

PRESENTS

TARA'S BIG TRAVELS

A FIGHT IN FLORENCE

VALLEY TRAVEL MAVEN TARA HITCHCOCK TELLS ITALY-BOUND ATTENDEES WHAT TO EXPECT AT CELEBRITY FIGHT NIGHT.

BY TARA HITCHCOCK

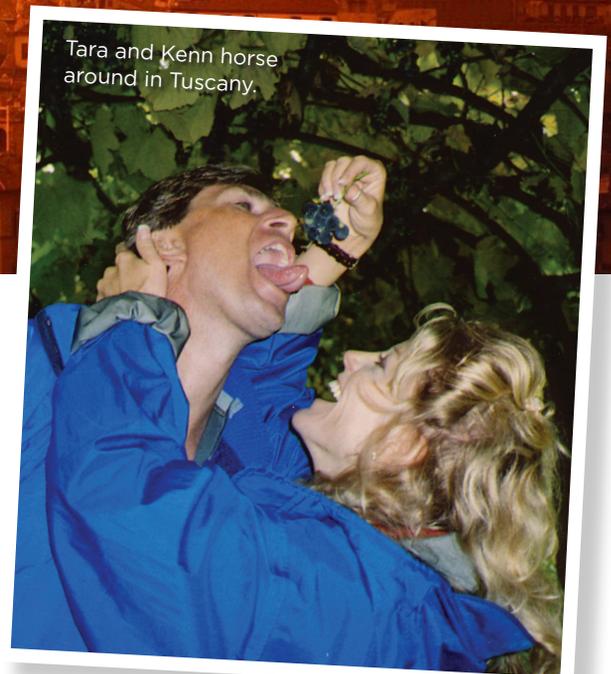
FELL IN LOVE WITH ITALY waaaay before Elizabeth Gilbert penned her “self-discovery tour guide” best seller *Eat Pray Love*. Italy is everything you see in the movies and more. Everywhere you look, there’s something old and historic and beautiful. Don’t get me wrong. I love Arizona, too. But it’s tough when the oldest and most historic structure you pass daily is the old Chevrolet dealership with that cool neon arrow sign on Camelback. It’s almost as if the arrow is telling me to go back to Italy, not into their car lot. We all have images in our heads when we think of Italy. My dad sees Sophia Loren, wearing glamorous big sunglasses and an Hermes scarf draped around her neck. I see George Clooney, inviting me for a boat ride near his house on Lake Como (which hasn’t happened yet, unfortunately), or world-famous tenor Andrea Bocelli, singing to me and a few others in a private con-

cert at his home over a glass of great wine. That hasn’t happened for me either, but it will for some of the Valley’s biggest charitable givers. Last year, Andrea performed for the first time at Muhammad Ali’s Celebrity Fight Night gala here in Phoenix, our state’s most elite fundraiser. In 19 years, Celebrity Fight Night has raised more than \$87 million for the Muhammad Ali Parkinson Center at Barrow Neurological Institute and countless other charities. Everyone from J Lo to Mini Me has graced the Celebrity Fight Night stage. I ended up on that stage with Andrea during the live auction and was so nervous that all I remember is him telling me, quite nicely, “You’re talking way too fast, I can’t understand you.” Andrea’s wife Veronica just smiled. I don’t think she understood me, either.

The Bocellis were so impressed by the event that Andrea emailed Celebrity Fight Night founder and local financial manager

Jimmy Walker a week later. “Jimmy, I have a favor to ask you,” the singer said. “Can you bring Celebrity Fight Night to my country?” Walker, who had turned down offers before to bring the event to Las Vegas, Chicago and Los Angeles, was humbled and overwhelmed by the request. He passed it by the board of directors, who okayed the trip. So, come September, some of our state’s biggest high rollers will be hopping on board Mark Cuban’s chartered Boeing 767 jet and heading to Florence for a week filled with the kind of activities that would make the Versaces envious. For a donation of \$50,000 a person, Walker has secured an itinerary complete with a beach party at the Bocellis’, dinner with Roberto Cavalli and his wife, and a closing event at the Palazzo Vecchio, approved by the mayor of Florence.

Oh, and Sophia Loren is on the guest list and has already RSVP’d.



Tara and Kenn horse around in Tuscany.

WHERE CAN I WEAR THIS?

I'm blessed that I've been to the "Land of Bocelli" a few times. Using airline points and Priceline, I've biked in Puglia, hiked the Dolomites with my step kids, got lost in Rome, almost tipped over in a Venice gondola, and got tipsy on limoncello in Ravello (hey, that rhymes). I've also been to Florence and Tuscany, which the Bocellis call home.

One of the first things you'll see in Florence is its distinctive dome, on top of the Duomo, the city's main cathedral. Raising the dome was no small feat. In the mid-1400s, Renaissance architect Filippo Brunelleschi took 16 years to do it. Today, you can climb up part of the dome for a panoramic view of Florence's skyline. It gets cramped on the way up, but it's worth the effort, even for someone like me, who has a fear of heights.

