everyone else](#) in Italy, and it was commonly diluted with water, or infused with sage, roses or powdered spices such as ginger, nutmeg or cloves.

Today San Felice includes 345 acres (140 hectares) of adjacent vineyards within the Chianti Classico region of Tuscany. Vines are electronically scanned using equipment mounted on all-terrain vehicles, via drones or via satellite imagery to assess their health. This reduces the use of carbon-spewing tractors that trample the soil. Wines are aged both in large Slavonian casks and smaller French barrels.

The strength of the individuality of San Felice wines pivots not on more modern, international blends, but on the discovery and subsequent use of an indigenous grape—historically cultivated but almost lost.



Winemaker Leonardo Bellaccini of Borgo San Felice RP PRESS

Winemaker Leonardo Bellaccini has worked on the property since the mid 1980's. He recalls how, working in collaboration with the University of Florence and the University of Pisa, they

imported 270 different local vine varieties onto their property to grow as an experiment. Eventually, they discovered the then almost extinct variety of Pignatello, which is now the ‘fingerprint of San Felice.’ Although Sangiovese grapes still makes up the majority of their plantings, Pignatello includes strong, gorgeous, juicy aromas of raspberries and black cherries and a taste that includes an elegant tannic backbone.

Although 2019 was a difficult year for the hospitality business worldwide, projections are for a relatively quick recovery. [Data from STR Global and HVS](#) project that hotel occupancies will increase to 2019 levels by the year 2023, and that 2021 will show a 76% increase from 2020.

Borgo San Felice Director Danilo Guerrini’s work experience throughout Europe, and his education at New York’s Cornell University, taught him to focus on changing the mindset of staff toward hospitality—which proved critical to making significant improvements at San Felice in the past five years. He also learned the value of modifying strategies to cope with changes.

He is positive about the future, although he misses American guests because they provide feedback regarding service and their experiences. They also appreciate the entire high-end *diffuso* concept.

“They have a specific word they use if they have an amazing experience. They say, ‘Terrific.’ This year, I am missing Americans, and their using that word.”



Borgo San Felice piazza at night, Tuscany BORGIO SAN FELICE