

Travel

Bentleyissimo!

LABOUR OF LOVE: Lucinda and Bentley outside the Villa Cetinale which was so painstakingly restored by her late father

Lucinda Lambton takes a cultured ride through Tuscany in the luxury of a 21st Century grand tourer



DRIVING a Bentley along the roads of Tuscany is like gliding naked through rivers of cream – surrounded, furthermore, by some of the most beautiful landscape on God's Earth. I have been doing just that as a guest of Bentley for the launch of its new Brooklands Coupé, on a jaunt that was as

startlingly lavish as it was interesting. Did you know, for example, that in 1565 a secret corridor was built for almost half a mile – from the Uffizi to the Pitti Palace – high above the streets of Florence?

Where it crosses the River Arno, on top of the Ponte Vecchio, it has three large windows to the west, created, would you believe, by Musso-

lini in 1938 for Hitler to enjoy the view. Incidentally, the vista for which they were created was destroyed only six years later by the Germans themselves, when their retreating forces blew up all the other bridges in 1944.

The Ponte Vecchio itself was saved thanks to Hitler's fondness for it as well as for the Vasari corridor – named after its architect, Giorgio

Vasari. Now an overflow for the Uffizi and hung from end to end with paintings – unquestionably the longest picture gallery in the world – it can be seen by all who book at least a month in advance. Few experiences can be as strange as to find yourself in these long, silent and secret

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stretches, unknown to so many who are passing beneath you.

It was built for just that purpose by the then ruler of Florence, Cosimo de' Medici, to enable him to go from the Government Palace to his own without being contaminated by the rabble in the streets. You can still peer down on the crowds today, through 'Cosimo's Eyes', the little, round, barred windows above the medieval shops on the bridge.

Marching onwards - faced on either side by the famed collection of self-portraits - you find the walls to the east cut away to reveal the aisle and altar of the Church of Santa Felicita, where Cosimo would make his daily devotions.

After a sudden dog-leg diversion marking the justifiably rebellious Manelli family's refusal, in 1564, to allow Cosimo's corridor to slice straight through their tower - one of 40 that survive of the 300 built in 13th Century Florence - you emerge into the outside world beside a fanciful 1580s grotto in the Boboli Gardens.

All in all, this was a bashing-your-head-against-a-stone-wall-with-disbelief experience, especially for those who know the city well, seeing surreally new views from these soundless surroundings.

As if that were not enough, we had had an evening's private view of the Uffizi itself, away from the crowds. From the brilliant guide there were titbits tantalising us never to go guileless again. Astonished by a painting with a rhinoceros roaming the streets of Florence in 1543, for example, I was told it was common practice for the Florentines to keep exotic animals in cages in the city and that giraffes, lions, rhinos and more would be hunted, on horses, to the death, through the streets.

OUR base for these rarefied excursions was the newly and opulently restored Villa Mangiacane, built by the descendants of Machiavelli and now a hotel. Only 12 miles from Florence and perched on a hilltop surrounded by its own vineyards and olive groves, the villa is one of the growing band of such beauties - once private Tuscan houses that have been converted into luxurious hotels. I bet, though, that few are as luxurious as this.

My bed was 12ft wide, fantastically ornate and seemingly of solid silver - another room boasts a silver four-poster - and my bath was a domed temple of marble, in a vast bathroom of glass and white marble veined with pink. Frescoes swirl on the walls and around doors throughout the villa, at one point framing a dead-centre-to-the-house view of the Duomo in Florence across the Italian countryside.

My welcome there was enhanced by the appearance, courtesy of Bentley, of the 'Birkin Blower', a racing car of the Thirties that had made history with my cousin Tim Birkin at the wheel. A touring Bentley stripped down to racing trim, the 'Brookland Battleship', as it became known, set a lap record of 137.76mph at that famous banked race circuit in Surrey. I have always known of it and been proud of the connection but had never seen it.

