

SPORTIGALLO; le CASACCE
INFORMATION for TENANTS

APRIL 1998

Sportigallo Information for Tenants

April, 1998
REV 5, 4/28/98

Here are answers to some likely questions.

1 Address

22 Via di Parga
Mulin del Piano
(Firenze) Italia

Having recited this address, we should admit that it's not useful. Mail is not delivered, during our short visits.

For an informal purpose, the name "Sportigallo" is of some use: some old timers in Mulin del Piano, the nearest big town, would know the name (the butchers, for example, know the name); still more people in the nearer villages, Doccia and Fornello would know it.

Incidentally, the name of the town is spelled in two or three ways:

Molino del Piano
Molin del Piano
Mulin del Piano

The last spelling seems to be archaic Italian, but it is the form my grandmother always used.

2 Telephone

There is no phone in the house.

2.1 Outgoing Calls

Nearest: Fornello and Doccia, in the Tabacchi (general store): these phones are easy to use: there's a booth; the call is metered and you pay only afterwards (I've never tried an overseas call; don't know if it's possible, there). *Drawback:* the phones are accessible only when the shop is open (more on that difficult topic, below).

Easiest: Buy a magnetic-stripe phone card, at a tabacchi (for 5000 or 10000 lire, I think). Nearly all pay phones now read these cards, and spare you the trouble of producing the right change. If you're incredibly organized, you'll carry two of these cards, in case one runs out. In Molino, there's such a card-reader phone booth on the southern edge of town. The booth stands just beside the main road, next to a newsstand at the edge of a tiny park. The kids enjoy a sort of miniature merry-go-round while I make my tedious calls.

Fanciest: For overseas calls, I have used the Post & Telegraph office in Florence. The scheme is the same as at the Tabacchi, but they are prepared for overseas calls and can advise one.

2.2 Incoming Calls

Best: Paolo Soni, our caretaker, can take a message for you *in Italian*:
 Paolo Soni (& his wife, Franca): 055-831-7290 (f rom U.S., full code
 would be 011 39 55
 831 7290)
 (55 is code for Florence region.) If you're expecting a call, you can
 check with him. In an emergency, Paolo or his wife would take the
 message, and when he got home he would drive up to deliver the
 message to you. Evidently, that's a chore for him, so you would save
 that method for a real emergency.

English-only speakers: For someone who speaks no Italian, Paolo's number would not be
 useful. Such a person could use either of two methods:
 call our lawyer, instead:
 Andrea Scavetta: 57-14-89 (f rom U.S., full code would be 011 39 55 57
 1489)
 FAX 57-01-75 (f rom U.S., full code would be 011 39 55 57
 0175)
 Sig. Scavetta, an agreeable man who speaks English well, would likely
 respond by phoning Paolo.

call us (in the U.S.: (617) 491-7695), and we will call Paolo, so as to relay the
 message to you.

2.3 Cell Phone?

We thought this might solve the phone problem, for people uncomfortable with isolation. One
 can indeed rent a cell phone—but it was still hundreds of dollars per week (1996), so I suppose
 we'll all wait till the rates come down. Rates should come down soon, since the government
 telephone monopoly appears to be ending.

Your American cell phone will not work in Europe, I'm told: wrong frequencies. Too bad.

3 Directions

From Florence, it's a 25-minute drive. The map below should help...
fig. omitted

but here are the directions, in words:

Follow signs for Pontassieve.

This is toward the Northeast. The road follows the Arno for a while (river is to your right), wanders from city into outskirts (big, ugly apartment buildings), then suddenly takes you into the country. You will have no trouble following the road; there are not choices. A railroad track runs just to the left of the road, higher on the hillside.

At le Sieci:

take a sharp left off the main road, at a light. The sign will say "Molino del Piano" and perhaps also "Santa Brigida." You will be following a small stream (which runs at the left side of the road). Now you are on a very small road, and clearly in the country.

If you miss the turn:

Then you will find yourself in increasingly built-up looking town of le Sieci. The road broadens, here; apartment houses and shops are set back from the road—in contrast to the earlier stretch of road, where the houses crowd in on the street. If you see all this, turn around!

To Molino:

The correct side road takes you, in about 5 minutes, to the small town of Mulin del Piano (hereinafter, "Molino"). The road is extremely narrow. At the far end of the town you will meet your first choice, just beyond a

statue of a falling soldier¹. Bear *right*, following the sign for Doccia, rejecting the branch that goes toward Santa Brigida.

To Doccia:

The road soon becomes steep, winding (and beautiful). You will pass, and look back down on-, a castle where one of the Medici boys was held prisoner (you'll see a single crenelated tower; the place, owned by an Englishwoman, is called "Torre a Decima"). As you come over the crest of the hill you will find that you're on the spine of a ridge, and a couple of hundred yards on, when you can see the spire of Doccia's little church, you will find a very small road branching off to the left; take it. A sign there says Fornello, I think.

turning to Sporti

you follow the small winding road about 2.2Km. (We'll backtrack in a minute, to this turnoff, in order to tell you how to get the key.) The road dips and turns left, then begins to climb steeply. At the crest of this little climb look to your right and you will see an unpaved road turning about 160°—almost doubling back. (Sometimes there is a sign at this turning, saying "Sportigallo.")

