

ITALY

Spello the ‘jewel of Umbria’

A rich history colored in earthen shades

By **Victoria Abbott Riccardi** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 20, 2011



VICTORIA ABBOTT RICCARDI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Spello was inhabited by the ancient Umbri and became a Roman colony in the first century.

SPELLO, Italy - Inside a linen store is not exactly where you would expect to grasp the essence of an Italian city. But it was in the small boutique Il Telaio di Spello that shopkeeper Maria Covelli explained how the muted grays, greens, reds, and browns of her woven tablecloths and bath towels were a metaphor for this hilltop city so often missed by visitors eager to see nearby Perugia, Assisi, and Orvieto.

“The gray color is medieval,” she said, holding up a hand towel similar in tone to the stone-hued tunics Umbrian women wore during the Middle Ages. “And weaving

cloths from cotton and linen was a huge industry in this region.” She pulled out a sage and ash flowered runner with hand-knotted fringe.

“This green is for the olive groves,” which surround Spello and provide the fruit for the region’s famously smooth olive oil. “The pink and cream,” she said, pointing to a blush and ivory dishtowel, “represent the color of the city,” which, like Assisi, was built from the rosy stones of nearby Monte Subasio.

Since we were alone in the shop, Covelli continued to explain how the garnet pigment represented the local red wines, such as Montefalco Rosso and Sagrantino. The russets and tans evoked the area’s wheat and flax fields. Scroll patterns, leaves, flowers, and amphora jugs - used to transport oil, wine, and perfume - were classic Renaissance designs, while the griffin was the symbol of Perugia and imported from China in the 17th century, when Italian potters began copying Chinese ceramics. The popular bee pattern? That was a symbol of Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, who became the Pope of Rome in 1623. Three bees were his coat of arms.

Overwhelmed by so many beautiful options, I held off on buying. Then I thanked Covelli for her time and told her I would be back.

Spello, considered the “jewel of Umbria,” cast its spell over me this summer when I rented a villa with some friends in the cool, bug-free mountains above the city, which is more like a town, since there are only 8,700 or so inhabitants. Spello is the sort of spot you always hope to find in your travels, a place that appreciates visitors but exists more for the locals. Instead of Prada bags and Maseratis, you find cloth satchels and walking sticks, along with flower-filled walkways, stone houses, and narrow, winding cobbled streets, which snake throughout the ancient part of the city.

The ancient Umbri founded Spello, which in the first century became a Roman colony known as Hispellum. It officially became a city in 1829. Three beautifully intact Roman arches form the entry points into Spello’s historic center, which is best explored on foot. If you hike up Via Cappuccini, lined with geranium-filled window boxes and elderly women sitting on stools gabbing and tattling, you will pass through one of the oldest, Porta dell’Arce, made from locally-sourced, white, limestone quadrangular blocks laid together without mortar. Turn around and you will see a glorious arch-framed mountain view. Continue up to the terraced green and the Topino Valley and nearby Assisi spreads out before you.

The heart of Spello lies at the bottom (or top, depending upon how you enter the city) of the slippery, polished stone walkways near Piazza della Repubblica - dotted with cafes, boutiques, churches, and food shops, such as Maria Teresa Bracchini, a great

place to try a porchetta sandwich, the local specialty of herb-stuffed roasted pork thinly sliced and served on a fresh roll. Spello, like other landlocked Umbrian cities and towns, features rustic mountain cuisine, resplendent with mushrooms, truffles, fennel, rabbit, pigeon, boar, lentils, farro, pecorino, and chicory, as well as local, lush, green olive oil. You can indulge in the season's new harvest, in fact, during the annual Olive Oil and Bruschetta Festival (L'Oro Di Spello) that this year runs Dec. 8-11. This four-day ode to the olive dates to 1962 and features tastings, parades, and other festivities.

One of the pleasures of visiting a place for more than a few hours is that you get a chance to refine your preferences, such as learning the best places to eat, shop, and visit. For local pecorino, truffle honey (great gifts), and cured boar (like prosciutto), we often stopped into Piero Filippucci, named after the owner, who also offers an impressive selection of jams, nut cookies, and dried pasta. Arte Legno sells lovely olivewood items, including bowls, salad tongs, and children's toys, while Enoteca Properzio is the place to sample and buy myriad local wines. Area manager Roberto Angelini will even arrange - as he did for us - a lunch and extensive tasting of dozens of Umbrian reds and whites, many rare and only available to purchase through him, since not all wineries in Umbria are open to the public. For restaurants, we particularly enjoyed the one-star Michelin La Bastiglia, serving fresh, seasonal fare indoors or al fresco on the flower-filled terrace overlooking a patchwork of wheat fields and olive groves.

