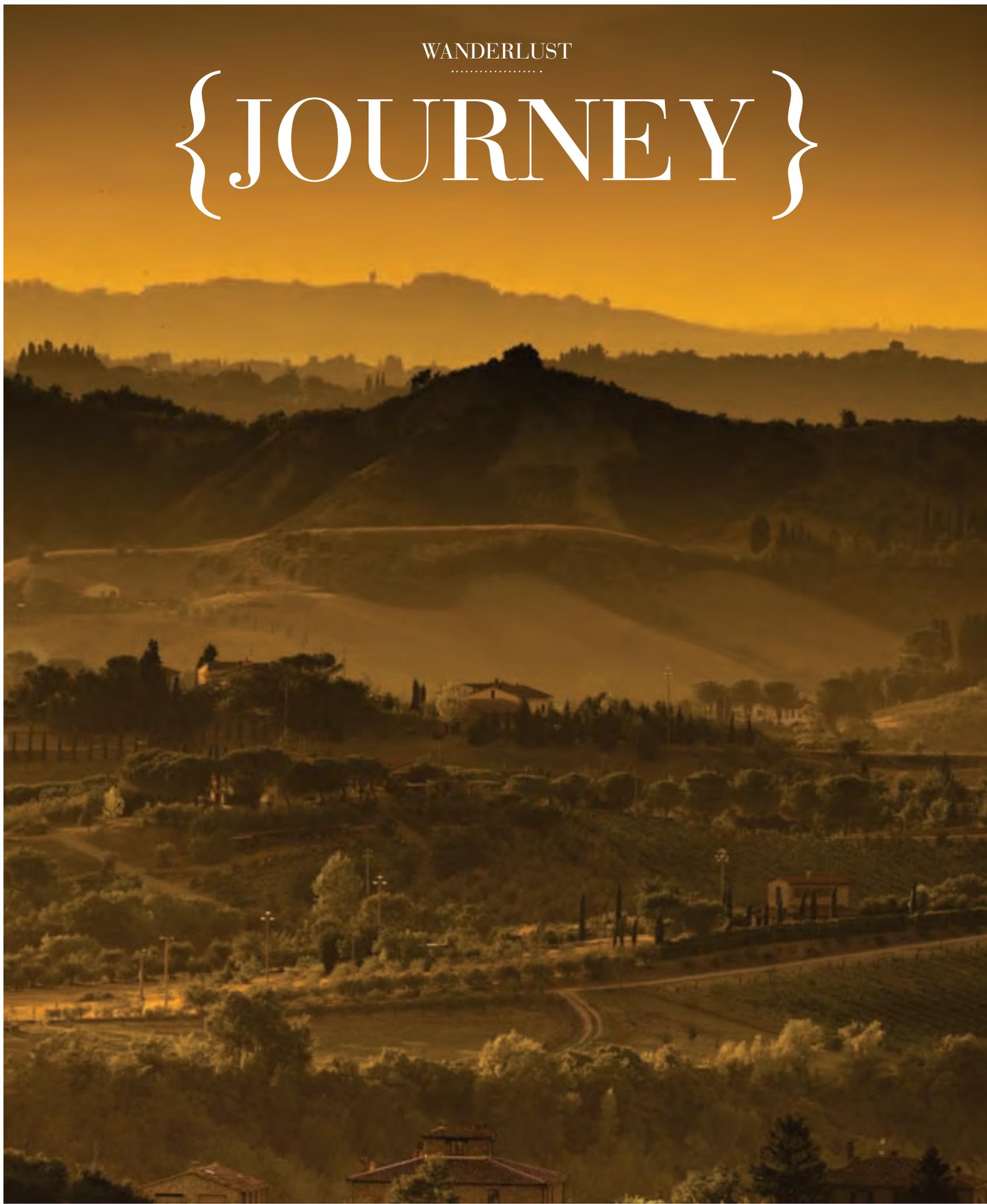


WANDERLUST

{ JOURNEY }





---

—  —

# A Ride to Remember

---

*Experience Italy's Tuscan countryside from horseback, riding through the vineyards and colorful landscapes of the Chianti region.*

*By Jess Morton*



“I think this will be a day that I will remember for the rest of my life,” Rikard Sipinen softly declared after a day of riding an American Paint Horse through a portion of Italy’s Chianti region.

