

The Castelluccio di Norcia cycle route



# When in Umbria...

FIONA BARBER DISCOVERS THAT THE BEST WAY TO SEE THE COLOURFUL ITALIAN COUNTRYSIDE IS ON TWO WHEELS. WITH PLENTY OF GOOD FOOD AND WINE, NATURALLY.

**J**ust a few cautious pushes of the pedals and the motor whirred into action. The bike surged forward and I whizzed past alfresco diners devouring cones of gelato.

This was a day of two firsts: my first time in Italy and my debut on an electric bike. In a tour-guided group, led by ecobike, we weaved through the narrow streets of Umbria's historic capital, Perugia. Food-drunk on pasta, cheese and bread, we visited the ancient Porta Marzia gates of the town and the stunning San Pietro's church.

Cruising around on an ebike is ideal for urban cycling, but to uncover the true character of this region and explore its lush and varied landscape, with its beautifully preserved small towns and hilltop villages, a little more effort is required.

Umbria is a wonderfully diverse district and, whether you're a seasoned cyclist,

novice, or on a family adventure, there's a route to suit. Experienced riders may dare to challenge the long alpine slopes, while others can enjoy the many flatter routes.

The gentle gradients of the Spoleto to Norcia disused railway line, which stretches 56km, offer riders of all abilities the chance to discover some of Umbria's greenest countryside. This extensive gravel trail weaves through towering trees and skirts several now-empty village stations. It journeys through cool ink-black tunnels – head torches are a must – and gives way to bridges and viaducts offering picture-perfect panoramic views.

We cycled the first 20km stretch and stopped at Zafferano E Dintorni in Castel San Felice to refuel on delicious homemade artichoke and wild hops risotto. This peaceful farmhouse bed and breakfast boasts idyllic views over the hills and mountains of

Valnerina, making it an ideal base from which to explore the emerald-green surroundings.

After a pit stop in Castelluccio di Norcia to sample the local ricotta and admire the spectacular Piano Grande (great plains) – where wild flowers bloom from yellow to red and violet to white between May and July – we drove to hotel Le Dimore di San Crispino, located just a few kilometres from the hill-top town of Assisi.

This hotel, restaurant, and spa, tucked away at the end of a winding country road, covers ten hectares comprising vineyards, olive groves and one of the most beautiful private gardens in Umbria. We relaxed on the tranquil veranda with chilled prosecco, and breathed in the sweet lavender air. If relaxation is top of your list, this venue is a must.

No trip to Italy would be complete

without sampling the local wines. While neighbouring Tuscany is home to some of the world's most notable regions, Umbria offers an array of grape varieties, wine styles and something special for every palate. Where better to sample a taste than with a trip to a local winery?

We headed south to Montefalco – famous for Sagrantino wine – past a flurry of bright-lemon sunflower meadows, fruit-filled olive groves and uniform vineyards, before arriving at Le Cimate.

Here, owner Paolo Bartoloni produces 90,000 bottles per year, with a focus on quality rather than quantity. He exports to the USA, Belgium, Austria, Germany and many other corners of the globe. On the menu are three reds, one rosé, two whites and one red dessert wine. The Montefalco Sagrantino is Umbria's most popular and distinctive red wine. Garnet-red with distinct blackberry flavours, balanced tannins and acidity, this complex wine is a perfect accompaniment to meats and mature cheeses. As it happens, Le Cimate also produce their own ham, salami, and olive oil, all equally as delicious as the wine. For €15pp groups can enjoy a feast of meats, cheeses and bread, plus three wines to taste, or for €35 indulge in a three-course lunch plus wine. Visit [www.lecimate.it](http://www.lecimate.it) for more info.

After the winery I reflected on my time in Umbria. If there's one thing I can be sure of from this whistle-stop tour it's this: to soak up the rivers, rolling hills and olive groves, the piazzas, winding streets and hamlets, there's no better way to do so than on two wheels.

And another thing. Three days of Italian cycling fuelled by cured meat, cheese and wine is enough to make you feel – almost – like a pro. Head ducked, elbows tucked, I leaned defiantly into the decline. Chris Froome eat your heart out.



Palazzo dei Priori, Perugia

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## DETAILS:

For further information on cycling in Umbria, please visit [www.umbriatourism.it](http://www.umbriatourism.it), [www.bikeinumbria.it](http://www.bikeinumbria.it) and [www.umbriabike.eu](http://www.umbriabike.eu).

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Spoleto