

# THE ART OF SERENITY

*An exhibition about St Francis of Assisi is coming to the National Gallery — and a visit to his hilltop Italian town is truly divine*

**T**HE birds in Assisi don't just sing. They belt out their tunes, a full-throated chorus of skylarks, curlews and thrushes. Well, if you had been blessed by St Francis, patron saint of animals, wouldn't you be happy?

There's something special about this Italian town. Were it not for the legend of St Francis, born here in 1181, it would be just another hilltop settlement in Umbria. Quiet and unassuming.

But a series of miracles attributed to him, visions of Jesus and the appearance of stigmata (a symbol of Christ's wounds from the cross) on his body, meant that his birthplace would change forever.

Word of his holiness spread and followers flocked to his religious order, the Franciscans. After his death in 1226 and later canonisation, worshippers arrived from across the globe. Assisi could never again be quiet and assuming.

Spain may have Santiago de Compostela and France, Lourdes, but neither can rival St Francis in universal appeal. The man who preached to the birds espoused a simple message of poverty, chastity and obedience.

No surprise that his home town receives more than 4 million visitors a year. Pilgrims come to kneel at his tomb in the basilica and glory

in the art surrounding them. By happy coincidence, the painters Cimabue and Giotto came along within decades of Francis's death to immortalise his life.

Enter any church in Assisi and you are stepping into the Early Italian Renaissance.

That's the idea behind the National Gallery's latest exhibition, St Francis of Assisi, opening next Saturday. 'Francis's life and legend galvanised the greatest talent of the day, creating a legacy of panel paintings, sculpture and frescoes,' says Dr Joost Joustra, its co-curator. 'His story was hugely important in the development of Western art.'

The show will bring together old and new: religious works by Fra Angelico, Caravaggio and El Greco hanging beside modern interpretations by Antony Gormley, Stanley Spencer and Craigie Aitchison.

Just one hitch. The greatest of all masterpieces created in his name, the fresco sequence in the

Basilica of St Francis, can't travel. To view these 28 panels executed by Giotto and his workshop between 1296 and 1304 you must travel to Assisi, as I did. It's also wildly convenient that this region offers some of Italy's finest food. No wonder my every-hungry husband wanted to come along, too.

**O**UR base was the Fontebella Palace. From our top-floor room, we could watch monks scurrying to mass and farmers harvesting spring crops, birds wheeling above.

Our first stop was the basilica, where Brother Daniel, one of around 50 Franciscans living in the monastery, was our guide. 'He was seen as a sincere and perfect follower of Jesus,' he said softly, as we craned our necks at the frescoes.

Son of a prosperous cloth merchant, Francis spent his early years as a soldier. Yet after a vision in which Jesus told him to rebuild

his church, he devoted his life to the poor. So here, imagined by 13th-century craftsmen, is the ultimate visual biography: Francis strips off his fine robes, announcing to his father he will embrace poverty. Appalled, the old man has to be restrained from striking him.

In another scene, the fearsome apparition of an angel with six wings and a crucified figure appears to Francis, after which he receives the stigmata. Giotto's genius is to convey the drama.

The holiness of Assisi was getting to us. In the main square, we ordered white wine, Grechetto di Assisi, and enjoyed a moment of quiet contemplation.

All the sacred sites at Assisi can be visited in a couple of days. San Damiano, the church where Francis experienced his first vision, was a gentle meander through olive groves, while Santa Maria degli Angeli, which contains the humble chapel Francis built, was a ten-minute taxi away.

You don't need faith to enjoy Assisi though; every visitor will find some serenity. The town isn't just having a moment, as the saying goes. It's already had nearly a millennium... and the birdsong really is loud.



**Ancient: Assisi, and Giotto's depiction of St Francis**

## TRAVEL FACTS

RETURNS to Perugia from £32 ([ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)); doubles at the Fontebella Palace from £114 including breakfast ([fontebella.com](http://fontebella.com)); Saint Francis of Assisi at the National Gallery from May 6 ([nationalgallery.org.uk](http://nationalgallery.org.uk)). See [umbriatourism.it](http://umbriatourism.it).

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