

THE INSIDERS | NORTHERN TUSCANY

**MERRION CHARLES**  
PRIVATE TRAVEL CONSULTANT

**MARKET:** Mercato Centrale, Florence  
In a covered cast-iron building dating from 1874, Florence's main food market, near the Basilica di San Lorenzo, is a must-visit. You'll find everything from meats and cheeses to seafood, breads, pastas and vegetables. Outside, stalls sell quality leather and cashmere goods and crafts; florence-on-line.com.

**EXPLORE:** Lucca  
About 80km west of Florence, Lucca is a stunning city to wander around. There are gorgeous shops, a monthly antiques market and plenty of bars and restaurants, including my favourite, Osteria Baralla. Walk around the city walls and if you visit in July there will be concerts in Piazza Napoleone; osteriabaralla.it.

**TASTE:** Pizzicheria La Grotta, Lucca  
A feast for the eyes and the stomach, this deli showcases many Lucchese specialities, including lardo di colonnata (pork cured in tubs made of local marble) and sugo al ragu Lucchese (meat sauce); alimenterilagrotta.com.

**ART:** Pietrasanta  
This stylish settlement northwest of Lucca, near the Versilia coast, is where Michelangelo spent time sculpting marble from the nearby Apuan Alps. Keen sculptors from across the world study in this small, meticulously maintained town, which also has some fine shops and restaurants. Have lunch at trendy Filippo Ristorante at Via Stagio Stagi 22.

**WALK:** Apuan Alps  
The Apuan Alps offer incomparable hiking with dramatic scenery, challenging peaks and climbs, and few tourists. Stop for lunch or stay the night in this area of extraordinary natural beauty; turismo.intoscana.it.

**SHOP:** Mara, Lunigiana  
My favourite boutique for clothes is in the village of Gragnola in Lunigiana, bordering Liguria. Owner Mara has an eye for good-quality, individual pieces. People come from all around to her shop in Piazza Stazione to pick up anything from a stunning wedding outfit to a glamorous winter jacket or a great-fitting pair of jeans.

**VIEW:** Fivizzano, Lunigiana  
There is nothing like the view from my home, Casa Glyn, in the hills above the walled city of Fivizzano. The old Tuscan farmhouse converted into luxury guest accommodation has spectacular views of the Apuan Alps and the Carrari hills; casaglyn.com.

• merrioncharles.com



**AIR** Tahiti Nui has specials from \$1330 for return flights from Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne to Papeete via Auckland; on sale to October 14 for travel in the first half of 2014; there are also deals to Los Angeles from \$1930. More: airtahitiniui.com.au.



**OBEROI** Bali has created a sea turtle sanctuary and released about 180 hatchlings this year; the beach in front of the resort is a nesting ground for species that include the green-shelled Lepidochelys olivacea. More: oberoihotels.com.



A NEW Australian-developed app with the cute name of Cinch Video has been designed to help users capture, edit, rearrange and share video content, including adding music. Be quick: it's free from iTunes for an introductory period.



A COMPANION site to Petite Paris has been launched with listings of holiday rental homes across France, many of which are owned by Australians. Bookings can also be made via both sites. More: lapartment.com.au; petiteparis.com.au.

HOME AND AWAY



TYSON SADLO

VENICE and George Clooney seems like a winning combination but add tequila and it really sounds like a party. Hotel Cipriani is celebrating the arrival of Casamigos Tequila, the creation of Clooney and his best mate, restaurant and bar mogul Rande Gerber. Venice's Cipriani, located on Giudecca Island, is the first hotel in Europe to offer the award-winning tequila to guests but Clooney and Gerber are working on distributing the product across the continent. Casamigos, named after Clooney's and Gerber's houses in Mexico, roughly translates to "house of friends" and since its January launch the tippie has become the world's fastest-growing tequila brand. Hotel Cipriani's head barman Walter Bolzonella has dreamed up a celebratory cocktail, Goodnight Amigos, in its honour. Clooney, a regular guest of the hotel, created a concoction known as Buonanotte here in 2005 and Bolzonella has taken the original recipe, based on lime, ginger and cucumber peel, and added a Casamigos base. Drink it Clooney style, on the rocks, no salt or lime. More: hotelcipriani.com; orient-express.com.

SUSAN KUROSAWA

ACCESSORY

**Yakima Skybox 18,**  
\$899

IDEAL for a driving getaway or adventure trip, the Skybox 18 cargo holder offers 510 litres of handy car rooftop storage and is long enough to carry 215cm skis. It comes with quick-installation hardware to mount on to car racks, with no tools required. Features include dual-side access, a sturdy lid that's easy to open and shut one-handed, secure locks and a matte anti-scratch finish. More: yakima.com.au.

