

Yoga retreats article

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Sunflower Retreats Holidays was founded in 1998 by Lucy Bremner and Alan Scheda. Alan is from Casperia, a beautiful medieval hilltop village in central Italy's Sabina area, one hour north of Rome and Lucy, born in London, a holistic practitioner since 1988 and Yoga teacher, met in the UK in 1994 while Alan was studying in university. The couple travelled together to Alan's home in Casperia regularly, before deciding to move to Italy and create Sunflower Retreats in 1998. The couple had a love for yoga, for nature and for Italy. Combining Casperia's beautiful unspoilt natural and historic surroundings with Yoga and the holistic, seemed a perfect combination, so Sunflower Retreats was born and has been running now for nearly 8 years.

Sunflower Retreats, the first yoga holiday company of its kind in Italy, is based around health and relaxation, good food, Italian culture, eco-tourism and nature. Through the different activities that are organised such as the morning daily yoga class, excursions to sulphur baths and wild hot springs, a wide range of holistic treatments from aromatherapy to La Stone, guided walks in the Sabina mountains and horseriding they offer each guest a historic cultural experience while staying in an Italian medieval village alongside local people, as well as offering a journey into the self through yoga, relaxation and wellbeing treatments.

The company also has a strong eco-tourism policy. Using local houses for their accommodations, they work with the villagers and employ local people in order to enhance the local economy and integrate the concept of eco-tourism into the culture of Sabina. Alan and Lucy say Sunflower Retreats has, in some ways, brought the village alive again. "By bringing our visitors, locals now realise that it is a place worth looking after. Around 7 years ago local people did not take an interest in the village. Young people were leaving. Over the last 7 years the local council and community have begun to invest in the village, restoring properties and keeping the village clean, this is largely to do with all of the international visitors Sunflower retreats have brought."

Alan designed walking routes in the countryside around Casperia and presented them to the local council and they have now been created by international students from ONLOS, an international volunteers association providing work force for the environment and social need. "With all this we helped the council of Casperia to be awarded with the Bandiera Arancione which is a recognised award from the Touring Club Italia. This is only given to places which have preserved the nature and announced the historical side and have a eco tourism structure. By Sunflower Retreats working in towards eco tourism or responsible tourism we are able to guide local people towards responsible tourism development."

Sunflower's aim is for its visitors to enjoy an authentic Italian village lifestyle and benefit from a truly holistic and spiritual experience, as well as working with the community of Casperia to preserve the natural beauty of the area. Sunflower's new venture, a Lounge Café offering traditional local food and wine, will enable them to go further in bringing the local people and visitors from abroad together. Here foreigners and locals alike can sit, listen to music, play cards and enjoy the traditional local food specialities and wine

Stretching a holiday

Elvira Cordileone, Toronto Star Canada

The tiny village of Casperia is just an hour outside Rome and the perfect place to unwind with yoga. For two weeks, time hovered as lightly as the morning mist over the surrounding Sabine mountains. Each morning our slumbering minds were ushered into the day by the bells tolling in Casperia's 13th-century tower. Valleys green with olive groves stretched out below.

There is nothing like doing yoga on a medieval stone terrace at the top of a mountain. Every day at 8:30 a.m., we gathered for class and, even though it was October, there were days when it was warm enough to stretch our bodies and loosen our spirits outdoors. As a long-time practitioner of yoga, I was looking for a vacation where yoga would be part of the package, but I also wanted to go somewhere rich with history. Presto, I found Casperia's Sunflower Retreats on the Internet. The idea of going to Italy appealed to me, especially the notion of getting back in touch with my heritage, although my ancestors don't come from that region. And I had the added advantage of speaking the language, even though my way of speaking it is a mashed version of the real thing.

I talked an old friend, Norma Jean Walker, into coming with me. The brave soul hadn't done yoga for more than 20 years and she was apprehensive about it. But as it turned out, you don't need any previous experience. The teacher is very capable and gives instruction for beginners as well as advanced yoginis. The classes were even given in English.

