

ITALIA.IT

VIAGGIO ITALIANO

Discover
Unknown Italy

In Italy, there's always something new to experience



"A lifetime is not enough to discover all of Italy"

We have often heard this claim from both visitors and locals. Blessed with a rich variety of experiences, landscapes, world-renowned culinary traditions and cultural heritage, it's hard not to agree. There's literally something for everyone at any time of the year in any part of our country!

To highlight this great diversity and encourage both locals and visitors alike to 'discover unknown Italy', the Italian Regions united to showcase little-known villages (*Borghi*), landscapes and cultural traditions in a single campaign. Joining ENIT (Italian National Tourist Board) and the Ministry

of Tourism, the Regions aim to entice visitors to visit lesser-known destinations for active and immersive experiences.

This *Viaggio Italiano* eBook features the places and experiences of 21 content creators who were invited to discover a selection of *Borghi* in all the Italian Regions and share their experiences. Their stories are a wonderful tribute to our land and people, our age-old traditions and historic treasures. We hope that you enjoy their stories and travel recommendations, and that they will inspire you to visit us time and time again!

Click a region to discover more!

Map Realised by Kaiti Expansion



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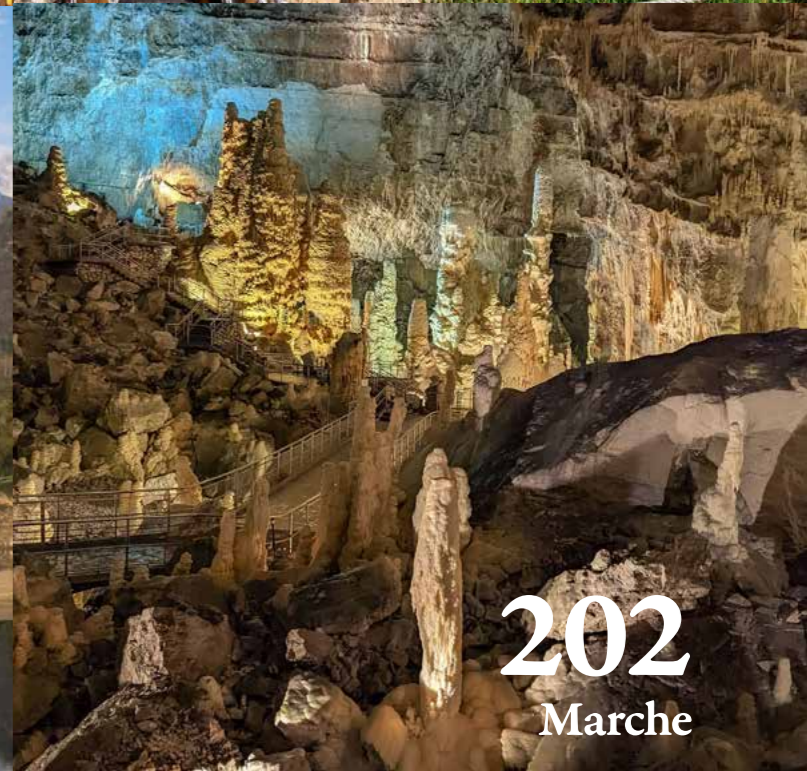
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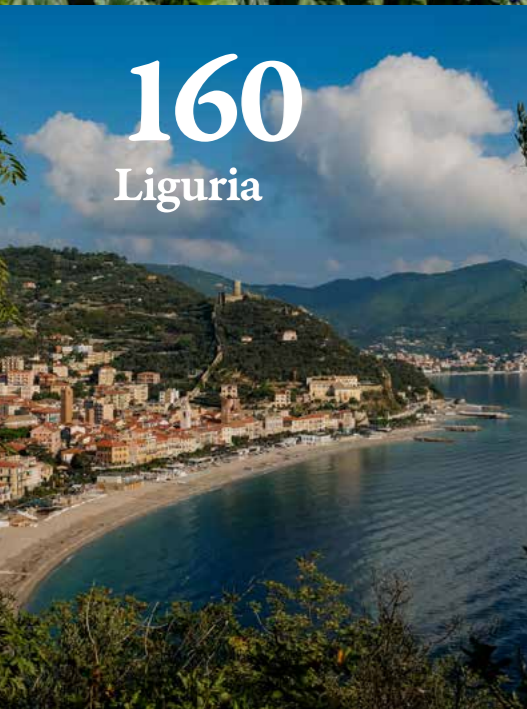
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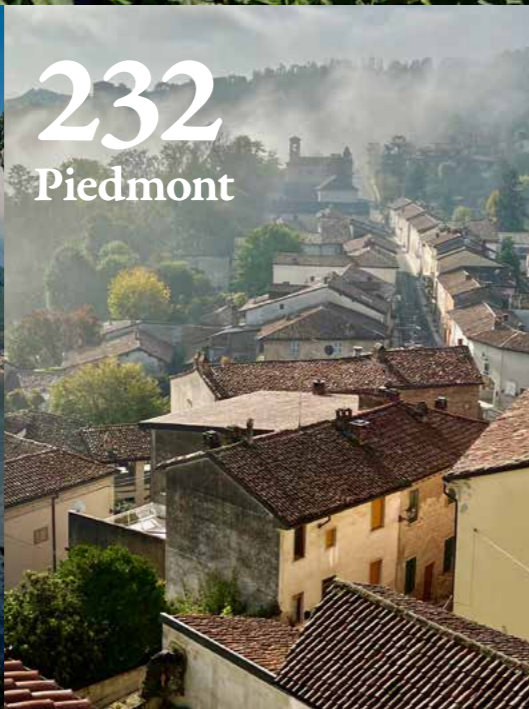
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ABRUZZO

17 PLACES TO SEE IN
Abruzzo
From the beach to the mountains



BY SARA AMATA & JAAC | BLOG SALTACONMIGO.COM

L'Aquila: the capital and the first place to see in Abruzzo

You may have heard of L'Aquila, the capital of Abruzzo, because of the terrible earthquake it suffered in 2009. The earthquake caused almost 300 victims, and destroyed its historic center. Like a phoenix, L'Aquila has risen from its ashes. Most of its old churches have been restored and look beautiful again. Santa Maria di Collemaggio is the best known example, but there are also San Silvestro and San Bernardino. Old monuments, such as the Spanish fortress, sit alongside newer ones, like Auditorium del Parco, designed by the best known contemporary Italian architect, Renzo Piano. Another of the symbols of the city, the Fontana delle 99 cannelle (Fountain of the 99 water spouts), has also recovered its splendor. L'Aquila is still the first place you have to see in Abruzzo. You cannot leave the region without visiting its capital.

La Costa dei Trabocchi: Beaches... and stilt houses!

We have already mentioned that Abruzzo is not a very popular Italian destination. However, there is an area that

is becoming fashionable: the Costa dei Trabocchi. In Italy we always associate Abruzzo with its mountains and, when thinking of the coast, the wide sandy beaches of the northern Adriatic came to mind. The coast of the south couldn't be more different - there are small pebble coves, promontories, cliffs and... trabocchi!

