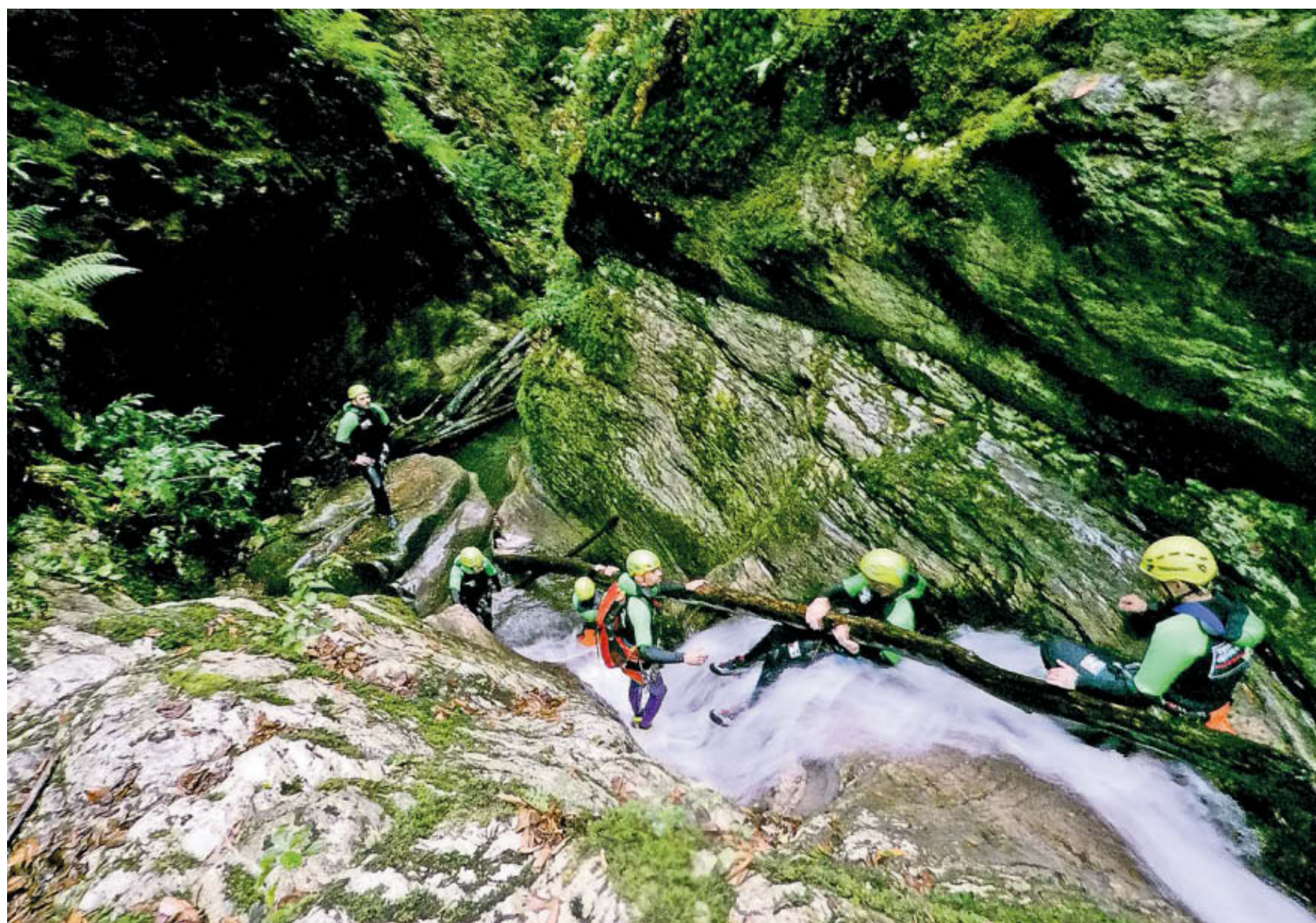


Travel

20

GET YOUR KICKS
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ALAMY; FREDRIK BVE; YVONNE GORDON

Reach end of your tether in Tuscany

Gordon and her group descend through a canyon using a mix of abseiling, rock sliding, climbing and jumps

Most visitors associate the Italian region with picturesque scenery, food, wine, Renaissance art and architecture – but *Yvonne Gordon* trades chianti for canyons and ropes up to find its energetic side

I am dangling from a rope underneath a waterfall, taking the full force of the gush onto my helmet. We were abseiling down the rock face beside the waterfall when I inadvertently bent my knee and swung in under the flow. The noise is deafening; my instructor Simone Cecchi is dangling from another rope nearby, but I can't see or hear any of her instructions.

I manage to lower myself

down the rope and a few seconds later am dropping into the pool at the bottom. Cecchi swings down seconds later, smiling and high fiving.

Anyone who has been to Tuscany will tell you about its vineyards, gently rolling hills dotted with olive groves and cypress trees, Florence's art and the leaning tower of Pisa, but I am here for a week to experience the region's adventure side. And boy, does it deliver. Today I am

canyoning – descending through a canyon using a mix of abseiling, rock sliding, climbing and jumps. The drop we are currently tackling is a 12m waterfall down a sheer rock face.

We start our adventure in an old stone building on the river bank, getting kitted out with wetsuits, helmets and a harness with shackles and ropes, before driving to the top of the canyon. Cecchi gives us

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Sunday Travel

a briefing session – tips about keeping your arms in, how to hold your nose on a water drop and how to open and close a carabiner – then we set off. We face a series of drops, ranging from 3m to 12m, and descend in a variety of ways, including by rope, sliding down the rock or jumping into the water.

