

Tee time in Tuscany

The Ryder Cup hits Italy next year. Rookie golfer Orla Thomas gets in the swing — on the fairway and in the spa



In 2008 my beloved grandfather died, leaving me a set of golf clubs that he had carefully collected since taking up the game in the Fifties. During childhood visits to his bungalow in Bognor Regis, we would spend hours together at the local putting green, but 29-year-old me was baffled by the bequest. Real golf was for old people, I thought; I was not — and never would be — old. For more than ten years the heavy set of irons sat ignored in my attic.

However, it turns out that Grandad knew better. When I turned 40 the dusty Slazenger bag began to whisper invitingly, promising hours spent strolling manicured lawns and drinks in the clubhouse. After a decade of child-rearing, the prospect of a hobby conducted in a peaceful, adults-only space was suddenly alluring.

I told friends that I wanted to learn how to play, and they reacted with incredulity. Similarly, [Italy](#) is not ordinarily thought of as a golfing powerhouse. But with the country gearing up to host the 2023 Ryder Cup, that's about to change.



Orla decided to learn how to play golf after she turned 40
DARIO GAROFALO

The European and US teams will compete at the Marco Simone Golf and Country Club near Rome, but I had something different in mind for my golfing debut and sought out scenic courses attached to some of Italy's loveliest hotels.

The Toscana Resort Castelfalfi, near Pisa, has Tuscany's largest course. From the property's panoramic terrace I try to count its 27 holes, scattered among rolling hills, rows of cypress trees and lakes glinting in the spring sunshine. The view is almost impossibly perfect, like the backdrop of a Renaissance masterpiece. Ten full-time greenkeepers are employed to maintain this tidied-up version of the Tuscan wilderness.

"Being in nature brings a different perspective," says Manola Alberti, director of Castelfalfi's golf club. "Out there it's just you and the course." She readily admits, though, that golf has a bit of a recruitment problem, with "today's players getting older and fewer young people taking it up". Embracing the trend towards inclusivity, Castelfalfi offers lessons for all ages and levels of ability — including beginners such as me.

After a decadent golfer's breakfast at the clubhouse I borrow a buggy and use its GPS to navigate to the driving range. Pedal to the metal, I cruise the curves of the course at 15mph, watching veteran players tee off. Among those uniformly attired in sombre, sporty black, my outfit stands out: a colourful homage to vintage golfing style, complete with floral sun visor.



I'm just one rookie among many, says Andrea Perrino, the pro instructor at Castelfalfi. "The pandemic has been really good for golf," he says. "In Italy it was one of the few games that people were still allowed to play."

He devotes the first part of our lesson to getting my stance right, and within an hour I manage to curb my inelegant thumping at the turf and start sending ball after ball sailing satisfyingly skyward. "Learning golf requires a lot of time, discipline and respect for the rules; at first there's a lot of information to take in," Perrino says. "But it's also important for new players, through practice, to find their own instinct within the game."

Castelfalfi's lake course is the most beginner-friendly, but I can't resist putting my newfound skills to use on the more challenging mountain course. Its topography is perhaps more accurately described as hilly, and the tee for the scenic 9th hole is especially vertiginous. My ball soars over the fairway, landing a few feet shy of the green. Not bad for a first-timer.

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My new hobby is clearly employing hitherto undiscovered muscle groups, because the next morning I wake up with the sort of soreness I'd ordinarily expect to follow a particularly strenuous gym session. Nevertheless, after a few hours at the spa and a complimentary stretching class, I'm sufficiently restored for a tour of the estate.

Strolling through olive groves and among miles of vineyards, grapes just in bud, I'm reminded that this is a working landscape — Castelfalfi produces its own excellent wine and olive oil, both of which I sample liberally at lunch.