

News, Apps, Deals, and Gear from New England and Beyond

HERE

EXPLORE THE BAY STATE BY BIKE

Take a long weekend and explore the Johnny Appleseed Trail in Central Massachusetts and the upper Connecticut River Valley on the Mass BikePike Tour, Aug. 1-4. Choose from a shorter (25- to 45-mile) or longer (45- to 70-mile) route and receive full support along the way. Go on an optional adventure to Swanzey, N.H., to celebrate the Cheshire Fair's 75th anniversary, and hang out around the campfire each night to refuel with s'mores. Camp out (bring your tent or pay for a luxury camp setup) or arrange your own accommodations. Registration of \$416.49 includes breakfasts, dinners, support, and more. Round-trip transportation from Boston to Fitchburg, the start and end point, runs \$50. 617-710-1832, www.massbikepike.org



CAPE EXHIBIT FEATURES HISTORIC CARS

See some of the most remarkable "dream" cars ever made, from a 1927 LaSalle to the futuristic Terrafugia flying car, during the Heritage Museums and Gardens exhibit "Driving Our Dreams: Imagination in Motion" in Sandwich. Fifteen concept cars, drawn from museums and private collections nationwide, will be on display April 13 through Oct. 27. Get up close to an Infinium solar-powered car, a 1956 Firebird II, and the 1963 personal Corvette of Harley Earl, a pioneer in auto design and the father of the Corvette. Design and test your own concept car in the Family Discovery Room, and attend talks by leaders in the automobile industry. Adults \$15, children ages 3-12 \$7, 2 and under free. 508-888-3300, www.heritagemusumsandgardens.org



THERE



TAKE A GROUP TOUR TO TIBET

Permits to visit Tibet are available again to US passport holders, after being suspended for the second half of last year. Since you can't travel on your own, sign up for China's Silk Road and Tibet: Route of Monks and Merchants, an 18-day trip offered by Seattle-based MIR Corp. that explores Tibet and Western China. See the Potala Palace in Lhasa, ride the world's highest elevation railroad, and visit the Mogao Caves, or Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, in China's Gansu Province, May 17-June 3 and Sept. 27-Oct. 14. \$5,895 per person, based on double occupancy, plus \$1,200 for internal flights; does not include international flights. 800-424-7289, http://mircorp.com/tour_csrt.asp

CELEBRATE CORNBREAD IN SOUTHERN APPALACHIA

Join in a "dry" cornbread-eating contest or a buttermilk chug, stroll down Cornbread Alley, where you can sample nine home-cooked creations, and bring your banjo to the Jam Tent at the National Cornbread Festival in South Pittsburg, Tenn. This annual event, which takes place April 27-28, starts with a 5K road race, followed by a national cornbread cook-off. It also features singers, dancers, arts and crafts vendors, a children's corner, agriculture displays, and a bus tour of historic homes. Admission \$5; under 5 free. 423-837-0022, www.nationalcornbread.com

FREE CITYWIDE WI-FI IN TEL AVIV

Tel Aviv launches its free citywide Wi-Fi service this month, offering complimentary connections to anyone using a computer, tablet, or smartphone that has a bandwidth of at least 20 MB. The service, available to locals and visitors, includes free access at nearly 80 locations, such as the Mediterranean promenade, the Hatikvah Market, Florentin Street, Park Hayarkon, and Old Jaffa, as well as major city streets, parks, and tourism sites. The local municipality expects to have free citywide Wi-Fi by the fall, in part to help travelers navigate the Tel Aviv-Jaffa area. 888-774-7723, www.goisrael.com

EVERYWHERE

GPS GIVES RV-FRIENDLY ROUTES AND INFO

Enter the length, width, height, and weight of your recreational vehicle into the new Magellan RoadMate RV5365T-LMB and let this RV-specific navigator guide you along safe and appropriate routes. The easy-to-use GPS has a 5-inch screen and comes loaded with the Good Sam RV Travel Guide and Campground Directory. The Junction View and Lane Assist features provide realistic images of highway signs and roadways with arrows pointing you to the correct lane to take at exits and interchanges. The device also has a Landmark Guidance feature ("Turn left in 300 yards at the 7-Eleven"), offers speed-limit warnings and two-turn advance notice, is Bluetooth compatible, and comes with free lifetime map upgrades, \$299.99. 800-707-9971, www.magellangps.com



SIGN DOCUMENTS FROM AFAR

Maybe you're sipping margaritas on a tropical beach or on a business trip far from the office and you urgently need to sign a document. Adobe EchoSign, an electronic signature service, lets you easily and securely access documents, sign them, and then track them from your travel laptop or Apple device. Access EchoSign from Adobe's website, and its app through iTunes. EchoSign is also integrated into the new Adobe Acrobat XI and Reader XI software, which lets you edit a PDF on your iPad or Android tablet. 877-324-6744, www.echosign.adobe.com

KARI BODNARCHUK

The List

FALL CRUISES



HOLLAND AMERICA LINE

Crown Cruise Vacations president Ross Spalding offers five simple reasons for booking an autumn cruise. (877-283-1114, www.crown-cruisevacations.com)

1

Take advantage of lower prices. When children go back to school, fewer people travel and prices drop.

2

Enjoy less-crowded ships and destinations.

3

See colorful foliage while cruising in New England and Canada.