It had been 15 years since the Swedish man had previously been on a horse when his father took him out galloping through the fields near their hometown of Nykvarh. Dogs began chasing the horses, and the last thing Rikard remembered was flying off his testy mount, fainting, and then waking to a dog noisily slobbering over his face.

“My sister was furious,” he laughed. “She said it was our fault, and that we were irresponsible.”

Now, with the horses put away for the evening, Rikard sits on a wooden bench watching a dramatic sunset outside the stables. Slightly sunburned, contentedly tired and smelling nicely of horse, Rikard says the day has been especially memorable because of the bond developed with his horse.

“We were a team,” he said. “I felt what soldiers must have felt for their mounts at the end of a long campaign—we got through it together.”

Rikard’s horse, “Apache,” was a kind and steady mount for a rider who lacked experience and technique. Yet, the horse also gave a great satisfaction to the rider; carrying him down steep descents and letting him enjoy long canters without ever feeling a loss of control.

It took a holiday in Tuscany, Italy, with his sister, Helen, and niece Linnea Henreiksson, as well as the novelty of a Western saddle and a Paint Horse, to get Rikard riding again: And, he’s already planning his next trip on horseback.



Linnea Henreiksson, Helen Sipinen and Rikard Sipinen

“I think this will be a day that I will remember for the rest of my life.”



## Gloriously Tuscan

May is a beautiful time to visit the ancient Chianti of Tuscany region with the regenerative power of spring is apparent everywhere. As the sun warms the earth, flowers bloom and there is a sense of renewal and new life all around.

Riding trails meander through Castellare di Tonda, an ancient farm of more than 900 acres that dates back to the renaissance period when owned by the Strozzi, a noble Florence family of bankers. Today, the farm produces three varieties of wine, and operates as a base for riders looking to get off the beaten track. This area was abandoned in the 1950s, when centuries of tenant farming (mezzadria) ended with a mass exodus of farming families for the cities. This mass emigration left the area under populated and its pristine scenery remains unspoiled allowing for hours and hours of spectacular horse riding in every direction.

Surrounded by forests, silver olive groves and miles of vineyards, the surrounding landscape is a paradise for trail riders, and Stefano Scotti, the owner of the estate and an avid horseman, takes special care to keep the trails well maintained. Besides being a base for riders looking to escape into the Tuscan countryside, the estate is also home to Stefano's breeding operation of Paint and Quarter Horses for both competition and. The breeding station has three stallions including the 2003 sorrel solid Paint stallion Cat N Diamonds, who is by Like A Diamond and out of Playin Lika Cat.

Writer Jess Morton and Castellare stallion Cat N Diamonds (Lucky)

.....  
Riding trails meander through Castellare di Tonda,  
an ancient farm of more than 900 acres that dates  
back to the Renaissance period.  
.....  
▼





## Morning Glory

Leaving the stables shortly after breakfast, the group rides down Tufo sand trails to the Castelfalfi Nature Reserve and then up to the estate's vineyards.

Tuscany is famous for art, culture, food and, of course, wine. Here, in the heart of Chianti, vineyards are everywhere. Splendidly lush and green, they contrast sharply with the red Tufo sand covering the ground. Around each massive vineyard is a well-maintained Tufo trail that allows the group to canter and gallop. The horses know this area well, and with noses tucked to their chests, a couple begin to prance and sidestep.

Helen, who is riding a young homebred Paint by Cat N Diamonds, has a smile on her face as the chestnut gelding surges ahead. Just behind her mother is Linnea riding Invest In Bonanza, aka "Hidalgo," with Rikard on Apache bringing up the rear.

From the vineyard, the group rides down past the medieval village and fortified castle of Castelfalfi, whose original name "Castrum Faolfi" was first mentioned in a document dated back to the 700s. This borgo was once home to the Medicis, a famous banking family during the Renaissance period. Color is everywhere—cobalt blue skies expressively contrast against the cypress trees that lead up to farmhouses of earthy shades with dark green shutters.