Visiting Lorenzo Villoresi, master perfumer, was our first suitably exotic sortie. Handsome as hell and in yellow tweed from top to toe, he is a master of his art who operates from a studio with a view over the rooftops of Florence. His is an ancient

My bed is solid silver, my bath a marble temple

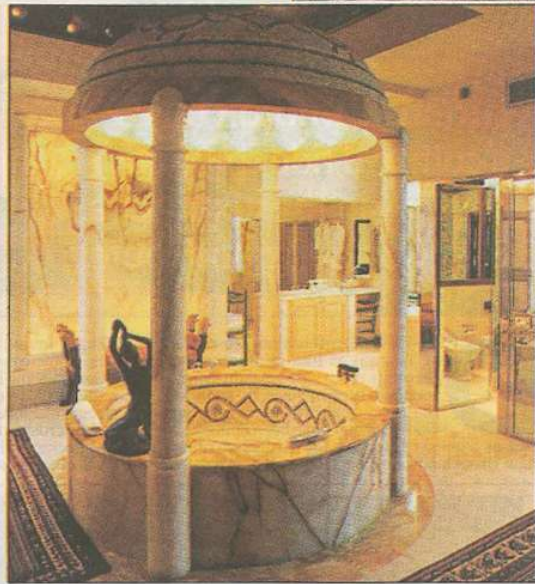
GETTING THERE

Air Meridiana flies daily from Gatwick to Florence. One-way fares start at £69. Visit www.meridiana.it or call 0870 224 3711. For further information on Villa Mangiacane, visit www.villamangiacane.com or call 00 39 055 829 0123. For Lorenzo Villoresi, go to www.lorenzovilloresi.it or call 00 39 055 234 1187. For Villa Cetinale, visit www.villacetinale.com. Open to groups of ten, £50 each including lunch. For private tours of the Uffizi, contact Guido Fratini (guido@discoveruscany.biz, www.discoveruscany.biz, 020 8133 6471).

Florentine tradition - the art of the city's perfumery became the most prestigious in Europe in the 17th Century. In 21st Century Florence, Villoresi is immersed in reviving this exotic legacy, with a laboratory steeped in the aromas of oriental wood, herbs and flowers, musks, spices and scents.

It is open to all - Tony and Cherie Blair are particular admirers - and, with his plans to open the first-ever Perfume Academy, the world and his wife will be beating a path to his door. He already sells his scents in 35 countries worldwide. I was drenched with nostalgia by his 'Teint de Neige' - with the delicate rosy hue of a powdered face, which for me most powerfully evoked the aroma of an old bathroom cupboard in Northumberland that was opened in my childhood for the first time in some 70 years!

Such were the delights arranged by Bentley, as we were swept from one to another in the new Brooklands Coupé, all a-gleam with walnut, oak and



DOMED ELEGANCE: Lucinda's bathroom at the Villa Mangiacane

maple veneer - to name but a few of the wood finishes - while sunk deep in plush, padded leather, which can be ordered in a wealth of such sumptuous shades as scarlet or brilliant tan, always with matching seatbelts.

DELIGHTED, I heard that one car had been commissioned in 'Dolly Parton Pink' with a cream leather interior. It was, though, the sheer quality of workmanship on these cars that knocked me for six, as well as leaving a multitude of Italian jaws dropped by the way-side as we passed.

It was with huge pride that I was able to show off the Villa

Cetinale near Siena, the great house and garden saved and so sympathetically restored over a period of 30 years by my late father [former Conservative politician Lord Lambton] and Clare Ward.

Toiling away - spending years building walls, for example - as well as supervising his Italian workforce, he gradually and sensitively gave a glorious new life to what was a lost domain in the saddest state of rack and ruin when he found it. Now it is a place so fine that you can barely believe the sights before you. Indeed, a Russian journalist in our party declared himself to be 'speechless'.

The building was begun in 1651 by Cardinal Fabio Chigi, who, when he was made Pope Alexander VII in 1655, applied himself to architectural matters

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PASSAGE OF TIME: The Ponte Vecchio, where Cosimo de' Medici, above, had a secret corridor built. Below: A participant in the Palio race

tence by people and with its surrounding countryside ruined. There are already three airports – at Florence, Pisa and Grosseto – all about an hour away.

One reason for Siena having so magically survived in its medieval state is that it has always been left out in the march of 'progress'. Since the Black Death annihilated two-thirds of the town's population in the 14th Century, and since the great Battle of Marignano of 1544 against Florence resulted in the

Republic of Siena losing its independence, Florence has always thought itself the superior city. Could it possibly be that this glaringly foolish scheme is in fact an act of revenge, one aimed at reversing 700 years of what is seen as a historical injustice?

