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Tight fit may bring rewards in Perugia's oddly named Woman Kisser Lane.



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Destination: Perugia

DAVID ELLIS recounts the tale of Luisa and the chocolate factory.

If ever there's a town that's a 'must-visit' for romantics and 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 whose tradition demands that you offer a kiss as you squeeze past anyone coming in the opposite direction.

There's no mention about giving them a chocolate afterwards.

Perugia is the capital of Umbria, about halfway between Rome and Florence, and it's Perugia 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, and are then topped with a whole hazelnut, covered with another coating of chocolate, and finally wrapped in foil that carries an expression of love in a half-dozen or more languages.

Luisa Spagnoli started the Perugia chocolate factory with fellow confectioner Giovanni Buitoni in 1907, when she was 30 years old.

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 Nestlé company which 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. But be prepared for the crowds. It attracts more than a 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 molds, 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 garments under the name l'Angora Spagnoli.

VISITING:

For general information about Perugia, visit [www.perugiaonline.com](http://www.perugiaonline.com).

Carolinususi Italian Tours have three-week escorted tours to Umbria and Tuscany every northern spring and autumn. Phone (07) 3396 8652 or (07) 3262 6332 or visit [www.carolinususi.com.au](http://www.carolinususi.com.au).



Above ... Luisa's fashion store in Perugia, one of more than 100 world-wide.

Left ... Luisa Spagnoli: sweet tooth for success.



Left ... Famed artist Raphael: his original Entombment of Christ was stolen in the strangest of circumstances.

Below ... What started it all: Luisa's famed Baci chocolates.



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.



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