Take that turn. You'll see a big old cypress 50 meters on; it guards the entrance to Sportigallo—this unpaved road goes to Sportigallo (the big house), to another couple of houses farther on, and to le Casacce. Now pass that big cypress and be alert for a steep little drive-way-like road up to the left: this is the drive to le Casacce. Its beginning is paved in concrete. As of April 1998, this drive is *difficult*. That means you need to get a running start from the main drive, and you need to try to keep your wheels on the concrete paths. By July, we're hoping it'll be repaved.

Take it, as far as you can go, and you will find yourself at the little house. (Incidentally, there is another drive linking le Casacce with Sportigallo: it is less steep, but calls for a U turn at Sportigallo. You may get at the house that way, and we all did until 1989. But we hope that the partially-paved drive (just concrete runs for tires left and right) will be easier for everyone.)

1. I can't resist pointing out how strange—and touching—this characteristic Italian war memorial seems to my American eyes: it is one of *many* showing a soldier *dying*. A very good idea, it seems to me, to remind people that this is the immediate result of war. I have never seen one of these in the U.S., where war memorials try to make war seem at least exciting, and perhaps even fun.

4 Getting Key

The key is held by our caretaker, Paolo. Here's Paolo:

fig. omitted

In the directions we just talked you through, we passed his house. So, here we will backtrack, as promised, in order to get the key. In life, of course, you would do no such thing: you would pick up the key first, before driving to Sporti.

Paolo lives at

1 Via di Parga

1 Via di Parga, you may recognize, is just a few house numbers different from the address of the house where you are going. That is good, of course: it reflects the fact that Paolo lives about as nearby as possible.

He is a very able man, who knows not only farming but also quite a lot about plumbing, masonry work and painting, having done all the work of restoring the splendid house where he lives. He is also earnest and extremely personable and outgoing, in the Tuscan tradition. His wife cleans our house before each group arrives, and takes the sheets and towels for washing, when you leave.

You should pick up the **key** from Paolo or from his wife, at his house. Here's how to find his house:

You recall that you take a left turn toward Sportigallo, just as the church of Doccia comes into sight. There's a sign for Fornello, you recall. The very first driveway to the left—a half kilometer beyond the turn—is a dirt road sloping down toward what looks like several houses. You should take that dirt road. Below and to the left you will see a tennis court. The several houses will reveal themselves to be one large house. Paolo owns the near end of the house—the part that looks new and spiffy.

Procedure:

Here are a couple of suggestions:

- Arrive before dark. This won't be hard, in midsummer, of course. (My wife, Debbie, always likes to add, 'As soon as you arrive at Sporti, go through all the rooms, throwing open the shutters. Until you do, the house will seem dark and dreary).

- Telephone Paolo a day or so before you arrive to say when you would like to pick up the key. (If you speak no Italian, or if you are going straight from airport to Sporti, we can do the calling for you.)

...Several Keys.

You will get two or three keys. One fits the kitchen door, which is the door by which you must enter the house; the other fits the stable—now a storeroom, at the eastern end of the house; a third key opens the door to a second storeroom where the water tanks and circuit breakers are (northeast corner of the house).

Don't Lock Yourself Out!

The kitchen door latch is of the spring-return type rather than just deadbolt. In 1990 I fashioned a little fork from wood, for the purpose of holding *open* the spring return latch. I would *leave that fork in place*. This arrangement requires that you lock the door by turning the latch so as to drive home the deadbolt. That's a good scheme! This little fork can stay in place at all times. The deadbolt does the job.

If the little wooden fork has disappeared, then you're in real danger of locking yourself out, and I would hide the kitchen-door key (or a copy) somewhere outdoors.

5 Shopping: food

Serious Shopping

The most convenient markets are in Molino.

The COOP is a small supermercato that sells everything but fresh meat, vegetables and fruit. The COOP is dull, but very handy for a person who doesn't want to look up the word for "cream cheese" or anything else, for that matter: you just grab what you need from the shelves. The COOP sells beer and wine, too, incidentally. Cheap Italian beer is quite good—much better than American.

Near the COOP is a fruit and vegetable store run by a most charming young man. Here you can get away with pointing rather than speaking, if necessary.

Meat

Molino has two butcher's shops: one near the COOP, the other at the northern end of town. Both are good; run by nice people. The northern one, at least, sells local eggs. Meat is sold by the "etto." An etto is 0.1 kilo or about 1/5 pound. We usually don't try to specify how many *etti*, but instead tell the butcher that we want steak for four adults, for example.

The butchers have their own peculiar open/closed days—different from those of the general grocers! I cannot remember the schedule—but take a look at the sign on the door of Celli's (a couple of doors down from the COOP), or ask someone, so that you're not disappointed on the day you decide to have bifestek(spelling?) alla Fiorentina!

Food: odds & ends

The tabacchi at Doccia sells bread, butter, pasta, jam, cheese, eggs, milk: it's a general store. In principle, the tabacchi at Fornello is similar, though much smaller. But the woman in charge there often seems to be out picking mushrooms, and she's not very friendly. So, try Doccia.

