



Traveller's Guide: Umbria

In the fifth of a six-part series produced in association with Footprint Travel Guides, **Julius Honnor** explores the green heart of Italy

Saturday, 11 June 2011

From a car park outside Perugia's city walls, a series of escalators brings visitors up through the shady foundations of the 16th-century Rocca Paolina castle, depositing them blinking into the sunshine at the end of one of Italy's most beautiful medieval streets, the Corso Vannucci. The castle was constructed quite deliberately over the top of the houses of the defeated local nobility as an emblem of Papal dominance. Today, you can step off the escalator to peer into their homes – built over but simultaneously encased and protected.

Above ground there is little left of the once-huge fortress. Ask a local and they will tell you proudly how their tradition of saltless bread dates back to the Salt War of 1540 against the Pope, a creative snub to the overbearing force of centralised power. This story may or may not be true, but it's certainly the case that when Italian unification came 150 years ago, Umbrians wasted no time in tearing down the hated citadel.

This endearingly anti-establishment streak still exists in Umbria today, though its left-field spirit is often well hidden under a layer of laid-back rural insouciance.

Equidistant from Rome and Florence, the green heart of Italy has long been marked by the comings and goings to the north and south, but never swamped by them. The hill towns are exceptionally beautiful, but they are usually beacons of stone in an otherwise green, hilly and wooded world. Underground history is a recurring theme, especially in Perugia, Narni, Todi and Orvieto; and from an archeological point of view, the Etruscans and Romans dominate Umbrian museums. However, it is the medieval period that has left the deepest stains on the region's contemporary urban psyche, with many streets in these towns little changed in 500 years.

Religion has made its mark here, too, but even at its holiest it's a pastoral and notably anti-establishment spirituality. Not for nothing did St Francis leave Assisi to live in the woods, preach to the birds and befriend the wolf; the film director Franco Zeffirelli wasn't the only one to depict him as a counterculture leader in his 1972 biopic, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*. The Catholic Church seemed to miss the point when they built a hulking monstrosity around Francis's simple forest chapel and Assisi is the one place where tour buses mean that the locals can seem outnumbered. Even here though, it's easy to escape the postcard shops to find old ladies scrubbing their steps and hanging out the washing while their husbands sit drinking wine and playing dominoes.

Bypassed by Italian development for much of the 20th century, Umbria can still feel like a region in a timewarp, much further from the politics of Rome or the money of the Italian north than it actually is. Sundays are still soporifically slow, shops and businesses close for long siestas and, in August, towns empty out as everyone heads for the beach. Assisi aside, tourism often feels like a novel concept, and is all the better for it. There are few of the crowds of Tuscany, and out of season – which in some places means for most of the year – you can go a long way without seeing another foreigner.

The Apennines form the spine of the region, and are especially peaceful. Snow-capped in

winter before being enrobed in spring flowers, they make for idyllic walking countryside. Or you could fling yourself off the top with help from a paraglider (00 39 074 382 1156; prodelta.it; from €25), or rush down white water rapids in a raft (00 39 348 351 1798; raftingumbria.com; €25-€36).

Throughout the year, but especially in summer, festivals celebrate everything from Perugian chocolate to flag-throwing and percussion, in even the smallest towns. Some, such as Perugia's Umbria Jazz (00 39 075 572 6113; umbriajazz.com), which runs from 8 to 17 July, and Spoleto's classical Festival Dei Due Mondi (00 39 074 322 1689; festivaldispoletto.com), which runs from 24 June to 10 July, are now international events.

Hill-top piazzas are made for long meals with great local wine and delicious pasta, flavoured with the mysterious truffles that grow under the roots of the region's trees. Umbria's olive oil is recognised as some of Italy's best and the wine is excellent, often made with the Sagrantino grape in wonderful little wineries.

Umbria is slowly changing, with boutique producers creating businesses from the virgin landscapes. And thanks to an extraordinary wealth of culture and heritage, the regional art and architecture is astounding, from the Etruscans to the Futurists, but also approachable, largely because few of Tuscany's tour groups make it this far south or east.

