

TRAVEL FEATURE: From Manchester to 'La Dolce Vita'

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It's 1990 in a gay bar in Canal Street Manchester, two young single guys met, with the potential of just a fleeting experience. Who ever knew what was to follow.



Bob and Ian

This is how many relationships start; Bob and Ian liked each other – quite a lot. They got together and within a short space of time they decided to give up their very comfortable lives in UK and 'live the dream.' They both have very strong eco principles, firmly believing in everything being as 'green' as it's possible to be.

They both loved Italy and decided to open an eco-friendly self catering hotel, but where? Tuscany was too expensive and too popular with wealthy Brits and over priced Michelin starred restaurants. They looked further east to a little known region **The Marches** – or *Marche* in Italian, a region of rolling hills, stunning coastlines and medieval hilltop villages as yet unspoilt by mass tourism. They call it Tuscany for grownups.



Casal dei Fichi

After a long search, in 2003 they found two derelict houses near a pretty village called Francavilla d'Ete which they turned into **Casal dei Fichi** (House of Figs, because of the number of fig trees in the grounds). This was a 'Grand Design' Italian style, the result is simply beautiful.

The Marche region is in many ways similar to Tuscany but without the hordes of tourists. The countryside is quite beautiful in a very gentle way; there are gentle hills, mountains, valleys and many wonderful medieval fortified villages.



The accommodation Bob and Ian provide brings a new meaning to comfort, they have six self catering apartments with every possible convenience.

We have had poor experiences with self catering cottages, not here, they have thought of everything. They cater mainly for couples but obviously children occasionally appear. Although being gay owned and run do not assume that the guests will be gay, over the year Bob tells us that they have an average of six same-sex couples staying. We spent seven idyllic days there and although they were full we saw almost no one.



The grounds are beautifully landscaped and very cleverly designed so that each apartment has its own semi private garden. The pool is quite lovely, heated by solar panels, of course, surrounded by banks of lavender and once again we were alone we had almost exclusive use as most of the other guests never seemed to be around.

The grounds are beautifully kept and there is even a vegetable patch that guests are welcome to help themselves to plus fresh eggs from their own chickens.

There are many self catering establishments, which are today becoming more and more popular, throughout Tuscany, Umbria and Marche, all in beautiful countryside and sunning scenery.



Casal dei Fichi is different and the boys have set a new, very high, standard. They do not ask for any 'security' deposit, there is no inventory or any of the normal T's & C's or rules that you have to follow. They do, however, ask for full payment at time of booking. It certainly isn't particularly expensive, you can pay from 650€ to 950€ per week, considering the facilities and the location this is almost a bargain. The nearest airport is Ancona just an hour's drive away, reached from Stanstead via Ryanair. BA fly from Gatwick to Bologna which is about a two-hour drive.

We flew to Rome with **easyJet** but that did entail a three-hour drive admittedly through some very beautiful country. A car is essential.

Bob and Ian are exceptionally friendly hosts and try to make all their guests feel like personal friends, that's a tall order but they succeed in many ways. Some guests are even taken out to lunch or dinner but we were happy not to be included in these treats.

There are lots of very good restaurants in the lovely local villages, the boys have full details having checked them all out personally, and they have excellent local knowledge and are very well-known in the local community. They have even negotiated deals with some of the restaurants who will offer a discount to **Casal dei Fichi's** guests.

Casal dei Fichi does exactly what it says on the tin: extremely comfortable catering apartments set in beautiful grounds. Bob and Ian's story is quite inspiring; they are two very shrewd and clever businessmen in a highly competitive market, keeping one step ahead of the competition.

They've come a long way from Canal Street, Manchester to offering an excellent product in one of the loveliest places we have ever seen. Their commitment to the environment is fantastic; there should be more like them.

This is truly the place to stay, completely unwind and forget everything. Peace and tranquillity is their byword.