What Spello lacks in museums, it makes up for in churches - over a dozen - including the legendary Santa Maria Maggiore. A single nave church completed in 1285, it houses a stunning collection of frescoes painted in 1500-01 by Bernardino di Betto, nicknamed Pintoricchio. His most illustrious works are the "Annunciation," "Adoration of the Magi," and "Dispute in the Temple," which to see requires that you put a coin in a box to turn on the lights, otherwise kept off in order to preserve the art's pigments. It's worth the euros to see the beautifully rendered Renaissance scenes featuring sapphire- and red-robed figures, ivory horses, and golden-winged angels hovering over elegant cream and



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Porta dell'Arce, one of the oldest Roman arches in Spello, was built with blocks of limestone from the area, fitted together without mortar.)

black stone archways.

Had we not rented a house in Spello, I never would have discovered the enchanting walk along the terraced olive groves of the old Roman aqueduct that we drove past every day on our way in and out of town. Located near the communal water fountain gushing cold, sweet water that residents pour into jugs, the path starts at the site of the elevated map laying out the walk. Grass, pebbles, and wildflowers line the way marked with 24 points of interest, such as an animal drinking trough and an arched bridge. If you look carefully, you find various sayings by sages such as Gandhi, Proust, and Plutarch chiseled into stone plaques embedded in the aqueduct's wall. (Bring your Italian dictionary.)

Spello's proximity to so many enticing hilltop towns and cities made it a great base from which to explore the region. One day we visited Assisi to walk around the crowded but beautiful home city of St. Francis and the famous basilica (walled with frescoes) that bears his name. Perugia, the birthplace of those hazelnut-chocolate confections called Baci (meaning "kiss"), has the grand duomo, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, a fabulous outdoor antiques flea market (the last Sunday of every month), and memorable watering holes such as Café Landri, circa 1860, for an exquisite afternoon espresso and chocolate-nut pastry. Orvieto and Montefalco, have charming medieval centers, along with numerous wineries open to the public, while tiny, sweet Torgiano has an impressive wine museum.

The morning before I left Spello, I stopped back into Il Telaio di Spello, as promised, to ponder the linens. I also visited the elegant fabric shop Tessitura Pardi. And between the two, I found three special reminders of this place I had come to love: a set of scroll-patterned placemats in medieval gray, a set of napkins in olive grove green, and a navy and copper floral tablecloth, reminiscent of the darkening sky seen from our villa each night.

If you go...

How to get there

One of the best ways to get to Spello is to fly into Rome and then rent a car to drive the 123 kilometers (about 76 miles), since you will want to have a car to explore nearby hill towns.

What to do

Santa Maria Maggiore

Piazza Giacomo Matteotti, 18

011-39-0742-301792

Completed in 1285, this church is considered the most important monument in Spello, with the stunning frescoes in the Baglioni Chapel that Pinturicchio painted from 1500-01. And look at the floor of the chapel, which is paved with majolica tiles from Deruta.

Roman ruins

Down the hill from the medieval part of Spello lies the Roman portion of the city, including the amphitheater, believed to have been built in the first century AD, and located near the Church of San Claudio, on the main road to Foligno. The walk along the Roman aqueduct begins outside Porta Montanara en route to Monte Subasio National Park. Just after the water fountain, you will see the map that marks the trail that snakes up through the hills above the medieval town and finishes in the tiny town of Collepino.

Tessitura Pardi

Corso Cavour, 5

011-39-0742-301870

An elegant linen shop with branch stores in Perugia, Todi, and two in Montefalco. Prices are higher than most other stores of its kind, but the quality, selection, patterns, and colors of the offerings are impressive.

Il Telaio di Spello

Via Garibaldi, 3

011-39-0742-652887

With eight other locations in Umbria, this linen shop has a lovely selection of items for the table and bath.

Where to stay

La Bastiglia

Via Sainittraria, 15

011-39-0742-651277

Located just inside Porta Montanara, and connected to the excellent one-star Michelin restaurant by the same name, this hotel has 33 simple rooms, many with terraces and gorgeous views overlooking lower Spello. Rooms, including a quadruple, \$97-\$262 from Nov. 4-March 31; \$110-\$297 outside those dates. **Hotel Palazzo Bocci**

Via Cavour, 17

011-39-0742-301021

Former residence of the Bocci family, this 17th-century building is in the old part of town and has 23 well-appointed rooms, an interior garden, and lovely frescoes in the hotel's reading lounge and bar. Rooms \$110-\$386, lowest to highest during low and high seasons.

Where to eat

Drinking Wine

Via Garibaldi, 20

011-39-0742-301625

Tucked away in the back of this wine store sits this small, cellar-like spot serving very simple, inexpensive traditional Umbrian dishes, such as local cheese and meat plates, pappardelle with boar ragu, and roasted rabbit. Entrees \$5.50-\$30.

HisPELLum Enoteca

Via Cavour, 13-35

011-39-0742-651766

Modern and elegant with a back patio for warm-weather dining. Umbrian cuisine with a modern flare, including such dishes as a warm cauliflower-cheese timbale, arugula salad with lemon and Parmesan, and fresh pasta with shaved truffles. Moderate prices.

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