

# ITALIA!

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## RETURN TO UMBRIA

From hilltop Assisi and bustling Perugia to lyrical natural vistas, Italy's green heart is still beating

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DISCOVER ITALIA!



# Umbria's Hidden Gems







Photography by Chris Allsop

Umbria, the “Green Heart” of Italy, is a hidden gem – or at least it is for tourists from the UK, who tend to plump (often blindly) for neighbouring Tuscany. Italians – and especially Romans – on the other hand, are much more clued-in to Umbria’s delights, and regard the region as a pristine wilderness bolthole, at its best during long hikes through its verdant hills.

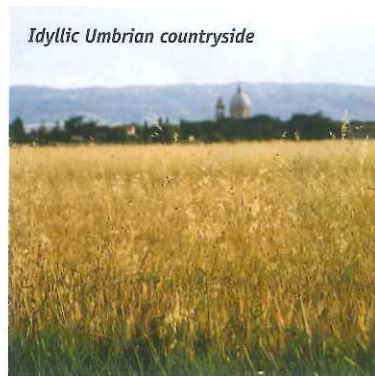
Besides the holy fortress of Assisi, Umbria’s capital Perugia is probably the other best-known destination for overseas visitors – a thriving university town at ease in its glorious medieval trappings. But this tiny, two-province region conceals in its picturesque undulations numerous less well-known medieval destinations that offer unique cultural experiences. So, convinced of their worthiness, I booked a seat on the next budget airline flight out of Stansted airport.

#### NORCIA AND THE FIORITA

The trip down to Norcia, in the southeast corner of Umbria, follows a road that winds through rugged, remote hills. We’re on the edge of the Sibillini National Park, a wooded, mountainous area that spills over the border into neighbouring Le Marche. It is, according to my knowledgeable guide, “very, very, very beautiful”. The multiple “verys”, it turns out, is a charming verbal tic (or anglicised Italian passion, take your pick).

The road, its edges softened by grasses and bright poppies, drops close to a clear-running river. The trout from the river, I’m reliably informed, are “very, very, very famous trout”. Then we pass a restaurant with bright, wooden signs offering truffle, prosciutto di Norcia and pecorino. “The prosciutto di Norcia,” she says, “is very, very, very famous.”

And she’s not wrong. The produce from this attractive walled town (pop: 5,000) punches well above its weight, even in a country already awash with quality groceries. The wilderness around the city is renowned for its wealth of wild boar, with which the dedicated Norcians craft outstanding dry-cured ham. Pop into any of the delis (known in these parts as



Idyllic Umbrian countryside

*norcimerie*) lining the main Via dei Priori and you’ll be offered a wafer-thin slice, and perhaps other pork-related goodies.

But if you can tear your mind away from food for a moment, you’ll discover that the centre of Norcia is a wheel-shaped *piazza* dedicated to St Benedict – the patron saint of Europe,

*We pass a restaurant with bright, wooden signs offering truffle, prosciutto di Norcia and pecorino*

no less. (That the statue wept an actual tear after Brexit is an unconfirmed miracle at this stage.)

Beneath the baroque church are the Roman remains of the home where the saint was reportedly born, while across the piazza is a stout castle built in 1538, now a museum. Its unusually thick walls are testament to the seismic zone that Norcia stands in. And surrounding all this aged beauty is a ►



The land around Norcia is famous for its wild boar

Despite the recent tragic earthquake in Umbria, Italy’s ‘Green Heart’ is still beating and the region holds secret corners that any visitor should seek out. Earlier this year, **Chris Allsop** went to visit a few select locations...



Clockwise from top left: View over vineyards to mountains and sky from Borgo Brufa; vertical Gubbio – bike hire not advised; medieval glass-blowing in Bevagna; driving past Assisi, the region’s most famous tourist destination, in search of other, hidden gems



DISCOVER ITALIA!







*Clockwise from top left: A marble lion guards the town hall at Norcia; a semifreddo disguised as a black truffle at Vespasia restaurant; looking down on Gubbio; in the background, Gubbio's Palazzo dei Consoli; donkey riding at Piano Grande; the start of the Fiorita, Piano Grande; Michelin-starred dining at Palazzo Seneca*

hedge of high mountains – at the top of which paragliders will apparently find “very, very, very good winds”.

Now back to the food. Besides its natural bounty, Norcia's Palazzo Seneca – a Relais & Chateaux luxury hotel – is home to the region's only Michelin star. Its elegant Vespasia restaurant, run by Chef Emanuele Mazzella, is a wonderful place to see what can really be done when top-notch culinary skills meet unbeatable fresh produce. There's also a black truffle-shaped *semifreddo* available for dessert for those who want to submerge themselves in the local flavour, but would rather do it in the truffle-free, shallow end.