But to characterise the area as "Tuscany without the tourists", as many do, is to do Umbria a disservice, for this is a region proud of its own distinct nature. It is rural and rustic, but also creative and individual; seldom brash or ostentatious, and all the more wonderful for it.

Julius Honnor is the author of the Footprint Travel Guide to Umbria & Marche. To receive a 50 per cent discount (excl P&P) off any Footprint Italian guidebook, visit footprinttravelguides.com and enter Inde11 in the coupon code at checkout. Valid until the end of July.

Getting there and around

Ryanair (0871 246 0000; ryanair.com) flies from Stansted to tiny Perugia airport five times a week. The airport is on the plain between Perugia and Assisi and is 20 minutes' drive from both. Taxis go to either for around €30, or there's a bus to Perugia for €3.50. Other gateways to the region – Rome, Pisa and Florence – are a rail journey away; for tickets, timetables and prices see Trenitalia.com. A 20-minute train journey connects Perugia and Assisi. The towns of Orvieto and Spoleto, both of which have lively cultural calendars, are also accessible by rail. Using public transport makes it hard to get off the beaten track; a hire car is an advantage.

Accommodation

One of the best ways to see Umbria is to stay in an agriturismo. Originally farms with B&Bs, the concept now includes grand country piles where you'll get wonderful personal attention and the best of Umbrian cuisine. For more information, go to agriturismo.it.

Stylish hilltop Torre di Moravola (00 39 07 5946 0965; moravola.com), near the medieval village of Montone, is a 10th-century fortified tower, converted in a stunning fashion by a British architect and a designer into an exclusive hotel with seven tower suites. Doubles from €220, including breakfast.

With great food and beautiful, rustic rooms, Casale degli Amici (00 39 07 4381 6811; ilcasaledegliamici.it) is on a lentil-growing farm in a peaceful spot about three kilometres east of Norcia. Doubles from €40, including breakfast.

In Bevagna, a grand, 18th-century town house and a Renaissance palace make up the wonderfully rambling Orto degli Angeli (00 39 07 4236 0130; ortoangeli.it). Between the two, a hanging garden incorporates part of a Roman theatre. Doubles from €220, including breakfast.

Combine the best of Umbrian food and drink with a stunning rural location by staying in an agriturismo that doubles as a cookery school. The fantastic Alla Madonna del Piatto (00 39 07 5819 9050; madonnadelpiatto.com) near Assisi is a great place to stay (doubles from €85 including breakfast) or learn to cook (€115 per person per lesson). Letizia Mattiacci's knowledge of Italian cuisine is imparted with friendly smiles and a generous supply of wine while you work.

The accommodation may be fairly basic at Fattoria il Poggio (00 39 07 5965 9550; fattoriaisolapolvese.com), but the chance to stay on Isola Polvese in the middle of Lake Trasimeno, and have the island to yourself after the last boats have gone, is worth giving up a few luxuries for. Doubles from €80, half board.

Wonderful walking

The Apennine chain of hills and mountains forms the eastern edge of Umbria, and offers great places for walking, particularly in the Monti Sibillini national park (sibillini.net) which straddles south-east Umbria and neighbouring Marche. Wild boar are common (as are wild boar sausages) and you may even spot a grey wolf or brown bear.

Morning mists collect in huge upland plains, stretched out beneath snowy peaks. The plains are vividly painted with wild flowers in spring and early summer and famed at other times for the lentils that are grown there. High and remote, Castelluccio, near the town of Norcia, is a great centre for walks across vast grassy hills and through beech woods.

Other good areas for rural strolls include the deciduous forests of the Monte Cucco regional park (discovermontecucco.it) to the north and the wooded valley of Valnerina.

