

Travel

NATIONAL NEWSPAPER TRAVEL SECTION OF THE YEAR

ALESSANDRO BRUSTENGHI is a 34-year-old friar on the brink of becoming the next big Italian singing voice – a tenor in the style of **Andrea Bocelli** and **Luciano Pavarotti**. His debut album, *Voice From Assisi*, is out next week. His home is the Franciscan monastery in Assisi, where one of his jobs is to tell tourists the story of his order's founder, **St Francis**. Here's his fascinating and unique guide to the stunning hilltop town.

ASSISI is an astonishingly beautiful medieval hill town – but it is not the only wonderful sight in this corner of Italy: not far away is Perugia, another lovely town on top of a hill, and nearby is the tiny village of Castiglione della Valle, where I come from.

There is, however, something very special about Assisi, the home town of St Francis. Each year it attracts five to six million tourists and the big draw is its links to St Francis and St Clare.

Francis was the son of a wealthy merchant in Assisi. In 1204, after receiving a vision, he suddenly abandoned his wealthy life, choosing to embrace poverty, travelling around in a rough garment to preach repentance. Inspired by St Francis's teachings, Clare of Assisi later joined him to found the women's Order of St Clare – 'the Poor Clares'.

Assisi is in the Italian region of Umbria, which very closely resembles neighbouring Tuscany in its landscape: the valleys and big sky are the same.

But things are on a smaller scale here – the people are friendlier (but then I would say that!) and things are more traditional. Life in many ways is much the same here as it was centuries ago.

The villages, with their castles and their defensive encircling walls, still look the same as they always have more or less since medieval times. These places are close-knit communities where everybody knows each other. Strangers are instantly recognised and those of a good heart are welcomed. People in Umbria are very generous.

People from here also tend to stay here. The first time I really left my village on my own to visit another city was when I was 14 and went to study in Perugia.

Before I went to London earlier this year to record my album at Abbey Road, the only other time I had been abroad was on a school trip to Paris when we travelled on the train. My

trip to London was the first time I'd been on a plane. I was a bit worried at first, but it was a wonderful experience. The take-off was amazing; it all felt like a miracle.

And I loved London for its fantastic mix of different people. Here I got the chance to enjoy the company of all sorts of people and I thought this is what heaven will be like. Yes, London is rather like heaven.

With my new singing career, I know there will be lots more opportunities for travelling around the world. But singing will be just another part of my work as a friar. The heart of my life will continue to be the triary – I love the tranquillity and enjoy my daily chores.

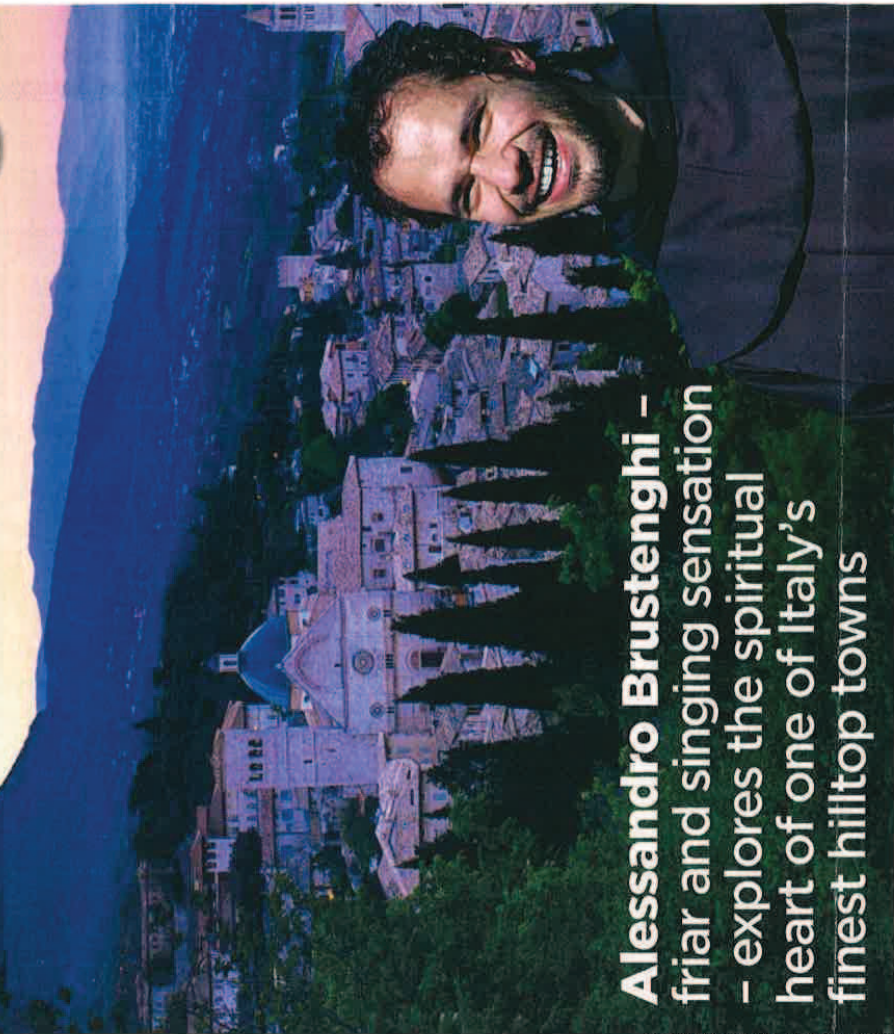
One of my main jobs is to take tour groups around Assisi's two Franciscan basilicas. I meet them at the entrance and explain the building's history.

