

Inspired in Umbria

Karen Jensen-Jones discovers her inner creative self on a stay at the Bland Badger creative retreat in rural Umbria...

My arrival at Villa Pia for the Bland Badger creative retreat couldn't have been more welcoming. After an hour's drive from Florence airport with a group of curious, like-minded creatives, we arrived in time for afternoon tea in the glorious autumn sunshine. Our hosts, maker and designer Ros Badger and food and interiors photographer Charlotte Bland, quickly dispelled any angst we may have had about our creative capabilities, suggesting that we do as little or as much as we like. Good advice! No pressure to be 'brilliant', just an opportunity to relax, eat amazing food and reconnect with our creative selves in what promised to be an inspiring environment.

TO THE MANOR BORN

Set in the medieval town of Lippiano in Umbria, just a couple of miles from the Tuscan border, Villa Pia is a rustic 18th-century manor house surrounded by vineyards and rolling hills. Rooms are charming with original pretty tiled floors, decorative ceilings and wooden shuttered windows. Furnishings are simple with antique drawers and wardrobes, and bathrooms are snug but perfectly functional. The beauty of Villa Pia is its defining simplicity, yet behind the scenes everything is carefully thought through and every need catered for. The perfect backdrop for slowing down and some creative activity.

Our memorable first evening embraced the Villa Pia ritual of gathering in the kitchen – the hub of the villa with its glorious open fire – for aperitifs, homemade focaccia and local olives before dinner. Ros and

Charlotte outlined the relaxed programme of workshops (including book-binding with Ros and photography with Charlotte) and excursions (including Arezzo's famous flea market and the nearby Apothecary Museum) and optional morning yoga and meditation with Meredith Gunderson. Journalist and author Aly Walsh was also on hand with her workshop on creative writing and blogging. Keen to stress the importance of slowing down and reconnecting, Ros and Charlotte encourage stepping back from the hurly-burly of the daily routine and mindfully engaging in self-care (lounging, reading and lie-ins) and meaningful making and doing.

MORNING MATTERS

But first, dinner, and the joy of eating seasonal food steeped in Italian tradition was ours for the week. Locally sourced Umbrian dishes prepared by traditional cooks from the village included handmade ravioli with sage and butter, porcini, Tuscan fish and earthy seasonal vegetables. Courses were plentiful and delicious, and the convivial atmosphere at the communal table was friendly and fun. Sleep beckoned, and the uninterrupted eight hours must have come courtesy of those Italian shuttered windows!

Early morning Hatha-based yoga with Meredith Gunderson takes place at the restored building Palazzo Regina, a short walk through the pretty gardens from Villa Pia. An experienced yogi, curator and mystic, Meredith studies and teaches spiritual practices that bring us more fully into our authentic selves. It's definitely worth getting up early for! Whether you're a beginner or a

Ros and Charlotte encourage stepping back from the hurly-burly of the daily routine and mindfully engaging in self-care



Time at the retreat is an opportunity to relax and restore



Mellow autumn light plays on the weathered stone walls of the villa

The rustic daily bulletin board



Local Tuscan fare was a highlight at every meal



Villa Pia, Lippiano



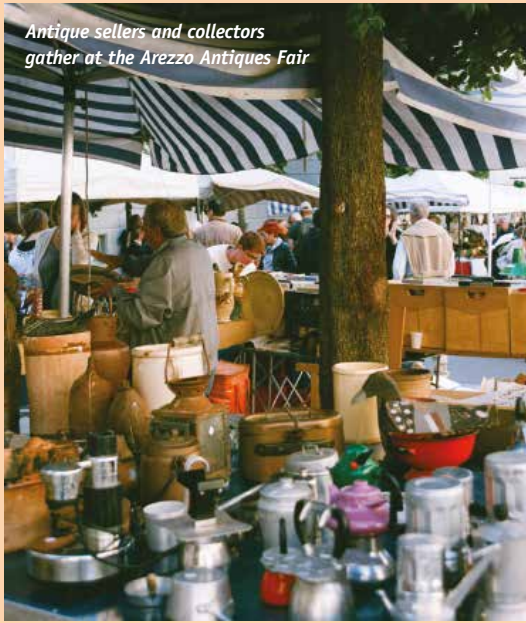
Restful rooms with stunning countryside views



Magnificent vista from the pool

EXPLORE AREZZO

Antique sellers and collectors gather at the Arezzo Antiques Fair



Perched on a hilltop overlooking four valleys, medieval Arezzo is about a 30-minute drive from Villa Pia. Home to an array of historical sites including churches, museums, fortresses and monuments, visitors may recognise the town as the setting of Roberto Benigni's Oscar award winning film *Life is Beautiful*. The Piazza Grande, at the heart of the town centre, is a good place to start your visit with a quick *espresso* before meandering through the cobbled streets and soaking up the Tuscan atmosphere. The Church of San Francesco, considered the most beautiful church in Arezzo, is a must see and well worth a visit. Piero della Francesca's early Renaissance fresco cycle depicting the *Legend of the True Cross* is mesmerising. One of the most admired 15th-century Italian painters, his series of scenes tells the story of the origins of the wood which was used to build the cross on which Christ was crucified, and is considered a true masterpiece of its time. (Do book in advance.) A short walk to Arezzo's Cathedral, Cattedrale dei Santi Pietro e Donato, and the artist's fresco of Mary Magdalene further demonstrates Francesca's prominence in the town.

