



Rome around

One car, two young kids and miles of Italian countryside to cover? Cathy Toogood offers her guide to a self-drive with tots in tow

It turns out my four-year-old is much better at making ravioli than me and loves covering herself in mud, while my one-year-old is obsessed with all forms of Italian transport.

These were just some of the discoveries I made after embarking on a family road trip from Lake Maggiore to Rome.

"You're brave," was the response most people gave me when I told them about

our summer plans with two under-fives – a journey by car of more than 400 miles and four different bases over a fortnight.

But, for us, what could be a better family adventure than one involving constantly changing scenery, some cultural big-hitters and, of course, plentiful pizza, pasta and ice cream?

Children are famous for never sitting still, so having a packed itinerary made sure

they were never bored, but we were mindful that we all needed some downtime too – this was a holiday, after all.

► MIX IT UP

With that in mind, we complemented action-packed stays in Florence and Rome with more-relaxed time in Pallaanza on Lake Maggiore and Sarteano in Tuscany, where we could all swim, play games and chill out. [→](#)

➔ On our city breaks, we broke our children in gently to the faster pace of holiday. We couldn't visit Florence without a bird's-eye view of its terracotta roofs but, with a wriggly toddler in tow, we swapped the queues and narrow staircase to the top of the Duomo for the open space and sprawling view from Piazzale Michelangelo on the south bank of the River Arno.

Our four-year-old eagerly scampered up the stone steps to the square, counting them as we went (164, if you trust a four-year-old's maths) and, surprisingly, both children sat admiring our surroundings for a good five minutes, spotting sights that we'd walked past and choosing a spot for ice cream on the way back.



ASK THE EXPERT



India Pearson, travel presenter, Holiday Extras, offers tips and tricks for family car hire

▶ Do your research before booking a car to avoid disappointment on arrival or having to pay extra to upgrade. Booking well in advance will reduce the chance of your chosen car being unavailable.

▶ Avoid any unexpected charges by opting for a 'full-to-full' refuelling option and by taking out sufficient insurance cover well in advance. A standalone excess refund policy will probably be cheaper bought online before travelling than at the car rental desk, and will give you peace of mind.

▶ Avoid the extra cost of hiring child car seats by bringing your own from home.

▶ FIRE THEIR IMAGINATION

With limited time in the city, we decided the best way to give the kids a taste of art was to wander around the sculptures in Piazza della Signoria. Staring up at the replica of Michelangelo's *David*, my daughter mused: "Mummy, were all of these statues once real people?" She'd created a whole new version of Florence in her head, where sculptures roamed around before a cruel magical force froze them forever.

Embracing this vivid imagination made days out more fun. We explored Rome's vast Colosseum while keeping an eye out for any straggling lions, wandered around cavernous underground wine cellars in Montepulciano deciding who would drink which barrel next, and pretended to be monsters while covered head to toe in thermal mud from the surreal beauty of the hot springs in Bagni di San Filippo, Tuscany.



LEFT: Replica of Michelangelo's *David*, Florence

ABOVE: Learning to make ravioli

BELOW: Colosseum, Rome



The fresh ravioli made by our four-year-old showed off her skills after years of kneading Play-Doh

▶ SHORT AND SWEET

While we covered a long distance overall, we tried to keep each journey to a maximum of three hours, only breaking this rule when we drove from Lake Maggiore to Florence in a day.

To keep the children on side during this relatively long haul, we planned a stop in Bologna en route for rich, garlicky parmigiana, obligatory ragu and, of course, ice cream.

One of the worst fears of a road trip, carsickness, struck once on Tuscany's winding roads as our daughter groaned from the back while we were admiring vineyard views near Greve in Chianti. We were, thankfully, prepared with spare clothes and baby wipes, and our daughter quickly

bounced back after she saw the three swimming pools on our campsite.

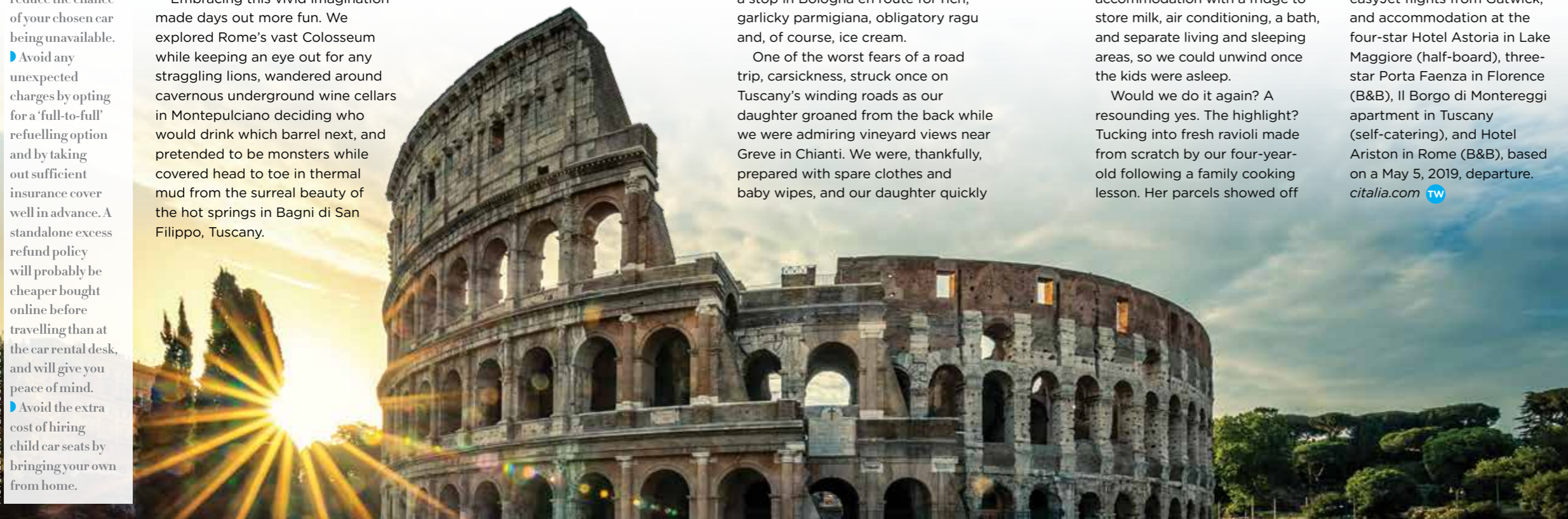
▶ SLEEP SOUNDLY

Sleep is essential for a happy trip – a bad night means grumpy children the next day. So we always chose accommodation with a fridge to store milk, air conditioning, a bath, and separate living and sleeping areas, so we could unwind once the kids were asleep.

Would we do it again? A resounding yes. The highlight? Tucking into fresh ravioli made from scratch by our four-year-old following a family cooking lesson. Her parcels showed off

the skills she's developed after years of kneading, shaping and prodding Play-Doh!

Book it: Citalia can tailor-make a 14-night road trip taking in Lake Maggiore, Florence, Tuscany and Rome from £5,369 for a family of four. The trip includes car hire, easyJet flights from Gatwick, and accommodation at the four-star Hotel Astoria in Lake Maggiore (half-board), three-star Porta Faenza in Florence (B&B), Il Borgo di Montereggi apartment in Tuscany (self-catering), and Hotel Ariston in Rome (B&B), based on a May 5, 2019, departure. citalia.com



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