

Was I really ready for this organic experience?

BY LYNDIE BOURGON

When we stepped off the train in Sinalunga – a small town in Tuscany that boasts a grocery store and not much else – it was gloomy and wet and we were in Ugo's way.

"Are those Canadian flags real? Or are you imposters?"

He would be the alarm clock during our vacation. Rolling out of bed early each morning, forsaking a shower and breakfast, and getting to work on his Italian farm.

Our journey to Ugo's Italian farm called Trove began in Edinburgh. We signed up to the WWOOF (willing work on organic farms) online community, and got searching for places to go for the summer. Hostels in Croatia? Why not? Paragliding in Slovenia? Yes, please.

In doing so, we were no more unique than the hundreds of young backpackers who think that our university educations and city-dwelling lifestyles are easy to shed in favour of *orti* and grape vines.

We were just a profile among a mass of similar travellers "looking to get away, try something new, have a real (insert country name) experience,

blah blah blah." You can go almost anywhere in the world, but it was the Italian sun and endless buffalo that we chose.

We were chosen to live at Trove, not based on our technical experience, but in part because of those flags. We are, in fact, actual Canadians and not imposters. We're "good workers" and "polite," as I'm sure you've heard before.

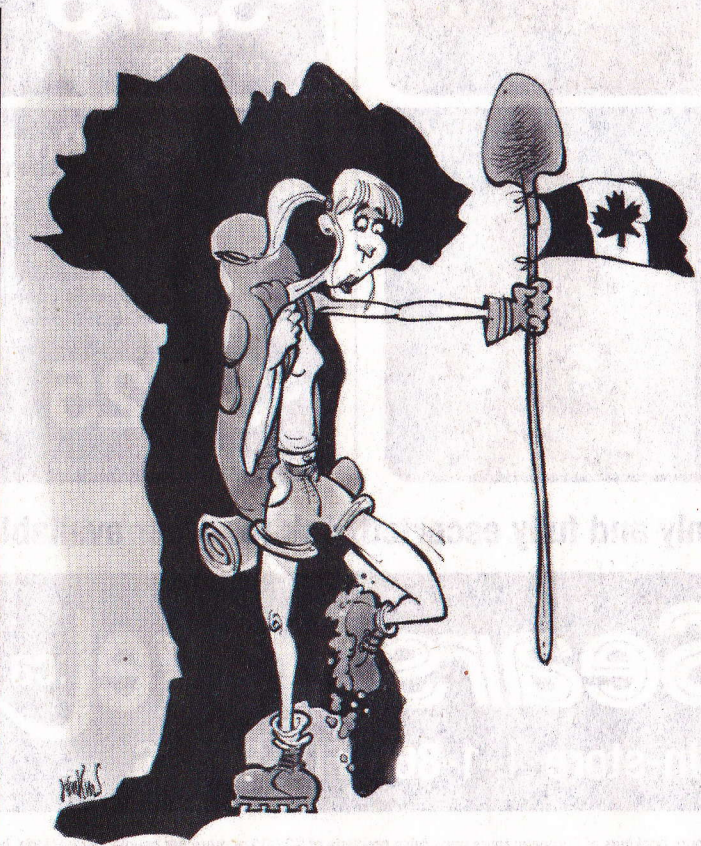
The scenic drive on our way to the farm was a one-sided conversation of endless reasons from Ugo of why he often sends travellers home early.

"He sniffled too much, and blew his nose right in front of me!"

"Those American girls, they had very long fingernails and got drunk off Limoncello! Imagine!"

So we never really unpacked our bags. Who knew what would set Ugo off – inspiring him to chuck our backpacks into the back of his decrepit vehicle and whisk us off to the train station with one-way tickets to anywhere-but-Trove.

We made it through, but not without stifling allergies and screwing up just about any task handed to us. I was too weak to shovel gravel into pot-holes. Simon didn't eat as much as me. "How did Simon



ANTHONY JENKINS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

die..." was Ugo's running joke: crushed under the tractor?

Every night (not to mention lunch hour too), we'd sit down to a large Italian meal. This is about as divine as you're imagining – hours of cooking, salads and pastas and hearty meat courses like rabbit or sausages. Ugo would pour the wine, bottled in his cellar, and remark that it was "shitty." At first, we would compliment the taste – "No! Not bad at all!" It wasn't until later that we clued in the vines had been fertilized with the house's pit toilet.

Maybe it was the recession, but backpacking through Europe is no longer just about hostels and cheap wine. Gen Y sees time abroad as the perfect experience to work for room and board, and an endless quest for the true – but how many of us are actually ready for a rural experience?

In the span of one year, I'd heard of six friends and acquaintances that left all behind to find humbling work in Italy, or France, or Ireland, or even the Balkans. We're all back in Canada now.

Out of those of us who "took time off," the experience has bred a divide in travel culture – those who have had great ex-

periences will extol WWOOF virtues to no end, and those who ended up shovelling manure into olive trees have probably all but erased the match-making URL from their mind.

On our last night there, we dined outside with the stars. Fireflies zoomed overhead, making it hard to remember how close the stars are to Earth, in particular this sliver of land at the bottom of a Tuscan hill. It's a memory I'll keep with me always, especially now that I'm back in Canada, embarking on a fast-career, fast-track, fast-food lifestyle. It's one I tried to think of as my bag was stolen in Milan, or when our plane was redirected twice from London. Throughout Europe, there are families and single old men and business owners eating the vegetables that young North Americans competed to grow in their garden. And now we're at home, in the Loblaws aisle, trying to find fresh basil.

» Special to *The Globe and Mail*