Two Kinds of Milk

You may not have met the choice between "fresh" milk (the kind that requires refrigeration—the only kind I've seen in the U.S.) and "irradiated" milk. We use mostly *latte fresca* just because we're conservative; we keep one or two of the other cartons on hand, in case we run out of *fresca*. For that purpose, the non-refrigerated form is useful.

Hours: when to shop

We still aren't good at remembering when shops are open. But here's an approximate schedule, from memory:

8:30 – 1:00 p.m.

4:30 – 7:00 p.m.

That sounds straightforward, but note some surprises:

Grocers are closed Saturday afternoon, all day Sunday, and Wednesday afternoons (this last is a special summer closing for the region just around Florence). (This rule does not apply to the tiny general stores called "tabacchi").

6 Money; banks

This can be difficult if you think of it at the wrong hour. Banks close at noon or 1:00 p.m.—but open between 2:00 and 3:00, at least in Pontassieve. Recently, Molino has gotten an ATM (automatic teller machine), and that's a BIG help. In fact, the ATM has just about eliminated the money problem. In case you're interested, though, we're including the old lore on bank hours, below.

Easy Money

We used to include in this writeup lots of talk about bank hours; this discussion is now pretty-much obsolete: you can use a credit card in an automatic teller machine, down in Mulino. You need a "PIN," as you probably know.

The bank machine is visible from the main road as you are approaching the northern edge of Mulino: it's on a side road off to the right. Beyond it, you'll see some newish housing.

The exchange rate is good. You're charged 1% or 2% (I forget which), on top of whatever rate you pay your credit card company for a cash advance. This works out, I think, almost exactly equal to what you would pay for traveler's' checks—and it's easier to use.

(Incidentally, machines will eat your card if you enter the wrong code three times. In Switzerland, of all places, the defective machines ate both my credit cards; my codes were correct, the machines didn't recognize that. The human in charge would not return the card to me. Beware Swiss bankers!)

I would take some traveler's checks for odd emergencies, away from Mulino.

A Backup Source of Money at Odd Times, in Florence

If your credit card gets eaten and banks are closed—you're broke and it's Saturday evening or Sunday—there still is hope. You need to know that there is one fanatic who stays open even when the train station *cambio* is closed: this is a fellow who sits in what literally is a hole in the wall just behind the Palazzo Vecchio. His rates also are better than the banks.

7 Driving: gas; parking in Florence

7.1 Gasoline

Gas(oline) is sold outside the tiny tabacchi at the north end of Molino (near the statue of the falling soldier). It's also sold at the Santa Brigida hardware store (at the near, Eastern end of town).

The hours are peculiar: do not expect to get gas just any time you need it. Morning and late afternoon are the best times; noon to 4 or 5 is the worst: gas can be hard to find, even on main roads.

Automated gas pumps

These can save you if you need gas at lunchtime. But beware pumps marked "GAS." In Italian, "GAS" really *is* gas—not gasoline: it's natural gas, I guess, for the few cars that can burn it.

7.2 Parking in Florence

Parking in Florence is easy, if you know how to do it, and almost impossible if you don't know how.

The difficulty: the center of the city is closed to cars. Agreeable but firm policemen turn you away if you try to drive to the Uffizi, for example. (This policy is a very good idea, of course, keeping the city tolerably quiet and almost safe for pedestrians.) The police will allow a car in for exceptional reasons: delivering passengers and luggage to a hotel; driving to a hospital—and countless others that might appeal to a rule-bending Italian cop.

The solution: Lungarno

We always park beside the river, as far in as we can go. The road into Florence from Sporti carries you alongside the Arno if you allow it to. You allow this by following signs for "Lungarno" (roughly, "along-the-Arno"). The Lungarno is a pretty avenue with a leafy park between it and the river (the park and river are on your left, as you drive into town); a row of trees and diagonal parking spaces separate the two directions of the avenue. Eventually, you will be forced to turn off this Lungarno; you are forced to turn right onto a big road that skirts the center of the city. The bridge at that point is, I think, Ponte S. Niccolo; the street that you would be obliged to follow to the right is Viale Giovanni Amendola.

We *don't* take that street. Instead, we park just before we are forced off the Lungarno. A fancy-looking hotel is on the right at that point; I think it's called "L'Europeo," but I may be wrong. We usually park on the diagonal, heading into the avenue's median divider. The trees shade the car, and parking is *FREE*.

The walk from here to, say, the Uffizi is probably a half mile—and a pleasant one.

Here's a map of the place where we like to park:

Figure omitted.

7.3 Getting to Florence Without Driving In(!)

Train from le Sieci

Some friends of ours discovered this trick recently, when they stayed at Sporti with two elderly women and a tiny baby: they feared a tiring walk into the center of Florence from the Lungarno (where we had suggested they park). They solved the problem by parking in le Sieci, close to the train station, and taking the train in and out of Florence. The station is up a side road to the left, and there's free parking. Trains run roughly hourly; more often during commuter hours, less often in the middle of the day.

8 Restaurants

Fancy

Aldo's Ristorante "*Il Maccherone*" tel 83-17-594

Aldo's in Doccia is very good, but quite expensive, and often crowded. Park in the public parking lot to the left, just before the trees and arbor. There no longer is outdoor seating. A lot of people in big cars come out on weekends. I think you need a reservation—but I haven't been to Aldo's in some years.