SHARON FOWLER



T&I LOVES



PERFUMED candles in Paris? *Mais oui.* You must get to Diptyque (34 boulevard Saint-Germain, 5th) and scoop up a Feu de Bois Gris 300g candle ("woody family") and look at the room sprays (fruity, floral, spicy, herbal or woody collections) and its classic unisex eau de toilette L'Eau, launched in 1968 and now even available as a travel-friendly roll-on. Cire Trudon (78 rue de Seine, 6th) has been in the candle business since 1643 and these are the full luxe, made from the finest wax and lasting longer than most other brands. In hand-crafted glass holders, the heady range includes Trianon, with "jasmine, wild roses, wild herbs from the meadows..." Also available at the grand Le Bon Marche in Saint-Germain-des-Pres on the Left Bank. More: dyptiqueparis.com; ciretrudon.com.

Atelier Cologne, covered in last week's guide to Paris's best perfumeries, has moved to 8 rue Saint-Florentin, 1st. More: theaustralian.com.au/travel.

SUSAN KUROSAWA

ON THE BENCH

**Terracotta bowls, \$18 each**

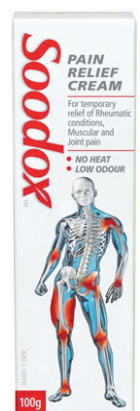


THESE rustic terracotta bowls should come in handy during long-awaited summer barbecues and al fresco parties. In white, pink, green and aqua, the 6cm x 17cm handmade vessels are perfect for storing dips and chips or for serving salads and soups during informal meals. More: lavenderhillinteriors.com.au.

MICHELLE ROWE

ON THE ROAD

**Soodox Pain Relief Cream, 100g, \$19.95**



TIRED tootsies or calf muscles from all that traipsing on cobblestones, trekking through rugged terrain or showing off at the hotel gym? Soodox promises temporary relief from muscle soreness, joint and arthritic pain and has an easily absorbed non-greasy texture and "low odour" composition of rosemary, emu oil and juniper berry plus arnica and eucalyptus oils. The easy-squeeze tube would fit into most toiletries kits and an additional formulation for women will soon be available. More: soodox.com.

SUSAN KUROSAWA

It's a dog's life in the Auvergne

ANDRO LINKLATER

THE homicidal sheepdog that launched itself at me from behind a grassy hillock had the look of a demented hearth rug but the fangs of a leopard.

No self-respecting border collie would take such a creature as a serious competitor in the herding business, but French sheep are different, at least those in the unfenced wilderness of the Aubrac plateau in the Massif Central.

More goat than sheep, they evidently regarded the ferocious dog as a minder that allowed them to graze full-time while it saw off wolves, bears and other predators,

including a pink-faced *randonneur* trying to decide whether the map had put a volcano in the wrong place or he was indeed lost.

I leapt backwards, apparently far enough to satisfy the rug that I was no longer a threat.

Those teeth were the most dispiriting spectacle of my walk through the Auvergne. The most inspiring was a vast view of velvet-green volcanoes curving out from the base of the Puy de Sancy when I was halfway to its 1800m summit. But the pleasure of wilderness walking goes deeper. Mostly it comes from the stillness of moving through the countryside at 5km/h, a speed that empties the mind of all its clutter

and is certainly the maximum intended for humanity by God.

But its essence is distilled into the moment of bliss and terror when you realise you are lost. Everything then depends on how well heart, brain and feet work together. Exhilaration remains long after the fright has gone.

On this reckoning, the mountainous country of the Auvergne is a jewel beyond price. Although there are tracks through it, it is vast and empty enough to meet the fundamental criterion of wilderness walking.

About an hour after I had left the sheepdog behind, I came to a stone farmhouse where another stood barking. The ancient farmer

who came out had a face that wasn't so much wrinkled by the Auvergne weather as corrugated. The sheep were his, and the dog I'd seen was the mother of this one. "Elle est du bon coeur," he said, explaining she was a Basque sheepdog, accustomed to guarding sheep by herself, and would certainly have attacked had I approached closer. He and the dogs were all that remained of the community in the area.

The crefins in Paris had made it illegal to shoot wolves, and even bears were encouraged to breed.

It is a useful attribute on the Aubrac plateau, for walkers and shepherds alike, to be of *bon coeur*.

THE SPECTATOR

HOTEL OF THE WEEK



IN T&I's regular online feature and photo gallery, senior contributing editor Christine McCabe presents the London Edition by Marriott International. More: theaustralian.com.au/travel.

BEST NEW BEDS

• Anantara Dubai The Palm Resort & Spa has opened on Palm Jumeirah with 293 guestrooms, private beach and exclusive overwater villas.

• Mantra Group has added Long Island Resort in the Queensland Whitsundays to its BreakFree portfolio.