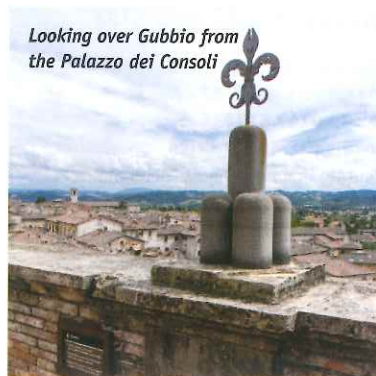
But Norcia has one more major trick up its sleeve. It's found along a winding road that takes you up to around 1,000 metres from the fertile plain that the town dominates, deep into the mountainous national park.

After about half an hour, we pull up in a lay-by. A robust, curly-haired dog observes me from the top of a small hill. It is of a sweet-natured breed, I'm told, that the shepherds use to guard their sheep from wolves. Fortunately, I'm not here for the sheep, but instead for a peek at the Piano Grande. Every year, this plain is covered with flowering lentils and more than 100 varieties of wildflowers that produce a stunning natural tableau. The precise time to come for maximum bloom varies according to the rains, but the last two weeks of June are the safest bet.

Even without the full bloom, however, the view is truly one of the loveliest I've ever clapped eyes on: the plain is surrounded by felt-soft hills hazy with purple woodland, birdsong colours the cool breeze, and all of it is the ancestral lands of those born in the tiny Castelluccio di Norcia – the highest town in the region. Striped sticks on the sides of the winding, wooded road that brought us here are a reminder that this area enjoys a lot of winter snowfall.

#### GUBBIO AND THE IGVINE TABLETS

One of the best preserved medieval towns of Italy, Gubbio (pop: 32,000) used to be a popular stop with Grand Tourists. It's a distinctly vertical place, with rose stone buildings arranged across a steep hillside,



*Looking over Gubbio from the Palazzo dei Consoli*

and lively streets that start and finish at peaceful, sun-filled squares containing a mix of the following elements: happy old men, classic Fiats, olive trees.

I've arrived here, however, not to idle in Gubbio's medieval loveliness, but to seek out the ancient Iguvine Tablets, housed in the looming magnificence of the Palazzo dei Consoli. There's an elevator that takes you up to the Piazza Grande, a large

*The plain is surrounded by felt-soft hills hazy with purple woodland, birdsong colours the cool breeze*

overhanging square of herringbone brick offering panoramic views of the surrounding hills.

Inside the gleaming palace is the Museo Communale, with exhibitions about local history dating from the 6th century BC to the 19th century AD. But the real prize here is the Iguvine Tablets (also known as



*Medieval symbol of the region*



**WHERE TO EAT AND STAY**

**PALAZZO SENECA**

Via Cesare Battisti, 12 – Norcia

☎ +39 0743 817434

[www.palazzoseneca.com](http://www.palazzoseneca.com)

Touting Umbria's only Michelin-star for its attached Vespasia restaurant, this converted 16th-century *palazzo* offers a serene, high-end base from which to explore. There's a lovely sense of balance to the hotel, with over-sized gold lampshades and modern art comfortably married to solid oak doorways and brass-buttoned leather sofas. As you'd expect from a Relais & Chateaux property, the hotel can arrange all manner of excursions, including truffle hunts, cheese-making forays. They'll even take you the full 800 metres to where the prosciutto is sourced for their restaurant.

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL ARBORIA**

06010 Città di Castello

☎ +39 335 612 8439

[www.archeologiaarborea.org](http://www.archeologiaarborea.org)

In the vicinity of Città di Castello is this bucolic paradise where Isabella, the agronomist owner, oversees an orchard of rare fruit trees. Her farmhouse used to be a hermitage (only in Italy, right?) and besides offering tours (groups preferred) of her remarkable orchard, you can also stay in a converted barn on an *agriturismo* basis, eating meals of pasta, truffle, and *torta di formaggio* on the long table in the garden. A wonderful place to get away from it all and located just off the Franciscan Way.

**PARK HOTEL AI CAPPUCCINI**

Via Tifernate, Gubbio

☎ +39 075 9234

[www.parkhotelaicappuccini.it](http://www.parkhotelaicappuccini.it)

A few minutes from Gubbio is this upmarket hotel housed in a rose-hued convent. The peacefulness that no doubt existed in its convent days has transferred to the hotel, and the property likes to deal in engaging contrasts. You'll walk from an interior courtyard that hasn't changed since medieval times into a modern swimming complex housing inflatable sofas and digitised faces indicating the male and female loos. Fun, fancy, and very Italian.