What are trabocchi? They are stilt houses used for fishing since at least the 18th century. Nowadays, most of them have been converted into restaurants, serving mainly fish and seafood, prepared according to traditional or creative recipes. Other trabocchi can be visited to learn about their history and tradition, such as the Trabocco of Punta Tufano.

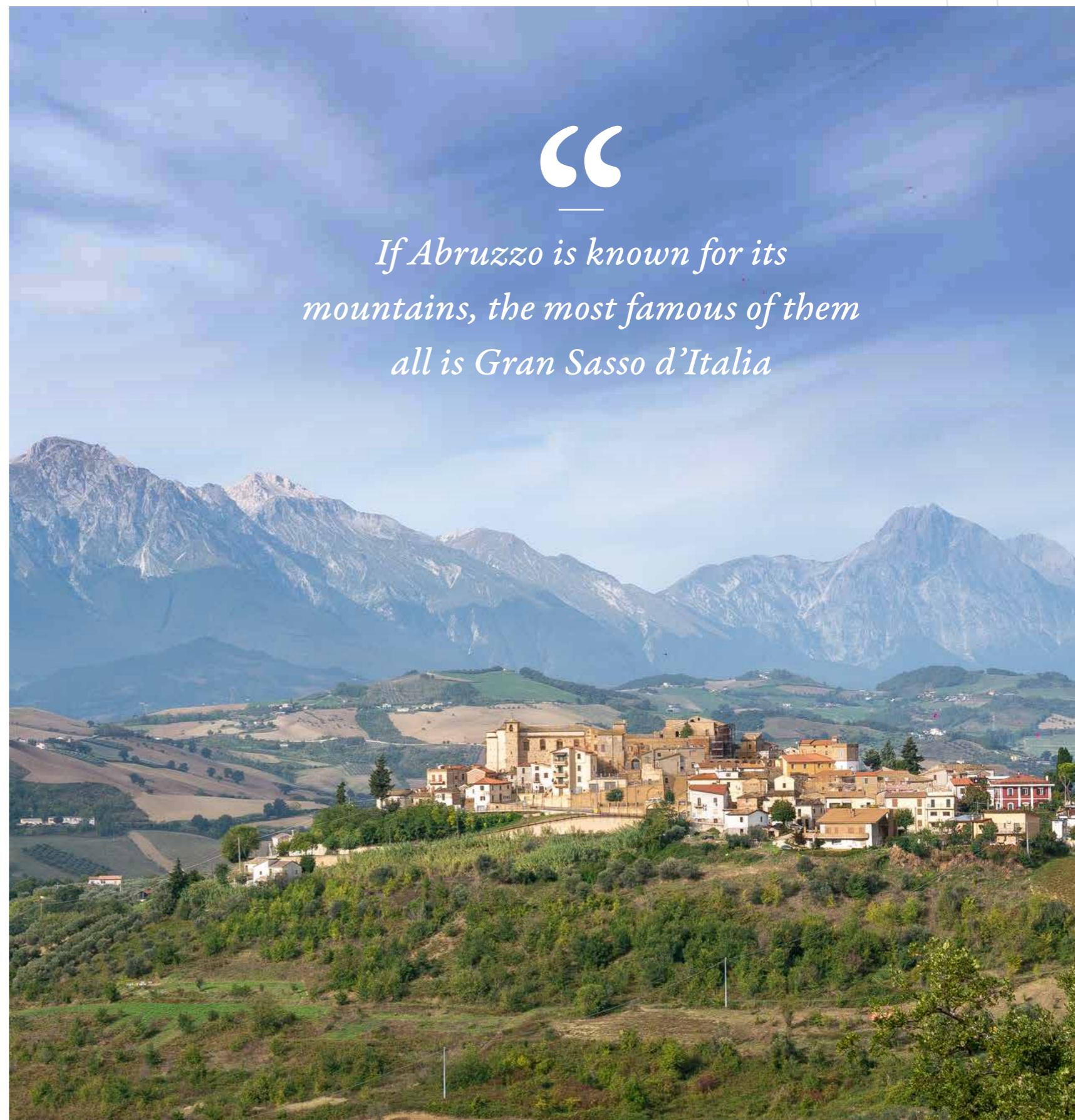
San Vito Chietino is the perfect base on the Costa dei Trabocchi, with its promenade, the Greenway, the views from the Promontorio Dannunziano, and from the Belvedere Guglielmo Marconi.

The Gran Sasso d'Italia and Campo Imperatore

If Abruzzo is known for its mountains, the most famous of them all is Gran Sasso d'Italia, the massif where Corno Grande is found - at 2912 meters, it is the highest peak in the Apennines and in all of peninsular Italy. In

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If Abruzzo is known for its mountains, the most famous of them all is Gran Sasso d'Italia



the same massif there is also the southernmost glacier in Europe, the Calderone.

Gran Sasso is another place you have to see in Abruzzo. The massif and its surroundings are part of the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park, the third largest national park in Italy, with almost 150,000 hectares in its protected area. What's the best place to see Gran Sasso from? From a distance, it can be seen from many places in Abruzzo: from Pescara, and from smaller towns like Castelli, Atri, Città Sant'Angelo, and more. To see it up close, you have to make your way to "Italy's little Tibet" - the plateau of Campo Imperatore. You can get there by car or take a cable car, as we did. The Funivia del Gran Sasso cable car travels from Assergi, at 1125 meters above sea level, to 2128 meters in about ten minutes. From there, there are hiking routes for everyone. You

can climb to Rifugio Duca degli Abruzzi in about 40 minutes, or reach Corno Grande in about three hours. We went on a 6 km hike and met some chamois.

Atri, its duomo and its calanchi

On our trip through Abruzzo we were looking for borghi, small villages, and one of our favorites, without a doubt, was Atri. It must be said that it is more of a small town than a village - there are about 10,000 inhabitants - but it has a very charming medieval historic center that gives it a certain village. That's where you'll find one of Atri's - and probably Abruzzo's - great jewels, the co-cathedral. You'll find a cycle of Renaissance frescoes, so intricate and detailed that you could probably admire a different scene every day for a year. Then there are the cloister, the 19th-century Teatro



Piceno, the narrow streets of the historic center and the incredible "grottoes", ancient Roman cisterns.

swim? Near the city are some of the most beautiful beaches in Abruzzo, those of the Torre del Cerrano Marine Protected Area, in Silvi and Pineto.

Did you know...?

In the dedication of La Galatea, Cervantes recalls that he served as a "waiter" in Atri for Duke Giulio Acquaviva. He went on to fight in Lepanto with the Acquaviva, and according to a theory - which you can read on the Atri tourism website - Giulio Acquaviva may have inspired the character of Don Quixote. At the gates of the city, you can admire one of the most surprising landscapes of Abruzzo: the Calanchi di Atri, some curious geological formations. Do you fancy a

Roccascalegna and the Majella

There's a place to see in Abruzzo that seems to be taken from Game of Thrones. We don't know why HBO's location scouts didn't choose it as a film set - we are talking about the fortress of Fortress of Roccascalegna. The fortress is perched on a rock, and doesn't seem real until you see it with your own eyes. First, you have to do it from afar, from the La Ruccia picnic area. And then you can get in.