Monte Subasio, the loaf-like mountain upon which Assisi perches on its lower slopes, is one of Umbria's most accessible pieces of highland countryside. A path from Spello to Assisi passes through olive groves and oak woods before rising to bare hillside with enormous views and the occasional monk bent earnestly against the slope. St Francis used to come up here to meditate, and it's easy to see why.

Headwater (01606 720199; headwater.com) offers a nine-day "Footsteps of St Francis" independent walking tour, which loops through Monte Subasio natural park, from £1,195 including accommodation, meals and flights.

Lake life

Italy's fourth biggest lake, Trasimeno, to the west of Perugia, is a shallow saucer of water surrounded by low hills. Its three wooded islands – Polvese, Maggiore and Minore – were visited by St Francis. The lake retains some of its ancient fishing industry and has long had strategic significance – it was the site of one of the worst military defeats of the Roman Empire, when Hannibal, having led his troops plus elephants over the Alps, lured Flaminius's Roman army into an ambush and killed at least 15,000 soldiers.

Trasimeno's warm, calm waters make it a good spot for kite surfing. Try the Scuola Kitesurf (scuola-kitesurf.it) at Lido di Tuoro. If you don't want to get wet, a 24km cycle path from Castiglione del Lago (where you can rent bikes) to Torricella on the opposite side of the lake is a rare opportunity in Umbria to ride on the flat.

Regular ferry boats leave Castiglione del Lago, the most attractive lakeside town for the islands. For more luxury, and freedom from the timetable, you could charter your own boat, with the option of strawberries and prosecco on board, from Navilagando (00 39 335 1739 492; navilagando.com).

Fine winery

Cantina Paolo Bea (00 39 07 4237 8128; paolobea.com) near Montefalco is one of the most rewarding Umbrian wineries to visit. It's an expensive day out (€50 per person; €40 for groups of three or more) but you get not only the individual attention of the winery's

architect and oenologist, but all his passion and enthusiasm too.

You also get to taste some very fine regional wines indeed, including a Sagrantino and a Sagrantino Passito. The processes here are beyond organic: using natural drying, cultivating indigenous varieties, sourcing new plants only from existing ones, and working with natural processes rather than against them. This may sound like new-age winemaking, but it's actually hi-tech, and very effective.

Giampiero, son of the titular Paolo, designed the new cantina and it's a prime example of creative, sustainable, imaginative industrial architecture, with special ducts to bring in air from outside and water channels to regulate the humidity. The Paolo Bea process feels a little like a religion, with the grape as the object of worship and the new cantina as its chapel.

From the modern to the ancient: wine has been produced in and around Orvieto since Etruscan times and cellars used for over two millennia are still to be found in the caves beneath the town. White predominates, made from Grechetto and Trebbiano grapes. Taste local wines at Enoteca Regionale in the cellars of the Convento di San Giovanni (00 39 07 6339 3529; ilpalazzodelgusto.it) where guided tours with tasting start at €6.

Built to last

Architectural highlights include the stunning Umbrian Gothic of the upper church of the Basilica di San Francesco in Assisi (sanfrancescoassisi.org) and many less obvious churches such as the pale stone, 12th-century Romanesque San Silvestro in Bevagna and San Pietro abbey (00 39 074478 0129; sanpietroinvalle.com; €3) within the Nera Valley national park, which dates to the 8th century.

Spoletto's amazing 14th-century bridge, the Ponte delle Torri, is probably built on Roman foundations, but the most atmospheric Roman remnants are more secluded. Carsulae (00 39 07 4433 4133; €4.40), 19km north of Narni, is a ruined and romantically overgrown Roman town on the Via Flaminia, in a startlingly beautiful rural setting.

Many Umbrian town centres are well preserved. Perugia's Piazza IV Novembre is a fine example of Italy's power politics between church and state, with the steps of the ornate 15th-century Duomo facing across the square to the Palazzo dei Priori, one of the country's finest town halls. The piazza is these days the centrepiece for Umbria Jazz (00 39 07 5572 6113; umbriajazz.com; 8-17 July), where Prince performs on Friday 15 July this year (€75).