Closed Mondays.

Plain

We prefer a rougher place, nominally a pizza parlor, but much more interesting than that sounds.

In Santa Brigida:

Our favorite local restaurant (but you'll gather from the description just below that our tastes are peculiar, and may not match yours!) is Santa Brigida's **Il Nappino**, an ugly but **wonderful** restaurant near the eastern end of town, just above the main street. This place is noisy, and usually crowded; the building is recent and ugly; the huge TV is always on in World Cup years. People sit at long tables; the waiters squeeze past. When the weather is mild, you can sit outside at the edge of a small public square.

But it is our favorite place to eat in all of Italy (yes, we have odd tastes). We find it is wonderful fun to put ourselves into the midst of this bustling happy local party (sometimes an entire soccer team will come in and fill a long table; there are families with babies). The menu includes good pizza (cooked in a big open-mouthed oven visible behind the counter), but I don't like pizza, and I had, instead, the most delicious pasta I have ever had anywhere: pasta *alla boscaiolo*, with mushrooms that must have been picked just outside town.

The waiters do their difficult work brilliantly: they stay calm and friendly through it all. They even seem to find the place jolly, as we do. The place is so good that it sometimes gathers a 20-minute line, on weekends.

After your meal, you can walk outside onto the terrace, get a gelato and a cappuccino from the bar, and sit in the long summer twilight, enjoying the amazing fact that here old people, families with small children, and teenagers can share a place and enjoy it. If only such a place could exist in America! Maybe after the revolution.

9 The house: Water

9.1 Main supply: Not for drinking

Our water comes from a well about 150 meters up the hill. There is a concrete pump house up there. Until 1996, we had always drunk that water. Now we don't.

Gravity carries water down the hill from a tank in the pump house, into a couple of big tanks in our house: about two days' worth of water are stored in the house. A pump sends the water upstairs. If, at some time, you don't get water in the house, you should go into the room that holds the water tanks, to see what's up:

1. first, peek under the lids of the tanks to see if they are full. If they are *not* and if water is not running in, then the problem lies up at the pump house: a problem for *Paolo*.
2. if the tanks are full, but the water is not getting upstairs, then you should hear the pump running. You might make sure that the circuit-breaker is on. After that, ask Paolo to take a look.
If he can't solve the problem, he'll call our plumbers, in Molino.

Drinking WATER (important!)

We had always drunk the water (which comes from a well about 60 feet deep, 100 yards from the house), till last year. As I've said, we don't any longer.

The town water experts told us that their analysis had shown an excess of an unspecified "mineral." We thought maybe iron, but we're not sure.

We use the tap water for cooking and for tooth-brushing, but not for drinking, even in coffee: the problem is not bacteria, so cooking presumably does not solve the problem, whatever it is.

Water to drink:

As you may recall from the photo-brochure, there's good water down at the bottom of the ravine behind the house (Fonte Cavallino). Often we're too lazy for that walk, and instead buy bottled water. Occasionally, we've filled water bottles from town water fountains; but you're likely to find that a nuisance, too. Bottled water is cheap, and just about everyone in Italy drinks it, everywhere. So, you'll feel Italian using it, too!

Keeping the Cisterns Filled

Unless Paolo has changed this, the arrangement for refilling the cisterns is no longer automatic. Instead, every few days Paolo goes and starts the pump, up at the pump house 100 yards up the hill. He does this so that he can flush out the rusty water that comes when pumping first starts (this is rust from the iron pipe that lines the well). I'm not at all sure this is necessary: is a rusty tinge to the bathwater bad? But if Paolo holds to this regimen, then you may need to check the tanks every day or so, to make sure you're not about to run out of water. If you are, then you should tell Paolo—either when you see him working the land, or when you stop at his house as you drive off somewhere.

9.2 Hot water

There are two electric hot water heaters: a small one over the sink in the kitchen; a bigger one in the bathroom. Both should be *OFF* except when you need some hot water.

The kitchen unit heats fast. We turn it on when we cook a meal, and turn it off after we have washed the dishes.

The bathroom heater is slower: takes about an hour to heat up, so we turn it on late in the afternoon, and turn it off when we go to bed. We find we get one large bath per tank of hot water. It's a good idea to run *straight hot* first, then cool it with cold. If you run a tepid bath on an American scale, you may be disappointed to find that you then can't warm it up: all the hot water may be gone. The water heater is pretty new (1996), and is turned up to maximum temperature. All you can do is husband that modest amount of hot water.

Circuit Breaker

When both water-heaters are on (the upstairs water heater (bathwater) and downstairs (over

sink)), you'll find you're right at the edge of an overload. Even turning on a lamp will then shut off everything. So, don't run both heaters at once.

9.3 Spring water

At the bottom of the ravine behind the house is a spring of especially good water. The spring even has a name: "cavallino," "little horse." The contadini at Sportigallo always thought that water was worth the walk. It probably would not occur to any American to make such an effort to get water that is better only in the subtlest way. Still, we pretend we can taste the difference, in order to support the tradition, and we do go fill a few flasks at the spring, every day or two.

You will find the path overgrown and steep. I usually take a stick, because I am nervous about snakes, and if no one else has cleared the path, I take a *segolo*—a tool that combines machete and ax, and which you will find in the stable (see below)—to make my next trip easier.

