SLOW TRAVEL AND PAINTING IN TUSCANY

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Paint, pasta and pure bliss at The Watermill in Posara

Jacqui Deevoy enjoys her most restful holiday yet on a relaxing painting and drawing trip in Tuscany



Bill and Lois Breckon

I'd barely stepped off the train at Pisa (I'd travelled four hours cross-country from Sanremo) when the magic began. The drive through the rolling hills of Lunigiana felt like slipping into a Renaissance painting – cypress trees standing sentinel, vines heavy with grapes and that golden Tuscan light I'd come in search of. But

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nothing prepared me for my first glimpse of The Watermill at Posara. Tucked beside the gentle River Rosaro in a tiny village, this lovingly restored 17th-century complex is pure fairytale: honey-stone buildings wrapped around a sunny courtyard, a vine-shaded verandah perfect for aperitivi, rose pergolas and gardens that tumble down to the water. I knew instantly this was going to be one of those trips I'd never forget.

Bill and Lois Breckon, the warm-hearted hosts who have poured their souls into this place, along with their right-hand man Karsten, greeted me like an old friend. Lois, with her beautiful smile (and much-coveted necklace!) and Bill, charming, witty and full of fascinating stories about the mill's history (and his days as an old-school journalist, like me!), made every single day feel personal. They've created not just a holiday spot, but a true home away from home – one where you're encouraged to create, relax and soak up *la dolce vita*. Their attention to detail is extraordinary; nothing is too much trouble.

The week begins...

Maggie Renner Hellman, the view from The Watermill, and one of Jacqui's paintings

The week unfolded like a dream under skies of relentless, perfect blue. Mornings started with continental breakfast in the spacious dining room with the other guests – fresh bread, ripe fruit, creamy yogurt and strong Italian coffee – before we'd settle into painting sessions in the light-filled studio or out in the gardens with our amazing tutor ***Maggie Renner Hellman***, with a smile like sunshine and oodles of talent! (I'd love to be able to paint seascapes like hers. One day maybe, one day...) Maggie, a talented, successful and well-established artist from California, was a real inspiration, offering gentle guidance that helped even this enthusiastic amateur find new confidence with my brush.

One of the loveliest surprises was meeting 91-year-old William, a retired surgeon and a fantastic watercolour artist. He has been returning to the Watermill every year for the past 23 years. His quiet enthusiasm, refined personality, gentle humour and beautiful work were an absolute joy. Watching him paint with such skill and concentration was truly inspiring and reminded me that creativity has no age limit. His son James was there and his work was also stunning. He paints with watercolours too; different to his dad's but just as mesmerising.

The lively markets of Fivizzano

Included in the price of this fabulous week-long painting and drawing holiday were several excursions. One day, we went to Fivizzano, just a short drive away. The medieval walled town buzzed with life. I was drawn to the clothes stalls – some of the garments looked designer but at market prices. The flower stalls were overflowing with roses, sunflowers – any flower you'd care to mention, in fact – and all extremely worthy of capturing in a painting. I decided, however, to do a painting of some of the buildings in a side street off the market as I felt compelled to practice perspective and straight lines, neither of which have ever been my forté. It wasn't easy and I sat at a cafe in Piazza Medicea, putting finishing touches to my

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first masterpiece of the week! We lunched simply but gloriously on panini and gelato. It felt wonderfully authentic – far from the madding crowds.

The stunning city of Lucca

The streets of Lucca, William on the back of a Vespa, and Jacqui

Midweek, we swapped brushes for a full day of exploration. I opted for the train excursion to Lucca, that glorious walled city. Wandering its tree-lined ramparts, walking through the historic centre and marvelling at the Romanesque churches and piazzas was pure joy. The contrast between quiet mornings at the mill and this vibrant day out was perfect. Others chose the Cinque Terre, returning with starry eyes and tales of colourful fishing villages.

A special treat one sunny pre-dinner evening was a ride for each of us around the village on the back of a Vespa. I was impressed to see nonagenarian William don a crash helmet without hesitation and whizz off into the distance with a huge grin on his face. It was one of those perfect, joyful moments that summed up the whole week of fun, freedom and friendship.

Delicious food at The Watermill

Painting outside at The Watermill

The food at The Watermill? Perfect! Lois and her skilled Italian cooks work wonders with local, seasonal ingredients – much of it from the mill's own garden.

Evenings brought feasts: homemade pastas with vibrant sauces, tender meats, fresh salads dotted with edible flowers, and desserts that had us all sighing with pleasure. Wine flowed generously – local reds and whites that paired perfectly with pretty much everything! Breakfasts, lunches and those sunset aperitivi on the vine verandah… Every evening meal was an event. One night, Billy and Lois' daughter

Lydia played piano for us. One of the tunes brought a tear to my eye. On the final evening, she sang an opera song. Once again, I got something in my eye. Truly beautiful.

The watermill itself and its grounds is a painter's paradise. From the millstream walks and riverside spots to the ancient castle at Verrucola and the serene, cloistered convent, every location offered new light, new compositions, and new inspiration. The weather cooperated beautifully – warm, sunny days ideal for outdoor work, with just enough breeze to keep things comfortable.

Evenings, after dinner, were for sharing our day's experiences in the salotto over digestivi, chatter and laughter echoing late into the night.

Jacqui painting!

And finally... the exhibition

By the end of the week, as we exhibited our work at a special last-night exhibition in the studio and said reluctant goodbyes, I felt transformed. Not just because of the paintings I'd produced (some of which I'm actually quite proud!), but because of the friendships forged, the beauty absorbed and the deep sense of restoration that only Tuscany – and places like The Watermill – can provide.

If you're dreaming of a creative escape that nourishes body, soul and sketchbook, look no further. Bill and Lois have created something truly special in Posara. I'm already planning my return. Bellissimo!

Find out more – prices etc – about creative holidays at The Watermill in Posara ***here***

Jacqui Deevoy

Jacqui Deevoy has been a freelance journalist for over three decades, starting out on teenage magazines, then later working for women's magazines worldwide, and national newspapers including the Daily Mail, the Mirror, Express and Telegraph. These days, as well as writing for magazines, papers and websites, she produces documentaries and hosts a Monday night talk show for Unprecedented TV.

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