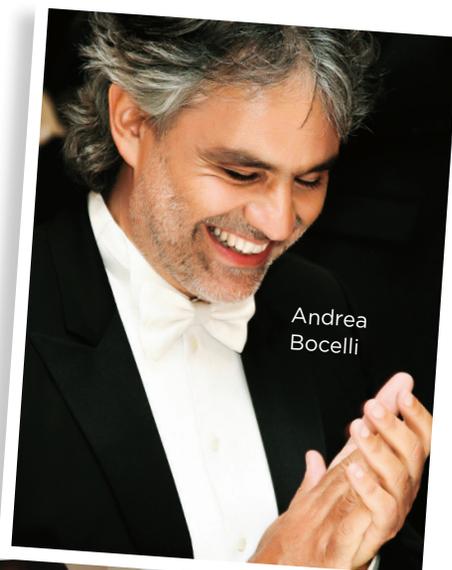
I'm pretty big on museums, and when visiting one, you've got to be strategic. I hit them early, making note of exactly what I want to see and moving quickly. I always buy tickets online to avoid the crowds, and instead of signing up for a tour, I'll glom onto one for free or grab the audio guide and conduct my own.

In Florence, most tourists usually head to

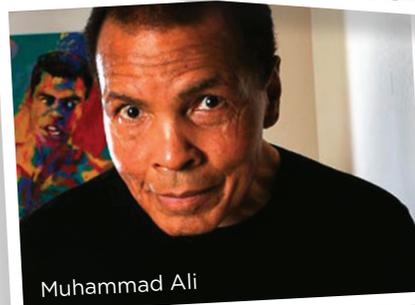
the Uffizi, originally built back in the 1560s to house offices, or *uffici*, for the Duke. Today, it's one of Italy's greatest galleries of Renaissance art, housing works like Caravaggio's "Bacchus" and Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus." Then there's the Galleria dell'Accademia. That's where some will brave a line for hours to get a glimpse of the David, naked in all his glory. Quite frankly, if you ever get a glimpse of the Kenn, my husband, while he's kiteboarding, I would argue his six-pack rivals that of the Biblical hero sculpted by Michelangelo. However, the David is an impressive work of art, and worth seeing. And you can usually spot the American. He's the one trying to have fun with a strategically-positioned selfie. He's also the one buying the souvenir "David Apron" so that he, too, can look ripped and naked in the kitchen back home.

Personally, I opted for a piece of Italian pottery. And some leather. Italians are fabulous, but they are pushy. They're New Yorkers with melodious accents. In Florence, if you stop at a square-side café for coffee, you risk bumping into two Italian guys hawking their leatherwear. I've never been a big clothes shopper. In fact, if you saw my closet, it's filled with gems from My Sister's Closet and T.J. Maxx. However, hanging gently in the corner is one leather jacket that I bought in Florence. It was hard to turn down those two Italians who somehow convinced me that I absolutely needed this "camel 100 percent stylish leather jacket that George Clooney would love" for the one annual week of cold weather in Arizona.

Fashion will be one of the highlights at Fight Night Italy. The Cavallis are opening



Andrea Bocelli



Muhammad Ali

their home for an evening, and the Ferragamo family, of worldwide shoe fame, is also hosting the group for a night.

Florence, for me, is a big city. It's

crowded. It's dirty. And, like Venice, there are lots of pigeons. Country star Reba McEntire, who will be joining the Celebrity Fight Night trip this September, knows that firsthand. On her last visit to Florence, a pigeon honed right in on the redhead and left its mark. Reba told me, "Everyone kept saying, 'Oh, that's good luck!' I told them, 'Tell my nose that 'cause it stinks!'" I asked Reba what she's packing for her fall trip. "Not much, because I plan on doing lots of shopping when we go. Hopefully the pigeons will be on fall break!"

The sunsets over the Ponte Vecchio can sometimes rival the ones in Arizona, and the gelato is unmatched, making Florence a great place to start a trip into Tuscany.

TRIP OF A LIFETIME

*FLY OUT OF JFK WITH COUNTRY STAR REBA MCENTIRE, SINBAD AND 80 OF YOUR CLOSEST FRIENDS ON A LUXURY BOEING 767 JUMBO JET

THURSDAY SEPT. 4 >> Private gourmet dinner in a historical Tuscan theater, hosted by the Ferragamo family.

FRIDAY SEPT. 5 >> Head to Forte dei Marmi for a beach party. Afterward, Bocelli and his family welcome you into their home for an unforgettable night of entertainment directed by 16-time Grammy winner David Foster.

SATURDAY SEPT. 6 >> One of the most noble families in Florence will host you for lunch and medieval entertainment at their centuries-old castle. Dinner will be hosted in the hills of Florence at the beautiful home of fashion dynasty legend Roberto Cavalli.

SUNDAY SEPT. 7 >> The featured gala will be held in the historical, grandiose Salone dei Cinquecento at the Palazzo Vecchio. This massive, Romanesque fortress-palace is one of the most impressive town halls in all of Tuscany.

MONDAY SEPT. 8 >> Compare notes over a beautiful breakfast at the Four Seasons before heading home on your chartered flight!

