

Umbria's medieval hill towns: Spello, Montefalco and Bevagna

Head for Umbria's three medieval walled towns of Spello, Montefalco and Bevagna, to enjoy its aesthetic and edible treasures in a stress-free style, says Lee Marshall.



Image 1 of 3

Spello is more of a hillside town, its interlocked stone houses striding up a spur of Saint Francis's mountain, Monte Subasio

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In Assisi, the tour groups are approaching the Basilica di San Francesco, each of them following a gaudy pennant or parasol held aloft. They merge and slow to a crawl as they join the bottleneck by the ticket office. Here in Spello, a few miles south, or across the green Valle Umbra in Bevagna or Montefalco, tourist numbers, especially out of season, are more in line with the old bus rule: you wait for ages, and then three come along at once.

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One of the joys of this trio of Umbrian towns is exactly this: they are on the doorstep of Assisi, which attracts four to five million visitors a year, yet they belong to another world – one of Grand Tourists rather than coach tours; one of gourmet antipasti in a wine bar full of locals rather than undercooked slabs of pizza in places where you barely hear a word of Italian.

Although they lack the spiritual significance of the birthplace of St Francis, and have nothing quite on the same artistic level as Giotto's frescoes in the lower church of the Basilica di San Francesco, Spello, Montefalco and Bevagna are by no means minor attractions. Along with Foligno, the vibrant little market-and-transport hub around which they cluster, they offer a blend of art, history, food, wine, landscape and crafts that makes them worth a week of anyone's time.

The area also has an impressive new piece of architecture – or perhaps that should read "art". Designed by the 86-year-old Italian sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro, and inaugurated in June 2012, the Tenuta Castelbuono winery near Bevagna is part building, part sculpture, part land art installation. Nicknamed "Il Carapace" (the tortoise shell), this flattened copper dome, which emerges at the top of a slope of vines like some prehistoric beast waking from sleep, is the centrepiece of a new vineyard planted with sagrantino di montefalco grapes, from which the red wine of the same name derives. A secular cathedral (and, in Pomodoro's words, "the first of my sculptures that you can actually walk into"), the Castelbuono winery has a dramatic tasting room upstairs under the dome, and an equally striking cellar space downstairs, its uplit walls painted the shade of a Tiepolo sky.

Spello

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Hill towns are not exactly thin on the ground in central Italy. But Spello is more of a hillside town, its interlocked stone houses striding up a spur of Saint Francis's mountain, Monte Subasio. The splendidly intact town walls are draped around the centro storico like a necklace.

"HisPELLum" was originally a Roman settlement – it lay on the Via Flaminia consular road, close to the strategic junction for Perugia. The most impressive remnant of this stage of the town's history, apart from the walls themselves, is the Porta Venere, an Augustan-era gate flanked by two 12-sided towers, standing in magnificent isolation on the west side of town.

Most of the other sights are strung out along Via Cavour, the main street, beginning with Santa Maria Maggiore. This church has a finely sculpted medieval portal, but the real treat is inside: the Cappella Baglioni side-chapel is decorated by one of Pinturicchio's most joyous and colourful fresco cycles, painted in 1501 for the powerful Baglioni family and centred on the birth and childhood of Jesus. There, in the Disputation in the Temple, is the priore Troilo Baglioni himself, looking decidedly smug as he considers his 15 minutes of time-travel fame. Next to him is the church treasurer, holding a bulging money bag.

Nearby there's a decent civic art gallery and a couple of other worthwhile churches, but Spello's real pleasures, apart from its two standout sights, are the civilised pace of life of the town and the lovely Subasio marble from which it is built, which takes on a peach-pink hue around sunrise and sunset.

Stay at... the comfortable four-star Palazzo Bocci (Via Cavour 17, 0039 0742 301021; palazzobocci.com; double rooms from €130/£101), based in an 18th-century residence on the main street.

For something more special, there are two delightful apartments in the centro storico, Buonanotte Barbanera and La Casetta (both at buonanottebarbanera.it), with decor straight out of a coffee-table book of contemporary country Italian interiors. At a starting price of €1,600/£1,250 a week for the smaller La Casetta, which sleeps a maximum of two adults and two children, these are at the luxury end of the spectrum.

Eat at... La Cantina (Via Cavour 2, 0742 301 651775; average €30/£23 per person without wine), which serves refined versions of Umbrian peasant dishes such as lamb meatballs with artichokes, or at the tiny, good-value trattoria De Dadà (Via Cavour 47, 0742 301327; average €20/£15.50 without wine).

More information: prospello.it

Montefalco

Certain central Italian towns from the Middle Ages look as if they have been laid out by artists inspired by the marine fossils that were abundant in the soil of this area. Think of Siena's conch-shell-shaped central square, or Montepulciano, where the main street spirals up like the shell of a sea-snail. Montefalco is a starfish: the 12th-century town was entered through five gates, each one associated with a parish church, each one giving onto a lane that leads up to a (more or less) five-sided piazza at the town's highest point.

Though smaller than Spello, Montefalco feels equally lived-in. Known as "the balcony of Umbria" because of its lofty position and views over the fertile plain below, the town keeps itself busy as the centre of the sagrantino wine zone. It also has a tradition of woven linen and linen-cotton, kept alive today by the Pardi family (tessitrapardi.com), which has two outlets in town, at Corso Mameli 10 and Via Ringhiera Umbra 25 (there's also one in Spello, on Corso Cavour 5).

