

Casa Tolomei

Casa Tolomei, the house in Bagni di Lucca where Elizabeth, Robert, and Pen stayed with Wilson and Ferdinando in the summer and fall of 1853, can now be rented by the night or the week. For the past three years, Laura Poggi and Andrew Walker and their three young children have lived on site while overseeing and assisting with the labor-intensive restoration of the Art Nouveau façade, the intricate frescoes in the second-story drawing room, and the light, airy bedrooms the Brownings occupied during their stay.



Bagni di Lucca is one of the most romantic places in the Browning story. Robert and Elizabeth came there first in June of 1849, soon after Pen's birth, and it was there that Elizabeth handed Robert the poems that became *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Four years later, during another hot Florence summer, the Brownings returned and rented Casa Tolomei, which "beguiled us," Elizabeth wrote, with its large size, low price, and convenience. They brought Pen with them this time, as well as Wilson and their new cook, Ferdinando Romagnoli.

Robert Browning described Bagni di Lucca as "cool, for Italy--& bright, at the same time, as a great sun makes it by day," and this is still true. The house sits near the center of the small, charming town, and the riverside passeggiata named the Lovers Walk in honor of Elizabeth and Robert is mere steps away. The chestnut trees were blooming during our April visit, and the mountainsides were hypnotically green, as lovely and full of mist as they would have been when Robert was hiking to Prato Fiorito.

Guests can sketch, write, eat, or simply look out the window from a table situated where Elizabeth sat writing to Arabella and enjoying the view of the garden. Laura Poggi, a Florentine, speaks fluent English, Spanish, and German and is an Italian teacher by trade, so lessons can be arranged during a longer stay. (She is also a wonderful and enthusiastic cook!) Andrew is British, and his mother, Susan, a former teacher who lives in Yorkshire, has written a pamphlet for guests about the Brownings' stay in Casa Tolomei that will help devoted members and even those completely unfamiliar with the Browning history hear the cheerful voices that once echoed in these rooms. Susan has also made a vintage photo album with photos of the Brownings that makes the rooms feel like what they really are—a place beloved of a family who spent happy times here.

Besides the great pleasure of being in the restored portion of the house, Society members can tour the lower rooms, where the intact mid-19th century kitchen and sitting room make it possible to imagine the lives of Ferdinando and Wilson as they played with Pen, fed one another and their employers, and fell in love.



“You can almost hear the steps of Penini walking around with Flush,” Laura Poggi says of her life in the house, “and imagine Ferdinando being busy in front of the fire in our old kitchen. Then, of course, Wilson would arrive and shout at him for doing something wrong--too much garlic in the pesto, probably!”

“The restoration started three years ago,” Poggi says, “with renovation of the entire roof--400 square meters (about 4,000 square feet) of chestnut beams and traditional clay tiles. Most of the old tiles, and many of the large beams, were in good enough condition to be retained.”

The external façade of the house presented a simultaneous challenge.



“At the front, facing the small piazza,” Poggi says, “the Liberty-style frescoes dating from the very early 1900s were discovered under layers of paint. All the more recent paint was painstakingly chipped away and then the original frescoes were retouched to bring them back to their former glory.”

The walls facing the garden were “taken back further in time,” she says, “to the neo-classical period frescoes. Of the four upstairs windows on that side, the original decoration of two was retained and the other two were re-created to match. These are just as they were in the Brownings' time.”

The Poets' Suite and the grand sala were finished in 2016 (after more painstaking work on interior frescoes—much of it undertaken with scalpels), while workers replaced the plumbing and wiring for the entire building. The remainder of the upstairs floor (including Robert's study) and the ground floor is in progress and will be completed by the end of this summer.

Perhaps the most surprising part of staying in Casa Tolomei—besides the sense that the family happiness of the Brownings lives on in the Poggi-Walker family—is that the house still beguiles with its large size, convenience, and affordable price. The Poets' Suite rents on **booking.com** for \$80 per night despite the fact that you can enjoy essential modern conveniences: an excellent shower, good plumbing, a full breakfast, and fast Wifi. Guests can also rent the entire second story if in need of more space. For more information, contact Laura Poggi or Andrew Walker at info@casatolomei.com.

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