Roccascalegna is very close to another national park, La Majella. La Majella is the second most famous massif in Abruzzo and it contains the second highest peak in the Apennines, Monte Amaro, 2793 meters high. We also saw it from a lot of viewpoints in the region, and from some – such as Atri or Città Sant’Angelo – it looks right next to the Gran Sasso. The Majella National Park is also famous for its mountain hermitages – look for photos of the Eremo di San Bartolomeo in Legio to see what I mean. Sadly, we didn’t have time to see them!

Bominaco: the “Cappella Sistina d’Abruzzo”

The oratory of San Pellegrino di Bominaco, a small religious building 30 km from L’Aquila, competes with the Duomo of Atri for the title of “Sistine Chapel of Abruzzo”. Okay, saying the “Sistine Chapel of...” is like saying the “Venice of...” How many can there be? And what do they have to do with the original? Well, we all know the rules of marketing and there are indeed some spectacular frescoes – even if they are not really like the ones in the Sistine Chapel, these frescoes are, without a doubt, spectacular. Especially considering that they are from the 13th century. You’ll see stories about the life of

Christ, Saint Peregrine and other saints, the Last Judgment, one of the oldest monastic calendars with the personification of months, zodiac signs and the lunar phases. We guarantee that you will love it.

Next to the oratory, there is the church of Santa Maria Assunta, another beautiful example of Abruzzo Romanesque. If the entrance to the complex is closed, you have to call the number on the door and practice your Italian.

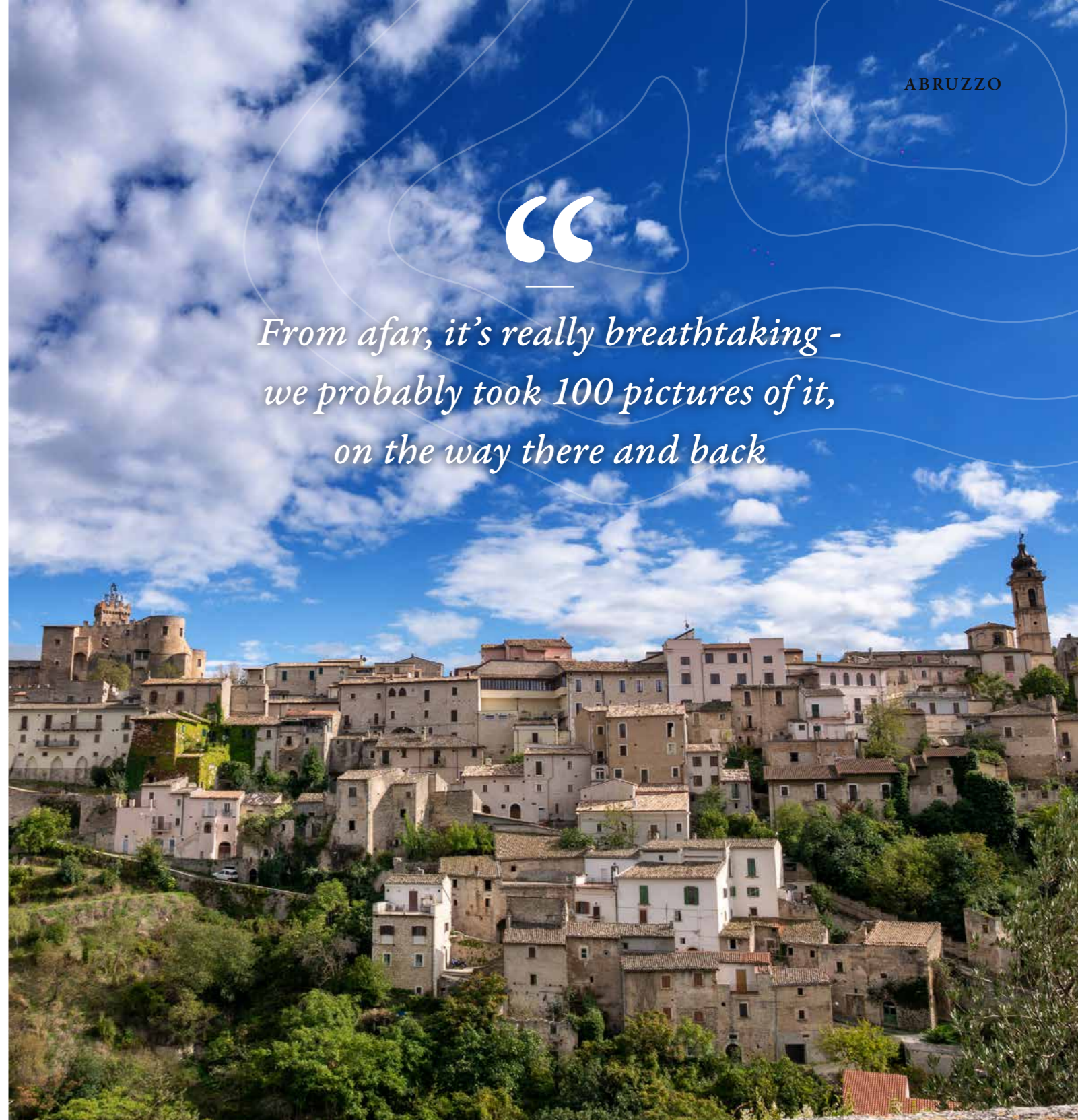
Capecetrano: its castle and the ancient “warrior”

Our next place to visit in Abruzzo, Capecetrano, is indeed a “borgo”, a small village. It doesn’t even reach 1,000 inhabitants and it has a small historic center. From afar, it’s really breathtaking - we probably took 100 pictures of it, on the way there and back. In the historic center, you can’t miss the Piccolomini Castle. Its patios, tower and defensive walls could be another good setting for Game of Thrones.

At the entrance to the castle – now part of the town hall – stands a copy of the Warrior of Capecetrano, responsible for the town’s fame throughout Abruzzo. The Warrior is a limestone sculpture from the 6th century BC more than two meters tall, that portrays a warrior of an ancient local Italic

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From afar, it’s really breathtaking - we probably took 100 pictures of it, on the way there and back





people. It was found by chance in 1934 in the Aufinum necropolis, near Capestrano, and the original is now preserved in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale d'Abruzzo Villa Frigerj in Chieti. There are two other places you cannot miss in Capestrano. One is the Convent of San Giovanni di Capestrano, with more views of the old town among olive trees. Next to the Tirino river, which you can descend by canoe, there's another Romanesque

jewel: the abbey of San Pietro ad Oratorium.

The surroundings of Capestrano are also very worthwhile. Some places to visit are the remains of the church of Santa Maria di Cartiganano, the lake of Capodacqua with its flooded mills that can be seen on a scuba dive outing, the abandoned villages of Pagliare di Ofena and Borgo San Silvestro, and the beautiful village of Navelli, also partly abandoned.