9.4 Bottled Water

As we've said, bottles are our usual source of drinking water, since we're lazy. We buy a half dozen 2-liter plastic bottles at the COOP. We also happen to like fizzy water, and the spring, though romantic and tasty, isn't fizzy.

10 Doctors; Hospitals; First Aid

10.1 Hospitals

Two hospitals are in range; a third, at Pontassieve, would likely forward you to one of the others, for anything serious.

Best Hospital

We learned in 1996, through arduous experience, that the best hospital is not the one in the center of Florence: Santa Maria Novella, near the Duomo. We went first to that hospital, following an Italian's recommendation.² Instead, we'd like to steer you to the suburban

2. The problems we met were two: 1) total lack of parking space, posed a monstrous problem. I had to leave everyone else, and didn't return for an hour and a half. 2) total lack of organization: I found my ailing daughter still sitting in the corridor. No one had even

hospital, on the near side of Florence. This suburban hospital is less busy, and better organized—though still you'll do better to find a private doctor, if you can.
miscellany

Hospital in Florence, in case it's nearer to you sometime

Directions:

Follow the Lungarno as usual, as you enter Florence. At the via Tintori, a road normally closed to cars, you should bear right—and be prepared to explain yourself to the *vigili* who are stationed there to keep cars out. You should consult your detailed street map.

Hospital at Pontassieve (third choice)

The hospital in Pontassieve is probably the easiest to get to (it's across the river and then north about one mile), and would be adequate for minor problems; probably not busy, too. For a serious problem, however, we were told that Pontassieve would simply transfer a patient to Florence. So, better to go to the suburban hospital first, for anything serious.

We also learned that a local *farmacista*, like the one at St. Brigida, can provide drugs, including antibiotics, and advice that in the U.S. would be in a doctor's (monopolized!-) domain. So, you might start with the *farmacista*, for a problem like diarrhea (the problem one of us struggled with, last year). The *farmacista* also is the site of scheduled office hours of a touring doctor.

In gloomy summary, what we learned by having a sick child for the first time in our many trips to Sporti, is that medicine in Italy works very badly. When we did at last find a good doctor, through a friend, he sent us to an expensive, gleaming *private* laboratory (Fanfani), in order to carry out the lab test that the hospital had neglected to do,. This lab, on a pretty square in central Florence, looked like a fancy hotel—complete with Cambodian doorman! Almost enough to make a person vote Republican!

10.2 Doctors

A Doctor is a New Neighbor at Sporti

Over at Sportigallo is a useful new tenant: a pediatrician named
Dott. Stefano Ferraro
tel. 83 61 382

His phone number probably won't be useful, since le Casacce has no phone; more to the point, you can just *go* over there in an emergency. His is the third apartment, as you walk down the slope at the back of Sportigallo: first is Bellagambi; second, a Japanese musician; third, the doctor. He speaks adequate English and is agreeable.

In Molino:

Dr. Baglioni makes house calls. (He also conducts a walk-in clinic at Doccia once a week; ask Paolo if you want to know which day.)

There are other doctors in Mulino, including a woman. We don't know their names.

At Santa Brigida:

asked her what was wrong, and there was no promise that she would be seen any time soon. The door to the emergency room was locked. 3) total lack of English-speakers. I could manage, but my wife and kids had not done so well, in the interim.

The farmacista at the far (western) end of the town's main street (really its only street!) can tell you the regular visiting hours of its rotating doctors, as we've suggested above.

10.3 Take Your Favorite Medicines With You

We wasted time and energy trying to interpret the farmacista's and hospital's recommendations concerning drugs for diarrhea. We'd suggest that you pack whatever your standard remedies are for intestinal problems, colds, etc. It's difficult to judge, for example, whether you want to adopt the Italian practice of taking bacteria designed to replace intestinal bacteria eliminated by an antibiotic!

10.4 First Aid

There is a simple first-aid kit in the bathroom: band-aids, some bandages, merthiolate, ointment, calamine lotion, and a snakebite kit.

11 Riding & Swimming

11.1 Riding

A New Pleasure: Riding School/ Tuscan Dude-ranch!

Through a friend, we discovered a wonderful riding school at Grignano, the ridge above Doccia on the way to Pontassieve. Our daughter took a couple of long lessons—and wanted to take lots more.

The lesson, which costs 35,000 lire—around \$22—begins with an hour's instruction as one rides in a small group around the ring (with a huge view in the background!) Her instructor was a multilingual cowboy named Franco. He runs the school. He is gentle and patient and intelligent; looks kind of like a hippy intellectual. His colleague Andy was just as nice.

After the hour's instruction came an hour's walk through woods and across fields (the nice cowboy stretched the whole thing to about 2 1/2 hours, rather than the nominal 2).

The school uses western saddles (the kind with the big, reassuring pommel), at least for beginners like our daughter. They appear to be open 7 days a week. I don't know if they take a vacation in August, but I would guess that they don't, since other people's vacations provide most of the school's business.

You can call to make a date, though we made our dates by driving up there (10 to 12 minutes from Sporti). The place is called *Vallebona*, and you'll notice signs for it, beginning down in Mulin del Piano.