4

Choose from many end-of-season deals as cruise lines aim to boost their yearly earnings.

5

Unwind at sea before the festivities and stress of the holiday season begins.

NECEE REGIS

Assisi embraces the measure of the charismatic first Francis

By Claudia Capos
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

ASSISI, Italy — A massive rainstorm is sweeping across the Umbrian countryside south of Assisi, drenching citron-tinged fields and hurtling lightning bolts at rustic farmhouses. With no umbrella or raincoats, we flatten ourselves against an ancient doorway, preparing for the deluge. Suddenly, as if guided by an unseen hand, the storm veers off, sparing the town. The sun reemerges, casting dazzling beams on stone-paved streets that have weathered many tempests over the centuries, from the Roman conquest of central Italy in 295 BC to the region's devastating earthquake of 1997.

Assisi's resilience as a spiritual, artistic, and architectural landmark arises from its historical renown as the birthplace of St. Francis, a patron saint of Italy who founded the Franciscan monastic order. For 700 years Christian pilgrims have ascended to the lofty hill town on the slope of Monte Subasio to pay homage to the humble Italian friar who was born into wealth in the 12th century but chose to live in poverty and serve the poor.

The Roman Catholic Church's March 13 election of Argentina's Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as its 266th pontiff, and his taking the name Francis in honor of St. Francis of Assisi, has rekindled interest in this charismatic figure and the town symbolic of his life and legacy.

From afar, the ancient walled settlement, dating to the seventh century, appears as a light-hued fresco of church bell towers, colonnades, and castles painted on blue plaster. When we arrive in midmorning, the tourist traffic is already bumper-to-bumper on the road winding up to Assisi, 16 miles east of Perugia. On the outskirts, we stop at the Patriarchal Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels, a 16th-century Renaissance church commemorating landmarks in the life and death of St. Francis (1182-1226). Inside stands a small, unadorned ninth-century Benedictine chapel, called the Porziuncola, where it is said that the 25-year-old Francis renounced worldly riches, embraced his

If you go . . .

Papal Basilica of St. Francis

Piazza San Francesco
011-39-075-819001
The double basilica ranks second only to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome as a site of Catholic pilgrimage. Daily from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. www.sanfrancescoassisi.org

Where to stay and eat

Hotel Trattoria Pallotta
Via San Rufino, 6
011-39-075-812307
www.hotelpallotta.it
The family-run hotel is tucked away on an ancient street in the historic center and has a rustic restaurant that serves typical Umbrian meals. Doubles from \$103.

religious calling, and found his first followers.

Continuing up the Via Patrono D'Italia, we nose into a jammed parking lot with a captivating view of the Papal Basilica of St. Francis. Built in the 13th century on the "hills of paradise," it attracts nearly 5 million visitors annually. The masterfully designed and engineered double-tiered structure houses two churches, one atop the other. Their walls showcase magnificent 13th- and 14th-century paintings and frescoes by Italy's most accomplished artists, among them Giotto, Cimabue, and Torriti, who depicted the lives of Christ and St. Francis.

Stepping through massive carved wooden doors, we enter the lower basilica, a dimly lit, mystical Romanesque chamber with stalwart pillars and grand ribbed vaulting. Descending a stone staircase, worn smooth by countless feet, we reach the hushed, airless crypt where St. Francis's remains reside. Retracing our steps, we emerge in the upper basilica, a vibrant celebration of Italian Gothic architecture, with soaring arches, elegant stained glass, and a rose window inset with diamond-shaped petals. Giotto's famous fresco of St. Francis preaching to the birds portrays the saint's humanity and concern for all



CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Sacred Friary and double-tiered, 13th-century Basilica of St. Francis crown a hillside in Assisi, in Italy's Umbria region. Below, a friar is among those heading into the basilica, which has paintings and frescoes from that time by Giotto, Cimabue, and Torriti.



living things. The basilica's museum displays many historical treasures, and its bustling gift shop offers a plethora of religious mementos.

Leaving the basilica, we thread our way through a stone archway in the old city wall onto Via San Francesco. The touristy pedestrian thoroughfare is lined with souvenir shops, selling carved-wood St. Francis

statues and Assisi tote bags, and ristorantes haloed by savory aromas of chicken and pasta. Brown-frosted friars ripple through the tide of pilgrims, pausing to talk with knots of schoolchildren. Away from the hubbub, we explore medieval alleyways enlivened by red geraniums in window boxes and on doorsteps. In early afternoon, we take a

break for chocolate gelato along Via Portica and spot an ancient stone building with six Corinthian columns on the Piazza del Comune. Our curiosity leads us inside the Church of St. Mary Over Minerva, an elegant chapel with a gilded altar and frescoes. The church was built over a first-century Roman temple honoring Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, and rededicated to the Virgin Mary in 1539. Suddenly, a thunderous chord erupts from the pipe organ, followed by a short recital. When the music ends, a man picks up his backpack and leaves. He is a tourist who was as enchanted by the church as we were.

Our final stop is the Cathedral Church of San Rufino, where St. Francis and his disciple St. Clare of Assisi were baptized. Afterward, we make our way back down Via San Francesco to the Piazza San Francesco. Assisi's wealth of artistic beauty, history, and spirituality, enriched by a humble friar who shunned worldly possessions, has captivated us in a single day, ensuring a return visit.

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