The abbey of San Clemente a Casauria

Let's visit another important religious building in Abruzzo: the abbey of San Clemente a Casauria, a Romanesque-Gothic Benedictine abbey that is another must-see for lovers of medieval art. Don't miss the sculptures on its portal, the apse, the carved pulpit, the candlesticks for the Easter candle, the ciborium with

frescoes, the urn with the relics of the saint... Get ready to be amazed! Next to the church there is also a small museum with Roman remains found in the area and the history of the place. It is free to visit, and you can get further information on the website.

Did you know...?

Near San Clemente a Casauria there is another abbey church, that of Santa Maria Arabona,

with another beautiful candlestick for the Easter candle. In all of Abruzzo, you'll find several medieval abbeys full of history and art. Others worth mentioning are San Giovanni in Venere, near the Costa dei Trabocchi, and those of the "valley of the abbeys", near Atri. In that area, we visited Santa Maria di Ronzano, Santa Maria di Propezzano and San Clemente al Vomano. The latter, which was a dependent

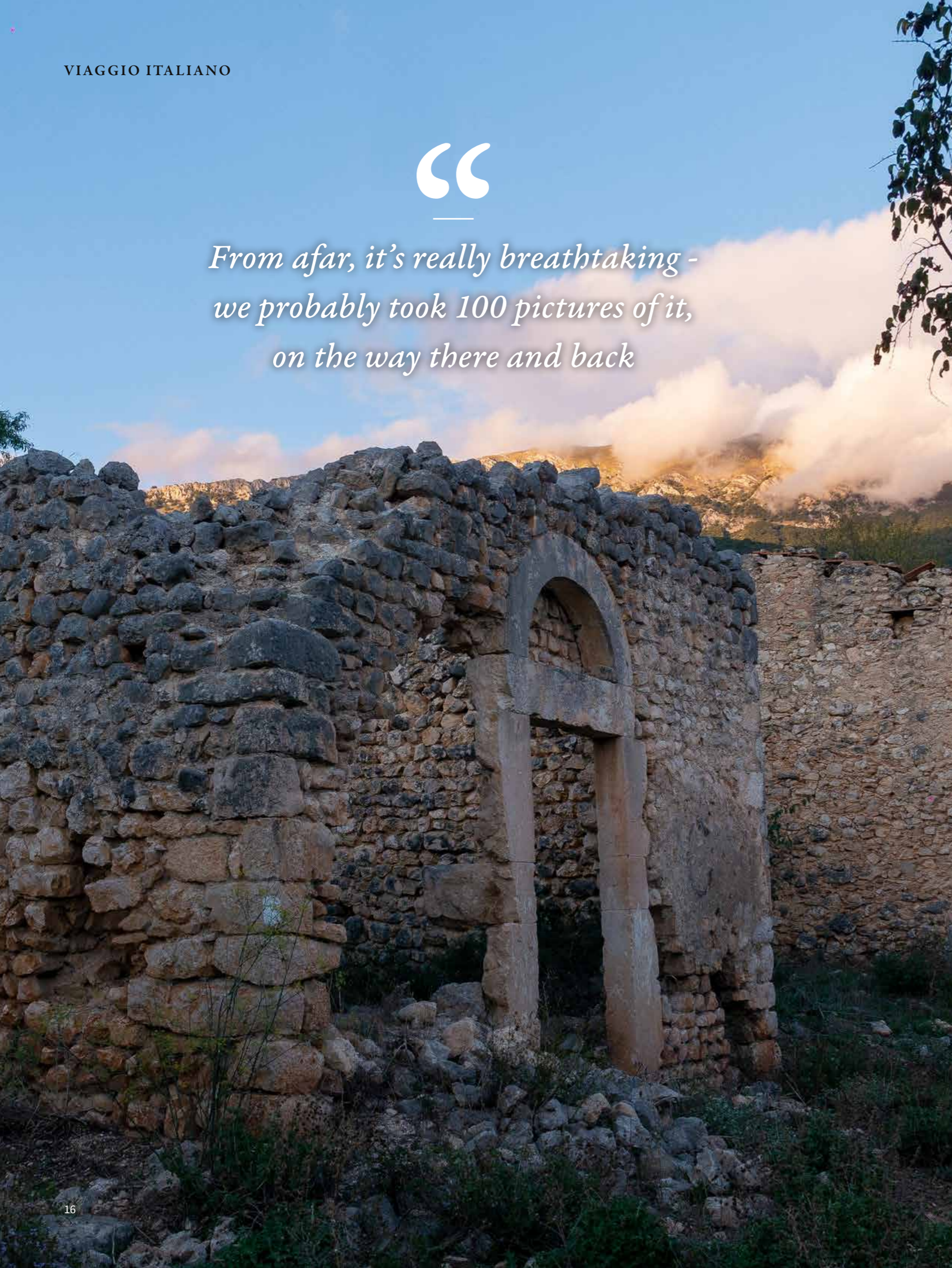
of San Clemente a Casauria back in the day, has an Arabic-style ciborium – partly Moorish and part from the south of the Italian Peninsula – which alone is worth a visit.

Scanno: the village of photographers

There are many photogenic medieval towns in Abruzzo, but few as beautiful as Scanno. From its setting,

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*From afar, it's really breathtaking -
we probably took 100 pictures of it,
on the way there and back*



to the traditional costumes sometimes still worn during festivities, to its steep alleys, fountains, piazze, churches... everything is just so photogenic. And that's not a recent thing - many internationally famous photographers visited Scanno in the 20th century, from Frenchman Henri Cartier-Bresson to German Hilde Lotz-Bauer, as well as the Italian photographer Mario Giacomelli. Nowadays you can see his famous photo "Il Bambino di Scanno" (Scanno Boy) at MoMA. In this village, renamed "borgo dei fotografi", there is an itinerary with the places captured by these great photographers. In each of them the original photo is reproduced so that you can take your own version of it, or simply admire where it was taken back in the day. Some places have even changed their names in honour of these great artists - such as the Scalinata (staircase) Henri Cartier-Bresson.

The valley and the gorges of the Sagittario

We already said that Scanno has a truly idyllic natural setting. It's surrounded by the mountains of the National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise (so close that bears have once come down to the town), next to a beautiful lake, Lago di Scanno, and in the heart of the Sagittario River

valley, with its gorges - another place to see in Abruzzo.

On the way there, we passed through other beautiful towns like Anversa degli Abruzzi and Villalago, and two lakes, Lago di Scanno and San Domenico, and we started to get an idea of this natural wonder. There are also hiking trails that run through the Sagittario Gorges Nature Reserve - we didn't have time to hike, but we marked this place on the map for future visits.

The "Spanish" fortress of Civitella del Tronto

Until the unification of Italy at the end of the 19th century, Abruzzo belonged to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and the imposing fortress of Civitella del Tronto, 500 meters long and with a total extension of 25,000 square meters, protected the border with the Papal State. The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was then in the hands of the House of Bourbon-Two Sicilies, a branch of the Spanish Bourbon royal family. So, these lands have been a Spanish domain. The fortress of Civitella del Tronto was built by the Spanish, and what you visit today is largely the result of the reform of Philip II in the 16th century. So, if you want to visit a piece of Spanish history on Italian soil, Civitella del Tronto is there!