Each morning we put on our leotards - and sweat shirts when it was cool - and did about an hour of Hatha (classical) yoga. Those looking for vigorous power yoga that's popular with the celebrity crowds should go elsewhere. This is yoga with a focus on breath and alignment, slow and easy. Our teacher, Lucy Scheda, had a thriving yoga practice in Brighton, England, before she married and moved to Casperia. She makes it her business to find out what everyone's health and fitness status is, and then adjusts postures for individual needs. So, for two weeks we lived without the drone of a television set. The guesthouse had no radio either and we were blissfully unaware of world events.

Built on the slope of a small mountain in the Lazio region of Italy, Casperia is a mere hour north-west of Rome by train. An ancient wall that 1,000 years ago kept out all manner of barbarians, rings the medieval village. It has a population of 1,000 but fewer than 350 souls live within the walls. The others occupy country houses nestled among the olive groves that cover the valley as far as the eye can see. We stayed in one of two guesthouses owned by Sunflower Retreats, each with three bedrooms, and able to accommodate a maximum of 12 guests a week. The houses have common living areas with fireplaces and fully equipped kitchens. If you don't have strong legs and a strong heart when you arrive, you'll acquire both by the time you leave. The village is all cobbled steps and sloped walkways. Because of this, cars cannot enter the walled section. They're parked around the road that rings it, the same road where the commuter buses stop, and where the post office, bank, drug store, a small supermarket and pastry shop (the proprietor of this store got to know me well) are situated.

Sunflower Retreats - so named because Italy is filled with sunflowers in June - offers a basic package that includes a daily yoga class, accommodation and continental breakfast and use of bicycles. Day trips to local points of interest, including the hot springs, horseback riding and scooters are available but cost extra. Some of the treatments I opted for during my stay were shiatsu, aromatherapy and a therapeutic massage - all as good as any I've had in Toronto and similarly priced, about \$80 Cdn. Adventurous travellers can hop a bus to neighbouring villages or to the main train line at Poggio Mirteto for treks to Rome or points beyond. We opted for several Sunflower excursions, including a day-long tour of the Sabina region with a stop at Sacro Speco in Narni, one of the hermitages where St. Francis of Assisi lived in the 13th century. I gathered chestnuts from the tree said to have sprouted miraculously from the staff he drove into the Earth. Another trip took us to Poggio Mirteto on market day. I haggled unashamedly with every merchant, street vendor or store clerk, reasoning that since the local people don't ever pay the asking price, neither would I.

In Casperia's tiny village theatre, we saw a one-act play by Chekhov one Saturday night - yes, in Italian. And along with the rest of the townspeople we attended an art gallery opening when sculptor, Johnny Madge, an Englishman who has been living in the village for many years, held his grand opening. And, oh, yes, the food - bursting with the flavour you only get when it comes to you straight from the garden. There was only one restaurant within walking distance, L'Asprese Pizzeria, but the ravioli stuffed with crushed walnuts and ricotta sent a jolt of pleasure straight from the palate to the brain. The most expensive meal we ate was on an excursion to Rocantica where I ate wild boar in a restaurant operated by a descendent of the original feudal lord - for about \$50.

Alan and Lucy Sceda run Sunflower Retreats. Alan's mother is Welsh, his father is Italian. Now in his 30's, he has been living in Casperia since the age of 3. Lucy is English and has been teaching classical hatha yoga for many years. She is also a certified holistic massage therapist. The couple and their young son live in one of the houses outside the village walls, among olive trees. Our sojourn was spent in comfort, with clean rather than luxurious accommodation and agreeable hosts and fellow guests. The townspeople were warm and welcoming.

"Yes, it is a vacation, but we offer people a journey into themselves and a holistic aspect of Italy. It's harmony and the simplicity of life," said Lucy. "Sunflower isn't promoting anything," said Alan. "We're trying to organize an experience. We want people to come here and have the opportunity to open up to yoga and the basic values of life, to sincerely experience real things, not artificial stimulation." The area is renowned for the talent of its marble cutters, timber workers, electricians and plumbers, who are in high demand in Rome, said Alan. It's also famous for the quality of the locally pressed olive oil. "The Sabina area is not well-known. There are no famous monuments and tourists don't tend to come to the countryside. There's never been industry, only rural farming. It's a harsh area with only hills and mountains," said Alan. Still, by the end of our stay, between yoga, massages, walking, resting and good food, we no longer clutched our chests after scaling the village to reach the guesthouse.