11.2 Swimming

Visitors with kids often ask us about swimming. We have never tried, but some friends have. There is an outdoor public pool (*piscina*) next to the Arno just as you enter Florence from our side. The park looks nice: there is a big pool, a small pool, and lots of grass.

The Sea?

It's a long drive: about an hour and a half, and the beaches are crowded. If you had a couple of days, you should go to the island of Elba, then stay at Marina di Campo or Procchio or

Marciana Marina. But you'd have to scramble for reservations if you went in midsummer. Mediterranean beaches are notoriously overcrowded.

12 Things to do nearby: walks, drives

A Sketch of the Property

This map doesn't really tell you a lot, but does show the little house (Le Casacce) and the big house (Sportigallo) and the paths and driveways the link them. At the very top you see what looks like a road, labelled "fossetto." This is the start of a long driveway to a farmhouse (now a summer house) called "Marco." You can also make out a path heading north from Le Casacce and stopping: that is the path down to the spring, Cavallino, which is down in the "fosso" or "fosseto"—which I think translates to "ravine." The little spur starting to the upper left is the road continuing toward Fornello. The road that turns into dotted lines, toward Vignale, is indeed very "dotted" in life: it's an overgrown thicket, in fact.

fig. omitted

12.1 Very Nearby:

12.1.1 Fornello

You can walk to Fornello in about 15 minutes, following the road the you turned off in order to take the driveway to Sporti. I would take this walk early or late in the day, when the sun is not hot. As usual, you will enjoy a lovely view as you follow the road. From Fornello you can look,

this time, *across* Sporti's valley, eastward to the biggest nearby mountain, Vallombrosa.

The village is *minute* and cute. You will see a few new summer houses, but most of the village is old, and the tiny scale of the whole is quite charming. There is a miniature flatiron building—well, really a pie-slice building—and a church that opens only now and then. If you're lucky, you'll find the tabacchi open, and perhaps you can get a *gelato* as a reward for the effort of your walk.

You may notice a sign boasting of a *castello*. This refers to the ruins at the top of the steep, isolated hill at whose base Fornello sits. Years ago, we used to walk up to the top of the hill, where, climbing among the ruined walls, we would discover the commanding view in all directions that led a succession of warriors to place themselves up there. The most recent occupants were the Germans, and then the Allies, and when I was a child I used to be thrilled by the occasional helmet still to be found. Now that goats no longer wander about up there, the place has become entirely overgrown, and we have not climbed the hill in about ten years. Even then, we carried a stick, to let any resident snakes that we were coming.

A back route to Fornello

The nicest walk from Sporti will take you to Fornello by a back route: you will descend into Fornello along the spine of a ridge. This walk can begin on either of two branches: the easy or the adventurous.

Easy branch

The easy branch begins on the main road, about 50 meters beyond the “driveway” of Sportigallo (in the direction of Fornello). You will see a tall gate, closed to cars. Enter alongside the gate: you will be approaching the ravine behind le Casacce, site of the spring, “cavallino,” incidentally. This is the beginning of the long driveway that goes up to a house that is almost always empty (this house used to be called “Marco,” after its contadino: the master's name is long forgotten!). If you find people at home when you get to the end of the drive, you may want to retreat. But if the house is boarded up, as usual, you can walk past, and at the far end of the house you will meet a path that runs along the flank of the hillside. Take that path to the left.

It will climb gently till you are on a ridge, and as you begin to descend you will discover that you are coming into Fornello. You can reward yourself with a *gelato* (if the proprietress isn't out picking mushrooms), and then you can take the easy walk home, along the road.

Adventurous branch

This branch takes you through the *pineta* (the pine woods) to the path that you would meet behind the house we have just mentioned. The path used to be well-defined—its the one used by the contadino who grew up in le casacce and courted a girl from ‘Marco;’ he married her, and they lived at the little house for years.

Begin your walk at the pump house. I'd wear shoes rather than sandals, since you'll be crossing fields (these were cut, when we were there, last June). Look west, with the pineta on your right, and you will see a path entering the woods, almost at once. In 1993 I spent a few hours clearing this path with a scythe. Hunters and a friend of ours who rides her horse here have helped keep the path reasonably clear.

You want to head north-northwest, passing through a short section of woods, then walk across a couple of fields so as to join the path that carries you onto the ridge and then down to Fornello. In 1993, this walk was not difficult: the path was pretty clear, and the fields were mown.

12.1.2 Santa Brigida

This is a 15 minutes' drive to the West. (You'll find Santa Brigida on the map back on p.3.) Keep going, beyond Fornello. St. Brigida clings to a very steep hillside (as they say; but you'll believe the metaphor, in this case). Again there is just one street, except for a few tiny side spurs. There are some shops: a good hardware store; a butcher and grocery store; a bank (the one that won't admit you unless they know you! —see *money*, above); ice cream, of course; last and most, the most beautiful movie theater in the world: an outdoor theater just to the left of the road in the center of town. It is a *walk-in*, and shows movies Sunday nights about 9:30. If you don't like the movie, you can squirm around in your chair as the films starts, and look down the long valley at dusk. The church bell-tower stands over you as you watch the movie.