Learning to rappel – remembering how to feed the rope correctly while walking backwards down the rock face – is a challenge. It's hard not to feel fear while stepping over the edge of each drop. I do my best to focus and even though I am jerky with the rope, the experience is exhilarating.

Later, I slide down a 6m waterfall on my back, arms folded across my body. As this is my first time and I still have no idea what I am doing, I am thankfully attached to a rope, held by our other instructor Marcello Carminati, who with his big dark beard, looks the image of Fidel Castro. “Viva la revolución,” I think, and off I go.

At the bottom of each drop we wade, swim and stumble like drunks through the rock pools, keeping up with the water's fast downwards flow. Over two hours, we make our way 3km down the river canyon and I take in the scenery, the noise of the water and the canopy of trees far above us. Towards the bottom, Cecchi and Carminati spring a surprise zip-line on us: we attach ourselves by pulley to



steel wire and shoot down from a 6m height, skimming and then landing in the water. I try to mimic a seaplane with my landing, but judging by the splash, I think it's more like a flying whale.

As befitting an adventure, our week encompasses everything from sailing to a ski resort trip, but it's not all high octane: we start with a gentle hike in the hills of Monte Pisano, near Pisa, in an area known as Valgraziosa (gracious valley). The hills here have been sculpted into farmland by the hard labour of families over many generations. Olive groves sit in terraces, kept together by dry stone walls and alternating with shady forests and crop fields. The walls – not unlike those in the west of Ireland – also line a network of walking and cycling trails and it's along one of these that we spend a few hours. We pass an old water mill and walking guide Giulio Cuccioli tells us about the importance of stone walls in the area – used not only as property boundaries and to hold terraces, but also to channel the flow of water.

Most of the walls were built more than 100 years ago and need constant maintenance. Cuccioli turns off the track and brings us along a wall-lined path to a farmhouse where we meet farmer Mario Cioni, who shows us how he builds and maintains the walls. First he



measures the level of the wall with a lead weight on a string, then he demonstrates how you want the wall to be slightly leaning in to the mountain so the it will sit at a slight incline. He inserts a large stone, then tucks smaller stones round it.

Cioni tells us that the land here is difficult to work, not least because of wild boars, which the walls keep out. “The only way to cultivate the hills is to make these types of walls,” he says. He enjoys the work. “It's meditative, because when I start, I forget everything,” he tells us, inviting us into the house for a glass of homemade vinsanto – the wine of welcome in Tuscany, made in special barrels in his cellar.

For another hike, we drive up into the mountains at Monte Amiata, an extinct volcano that's 1,738m high. The temperature drops the higher we get, and the

scenery becomes more like Switzerland than Italy – lots of trees, winding roads with switchbacks, signs for ice and snow. Even the buildings and hotels look like chalets. We hike up through the beech forest on the mountainside until the trees clear and we come to some ski lifts. There's no snow but the slopes and hills are used for mountain biking outside of the ski season. We descend by walking down the ski slopes, the lifts beside us sitting still.

After a couple of days in the mountains, I'm keen to experience some of Tuscany's coastline. From the coastal town of Piombino, there's a ferry to Elba Island, the largest of the seven islands in the Tuscan Archipelago and Italy's third largest island after Sicily and Sardinia. The island is famous as the exile spot of Napoleon in 1814, but it has been settled since ancient times.

On Elba, our home for the night is a 40ft sailing boat and we arrive on board just in time for lunch – our guide Alessandro Trombetti fills us in on the island as we tuck into fresh anchovies, pâtés, meats, cheeses and olive oil. “Elba is a piece of the Alps surrounded by water,” he says, telling us how the island has 190 different minerals and is popular for hiking and cycling. In May, he says, the whole island smells of lavender.

In the afternoon we sail around the island and admire it from the water as Trombetti points out where the other islands in the archipelago are and what they are famous for – from Montecristo with its emerald-coloured water to the white shell beaches of Pianosa. Back on land, we explore the town where tourists and locals mingle over beer and coffee on outdoor terraces under palm trees.

Tuscany is named after the



Monte Amiata, an extinct volcano that's 1,738m high, above; the town of Sorano, left, dates back to Etruscan times

Etruscans, who established a civilization here in pre-Roman times and many of the region's towns, such as Pitigliano and Sorano, date back to that time.

Pitigliano sits high on a cliff, carved into the tufo (tuff) rock, created during volcanic eruptions, and remains from Etruscan times include cuts in the rock and a series of ancient walkways, Vie Cave. We take these pathways to the town of Sorano 9km away, which is also built into tufo rock – the

rock is easy to carve and along the way we see doors and windows set into caves.

Another day we walk part of the Via Francigena pilgrim route from San Quirico d'Orcia to a village called Bagno Vignoni, which has a large thermal pool in the main square in the centre. This one is just ornamental, but another surprise of Tuscany is that it is full of natural thermal springs – perfect for resting weary muscles after a day of adventure.

TUSCANY FOR TOUGH GUYS

● Canyoning starts at €60 for 3-4 hours with Toscana Adventure Team (tateam.it). Half-day sailing trips from Elba Island with swimming and snorkeling are €70 (aviosail.eu) and dry-stone wall workshops are from €195 (montepisano.travel)

● Yvonne was a guest of Toscana Promozione Turistica, toscanapromozione.com

● Adventure Holidays has walking, cycling and a 6- or 9-day multi-adventure holiday in Tuscany with hiking, SUP, rafting, mountain biking and horse riding, from €2,015pp (adventure-holidays.ie)

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On Elba Island — Italy's third largest — Gordon stays on a 40ft sailing boat for the night