◀ **Cinghiale** in Tuscany have great cultural significance. Growing up to 400 pounds, the wild boars were once considered a satanic symbol during medieval times due to their tusks and dark appearance. For hundreds of years, they were hunted by men on foot carrying spears and following packs of hounds. The dogs were trained to capture the boar until the hunter could get close enough to spear it. Today, the hunt of cinghiale is still popular during the winter season, though nowadays the dogs are used only to flush the game. The wild boar is then finished off with a rifle.

The foundations of the castle have stood for at least 2,500 years and date back to the Etruscan period. The trails the group is riding have seen centuries of travelers, merchants and soldiers. Under the castle is the original road made of cut white stone, which dates back to Roman times. This peaceful section of the trail is lined with ancient cypress trees, which shade the horses from the midday sun as they carefully pick their way down the hill where Castelfalfi stands.

The unique sound of horse shoes on the cobbled stones, surrounded by the rich smell of pine and wildflowers, is representative of a time gone by, and gloriously Tuscan.

Here the countryside becomes wilder with long dirt roads cutting into the patchwork of colored fields. As the group rides up a hillside to an ancient ruin, shoot six large wild boar, cinghiale, shoot out of the brush in front of the horses. One after another, they sprint down toward the shaded woods below, tails swinging madly behind them. A few moments later, seven young cinghiale run out onto the road to catch up with the adults.

The group's reliable Paint Horses simply watch the animals in awe.



## Midday Conversations

From the nature reserve, the group rides on to Ghizzano, a small medieval village that is under Pisan control. There, they take a lunch stop high in the hills under a large oak tree where the tourism board has installed a rest area for horseback riders. There are plenty of mature olive trees to tie off the horses, and long lush grass for them to graze on while the group enjoys their lunch, which was delivered by a car to the spot.

The group drinks locally produced Chianti wine, and enjoy an Italian-style picnic complete with prosciutto, salami, three types of Tuscan cheese, salad, boiled eggs and Tuscan bread. To complete the meal is Italian coffee along with cake made with orange and pine nuts.

The group drinks locally produced Chianti wine, and enjoys an Italian-style picnic complete with prosciutto, salami, three types of Tuscan cheese, salad, boiled eggs and Tuscan bread.

It's a time for relaxation and conversation as the group discusses the horses they have ridden over the years.

Helen laughs as she recalls her first horse, a 16-hand black ex-racehorse.

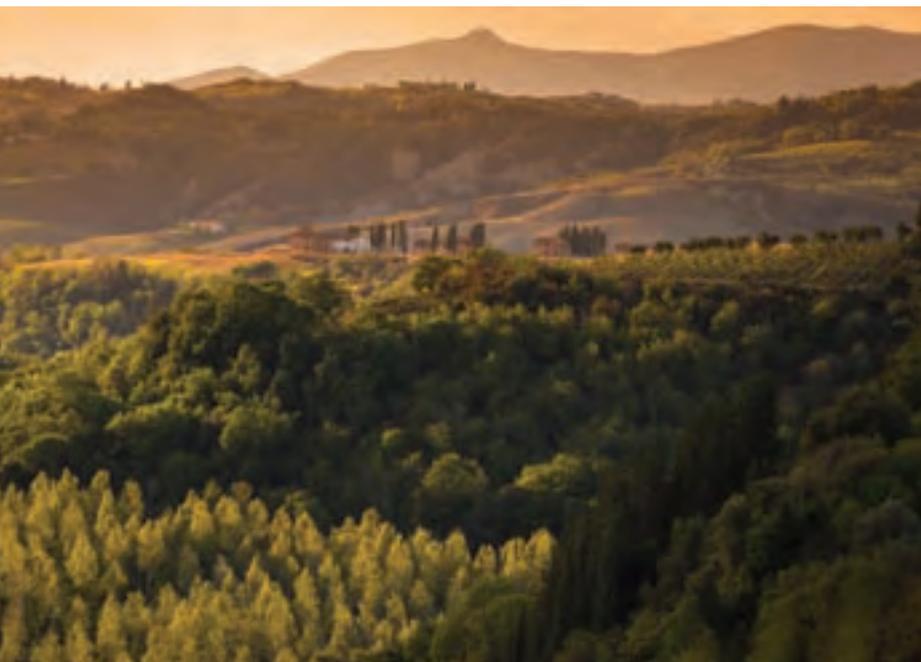
"I was a tiny child," she recalled. "My horse would never let me catch her. I would spend hours trying to get the head collar on her, and had to learn all sorts of tricks to get hold of her. Poor mare. Back then I used to ride her for hours, and usually at speed ... she probably saw me as some sort of crazy elf girl that always made her run and she wanted nothing to do with me."