Ten minutes beyond Santa Brigida (bear right, not left: the left branch would take you down to Molino) is an isolated little church at the site of a miracle of 400 years ago. It is called Madonna del Sasso ("sasso" = stone: the boulder from which the little shepherd girl saw the madonna arise). You will find a small road to the right from the main road. It climbs the steep hillside through pine woods. There isn't much at the church, except quiet—or an eerie moaning of wind, on a windy day—and its long view over the wilder valley here: less cozy than the view from Sporti.

If you continued on this road, eventually you would meet the road that descends to Fiesole and Florence. But that's a longish drive, and a story for another—paragraph.

Nearby

12.1.3 Fiesole

One can go into Florence *via* Fiesole, a small town—now suburb—a few miles north of the City. We have a friend who does this regularly, but we have found the extra 20 minutes or so more than we are willing to pay, except when we are headed for Fiesole itself. (You'll find Fiesole, too, on the little map on p. 3.)

We did once go to Fiesole from Sporti, to hear some music after dinner. (There are concerts there at least weekly, in the summertime.) The roads from Sporti to Fiesole are small and pretty, and take you into valleys you would not otherwise see. Fiesole sits high on a steep hillside with a grand view of Florence. It's on the fancy and touristy side, of course.

12.2 Farther: Daytrips

Here's a view covering a larger territory: several destinations within a few hours' drive:

fig. omitted

12.2.1 Poppi

Poppi is our favorite little town in the opposite category: not fancy, not at all touristy. It makes a good destination for a day trip (1 1/2 hours each way). You can see it over to the right (the east) on the map below.

fig. omitted

The drive (eastward) takes you down to Pontassieve, then across mountains that are higher and wilder than anything near Florence, then down again into a wide flat valley that looks more French than Italian. Then you will notice an abrupt *bump* of a hill rising from the flat valley ("poppi" means "breasts," I think). On top of the bump sits a little walled town, ignored by ordinary tourists.

No doubt Poppi is somehow a second-rate walled town, with a crenelated castle that is second-rate. But I like it the better for that. The only 'tourists' are Italians, getting away from the city.

At the foot of the fortified tower is a pretty park; next to that is an outdoor dance floor and juke box; next to that is quite a good restaurant called "Il Casentino." There is a big dining room, but we prefer to eat outside, under an arbor. If you go on a weekend, be warned that the place may be crowded, and if you arrive too close the the hour of two you may not get fed at all. (That happened to us in 1990: a wedding party had filled the place up. We got no food at all.) I *think*

you can telephone for a reservation: Tel. 0575/52090.

Attached to the restaurant is a charming pensione. We spent a night there in 1984, and it was just what we had hoped: it feels like an old house. In the hallways are handsome old bureaus and sideboards. Our room looked out over the roofs of the town, and to the wide valley beyond.

Here's a copy of the promotional photo Il Casentino provides. The big dining hall is on the left.

fig. omitted

12.2.2 Siena

We don't need to tell you about Siena; nor do we need to promote it. What we would like to promote is the *back route* to Siena. Here it is, on a map (we've darkened the back route; unfortunately, it comes out colored like the autostrada; the back route is the wiggly one, through Greve):

fig. omitted

The drive starts with the beautiful trip past Doccia over the ridge to Pontassieve. Then the drive is unremarkable for a while, down in the valley, heading south. When you get on smaller roads and head toward Greve, you'll find yourself in wonderful wine-growing countryside, and you'll pass names that ring for anyone who has drunk Chianti: *Castellina in Chianti*, for example.

This route takes a couple of hours to Siena. By the end of a day in Siena, we're usually worn out and content to take the dull but fast route back: the autostrada. Get off that at the southern edge of Florence. I think it's the very first Florence exit. Cut across to Pontassieve. Afraid I'm a little vague, here.

13 Maintenance Details

13.1 Cooking Gas

A small propane tank is enclosed in the stove, lower right. A spare is kept in the storeroom next to the kitchen.

Changing a tank

This is easier than you might expect: open the door, drag the tank out far enough so you can get at it (it's attached to the stove by a rubber hose); squeeze the shiny metal clamp to release the valve that plugs into the tank. You need not shut off the valve, since the tank—called by a name that sounds alarmingly like “bomba”—seals itself when disconnected. When you install the new tank, you may not be able to get gas to flow, at first: push down on the yellow plastic lever on the valve: this primes the gas line, starting the flow of gas. (Make sure the valve is *on*, too.)

Getting a refill

If you remember, you might carry the empty tank with you when you pass through either Molino or Santa Brigida: the hardware store at S. Brigida or a shop on the main street of Molino will fill the tank for a few thousand lire. Pretty obviously, it's a good idea to have a full spare tank, though a tank lasts quite a long time: perhaps a month, in steady use.

If you don't manage to refill the tank, make sure to tell Paolo that a refill is needed. Otherwise the empty tank could sit in the storeroom, waiting to surprise the next person who needs it.

13.2 Firewood

In the stable (not the barn, but the room that is under the bathroom) is a supply of firewood. This supply grows and shrinks from year to year. The woods are full of fallen branches, of course, and in the stable you will find a sharp bow-saw, in case you are energetic.

If you need a lot of wood, you should ask Paolo for help; tell him he can charge us (not you).