Spanish origins aside, we believe that it is another of the places to

visit in Abruzzo, because of its history and its grandeur. In the interior there is still a lot to be restored, in fact construction was ongoing during our visit, but it is still worth visiting, and you have information on their website. In Civitella, do not forget to walk through Ruetta, the narrowest street in Italy.

Did you know...?

Near Civitella del Tronto there is another pretty village: Campli. The village has a set of Holy Stairs, like the one in Rome and, if you climb them on your knees on certain days, you can get a plenary indulgence. They date back to the 18th century, and their side walls are covered with frescoes. In the crypt of the cathedral, there are more frescoes from the 14th century. Don't miss them!

Sulmona and traditional confetti

Sulmona is one of our favorite towns in Abruzzo. It's a small town, also surrounded by nature, with the mountains and the Majella National Park at its doorstep. In the historic center you have three must-visit sights. One is the Palace and the Church of the Annunziata - do not forget to look up, to admire the Gothic and Renaissance sculptures on its facade. Another is Piazza Garibaldi, surrounded by the old 13th-century aqueduct,

and the scene of the Giostra Cavalleresca di Sulmona, a recreation of the city's ancient medieval jousts. There's also a statue dedicated to the Roman poet Ovid, who was born in Sulmona.

During your walk through the city, colorful "confetti" will surely catch your attention. No, I am not talking about pieces of paper. These are sweet! In Italy, confetti are sugared almonds, usually given to guests at weddings, baptisms, communions and the like. The confetti of Sulmona are the most famous in the country, produced since at least the 15th century and even given at the two weddings of the sons of the King of England - William of Wales and Henry of Sussex.

Alba Fucens: Roman ruins in the mountains

Would you like to visit the oldest city in Abruzzo? A Roman city founded in 303 BC, in the heart of the Apennines, a thousand meters above sea level. We are talking about the archaeological site of Alba Fucens, next to Monte Velino, a place that in its day was surrounded by almost three kilometers of walls. Today, it is open 24 hours a day - we walked through it completely alone, entertaining ourselves while we looked for the old forum, the basilica, the macellum, the



baths, the temples... and the amphitheater, in the upper part of the old city. From there the views, especially in the last hours of the day, are spectacular.

Santo Stefano di Sessanio and Rocca Calascio

There are so many beautiful villages in Abruzzo! We visited quite a few - together with Scanno, one of our favorites was definitely Santo Stefano di Sessanio. In the upper part of the town you'll find the castle tower, which can be climbed in summer, and in the rest of the town there is not a single alley that is not worth walking,

Some are vaulted, and some are really narrow - we couldn't get through with our backpacks!

Near Santo Stefano di Sessanio is one of the most famous castles in Abruzzo, Rocca Calascio. In summer, there are buses to go to the top of the hill where the castle is. The rest of the year you have to make your own way up (and landslides do occur) or see it from below as we did. The day we visited didn't promise much, and the sign stating "pass at your own risk" did not give us much confidence.

Celano and Aielli: castle, gorges and urban art



There are two other villages in Abruzzo worth mentioning, less than 5 km from each other – Celano and Aielli. They are not as beautiful as the ones previously mentioned, but each of them has a real gem, and there's another one in between the two.

In Celano, you have to visit the Piccolomini Castle, a 14th century military fortress, and later transformed into a palatial residence by Antonio Piccolomini of Aragon, nephew of Pope Pius II. Today, it houses the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Sacra della Marsica. We admit that we only saw it from the outside, but we guarantee that it is impressive, even from afar.

In Aielli, you can't miss the murals of the Borgo Universo project – every weekend there are guided tours in Italian. You'll see works by great street artists such as Okuda San Miguel, Ericailcane, Gio Pistone, Sam 3, Alleg, Guerrilla Spam and Matlakas, and new ones are added every year.

Between the two villages there are the Gole di Aielli-Celano, gorges that can be visited on a 3-hour hike from Celano, another spectacular Abruzzo landscape.

Stiffe Caves

We continue with nature wonders, and move on to the Grotte di Stiffe (Stiffe Caves), the most famous caves in Abruzzo. These caves are about 2 and a

half kilometers long, and they were formed by the erosion of an underground river. You can walk about 700 meters along the river between its waterfalls, the highest of which is about 20 meters, and see stalactites, stalagmites, columns, lava flows and more. You can only enter with guided tours, only available in Italian and about an hour long. You can book on the tourism website of San Demetrio ne' Vestini, the town where the caves are located.

The National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise

Let's end with another of the region's must-sees: the Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park. Even though it bears the name of 3 regions, its territory is mainly part of Abruzzo – until 2001 it was just Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo, and in Italy everybody knows it by that name. It is the second oldest national park in the country, founded in January 1923, and it is famous for being the habitat of the Apennine brown bear and the Italian wolf. In addition, there are deer, roe deer, wild boar and chamois, as well as spectacular plants and landscapes.

Make sure you stop at any of the visitor centers before entering the park, it's very important to know the rules and follow the marked trails to respect the local fauna.



Sara, Italian, and **JAAC**, Spanish, are a travel-loving couple based in Madrid. When they are not in the Spanish capital visiting museums, eating chocolate with churros or Italian gelato, they are enjoying the beauties of the world. They are lovers of culture in all its expressions: art, architecture, gastronomy... but they also enjoy nature. They tell all their travel adventures in SaltaConmigo.com since 2007.

Alto Adige

Italy's wine wonderland



ALTO ADIGE



BY DARYL & MINDI HIRSCH | BLOG 2FOODTRIPPERS.COM

Located in the shadow of the Dolomites, Alto Adige is a wonderland for travelers seeking fabulous wine and spectacular scenery. While it may not have the cachet of other wine destinations, this unique region in Northern Italy is well worth visiting.

Alto Adige is a great place for wine. You can taste it. You can buy it. It's a wine region that's relatively under the radar in today's wine world.

But visit the area, more commonly known among locals as Südtirol, and you'll find a wine culture that's existed for over a thousand years.

THIS ENTIRE REGION IS A WINE LOVER'S DREAM.

In a world where wine has been increasingly globalized, corporatized, homogenized and price-inflated, winemakers in Alto Adige sell quality 'juice' at a fraction of the price charged in pinot producing regions in France and the USA.

This is an Italian region where family-run vineyards produce food-friendly wines that are intended to be enjoyed by locals and with local dishes. By doing so, they convey the spirit of the grapes and region beautifully.

FUN FACT: Although South Tyrol was annexed to Italy from Austria-Hungary in 1919,

German remains the dominant language in Alto Adige.

Alto Adige isn't the part of Italy that most travelers dream about visiting. It certainly wasn't at the top of our travel bucket list until we journeyed to the region with limited expectations. We're glad we did.

To this day, outside of South Africa, we can't think of a more beautiful place to taste wine. While we've tasted wine grown on majestic slopes in the past, this is the first time that snow-capped mountains were part of the wine tasting equation.

Imagine hiking by foot past small, limited production tiered vines under the shadow of the mighty Dolomite Alps. Then imagine tasting the wine that comes from those vines.

Alto Adige's significant varietals include Pinot Noir (more commonly known in Italian as Pinot Nero or in the native German dialect as Blauburgunder), Gewurztraminer, Kerner and Lagrein. Some wineries focus on just one of these varietals while others produce the gamut.