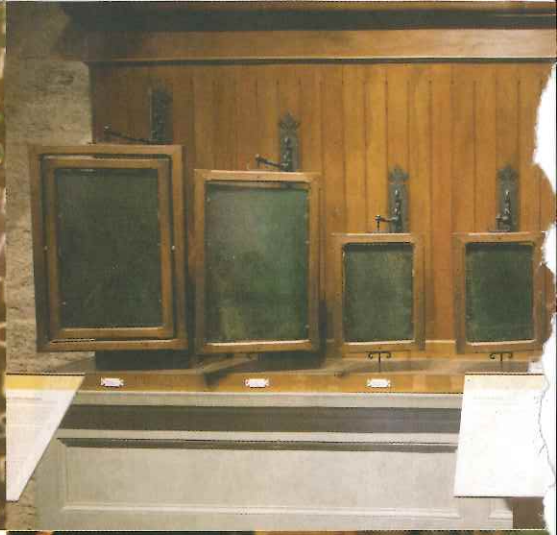
**BORGO BRUFA**

Via del Colle, 38 – Brufa di Torgiano

☎ +39 075 9883

[www.borgobrufa.it](http://www.borgobrufa.it)

A sprawling four-star with a serious wellness offering, Borgo Brufa is located between Assisi and Perugia but feels like it's in the middle of nowhere. The rooms are comfortable and spacious, but you're better off outside, among the rosemary bushes and skittering verdigris lizards, chilling in the infinity pool and staring out at the fabulous views of the countryside.







*Clockwise from top left: Close-up of one of the Iguvine tablets; all seven tablets together; authentic medieval music at Bevagna; silk production, in the medieval style, at Bevagna; stained glass at Bevagna; view from Borgo Brufa; enjoying the festivities at Bevagna*

the Eugubine Tablets), the only documents of the ancient religions of Europe and the Mediterranean to have reached modern times in an almost complete state.

Discovered in a cave beneath a local theatre in 1444, the seven bronze tablets were manufactured in around the 3rd century BC and are covered in ancient Umbrian script. The inscriptions mainly describe religious ceremonies of the time, but through these descriptions it's been possible to piece together a much stronger image of life among pre-Roman civilisations.

The tablets, locked in glass frames, have the look of something that Indiana Jones might readily shoot Nazis for. The tablet display is succinct, yet almost other-worldly.

### BEVAGNA E IL MERCATO DELLE GAITE

My final stop is at Bevagna, (pop: 5,000) located near the centre of the region and not far from the local wine mecca of Montefalco. It's an evening affair, and we pass the extraordinary fortress of Assisi while it is still luminous in the glare of the setting sun.

It's easy to repeat yourself when you're writing about Italy, but Bevagna really is a beautifully preserved medieval town. And it knows it, which is perhaps why, for the final two weeks of June annually, it puts on the *Mercato delle Gaite* – a medieval festival with the centrepiece being a re-enactment of artisan skills. The term *Gaite* refers to the four quarters of the town, and each one spends a lot of time setting up its competing demonstrations.

My evening begins by eating in a cosy square, hung with coloured cloth and filled with excited locals and families, and pre-teen volunteers in traditional sackcloth garb (except for their Converse trainers) rushing around with trays of food.

The grub arrives quickly, and it's perfectly cooked despite the huge crowd – ravioli with spinach and ricotta filling, followed up by a lamb shank. The menu is even respectful of the theme: as there would not have been any tomatoes or potatoes in medieval times, you can't find any here tonight, which is of course very unusual in Italy.



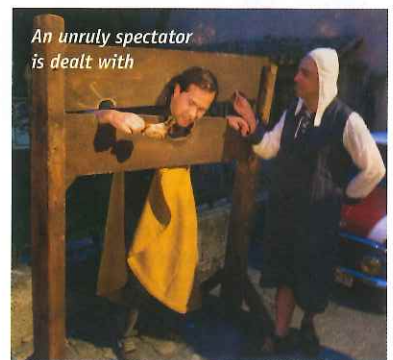
And it is precisely this level of detail that sets Il Mercato delle Gaite apart from many of the other medieval festivals you can find in Italy. Yes, they're having fun in Bevagna, but they are deadly serious about their commitment to the medieval theme – perhaps not least because medieval experts, many of them university academics, are bussed in to judge each quarter's re-enactment and proclaim a winner.

As night falls on the crowded, winding streets, I wander through the various quarters. The demonstrations include stained-glass creation and silk production, and I marvel at the realism of the experience (although, this being Italy, it's entirely possible that this is what their day job looks like too). I feel immersed in the time period. Then I notice three old women with medieval hankies on their heads break from their silk demo and swiftly pass a small flask between them. Hidden gems within hidden gems. ■

### GETTING THERE

#### ► BY PLANE

Ryanair flies direct to Perugia from Stansted (daily over the summer). To really see Umbria, a rental car is a must.



*An unruly spectator is dealt with*