13.3 Garbage

Outside every town and village are miniature public dumpsters. We put our garbage into plastic bags, and dump it when we're on our way, driving here or there.

13.4 Miscellaneous Appliances

Gadgets in the house:

- an iron (should be in the storeroom next to the kitchen)
- a 220v-110v converter (ditto): this is big enough for small gadgets like shavers, battery chargers, radios.
- tools: for carpentry (same storeroom); for bushwhacking: in stable

13.5 Laundry

13.6 Sheets and Towels: When you leave

Laundry

As you leave, please leave the key and sheets and towels with Paolo or his wife.

Rather than leave you to figure out how much to pay for sheets and towels, we propose the following scheme:

typical 4-person load³:
lire

You can scale your load appropriately—except that Paolo asks that we not scale *down* for a smaller group, and we’re anxious to keep him and Franca happy!

Of course, we’ve still left it vague, so that you can adjust to the number of sheet and towel changes that you find appropriate. Our proposed payments, above, are arbitrary; we offer them to try to ease the burden of choice, otherwise imposed on you, and to limit the variation so that Franca doesn’t feel alternately under- and over-paid.

13.7 Everyday Laundry

We do ours by hand, in the bathtub (using water left over after a bath). We have heard that there’s a laundromat in Florence. There is none in Pontassieve. We have also never looked into real laundries, which surely are available in Florence.

Once, as you may have noticed in the brochure, we did our laundry outdoors at Fornello.

14 Closing Up

Franca will come after you leave, so you need not clean fanatically. But we sweep before we leave.

You can leave the fridge on, with anything in it that you might like to find if you were arriving. But we shouldn’t leave things, like milk, that wouldn’t survive long. Franca may not think of checking the contents of the fridge before the next person shows up.

We close the shutters on the ground floor, whenever we go out for more than a few minutes. (We leave the keys in the doors—on the inside of each door.) It’s the custom in Italy, and provides some protection. When we close up, we shut all of the shutters on both floors.

Since you can’t tell just when Franca will come up, it’s important to be sure the water heaters are off. Don’t bother to turn off the main valve of the stove’s gas tank (the tank that’s tucked away in the stove).

We put inside the table and chairs that we have used out on the terrace.

15 Neighbors at the Big House

I hope it’s not significant that this topic comes just ahead of “bugs & snakes.”

3. Our guess might be perhaps three sets of sheets, six towels.

Neighbor's Parties

The only really dismaying moment of our last stay came on a Sunday night when music began to boom at us from the terrace of Sportigallo. It was really loud, in the manner of a disco; when it didn't subside (as it would have if it had been a naughty child's work, then suppressed by a parent), I interrupted my dinner to drive over there and tell them that I had come to the country for tranquillity. The young Bellagambi's dutifully turned the volume down low, and we had no further problem. They seemed surprised to find that they *had* a neighbor.

I hope that my one indignant visit will be sufficient. If it isn't, feel free to do what I did once again, explaining that you're a friend of the owner.

The older Bellagambi generation also gave a Sunday evening party, but their was not shockingly loud, and we even kind of enjoyed the music in the distance. Wouldn't want it often; once in a while seems all right.

Neighbors Picking Cherries, etc.

These same people may wander over and pick cherries near the house where you're staying. They may be technically within their rights, since they have taken over the work of having our crops cultivated, and therefore are entitled to the fruits of that cultivation. Still, you are entitled to glower at them and make them feel guilty if they disturb your breakfast or dinner. We go once such visit, from a galootish fellow who did not apologize—but who later offered us a share in the cherry pie (we declined)—and who did not appear again.

16 Bugs; Snakes

Bugs

There aren't many. The screens on the windows are mostly against flies, which used to be many in the days when Sporti had farm animals. I don't remember whether I have met a mosquito at Sporti. We always eat our dinner outside on the terrace, as darkness comes, and we have never been bothered by bugs.

Snakes

I have been told it is not safe to walk through tall grass without high shoes, because there are some vipers about. I have never seen one. The farmer who used to work the land for us said he had seen a viper once, when his tractor disturbed it. People who gather mushrooms in the woods sometimes are bitten: they are obliged to go off paths, and to use their hands to disturb things on the ground, turning stones and lifting sticks.

There is a simple snakebite kit with the first-aid stuff in the bathroom: a suction cup and tourniquet.

I have seen some ordinary snakes (they are much bigger than vipers). Don't panic if you see a snake a few feet long.

Speaking of snakes here's an item of good news: wild boars have begun to appear around Sporti (or, at least, to make themselves *heard*, and their diggings to *appear*). We heard a boar one night, in June 1993. Farm pigs used to do the job of eliminating snakes; now, our informant suggested, boars will tend to do the same. (The boars apparently were introduced for the pleasure of hunters; but they may do some good, nevertheless.)

Scorpions

These creatures like to live in woodpiles, I guess. I have seen small ones. They hurt—like multiple bee stings, I think—but they're no real threat, so far as I know. They are nothing like the giants I met in India.

What a note to end on. How can I restore your good cheer? I can't, probably. Just read through the section on Restaurants again: think about the food that's awaiting you—and the coffee!

Have fun!

(Spinf_ng.498; 4/28/98 12:25pm)

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