When you taste wine in Südtirol, you're not tied to your car all day. It's possible to hike the Via Val Venosta - a wooded wine path shared by streams and vines alike - in towns like Castelbello/Kastelbell.

Other wine trails exist in towns like Termeno/Tramin





and Caldaro/Kalern too. They all offer unforgettable views featuring both grape vines and mountain ranges.

FUN FACT: Every town in Alto Adige has two different names - the original German name and a newer 20th century Italian name. We've opted to use the Italian names in this article.

To be clear, Alto Adige's majestic mountains aren't just any mountains. These are the Alps. The Alps! The land of Ricola and Heidi. James Bond skied away from his villains in places like this. When you've grown up in markedly less beautiful places in the eastern USA like we did, the Alps trigger a fantasy life of chalets and fondue.

Which brings us to food. Visions of pasta and pizza immediately sprang to mind when we heard we were headed to Italy. While those Italian food favorites do exist in Alto Adige, the Südtirol diet instead involves food like knödel (in a slightly more Italian form called canederli) and schnitzel.

We enjoyed eating those foods as well as dishes like mezzaluna ravioli (commonly called schlutzkrapfen in German) served in butter and stuffed with spinach and cheese. Similar to

pierogies, these thin-doughed, stuffed pastas are more delicate and elegant compared to their Polish cousins.

South Tyrolean food is technically Italian food since Alto Adige is in Italy. But, due to the geopolitical forces of the 20th century, this Alpine region's cuisine inarguably leans Austrian. It's not the Italian cucina that conquered the globe.

Instead, it's a different way of eating in Italy. Even the desserts - think apple strudel instead of tiramisu - are different. While we enjoyed exploring Alto Adige's cuisine, nine days of dumplings, breaded cutlets and strudel is a lot of days.

Despite these culinary differences, we didn't miss out on eating pizza during our trip. However, in a nod to local food culture, most of the pies we ate were topped with speck, the region's famous smoked answer to parma ham, and skewed closer to Roman pizza than to the Neapolitan pizzas that we love most in the boot.

So, you should expect to eat your fair share of Germanic food when you travel to Alto Adige. However, this is a small sacrifice when you consider the beauty, the people and the wines that the farthest region of Northern Italy has to offer.

Alto Adige Wine Trip Itinerary - 5 Villages Not to Miss

Planning a trip to Alto Adige requires a bit of creativity. Sure, you could base yourself in Bolzano where you'd be near great pizza and an international airport, but you'd miss out on many of the region's greatest assets. Instead, you'll want to rent a car and base yourself in one of the region's many borghi (small medieval villages) during your visit. Staying in one or more of these villages will complete your Alto Adige/Sudtirolo experience. Italian borghi are not the kind of towns featured in most guidebooks. They're classic villages that made their bones in the Middle Ages. They're also excellent jumping points for an Alto Adige wine itinerary. That being said, some Alto Adige villages are better than others for overnight stays. We recommend basing yourself in one or more of the following villages:

Egna / Neumarkt

Famous in the region for its streets lined with historic houses and arcades, Egna feels like an oasis that's far from the maddening crowds. In reality, this charming hamlet is a short drive from Bolzano and has all of the amenities (i.e. restaurants and shops) that travelers require. More important, Egna is

Sudtirolo's ground zero for Pinot Noir wine.

You can taste Pinot Noir wine at Egna wineries. You can buy Pinot Noir wine at shops. You can drink Pinot Noir wine at restaurants. And you can walk amid Pinot Noir vines on the Pinot Noir Trail located just outside of the quaint village.

We can't sing the praises of the varietal locals call blauburgunder enough. Even those (like Mindi) who typically prefer bigger reds will appreciate Egna's well-balanced Pinot Noir. Whether you drink this wine or pair it with food, it's notable for its slightly smoky flavors and light blackberry complexity.

"There's red wine and there's Pinot Noir."

If you just take one cellar tour in Egna, it should be at sustainable Pfitscher Winery. Technically not in Egna, the multi-generational winery is just minutes away in the verdant hills of nearby Montagna. The winery grows grapes in six borghi, some on century-old vines.

Not only will you see some of these vines growing in the shadow of the Alps, but you'll also taste excellent Pinot Noir wine while gazing at that same view. It's truly one of those 'pinch me now' experiences that travel is all about.





Castelbello-Ciardes / Kastelbell-Tschars

Staying overnight in Castelbello has its benefits.

Located on the Val Venosta Wine Route, this village is teeming with both orchards and vineyards. It goes without saying that the juxtaposition of orchards and vineyards with Dolomite mountains is stunning. But do those apples and wine live up to their view?

We're pleased to report that the quality of both Castelbello's apples and wine is excellent.

We've eaten a lot of apples in our lives. And, with the exception of honeycrisp apples grown in Pennsylvania, Val Venosta apples are easily the best we've ever eaten. As for the wine, it impressed us enough that we bought six bottles at three wineries during our visit.

Staying overnight in Castelbello means that you can start your day by walking on paths surrounded by a sea of apple trees in the morning and tasting wines at neighboring wineries that dot those same paths in the afternoon.

You'll want to taste Gewürztraminer at Weingut Köfelgut, Pinot Noir at Marinushof and both varietals at Rebhof Kastelbell. We did wine tastings at all three of these wineries and purchased bottles from each producer.

Chiusa / Klausen

Ranking as one of Italy's most beautiful villages, Chiusa's charms aren't hidden. The medieval town has ancient churches and historic buildings galore. Plus, a river literally runs through the town.

But Chiusa's charms go deeper than its pretty facade. This town has an impressive castle, an omnipresent monastery and a myriad of restaurants serving traditional Tyrolean food and a whole lot of pizza. It also has an excellent winery that's accessible to travelers who want to do tours and tastings.

Our tasting at Valle Isarco Cellar provided us with a fantastic introduction to Alto Adige wine. That's no overstatement since we enjoyed a generous tasting of nine different wines during our morning visit.

Be warned that you'll likely want to buy a bottle or two if you do a similar tasting. But this winery isn't the only fun way to experience wine in Chiusa.

Eating dinner while sitting inside a ginormous wine barrel in Torggler's rustic dining room may be the most unique thing to do in Chiusa. Unless you're craving pizza, plan to eat tasty plates topped with buchweizenspätzle (buckwheat spaetzle), schlutzkrafen (spinach ravioli) and rippelen (crispy pork spare ribs) while seated in one of those barrels.

Caldaro / Kaltern

We got lucky. Our day trip to Caldaro happened to be on a day when the village was hosting a boisterous festival involving oompah bands, tons of food and flowing wine. But there's plenty to do when there's no festival in town.

Like many Alto Adige villages, Caldaro has a beautiful wine trail called the Kaltern Weinstrasse. It's a picturesque route that rambles by rows of vines and offers views of the stunning Caldaro Lake. However, this village has something extra - a wine museum that encapsulates the history of wine in the region. Caldaro's South Tyrolean Wine Museum displays barrels, giant wooden wine presses, stained glass, chalices and drinking devices which represent centuries of wine history. While these items are interesting and educational, visitors who step out the museum's back door can learn about wine the best way possible - by tasting a variety

of wine grapes straight from trellised vines that loom over the valley's gorgeous winescape.

