

## TRAVEL



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With its luscious fields and vineyards and rolling hills, some Italians call Umbria the “green heart” of the country.

## Cypress trees, artists and lovely Assisi

UMBRIA from T1

Umbria's well-preserved historic towns reflect the ebb and flow of different civilizations and showcase the artistic and architectural treasures left behind. Named for the Umbri tribe, the region was overrun by successive waves of conquerors, including the Etruscans, Romans, Byzantines, Lombards and French. The Papacy ruled Umbrian territories intermittently throughout its somewhat turbulent history, which was further enlivened by skirmishes between rival autonomous cities.

We stayed for a week at La Casella, an agritourism equestrian farm and resort 15 kilometres east of the Fabro turnoff on the A-1 Autostrada del Sole motorway, and set off each morning in a different direction to explore Umbria's back roads. Our first day's wanderings took us to nearby Parrano, a fortified town dominated by an 11th-century castle. Walking through a massive stone archway into the historic city centre, we paused to gaze over the pastoral landscape mottled with farms and forests. In the afternoon, we followed a loop of gravel and paved switchback lanes up to two hilltop towns, Castel dei Fiori and Montegabbione, where steep stone stairways unfolded to reveal airy plazas suspended by ancient walls above pristine valleys.

Just past Montegabbione, we turned off at a sign for Tenuto Corini and followed a narrow lane lined with poker-straight cypress trees to a family-owned winery and olive-growing estate. Fausto Corini, bronzed after a day's work in the vineyards, showed us several bottles of his award-winning wine and promised, in broken English, to arrange an afternoon tour and tasting with his son, Stefano, later that week. We parted with a bottle of his signature 2003 Frabusco wine, and arrived in Faiole at sunset to observe the town's annual Procession of the Madonna through streets decorated with flower-petal designs.

The following day, we threaded our way south through Ficulle into the Orvieto Classico grape-growing region and drove up into the Medieval Quarter of Orvieto, a splendid hilltop town perched on a pedestal of volcanic rock. Wending our way along the Corso Cavour past upscale shops and pleasant outdoor cafés, we reached the 13th-century Torre Del Moro and climbed 240 steps to top of the 47-metre high bell tower to relish a 3D panorama of the city. Below, Orvieto's Duomo, known as the “gilt lily of cathedrals,” shimmered like a jeweled crown in the midday sun. Construction on the Romanesque Gothic masterpiece started in 1290 and was completed over three centuries by prominent Italian architects and artists. Today, shaded café tables around the Piazza Duomo invite visitors to admire the gilt mosaics, bas reliefs and rosary window on the cathedral's ornate

façade as they sip a cool drink or espresso coffee. Visitors can pay to see the cathedral's magnificent frescoes and chapels.

Equally fascinating is Orvieto's Citta Sotterranea, or underground city, a once-secret labyrinth of 1,200 caves and tunnels hand-dug in the soft rock over the past 3,000 years. A tour guide ushered us down through narrow, twisting passageways into two different caves occupied by the Etruscans from the 6th to the 3rd century B.C. The remnants of pigeon-breeding niches in the walls, immense stone grinding wheels and olive presses revealed the gradual evolution of day-to-day activities conducted in the dimly lit chambers.

No one should pass through Umbria without spending at least one day in Assisi, a lofty

hilltop town revered as a pilgrimage site and riveted in history by St. Francis, founder of the Franciscan Order and a patron saint of Italy. The steady stream of tourist buses led us to the Piazza di San Francesco where the double Basilica of St. Francis, an amazing feat of 13th-century construction, dominates the Umbrian landscape. Entering through massive hobnail wooden doors, we first toured the lower basilica, with its vaulted ceiling and darkened frescoes, and went down into the crypt of St. Francis. Then we ascended to the upper basilica, notable for its high-arched ceiling, delicate stained-glass and rosary windows, and Giotto frescoes depicting the life of St. Francis.

Our trip culminated with a two-day sojourn at the restored 17th-century Cavaliere Palace Hotel in Spoleto. As a porter hauled our luggage up Corso Garibaldi to the hotel's arched entryway, we were engulfed by wine-drinking revelers who had gathered by the thousands for Spoleto's annual three-day Wines of the World festival in early June. The gala event served as a perfect prelude to the city's yearly musical blowout, Festival dei 2 Mondi (Festival of Two Worlds), founded by Maestro Gian-Carlo Menotti, which runs for two weeks in late June and early July. We soon joined the celebration, indulging in copious amounts of Umbrian wine, food and music that infused every nook of the stone-paved streets, staircases and plazas.

The following morning, we took the city's moving escalator up to the nearly invincible Rocca Albornoziana fortress and photographed the Ponte delle Torri, a 14th-century stone bridge built upon a Roman aqueduct. When an afternoon thunderstorm unleashed a torrent of water, we ducked into the Ristorante Canasta, a bistro with picture windows overlooking a time-etched Roman theatre dating to the 1st century. As we waited for the storm to subside, we did what the Umbrians do. We ordered a carafe of wine and a plate of freshly made pasta and watched it rain.

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CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE TORONTO STAR

A local artisan in Orvieto paints pastel designs on majolica pottery, a specialty of the town. Other handicrafts include lace making, wrought-iron work and wood crafts.



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