



Cycling through Italy: Cobblestones, Cappucini, and Calories

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With full ceremony, the waitress shaves the nugget of black gold (It's expensive! Around \$1500/kg) onto perfectly cooked pasta that glistens by candlelight, in a lathering of butter. There is nothing else; no Parmesan, garlic, tomato, cream... Italian cuisine is best kept simple. Truffle pasta is simply delicious.

Our gastronomic treat is taking place in "Ristorante Tessenaca", In Gubbio.



Credit: Ristorante Tessenaca

Cobbled laneways, Etruscan arches and medieval churches wrapped in the ribbon of an ancient stone wall, beyond which, paddocks of golden wheat.

Actually, that's not quite true. Outside the wall are drab 1980's apartments. Building in stone went out of fashion when slave labour lost its luster. No matter, enter the old town and you enter a time warp.



Credit: Flickr/Friar's Balsam

Gubbio is carved into a small but steep hill. At the top there's a church - of course. 500 years ago, you'd have to hoof it to the house of prayer and whip yourself with each step, as was custom in the self-flagellating times of St Francis – a fairly well known catholic chap who lived 15 km down the road in Assisi.



Credit: Wikipedia/Commons

Today, the pilgrim path through Umbria is much softer. A ski lift will spirit you to the church and cars carry you to villages high above those golden fields of wheat. Back in the day, the height was helpful to see oncoming threats through the turrets of your castle. Castles are now restaurants and the views - a magnificent breather from truffle inspired feasts.

There is one downside to endless pasta, olive oil, vino and grappa. Calories. Before long, I look like Friar Tuck. My only exercise: lifting a fork to mouth, strolling a lap of a church and then getting in a car to do it all again in a different medieval town.

So, my wife and I ditched the car for bikes. You cover less ground but see more; eating becomes guilt free and each day has an element of physical challenge followed by reward – an ice-cold Italian lager.

The cycling in Umbria is brilliant. Surrounding mountains receive none of the international attention that accompanies the Dolomites, Swiss Alps or the Pyrenees. However, there's plenty of gradient pain if you want it.



Credit: Facebook/Bike in Umbria

www.bikeinumbria.it is a brilliant website for mountain bikers, road cyclists and tourers. It lists the best rides, supplies downloadable maps, itinerary suggestions and accommodation ideas.

With 22 great rides within striking distance, we based ourselves in Gubbio. No daily packing, unpacking; checking out, checking in. Each day, we returned to the familiar comforts of home. With one exception: our real home is not the restored 17th century monastery, Hotel Ai Cappucini.



Credit: Hotel Ai Cappucini

“People need emotion, history and tradition for a stay in a hotel... this is very important.”

Maria Carmela Colaiacovo’s family bought the former convent 23 years ago. They transformed it into a stunning hotel. Monks have given way to tourists; austerity has given way to opulence, at every turn.

The hallways are wide and long. On every wall - priceless art. I’m not kidding; the family has spent millions acquiring art by some of the country’s famous artists.

“When the hotel was re-born in 1990 we found a very important contemporary painting on the wall by Capo Grossi. So, we decided to continue this tradition and to acquire the work of other famous artists such as Arnaldo Pomodoro,” Maria told me.

Frescos, ceramics, paintings “all are original in our hotel.”



Credit: Ai Cappucini

The art blends seamlessly with modern hotel luxuries such as the newly installed pool, sauna, spa. All encased within the timeless architecture of the convent – stone walls, terracotta tiles, ancient wine cellars, pretty courtyards and gardens.



Credit: Hotel Ai Cappucini

Maria goes on to tell me they invested in the hotel as a “gift to the region.”

That's some gift. The Colaiacovos have done well out of Umbria (and Italy in general) - the family owns Colacem, one of the largest cement companies in the world. They have made many millions from grinding up the local stone for cement. On this slightly unattractive point Maria Carmela stresses: “We have nothing to do with the cement factory down the road – that is not ours”.

I understand her interest in disassociating herself from the said plant. It is an industrial eyesore, five kilometers from the beauty of Gubbio... and Maria's hotel.

If you are privileged enough to stay at hotel Cappucini, you join a list of notables, (Colin Firth, Joan Savage) and notorious (Berlusconi). There are also some Aussies on the regular guest list: “yes, we are like a second home to the Triguboff's.” (Harry Triguboff is an Australian property developer known as “High-Rise Harry.”) Cement Tsars hosting developers, it makes sense.

Normal people stay here too. Well, normal people with deep pockets. The convent is now more likely to cater to kings and lords than impoverished pilgrims.

But Maria adds: “We love cyclists... We have special rooms for bikes, there is massage here, our restaurant is in the Michelin guide and we are the gateway to everything Umbria offers... art, gastronomy, culture, concert...” And hills.

We set out to conquer some new mountains, another great lunch and then, we will return to our humble abode. Leaving Umbria will not be easy, checking out of the hotel – even harder!

IF YOU GO

Hotel Ai Cappucini:

<http://www.parkhotelaicappuccini.it>

Flights to Rome:

<http://www.singaporeair.com/>

Tourism Italy:

www.italia.it

[facebook.com/Italiantouristoffice](https://www.facebook.com/Italiantouristoffice)