Within the large Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli is the Porziuncola, the little church that was given to Francis by Benedictine monks. He restored the church with his own hands and later the basilica was built around it. The little church has been preserved exactly as it was, and it's important because it was here that St Francis founded the Order of Friars Minor (the Franciscans), and it has been with us ever since.

ONCE I've told the group the history and the significance of the church, I let them explore unaccompanied so that they can quietly contemplate everything. Everybody loves the statue of Francis in the cloisters, which have two pet doves who nest there. I love meeting and talking to the tourists. I think they're a little surprised to see someone as young as me living as a friar but their reaction is beautiful: I find that visitors are thirsty for enlightenment – they want to know, they want to feel. They recognise that there is a special spirituality here.

As Franciscans, we do not offer a

Heavenly



Alessandro Brustenghi – friar and singing sensation – explores the spiritual heart of one of Italy's finest hilltop towns

UPLIFTING: The ancient hilltop town of Assisi in Umbria, where singing friar Alessandro Brustenghi, right, lives in the Franciscan monastery

conventional tour of the town. Our tour offers you the chance to discover the spirit of Assisi with a Franciscan guide. It has a spiritual dimension.

You can, of course, have a tour with a town guide who provides history and stories. But our job is to introduce people to the lives of St Francis and St Clare and to show how these two saints had such an extraordinary effect.

For example, we show how this is reflected in the frescoes of Giotto, which show the life of St Francis. These frescoes are in the Basilica of St Francis, which is also a monument to medieval art and architecture. The main reason tourists and pilgrims come to this basilica is that St Francis, who called all animals his 'brothers and sisters', and was known for preaching even to birds, is buried in the crypt. What is striking about the art here is that it represents a revolution in style. Previously, Christ was represented in a very stylised icon form but thanks to St Francis, Christianity began to take on a more human appearance. Here the face of the Virgin

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Assisi



CHURCH WITHIN A CHURCH: Alessandro sings at the Porzaincola inside the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli

GETTING THERE

Tour operators to Assisi include **Sunvil Discovery** (020 8758 4722, sunvil.co.uk) which offers seven nights' B&B at the centrally located Hotel Umbra from £709 including return flights (London-Rome Fiumicino) and car hire. **Citalia** (0844 415 1956, citalia.com) offers seven nights' self-catering from £329, including return flights from Gatwick.

FRIEND OF ANIMALS: A plaque on a wall shows St Francis preaching to a flock of birds



Mary, for example, is a typical Umbrian face.

Religious art moved from idealised, perfect images to something that embraced humanity, having the effect of making Christianity accessible to more people.

Another important site to visit is the Hermitage of the Carceri in the mountains. This can be reached by a beautiful walk. Here you will find the cave where Francis prayed, and it was around this cave that the Hermitage was built into the rocks. It's a spectacular place.

Anyone coming to Assisi should also visit the church of San Damiano. It's a mysterious and beautiful place which, at the time of St Francis, was falling

into ruin. The road down to it from Assisi is very steep and passes fields of olive trees.

You can appreciate the beautiful Spoletan valley as you walk down. It was here that St Francis received his first vocation. Francis came into this church to pray before the crucifix, asking what to do with his life. Christ replied to him, saying: 'Go rebuild my church which as you can see is falling into ruins.' He went ahead and rebuilt San Damiano.

The start of my musical career began in a small church in 2011, when I attracted the attention of Decca Records. I am the first friar to land a deal with a major record label.

I worried that this was too big a project

for me, but on the other hand I was convinced that this had happened for a reason: maybe this was a mission from God. I'm not after fame but I'm happy that all the money will go to assist the activities of the Order of the Friars Minor.

We decided to make an album with popular songs of faith and some special songs of St Francis. I hope people who hear it will see that it is one of passion, history, and soul. But to really understand the life and work of St Francis, you must come to Assisi – and, who knows, you may have me for your personal guide.

● *Voice From Assisi* is released on October 15, priced £9.