If you don't quite understand where a vintage comes from, tasting the fruit of the region's varietals provides an excellent orientation to the fruits of its winemaking. But, let's face it, tasting grapes is one thing and drinking wine is another.

We accomplished the latter at a Caldaro wine bar where we imbibed glasses of locally produced Lagrein served on a repurposed wine barrel. We then completed our wine mission at the town's festival.

We didn't just drink wine at the festival. We also ate a plate topped with polenta, bratwurst and taleggio cheese while listening to the double time oompah of tubas, baritone horns and trumpets. These might not be the types of food or entertainment favored in cities like Rome and Florence and that's okay. Caldaro is in Alto Adige after all.





Termeno / Tramin

Termeno is a must-visit for wine enthusiasts who travel to Alto Adige. The village has a unique claim to fame as it may be the birthplace of Gewürztraminer wine.

Like most origin stories, this one is debatable. After more than 1,000 years, there are no witnesses who lived in Tramin, the town's original name, back in the day. But the argument has credibility considering that the word gewürztraminer includes Termeno's original name.

Visiting Termeno is one thing. Tasting its wine is another. The latter can be easily accomplished at a range of restaurants and bars as well as

at wineries like Cantina Tramin. This winery has a claim to fame too. It's the first Gewürztraminer producer in the entire world of wine to receive 100 points from Robert Parker's Wine Advocate. We didn't just taste Gewürztraminer wine in Termeno. We also hiked on the village's Gewürztraminer Trail, a beautiful path that's remarkable for its views of both vineyards and mountains. And the trail's best part? It's possible to take a wine break along the way.

Kastelaz Keller is an ideal spot for this type of break. Besides serving local wine, the popular cellar also serves tasty dishes to those who work up appetites during their treks.

Alto Adige Wine Trip Itinerary - 4 Villages Worth a Visit

Not all Alto Adige villages justify an overnight stay. Some of these villages are homes to important sites. Others are simply beautiful spots that fill the soul with good vibes. Accomplishing one or both of these feats, the following villages are ideal spots for day trips:

Vipiteno | Sterzing

Vipiteno is easy to love. With a history that dates back to the Middle Ages, it's chock full of attractions that include churches and museums. Tall and slender, its Torre delle Dodici acts as both the village's touchstone and its timepiece. During our afternoon visit, we wandered into a variety of churches and shops. Daryl even bought a snazzy ski jacket in one

of those shops. But, to be honest, our visit was not particularly wine-focused until we hit the road and drove to nearby Novacella Abbey. Novacella isn't your typical abbey. Founded in the 12th century, it's one of the world's oldest wineries and has terraced slopes that ascend as high as 900 meters. Scheduling a tour to see the vines and learn the history is a must. Of course, tasting the wine is a must too. During our tour, a knowledgeable guide led us through an ancient gated door to a terrace where vines were growing as far as our eyes could see. He later regaled us with stories as he guided us through a selection of wines that included Kerner, Gewürztraminer and Pinot Nero Riserva. Since the Pinot was our favorite, we bought a bottle as a drinkable souvenir.



Glorenza | Glurns

Located near the Rescher pass, Glorenza is an ancient village that exists in the shadow of the Alps. It gained fame for its salt trade more than 500 years ago and has been destroyed and rebuilt a number of times over the ensuing centuries.

If you drive to Glurns, as Glorenza is commonly called, you'll enter the village through an ancient one-lane archway that leads into the medieval walled town. Village highlights include a simple public square, a pretty parish church and quiet arcade-covered blocks

But Glorenza has a trick up its sleeve. It's also the home to the country's oldest whisky distillery. Puni Distillery distills whiskey in a modern cube-shaped geometric brick building just a couple blocks outside the city's walls. We tasted three signature single malt whiskies during our visit.

Not your average whiskies, these smooth spirits were matured in casks sourced from the USA, Spain and Sicily. In other words, their flavor profiles mimicked flavors more commonly found in bourbon, sherry and marsala respectively.

Barbiano | Barbian

You don't need a lot of time to explore Barbiano. It's a blink-and-you'll-miss-it kind of village. But it's worth parking your car, traversing the stairs and catching a view of the valley and mountains surrounding the town.

Once you park your car, you can check out Barbiano's crooked church. It's not as famous as the crooked baptistry in Pisa, but its lack of notoriety (and possibly its lack of noticeable crookedness) adds to its charm.

We didn't notice any other tourists during our weekday visit. Perhaps it was because our visit was during the shoulder season. Then again, we were more focused on eating local dishes like canederli di spinaci and schnitzel in the traditional Austro-Italian tavern than we were at people watching.

Burgusio | Burgeis

A short drive from Glorenza, Burgusio warrants a visit for one reason - the Marienberg Abbey. While the monks at this abbey didn't operate a winery, they did something else special. They built their abbey at an altitude of 1,340 meters which makes it the highest altitude Benedictine abbey in all of Europe.



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Southern Italy road trip itinerary.

Basilicata Villages





BY SCOTT TISSON | BLOG INTREPIDESCAPE.COM

For a lot of European travellers (myself included), Southern Italy is relatively unexplored. It seems to be more popular to travel in the north. It's better connected and has some of the major cities. But please don't let that stop you venturing into the south.

Yes, you'll need a car. Yes, it's off the beaten track. And yes, many people won't speak English. But that's exactly the reason you should go. This kind of travel is rugged and authentic, something not easily found in Europe. Basilicata is also the second least visited of the 21 regions of Italy. These are exactly the reasons you should go, which leads me on nicely to a few extra points...

Is Basilicata worth visiting?

Absolutely. As one of the least travelled regions in Italy, Basilicata is very affordable. It has amazing history and stunning small Borghi. (**BORGI:** small towns or communities usually perched on the top of a mountain or vista, the singular also known as a Borgho.)

