

Bologna is home to the oldest university in the Western world, founded in 1088

Work for a taste of the local

Hands-on escape: Are you willing to toil for a few hours a day in fantastic surroundings for board and fine food? Then meet the Help Exchange **BY STEVE CLARKSON**



Deep in northern Italy's Emilia-Romagna region, on the hilltop, sits the sleepy medieval village of Dozza. The nearest bus stop stands outside a small café at the end of the road, a 15minute bike ride from the village.

But there is work to be done – carrying a bundle of hay on a rusty rake towards the cowshed on a small farm.

The deal is, I earn the privilege of staying here – in sweat. I produce my fair share in a consistent 37°C climate. Though in exchange for working five hours a day, I am rewarded with food, shelter, and the pleasure of living as a local for next to nothing, thanks to the innovative Help Exchange scheme, which connects travellers and locals, or 'helpers' and 'hosts' around the world.

Behind me is fellow helper Gus, who's carting a wheelbarrow full of vine leaves en route to the goat pen. Elsewhere, Vanessa is preparing dinner and Margo is



Feed and eat: Goat on the farm

Bare essentials

Dozza is a small medieval hill town in Bologna, northern Italy. It is famous for its festival of the painted wall: since 1960 artists have come there to paint murals.

Currency: £1 = €1.10
Language: Italian

washing the vegetables she picked earlier from the garden. Steven is cutting the grass further up the hill, while Kyle weeds around the tomato plants. We all eat the meat of the animals we feed on the farm with the fresh vegetables and herbs we pick from the garden and it is all washed down with wine made from our hosts' own vineyard. Later, we are provided with books and a computer in our comfortable en-suite 'helper rooms'.

And during our time off, we get to explore. We get invited into local couples' homes for prosciutto, cheese and grappa; take revitalising dips in an outdoor swimming pool just over the hill, or hop on bikes to Imola, the nearest town. Sometimes, we just stay on the farm and chat with our hosts, play with their children, take photos or read in the long grass.

A working holiday may sound like an oxymoronic way to spend your two weeks off. Yet aside from the good company, cosy lodgings and fine cuisine, an excursion of this kind brings more significant benefits. I realise that, while I will

Office window: a few hours of relatively fun labour can change your world for a month

return to Britain only to continue working at my job, it feels like I'm experiencing something quite unusual.

Safety-wise, I was confident I would survive this leap of faith, as my hosts had many reviews and references from former helpers on their online Help Exchange listing. Victoria and Davide told me they had accommodated helpers like me from all over the world in the four years they've been registered as hosts, with only a few from the Britain.

On the morning I am to depart, Victoria takes my photo to accompany my own page in a binded collection of helper profiles, which is bursting at the seams. They've kept the book since 2005, when their first helper arrived. Although I am the 110th addition to their collection, Victoria she says she never forgets a single helper. As I say my farewells to my work buddies and my host family at the end of my fortnight away, I am sad to be leaving the farm.

Most travellers would argue there are richer ways to see and live in a country than by tourist map and four-star hotel. Yet even the most ardent rambler would admit touring a nation's hostels – although exchanging travel tips with other like-minded nomads on the circuit can be rewarding – leaves a lingering awareness that you have only really scratched the surface of a culture.

Across all continents, the Help Exchange scheme offers an inspiring antidote to this all-too-familiar feeling.

Steve Clarkson arranged his stay by signing up as a premium helper (£18 for two years) at www.helpx.net. His hosts also offer private accommodation. www.farmstayitaly.org

Connect with a host

The Help Exchange – or HelpX – scheme has been providing the traveller with this innovative way of seeing the world since 2001. Work varies from host to host but there are opportunities in farms, hostels, restaurants, hotels, teaching and au-pairing. In addition to the 88 hosts in Italy alone, there are hundreds more across Europe,

North America and Australasia. Hosts also exist in fewer numbers in countries within Asia, South America and Africa. Many farms require a minimum stay of one to four weeks; hostels are usually happy to accommodate helpers for a whole season, but almost everything is negotiable.

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