This affluent town also offers stylish shopping with high-end boutiques, jewellery and antique shops and great bookshops. But the highlight, on the first Sunday of the month and then every subsequent Saturday, is the Arezzo Antiques Fair, which takes over the Piazza Grande, Piazza San Francesco and Logge Vasari. With dealers arriving from across Italy, over 500 exhibitors offer furniture, books, porcelains, glass, fabrics and the most unexpected finds to satisfy every fancy. This is no ordinary flea market, with stalls spreading over the alleys and squares across the historical centre creating a vibrant and bustling atmosphere. Piazza Grande is a lovely place to have lunch or a late afternoon *gelato* and sit back and watch the world go by.



An array of fine vintage textiles on sale in Arezzo



The joy of eating seasonal dishes steeped in Italian tradition

Villa life

Earthy vegetables sourced locally



more experienced yogi, Meredith's mindful approach gently guides you to a place of personal balance. There are no hard or fast rules, just a gentle enquiry followed by blissful, effortless rest. And the views from the *palazzo* over the Tuscan landscape are spectacular, especially on a misty morning. It was easy slotting into this slower pace, not least because of the uplifting surroundings.

Back at Villa Pia, breakfast was just as regional as dinner, with lovely home-made bread, local hams and cheese, and fresh fruit piled high. We made our own coffee (my flat white was delicious) using the state of the art coffee machine in the kitchen (easy peasy once you get the hang of it) and the fridge was stocked with every type of milk imaginable and plenty of fresh fruit juice. With the autumn sun still warm enough to sit out in, breakfast was taken casually outdoors under the rustic pergola overlooking the rolling hills.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Our first workshop set the tone for the rest of the week. With over 30 years' experience, Ros's passion for creating is evident to anyone lucky enough to work with her. Patience and encouragement are the hallmarks of her workshops, and after a helpful demonstration we were in full flow, choosing beautiful paper, stitching and gluing, and creating our individual leather-bound books. The pleasure in making something from scratch with a similar-minded group is immeasurable and the finished result is a unique journal of which I am incredibly proud. Later in the week, Ros enlightened us to the magical world of cyanotypes – a photographic printing process that produces a cyan-blue print through the magic of the sunshine. A simple process using paper and chemicals and a chosen negative or object, it's a satisfying process watching your paper change colour under the Tuscan sun and your artwork magically appear. Ros's 'can do' mantra is highly infectious and her workshops are pure joy, and a world away from the daily grind back in Blighty.

One of the highlights of the retreat was our trip to nearby Arezzo with its historical centre and cobbled streets filled to bursting with antique dealers and collectors on the first Sunday of each month. Ros and Charlotte gently guided our visit, pointing out places of interest and historical charm, while leaving us space to find our own inspiration. Soaking up the sunshine with plenty of pavement café pitstops, we scoured for paintings, books, local ceramics, glass, knick-knacks and curiosities of all kinds. Roman coins, tarnished candlesticks, old violins and even a grandfather clock were sighted in the Piazza Grande, overlooked



A bounty of squashes at the market



Karen hones her pasta making skills



The gentle art of cyanotypes – a simple photographic printing process

Making cyanotypes



Creating a floral cyanotype



The prints ready for collection

There's time to take life at a slower pace and savour the good things



Bland Badger offers everyone the chance to reconnect with themselves



The olives are ready for harvesting by hand in the autumn



This olive farm is near to Villa Pia



A simple lunch among the olive groves

At the olive farm

Our photography workshop



Mise en place for the still life photography course at the villa



The joy of discovering beauty in the details on this elegant table



The communal dining table set for another convivial meal

by the medieval walls and Renaissance architecture. With its wealth of art, history and religion, we couldn't leave Arezzo without a visit to the Basilica of St Francis, where Piero della Francesca's frescoes, damp and aged, are mesmerising. A refreshing glass of Aperol spritz discussing our flea market finds ended the trip on a particularly high 'Italian' note.

LIFE THROUGH A LENS

Back at Villa Pia, Charlotte's expertise at photographing interiors and food was invaluable at her photography workshop, where she shared tips for developing our own photographic style inspired by the beauty of the Italian landscape. Using the incredible natural light and a range of treasures from our flea market finds, she showed us how to style our props and get the best shot possible from our cameras and phones – my Instagram images have never been so stylish! And to complement our images, *Sunday Telegraph* columnist and former fashion editor Aly Walsh's writing workshop revealed a rare insight into the creative world of blogging. Her experience of writing her own successful style blog, *That's Not My Age*, was an eye-opener and a useful lesson in how to write creatively online. Her candid approach was refreshing, and much was revealed about the highs and lows of blogging.

Other excursions included a visit to the local Apothecary Museum and lunch at an old olive farm. At the next retreat, Ros and Charlotte will introduce floral designer Amy Merrick, who will be guiding workshops on foraging for local flora and creating beautiful table settings, with photography expertise by Charlotte. Cookery courses are available alongside massage, swimming, tennis and simply doing nothing at all.

Being creative is a state of mind, and the Bland Badger creative retreat offers everyone the chance to reconnect with themselves, have fun, and live in the moment. And Villa Pia is the perfect setting, with all the elements of a hotel but the atmosphere of a charming country house that you'll want to re-visit year after year. I know I will. ■

FIND OUT MORE

- Bland Badger creative retreats run annually from 3-10 October 2020 and then two retreats from 24 September – 2 October, and 2-8 October in 2021. Early booking is advised. One week staying at Villa Pia, including all meals and drinks, workshops and Arezzo Market excursion, from £1,200. Transfers to Villa Pia from Florence Airport can be arranged.
- For more information, including travel details visit www.blandbadger.com