

The home of Baci chocolate and the young Raphael is a treat

Sweetest adventure in Europe

Love is in the air at Perugia, writes DAVID ELLIS

If ever there's a town that's a "must-visit" for romantics or chocoholics it's Perugia in Italy.

And if you're both, you'll find yourself in seventh heaven: One of the town's biggest factories makes chocolates called Kisses and there's a street that's so narrow it's officially named Woman Kisser Lane, and tradition demands that you offer a kiss as you squeeze past anyone coming in the opposite direction.

There's no mention if you give them a chocolate afterwards.

Perugia is the capital of Umbria about halfway between Rome and Florence and its Perugina chocolate factory makes the world-famous chocolates called Baci – Italian for kisses.

As anyone with a sweet tooth knows, these tasty little bundles of chocolate incorporate nougat and ground hazelnuts, topped with a whole hazelnut, covered with another coating of chocolate, and finally wrapped in foil that carries an expression of love in half a dozen or more languages.

Luisa Spagnoli started the Perugina chocolate factory

IF YOU GO

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But be prepared for the crowds: it attracts more than one million tourists, and is one of the largest chocolate festivals in the world, with visitors able to buy such delights as chocolate-covered bananas, chocolate liqueur, chocolate moulds and giant bricks of chocolate.

And wallow in a spa-full of chocolate.

But Luisa Spagnoli, the woman whose talents spawned the town's fame, didn't stop at just chocolates.

She turned her business acumen to the breeding of angora rabbits and in 1928 became the first person in the world to turn the soft, silky fur into shawls, boleros and fashion

The beautiful old streets of Perugia, the capital of Umbria are a delight for romantics – and chocoholics.



with fellow confectioner Giovanni Buitoni in 1907 when she was 30.

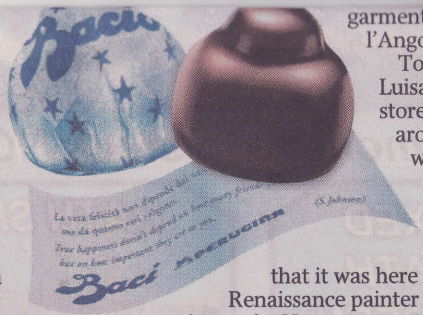
Locals say the pair fancied each other and initially exchanged clandestine messages through their own hand-made chocolates – but historians scotch that as fanciful urban myth.

The factory started with a handful of workers, but today is owned by the multi-national Nestle company that ships its chocolates, candies and after-dinner mints around the world.

Free tours of the factory, in the Perugian suburb of San Sisto, are held in specific languages daily, and include a visit to the Museum of Chocolate, a video on how chocolate is made, a guided walk along the production line, and a shop that sells the full range of chocolates, candies, nougat and biscotti, T-shirts and memorabilia.

And, yes, for chocoholics the guides offer free samples from silver trays at different points throughout the tour.

And possibly the best time to visit Perugia is in October when the annual nine-day EuroChocolate Festival is held.



garments under the name l'Angora Spagnoli.

Today some 100 Luisa Spagnoli fashion stores are scattered around the world, with headquarters firmly entrenched in Perugia.

The townsfolk are also proud

that it was here that the famous Renaissance painter Raphael learned his trade. He was apprenticed to another master, Perigino (who was born Pietro Vannucci, but took the name of the town where he grew up).

Art lovers flock to Perugia's Exchange Guild to see one of the best-preserved Renaissance frescos in Italy, painted between 1498 and 1500 by Perigino and some of his students including the young Raphael.

Art historians attribute the figure of Fortitude, seated on a cloud, as the work of Raphael who, incidentally, the locals delight in telling visitors died at an early age of 37 "from an over-indulgence in sex".

Another must for anyone interested in art is a visit to the town's Franciscan Church to see a copy of Raphael's painting

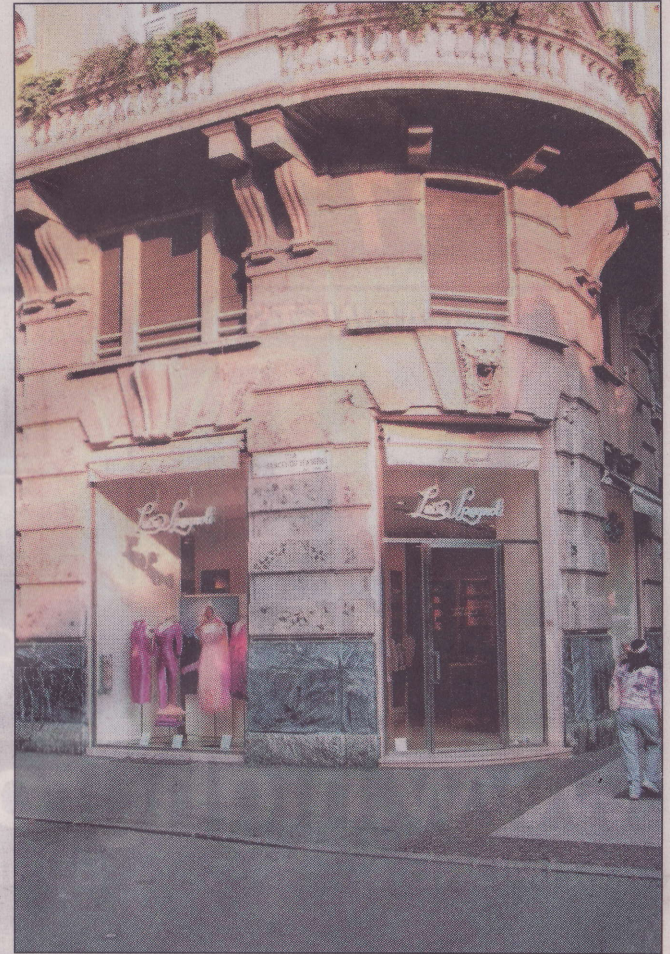


Entombment of Christ. The original caught the eye of Cardinal Scipione Borghese, a wealthy and powerful nephew of Pope Paul V, while he was on a visit to Perugia in 1607.

The painting wasn't for sale but the Cardinal had some men "acquire it" and the original remains to this day in the Borghese museum in Rome.

And if you take a visit to Perugia, you just simply can't miss a visit to Vicolo Baciadonne (Woman Kisser Lane.)

But just remember before you head along the half-metre wide laneway, make sure you check who is coming the other way, and whether or not you would enjoy the traditional greeting.



Tradition dictates that you offer a kiss to anyone squeezing past you down the very narrow Woman Kisser Lane (above left); Luisa Spagnoli (above centre), started the Perugina chocolate factory in 1907; Ms Spagnoli expanded her interests into fashion, and now has 100 stores bearing her name around the world and in her home town (above right).