Our Bentleys carried us smoothly from these turmoils to Volterra, where we were ushered into the town by a team of 15 Bentley outriders. Smart as paint in black, emblazoned with the Bentley logo, they made our progress seem almost royal. In the main square, Piazza de Priori, made up entirely of 13th Century buildings, our gleaming posse of Bentley Brooklands Coupés made a dramatic 21st Century contribution.

San Gimignano could also be your next stop on this journey – although, I fear, minus Bentleys and outriders! It's a town that never fails to surprise, with the survival of so many towers built in the 1100s and 1200s. Originally there were 76; now only 13 survive, but what a sight they make for miles around, soaring skywards from the cluster of medieval buildings that make up this little hill town.

In the Duomo, the 1367 frescoed scenes of the Old and New Testaments by Bartolo di Fredi are as delightful as any in Italy. There's the creation of Eve as she forces herself forth from Adam's stomach, enchantingly odd animals – obviously unknown to the artist – trooping into the Ark and a drunken Noah, most unexpectedly awry and displaying his privates. As for ghoulish scenes, in Taddeo di Bartolo's Last Judgement of around 1410, there can be few frescoes that are as gruesome.

I have not yet mentioned that, thanks to just having had an operation on my knee, this entire tour was in a wheelchair and on crutches. It made not one scrap of difference, though, to the thigh-tingling delight at the sheer satisfying interest and pleasure of it all.

One shadow alone darkened these balmy skies – that humanity generally seems rather rough hewn from behind the wheel of a Bentley!

famed Palio horse race of Siena was run in the woods of Cetinale – the 'Tebalde' or 'Holy Place' – filled with statues of saints and hermits, as well as seven frescoed altars. Step into it through a great gate and straight away you are surrounded by stone creatures carved in honour of the various districts of Siena – all represented by animals – which compete against one another in the Palio. A stone-winged dragon, a tortoise, a snail and a leopard big enough to sit on have all been rediscovered.

SO IT is three admiring cheers for my father and this triumph of restoration, and it is three cheers, too, for my brother Ned and niece Rosie Bowdrey, who are hard at work making it a viable business – by planting a vineyard and an organic vegetable garden and by setting the great house to rights so as to be able to let it out. With their efforts, the future of Cetinale is safe and sound.

Up to a point. As, inexcusably, there are plans afoot that will destroy both it and, more importantly, the surrounding medieval villages, historic buildings and Tuscan countryside for miles around.

For, difficult though it is to believe, a new international airport is planned on the picturesque plain of Rosia nearby, with the capacity for four million people a year and all the attendant destructive forces to rural life that brings.

Most terrifyingly of all, therefore, Siena itself is under threat – of being jam-packed out of exist-

more papal, including, if you please, commissioning Bernini to design the colonnaded piazza of St Peter's in Rome.

His nephew, Cardinal Flavio, employed the architect Carlo Fontana to transform Cetinale into a grand baroque villa. With a great stone papal mitre and cardinal's hat carved in bold relief above the main windows on the facade to the south, and with stone stairs marching up to a marble portal surmounted by the Chigi coat of arms to the north, here is splendour on the grand scale.

The gardens are arranged along a straight axis, with an avenue that streaks off to the north and south of the house. To the south, down through a great wooded gorge, it rises up to a colossal statue of Hercules.

To the north, up between rows of cypresses, it passes through a stone 'theatre' and on and up some 300 steep stone steps to a 17th Century hermitage – the 'Romitario' – which was occupied by monks until the 19th Century and is now newly restored.

This final coup de theatre was created by yet another Chigi cardinal, also called Flavio, who would climb those stone steps – the Scala Santa – every day on his knees, so as to pray on high for the sins, doubtless multifold, of the Chigis to be forgiven.

These are gardens where avenues filled with statues, busts and urns branch off in every direction. Two statues in the front loggia are Roman, dating from the 4th Century AD, and there is an assembly of later busts of Napoleon and his marshals marking the Emperor's visit here in 1811. Two new gardens, one Italian, the other English, complete the march of time.

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