**For more trip details, go to celebrityfightnight.org



Salone dei Cinquecento at the Palazzo Vecchio

GRAPES & GARDENS

Tuscany is not a destination. It's an experience. I know Andrea Bocelli agrees with me. "A particular quality in 'being' and 'doing' distinguishes these lands," he told me. "A predisposition for beauty which is unfolded in daily life, from a ride on horseback along woodlands pervaded by the scent of the Mediterranean maquis, to the sudden encounter with a 1,000-year-old parish church, to the vineyards, which are the pride of farmers, to the food, which is a triumph of local flavors." Sounds like Bocelli may have a second career as a travel writer. My Tuscan experience was heightened on the back of a road bike. A few years ago, Kenn and I met up with friends for a bike trip through the temperate region. We started near Florence, and for the next three days, took our bikes through olive orchards, wheat fields, medieval towns like Greve and hilltop villages like Val d'Orcia. We stopped for a private tour and olive oil tasting at Badia a Coltibuono and almost got into a serious grape fight near Radda.

I was nervous to do a bike trip through Tuscany. That meant some "training." I spent several weeks making sure I got on a bike at least once for many miles. One of my fondest memories was sharing pasta carbonara with a woman from New York City who finished our 24-mile day on the bike and yelled out, "My trainer is so fired when I get home! What have we been doing for two months?! I can't even move!" My "trainer" was Snowbowl Road in Flagstaff. I made sure to attempt that hill several times before heading to Italy. It helped.

However, no amount of training can prepare you for the aftermath of downing a pound of pasta at lunch, two glasses of wine and trying to get on your bike for the trip back to your hotel. I actually had to pull over and wait out my wine-buzz after I almost slammed right into an undecipherable street sign.

HANGING AT THE BOCELLIS'

A more atypical Tuscany trip includes the coast. Most people don't think of the beach when they think of the region. But the Bocellis live in Tuscany's west half, in a small town called Forte dei Marmi, on the Tyrrhenian Sea. It means "Fort of the Marbles" in Italian, taking its name from the fortress that stands in the middle of the main square and the marble quarries nearby.

"This is the Andrea that I wish everyone could see," *Celebrity Fight Night* music producer David Foster told me. "Making music

with him under these circumstances [will be] as much vacation as it is work." For 15 years, Foster has been the musical director behind Phoenix's big gala. The 16-time Grammy winner from Canada has a r sum  that reads like a who's who of music history. Turns out, he's helped write some of my all-time favorite songs. The theme to *St. Elmo's Fire*? Yep, that was David. Celine Dion's "Because You Loved Me"? David again. In fact, I think the only thing David Foster hasn't written is "What Does the Fox Say," that catchy yet annoying viral YouTube hit.

Hosting intimate dinner parties is nothing new for the Fosters, as David's stunning Danish wife Yolanda is featured in this season's *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. Chances are, the dinner party at Andrea's house will not be filled with reality show cat fights, unless Reba demands more southern sauce on her pasta. The first night will consist of a private beach party, catered by one of Bocelli's favorite chefs. Chances are, the guests will end up next to one of Bocelli's prized possessions, a handcrafted Grand Piano a friend gave him after the birth of his daughter Virginia. Andrea told me, "On the wood

of this marvelous instrument are engraved the names of my three children. It often happens that in the course of the evenings spent together with family friends, we pass from the table to the piano, to sing together, to joke, and to share a moment of cheerfulness. And this is what

will surely happen also with the guests of *Celebrity Fight Night!*"

The trip is almost sold out. Walker is convinced that's a testament to *Celebrity Fight Night* itself. "There are two words: Muhammad Ali. The Champ has suffered from Parkinson's for 30 years. He shows up every year. He's taken some hard punches with this illness. But there's a warmth and love among



A quaint Tuscan village, snapped by Tara along her bike route.



Tara's Florentine leather salesmen

the guests that I haven't seen at an event anywhere else."

About four years ago, Jimmy Walker was standing in the lobby of the Ritz Carlton in New York City with Valley sports magnate Jerry Colangelo. "Jimmy, Andrea Bocelli is at the elevator," Colangelo said. Walker, never one to turn down a chance to meet a big-time celeb, approached Bocelli, introduced himself and told him about *Celebrity Fight Night*. "You know Muhammad Ali?" Bocelli asked. "He's my hero. All my life I wanted to meet him." Less than seven days later, Walker escorted a brilliant Italian singer who happens to be blind up the stairs to meet a brilliant former boxer who has Parkinson's disease. According to Walker, Andrea "kissed Muhammad's cheek, got down on his knees and said he was humbled to finally meet the champ." Muhammad whispered back, "Would you sing to me?"

That meeting sparked a friendship that has lasted since. There's a chance Muhammad and his wife Lonnie will join the *Fight Night* crew on that flight to Italy. With Parkinson's, travel is usually a game-time decision. But whether or not the champ is on that plane, you can bet that come September, there will be a group of 80 people and one of the world's greatest singers, holding up glasses of the finest Brunello in his honor on what will truly be the trip of a lifetime. ■

Watch *Tara's Reel Travels* Thursday mornings on CBS 5 KPHO or visit taraontv.com.