Once used as a draught animal, **Chianina** are the biggest cattle breed in the world and date back to the pre-Roman Empire, making it among the oldest of all pure cattle breeds. The large, strong animals hail from the Chiana Valley in Tuscany, and are the producers of the world famous Florentine steak. ►



The forested and hauntingly lovely **Val d'Elsa** is home to some spectacular ruins such as the monastery San Vivaldo, pilgrimage route built 400 years ago and the Cafaldo Springs, a mysterious natural spring located at the bottom of a shadowy canyon. ►





## Afternoon Adventures

Following the midday meal, the horses are resaddled and the riders wake up their senses from the break with a quick canter through a unique section of the trail. Here, the rock has been cut away to form a tunnel, and the horses love the twists and turns as the trail slowly winds its way up the mountain.

The group rides on to the old Villa Monti, used as a hunting lodge by the Bardi family during the Renaissance period. The current owners claim the ghost of a white horse can be seen galloping during winter from the villa windows.

After crossing through open fields and riding through horse-high grass, the riders come to a Chianina cattle farm. Heavily muscled with long legs, hard hooves and a calm disposition, the cattle ignore the riders, although a couple of curious calves amble towards them before taking off in fright to return to their mothers.

The trail then leads through the village of Sughera, just outside perimeter of Castellare's 900-acre property. In the distance, 20 horses of varying colors can be seen grazing. These are the retired trail horses as well as the broodmares and yearlings from the breeding farm.

As the group enters Castellare on the grass trail outside of the fenced pasture, the horses decide to join the riders, who urge their mounts into a canter to gallop alongside the horses. A long, grassy stretch where the horses surge ahead happily, it is no doubt a highlight of the day's ride for everyone.

## Easeful Evening

Having bathed the horses and put them away for the evening, it's understandable why Rikard describes the day as one of those he'll remember for the rest of his life. For years, he was scared of horses but today his Paint Horse was a partner in his Italian adventure.

Tuscany has always been famous for its wines, its art galleries and its wonderful cucina povera. Riding this spectacular region on horseback is a unique and eco-friendly way to discover both the area's wonderful countryside and historic points of interest.

And what better equine partner to see the Tuscan beauty from than the American Paint Horse? 

**Go online** to learn more about Castellare di Tonda and trail rides through Tuscan region of Italy:

[www.inthesaddle.com/rides/view/143\\_castellareditonda\\_tuscany\\_italy](http://www.inthesaddle.com/rides/view/143_castellareditonda_tuscany_italy)



### COLORFUL COUNTRY

One does not instantly think of American Paint Horses in this land of medieval castles, crumbling ruins and old Roman roads, yet the Paint Horse with his unique coloring and willing nature has made his mark on the Italians—and is today one of the most popular breeds in the country.

But why do so many Italians choose Paint Horses when Tuscany is known for its native Maremmano horse?

A Paint Horse's character is the most common answer. The Paint has a reputation as an honest and calm horse. The modern Maremmano horse, which was once stocky, rustic and hardy, has been infused with Thoroughbred blood since the turn of the last century in an effort to breed athletic sport horses. The result is a tall and often high-strung horse that is better suited to the show-jumping ring than working cattle in the Maremmano swamplands.