



The good life in Umbria's slow lane

It's virtually unknown outside Italy but, as **Fiona Duncan** reports, unassuming Norcia is one of the country's top gastronomic centres

Founded by the Sabines, known as Nursin in Roman times and frequently rebuilt in the wake of devastating earthquakes, low-rise Norcia sits wrapped inside its unbroken ring of 14th-century walls, at once loughy and resilient, ornate and engaging, with refreshing glimpses of the surrounding mountains from within.

It's little known outside Italy, overshadowed by its more famous, more pastoral western Umbrian neighbours - Assisi, Perugia, Orvieto, Spoleto, Todi - but is one of Italy's most fascinating towns: a throwback - in a good way; like something from the Fifties; a place where everybody knows one another, and stops to talk; where the living is good and life is pleasantly slow.

With its superlative hams

and truffles, farro (spelt) from nearby Monteleone, and tiny, sweet lentils from the mountains, it is also in the first rank of the country's major gastronomic centres. The food is one of the reasons for its quiet prosperity.

Set on the lush upland plain of Santa Scolastica and surrounded by the majestic Monti Sibillini, its remote location, accessed from better-known western Umbria via a new tunnel, creates the feeling of having arrived in a different world.

It's certainly a friendly one. Within minutes of arriving at our hotel, the Palazzo Seneca, where a refectory table covered in books doubles as reception, Roberto, an enthusiastic employee, had proudly offered to show us the highlights of his town.

In the appealing Piazza San Benedetto, ever humming



with small-town chatter, three very different buildings make their mark. A fine, if gaunt 16th-century fortress, La Castellina, built for the town's papal governors and unadorned save for a fine pair of lions guarding the entrance, houses the Museo Civico, while the Palazzo Comunale incorporates a colourful mix of styles.

But it's the Gothic façade of San Benedetto that most readily draws the eye. Though Norcia is the birthplace of St Benedict, the founder of Western monasticism, the

order's simple, worn, much rebuilt mother church had long been devoid of monks until a new, young, mainly American community took up residence a few years ago, creating a benign presence at the heart of town.

With the help of the Bianconi family, innkeepers in Norcia since 1850, they have recently begun brewing beer, derived from local ingredients, as a means of supporting themselves. "We are calling it Birra Nursia", Father Basil told us, as we got chatting in the Piazza (you just do, in Norcia). "We hope it will be a success."

Leaving the piazza, we strolled with Roberto to a handful of other churches: the low-key Duomo with a richly decorated altar by Duquesnoy; Sant' Agostino, adorned with vivid frescoes; and, seemingly of no consequence from the outside, the Oratorio di Sant' Agostinuccio, which hides a richly gilded, inlaid and painted wooden ceiling.

Roberto then went back to his table, and we turned our attention to food. The town is thick with *norcinerne*

(synonymous with pork butcher" across Italy, and derived from the word Norcia), announced by mounted boars' heads and filled with marvellous hams, sausages and salamis, lentils, pecorino and ricotta, jams, honeys and, most famously, black truffles.

If you want to learn about truffles, go truffle hunting. Even if you aren't seduced by truffles, you must get into the glorious mountain scenery, protected by the Monti Sibillini National Park, and the remarkable Piano Grande in particular. But we certainly were seduced and after a splendid lunch in the medieval surroundings of the Grotta Azzurra, with the local carabinieri and our friends the monks and their Belgian biere-meister at neighbouring tables, we were taken to the wooded hillsides by Nicola, a professional hunter, and his prized dogs, to be shown the art of finding them.

We returned to Norcia in time to attend Compline in the crypt of San Benedetto. To have missed the heavenly Gregorian chanting really would have been a sin.

Top town: Piazza San Benedetto, Norcia's main square, top; local produce, above; and the dining room of the Palazzo Seneca hotel, top right



ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com) flies from Gatwick to Rome Fiumicino from £107 return. Car hire, such as Europcar (0871 384 1087; europcar.co.uk), is available at Rome airport. Private transfer is available for guests at the Palazzo Seneca.

Alternatively, take the train (trenitalia.com) from Roma Termini, linked to the airport by half-hourly shuttles, to Spoleto; at Spoleto, a regular bus runs from outside the station to Norcia.

THE INSIDE TRACK

❖ No visit to Norcia would be complete without a visit to the vast and strange upland plain, the Piano Grande (20 minutes by car), five miles long and three wide, and 4,000 ft up, ablaze with wild flowers from mid-May to mid-July, and then with the yellow of lentils; it's one of the most magical places in central Italy, Tuscany included.

❖ Castelluccio, at almost 5,000 ft and overlooking the plain, is a fascinating upland village. An excellent new restaurant with rooms here is Antica Cascina (0039 743 821194; anticacascina.brandimarte.it). Take the road north for more wild scenery.

❖ Norcia makes a great base for outdoor activities such as walking, riding, rafting and trout fishing on the Nera. For suggestions and information: bianconi.com/en.

❖ There is enough in the national park around the town to keep you happy for many days, but the town is also a good base for visiting Spoleto and Assisi, Ascoli Piceno and for the Valnerina, the valley towards Rome, where the ancient abbey of San Pietro in Valle is a highlight.

THE BEST HOTELS

Les Dependances £ An offshoot of Grotta Azzurra (see below), this central budget rooming house offers basic, clean accommodation (0743 816513; hotelgrottaazzurra.com; from €44/€35).

Grotta Azzurra

€€ In a wonderful medieval building just off the main square, a former papal granary, run by the Bianconis since 1850; a warren of simple, old-fashioned rooms with terracotta floors and



wooden furniture; all shapes and sizes; try for a room with a balcony (0743 81513; hotelgrottaazzurra.com; doubles from €49/€38).

Palazzo Seneca

€€€ The lovely Palazzo Seneca, yards from Piazza San Benedetto, is all luxury, elegance and style, blending contemporary furnishings with old. One of central Italy's best new hotels. Charming staff (0743 817434; palazzo-seneca.com; from €140/€113).

DO YOU KNOW?

An 18th-century earth quake didn't reach the town's buildings more than two stories.

THE BEST RESTAURANTS

Taverna de' Massari

€ A cosy, wood-panelled, family run restaurant noted for its local dishes, well cooked. Try the tagliatelle porcini e tartufo (Via Roma; 0743 816218).

Granaro del Monte

€€ With suits of armour, vaulted ceilings and tapestries, the dining rooms of the Grotta Azzurra are full of atmosphere and tradition and include a huge fireplace on which meat is expertly grilled. Superb local produce, simply executed (Via Alfieri; 0743 81513).

Vespasia

€€€ The gourmet dining room in Palazzo Seneca is the place to try local produce with a creative twist (Via Cesare Battisti; 0743 817434).

WHAT TO AVOID

❖ The old road from Spoleto over the mountains is pretty, but winding and slow; use the new tunnel through to Sant'Anatolia di Narco. ❖ If you wish to attend Compline, lasting 20 minutes and beginning at 7.45 each evening, make sure you arrive in good time (wait by the red rope across the stairs) or you won't be admitted. For further information: obsnorcia.org.