I can still remember walking into the church of San Francesco at Montefalco on a cold winter's day some time in the Eighties; we were the only visitors, and felt we had stumbled on buried treasure. Today that church is part of the well-organised Museo di San Francesco (montefalco.it/museo), but the impact of Benozzo Gozzoli's Saint Francis fresco cycle of 1452, still there to admire within, is as fresh and direct as ever. I love the scene of the sermon to the birds: they stand, the hoopoe, raven, swan and others, like schoolchildren on their best behaviour. Upstairs in the pinacoteca, an austere 12th-century crucifix by a painter from the Spoleto school outshines all the rest.

Stay at... Villa Zuccari (località San Luca Di Montefalco, 0742 399402; villazuccari.com, doubles from €110/£86), a few miles out of town. This flamboyant, peach-pink 16th-century villa

is stylish, friendly and stuffed with antiques, and has a large outdoor pool. If you want to be right in the centre of town, it has to be Palazzo Bontadosi (Piazza del Comune 19, 0742 379357; hotelbontadosi.com; doubles from €170/£132), a warmly chichi boutiquehotel that opened in 2009 in the central square.

Eat at... Palazzo Bontadosi's restaurant, Aurum (average €40/£31 without wine), is worth a visit even if you're not staying there, for locally sourced creative dishes such as spelt-flour tagliatelle with olives, spinach and thyme.

Alternatively, head across the square to L'Alchimista (Piazza del Comune 14, 0742 378558; montefalcowines.com; average €25/£19.50 without wine), a restaurant and wine bar where you can order anything from a glass of sagrantino with a plate of prosciutto to a full meal.

More information: promontefalco.com

Bevagna

Bevagna differs from the other two points of this Valle Umbra triangle in being essentially a valley town. It lies close to the course of the Teverone river, which was channelled into the photogenic mill races and ponds that can be seen just outside the eastern stretch of the imposing town walls. On a branch of the Via Flaminia, Bevagna was at least as important as Spello in Roman times; Agrippina, Nero's mother, had a villa here, and the area's fertile agricultural lands were famous for their cattle farms (today it is wine and olives that dominate – though Cannara, just to the north, is famous for its onions).

Sleepy Bevagna seems to struggle to fill the area within its walls: but this is all a part of its charm. The town's fitful, slow-motion development after its Roman high-water mark gave rise to an organic urban fabric, in which the past was reused rather than removed. Layers of history coexist. The town's best-concealed Roman-era sight lies underneath a modern building in Via di Porta Guelfa. Sea monsters, a beautifully detailed lobster and a crazy octopus disport themselves on the mosaic floor of a second-century-AD baths complex (entrance is via the combined Museo Civico ticket, which also takes in Bevagna's cute little 19th-century theatre).

Bevagna's other essential sights are San Michele Arcangelo and San Silvestro, the two Romanesque churches that face each other across the intact medieval main square, Piazza Silvestri. Both are fascinating, but my favourite is San Silvestro; its utter lack of adornment and steeply raised presbytery radiate a stern purity.

The Tenuta Castelbuono winery (0033 0742 361670; tenutacastelbuono.it), a few miles north-west of town, is open for tastings from Tuesday to Sunday inclusive, but telephone ahead to make sure.

Stay at... the Orto degli Angeli hotel (Via Dante Alighieri 1, 0742 360130; ortoangeli.com; double rooms from €130/£101), a lovely 14-room refuge occupying two wings of an 18th-century nobleman's house. The property incorporates a 17th-century palazzo and, in the hotel's Redibis restaurant, parts of Bevagna's Roman amphitheatre. A hanging garden, fragrant with lavender, old roses and a magnificent wisteria – as a photograph shows – was already long-established by 1934, and remains one of Umbria's loveliest green spaces.

Just outside the Porta Guelfa town gate, the pleasantly old-fashioned Residenza Porta Guelfa (Via Ponte delle Tavole 2, 0742 362041; residenzaportaguelfa.com; doubles from €80/£62) is one of the area's best-value accommodation options, with both an outdoor pool and spa, and a large hydromassage tub.

Eat at... the refined restaurant at the Orto degli Angeli, Redibis (contact details above), which is the district's top culinary ticket – though be aware the bill can easily come to €100 (£78) a head without wine. A more affordable gourmet experience is on offer at Ristorante Enoteca Onofri (Via

Onfori 2, 0742 361926; enotecaonofri.it; average €35/£27 without wine), housed in a former olive press just off the main street. Truffles, fresh vegetables, herbs, chianina beef and Cannara onions feature large on the militantly seasonal menu, which also includes some moreish desserts (don't miss the pistachio crème brûlée).

More information: prolocobevagna.it

GETTING THERE

The quickest route from Britain is via Ryanair (ryanair.com) from London Stansted to Perugia (airport.umbria.it) seven miles north of Assisi. It's just about possible to explore the area without hiring a car: there are buses (umbriamobilita.it) from the airport to Perugia, Assisi (change for Spello) and Foligno (change for Bevagna and Montefalco). Spello also has a train station (trenitalia.com) on the Perugia-Foligno line.