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ITALY

UMBRIA UNCORKED

Winding back roads lead to ancient hilltop towns in this less-travelled region of Italy

CLAUDIA CAPOS
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

TODI, ITALY—After five hectic days of sightseeing in Rome amid endless traffic congestion and sweltering early summer heat, vacationing Toronto residents Bob and Sandy Graham did what the Romans do. They headed north to the cool, lush Umbrian hill country for a week of rest and relaxation.

Seated on the flower-bedecked outdoor terrace of the Ristorante Pizzeria Cavour in the medieval town of Todi, the couple savored their lofty view of the hazy countryside, accented by a weathered church bell tower, as they sipped white Orvieto wine over a lunch of penne with tomato-meat sauce and grilled salmon.

“We love the small villages and hilltop towns of Umbria,” said Bob, who owns a consulting engineering company in Pickering, where they live. While planning their trip to Italy, the couple discovered the Molino del Duca Cesi, a historic mill converted into a cozy guesthouse located in ancient Cesi, just north of Terni. They selected it as their home base for the week and mapped out one-day driving trips to explore the surroundings.

“If there is a side road, we’ll take it,” explained Sandy, recalling their previous trip to Italy, which included stops in nearby Tuscany. “We’ve had some great experiences pulling into vineyard estates and buying bottles of wine. We’ve also enjoyed walking through small towns to take photographs of narrow alleyways and churches that are simple on the outside but have amazing frescoes inside.”

The couple agreed that Montecastello di Vibio, a nearby walled city with a commanding overlook of the silvery Tevere River winding through patchwork fields, was their favourite Umbrian hilltop town. To that point, at least.

“But tomorrow we’re going to Spello and Citta di Castellano,” they said. “Who knows what we’ll find?”

That sense of adventure is what makes Umbria so alluring. Though long overshadowed by its western neighbour Tuscany, this small, landlocked region stitched into the mid-point of the Italian “boot” casts a spell that many find hard to resist. It rewards travelers with a rustic taste of central Italy that enlivens the imagination. Winding roads lace together rolling countryside braided with vineyards, sun-kissed valleys sequined with shimmering olive trees and high hills crowned with medieval towers and feathered with dense woods.



DREAMSTIME PHOTO

The Consolazione Temple in Todi is just one of the many attractions in the hills of Umbria.

UMBRIA continued on T4

NEW ENGLAND

Hard times when spa visit meets boot camp

Tough hikes, fine meals for Vermont guests

KAREN T. BARTLETT
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

KILLINGTON, VT. — When you sign up for a spa vacation, it’s usually to enjoy being pampered in palatial surroundings. New Life Hiking Spa, on the other hand, is a boot camp with spa services in a faded ski hotel.

There are no weigh-ins. Guests choose as many or as few of the hikes, group classes and lectures as they want. Everything’s included, even backpacks and hiking sticks. Every third day, I received a complimentary massage or other spa treatment.

I adore glamorous destination spas. But I have this hot pair of tight leggings that seemed to have shrunk — before I even washed them. Which is why I came to this funky lodge in the Green Mountains. I kept a detailed log of every minute at New Life (www.newlife-hikingspa.com; 866-298-5433), as the inches melted away.

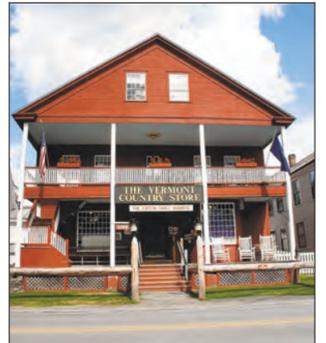
CHECKING IN

10 p.m.: Not long after the distinguished-looking gentleman in the seat beside me asks if I planned to ditch the remaining half of my dark chocolate bar before arrival (No way, dude), we were disembarking the plane and heading to our accommodations. At the gabled Inn of Six Mountains, the night clerk hands me a room key and tomorrow’s schedule. Yep, no porters or Frette linens here. But the endless hot water and shower pressure are fabulous. I stash my chocolate in the back of the desk drawer.

DAY 1: DROOPY MUFFIN

8 a.m.: The guide must be joking. Our intermediate hiking trail is named Droopy Muffin? How cruel is that?

VERMONT continued on T7



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