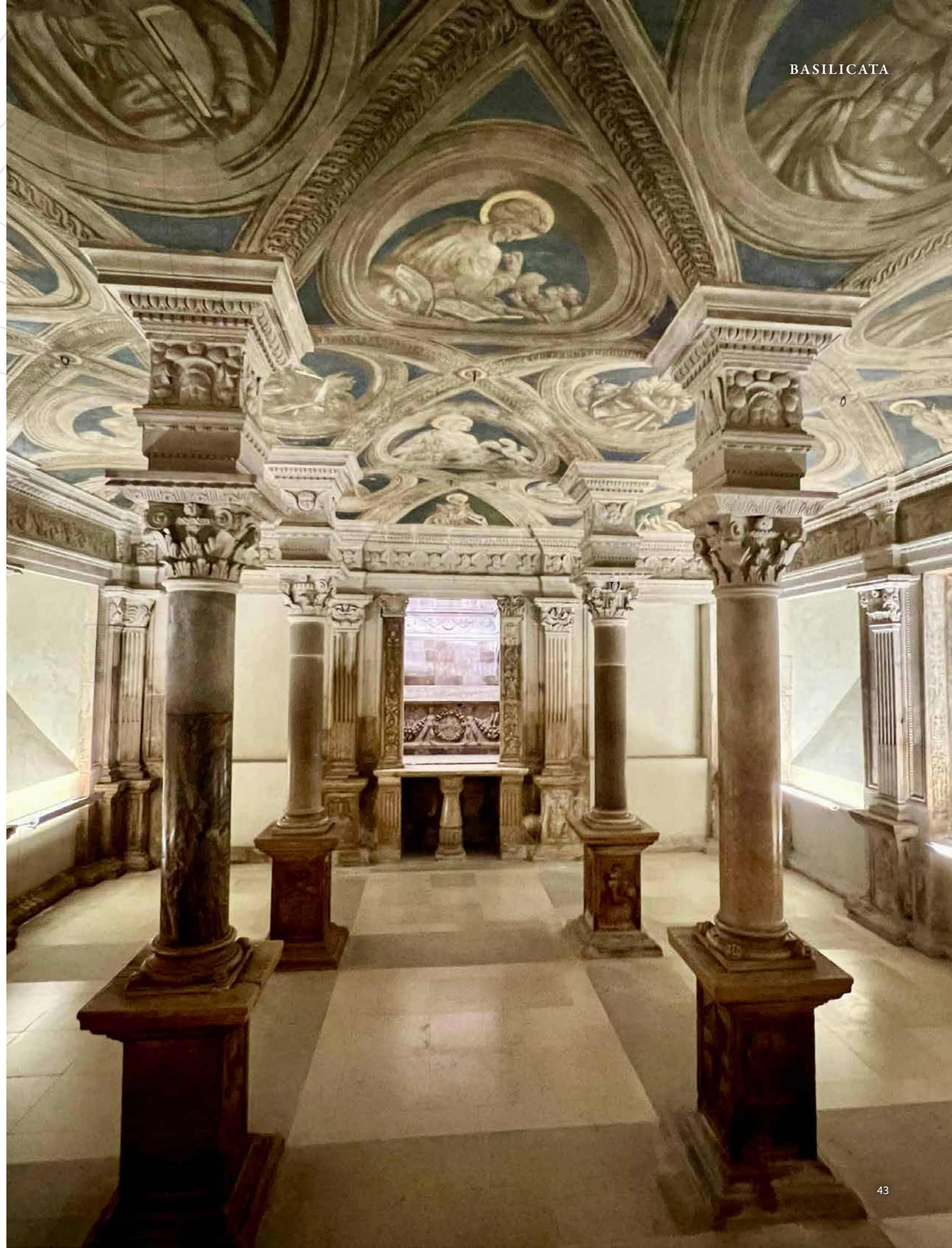
There are 14 world heritage sites in Basilicata and as you'd expect in Italy some amazing food to enjoy, including 'Lucanica di Picerno', the pork sausage.

WHERE IS BASILICATA?

Basilicata is a region in the south of Italy, and one of the least visited. There are two coastlines in Basilicata, the Tyrrhenian Sea between Campania and Calabria and the Gulf of Taranto.

Getting to Basilicata is easiest from the city of Naples and its international airport. There are plenty of places at the airport to hire a car and you will need one for travelling around Basilicata. I don't recommend spending much time in Naples.

Our trip was to focus on the previously mentioned Borghi's, effectively linking 9 hidden gems into one road trip. Many of these you won't have heard of, and as you see the photos and read my words you'll wonder why. As did I. Why aren't these places better travelled? Why aren't they going viral on Instagram? Well let's try to change that.





Moliterno

Our first stop, in the province of Potenza was Moliterno, approximately 2.5 hours' drive from Naples. It's a small agricultural town overlooking the huge valley of the Agri River, and what a start to our adventures in Basilicata.

Our first stop was the castle, Castello Medievale. And what a viewpoint. I stood here on my first day and took in the views for a minute. It felt like a real 'Welcome to Basilicata' moment. It really is the best place to start in Moliterno.

Some say the castle was built in the 12th century, either way the views from the Longobard Tower over the town and churches are spectacular. The Church of Saint Mary and Church of the Rosary (English translations) also look stunning; however, I did not go inside on this visit.

Other places worth visiting on your trip to Moliterno are the Bosco Faggeto Oasis, fantastic for hiking. And the local cheese Pecorino di Moliterno. You'll find this cheese all around Basilicata, but it is in Moliterno where the cheese is made and left aging for 12 months. If you're lucky you might just get a tour with Francesca.

Maratea

Our next stop took us to the Basilicata Coast, still in Potenza and to the medieval town of Maratea. Maratea is known for

a few things, firstly as "the Pearl of the Tyrrhenian" and the town with 44 churches!

Maratea is known as "the Pearl of the Tyrrhenian", but I knew it for a different reason, I'd seen the incredible Italian version of Christ the Redeemer (Il Redentore) standing tall above the coastline, and what a site that was. We arrived as the sun was setting, so the statue was to be our first stop. It's a 22-metre-high statue opposite the Basilica of San Biagio, it's an astonishing structure. We drove there as the light was fading, but in truth I wish we had hiked there first thing in the morning. Either way this simply a must see in Maratea, and in Southern Italy in general. Maratea has a thriving harbour featuring a few upmarket bars and shops, or you could get lost in the cobbled streets of the old town. But it's really known for its hiking and cycling. You are spoiled for choice on the Tyrrhenian coast, with countless mountains and hidden beaches. Or why not cycle up to Il Redentore? You'll certainly earn that view.

Hot Tip: On the drive to Maratea take the SS585 and stop at the viewpoint overlooking the stunning town of Rivello.

Latronico

Our next Borgo in the province of Potenza is Latronico, one hour's drive from Maratea. It's firstly worth noting that this town will be a little cooler than the others,

at an elevation of 888 metres. Latronico is much quieter than the previous two Borghi's and has a smaller population. There are a few hiking spots in the area and close by you have the Pollino National Park and the highest peak of Serra Dolcedorme at 2267 metres.

You can drop by the Museo Del Termalismo art gallery or even the Terme Lucane Spa. Terme Lucane is well worth visiting for the local walking and stunning waterfalls, but personally the spa felt more like a medical centre.

Aliano

Moving onto the Province of Matera now and to the picture-perfect town of Aliano. This will take you just over one hour to reach from Latronico. It's our smallest so far.

I'd seen this stunning Borgo a few times in my research into Basilicata. The stunning location of the town on a ridge overlooking the Calanchi region. It's also known as the setting for Carlo Levi's book 'Christ Stopped at Eboli'.

Carlo Levi was a popular author, activist, painter, journalist, and doctor who was exiled to Aliano in 1935. There are statues and museums dedicated to his work, and even his final resting place.

As we arrived, we were greeted by colourful street art, Carlo Levi statue and amazing views. It has a great vibe to it, and most of the locals were extremely welcoming.

Hot Tip: Visit the Calanchi, known as the Badlands. In any other

area this would be full of tourists, but the unique landscape of the Calanchi is almost unknown. We saw barely any tourists here. You can drive through it on the way to the next Borghi but allow plenty of time. This landscape must be seen to be believed.

La Rabatana

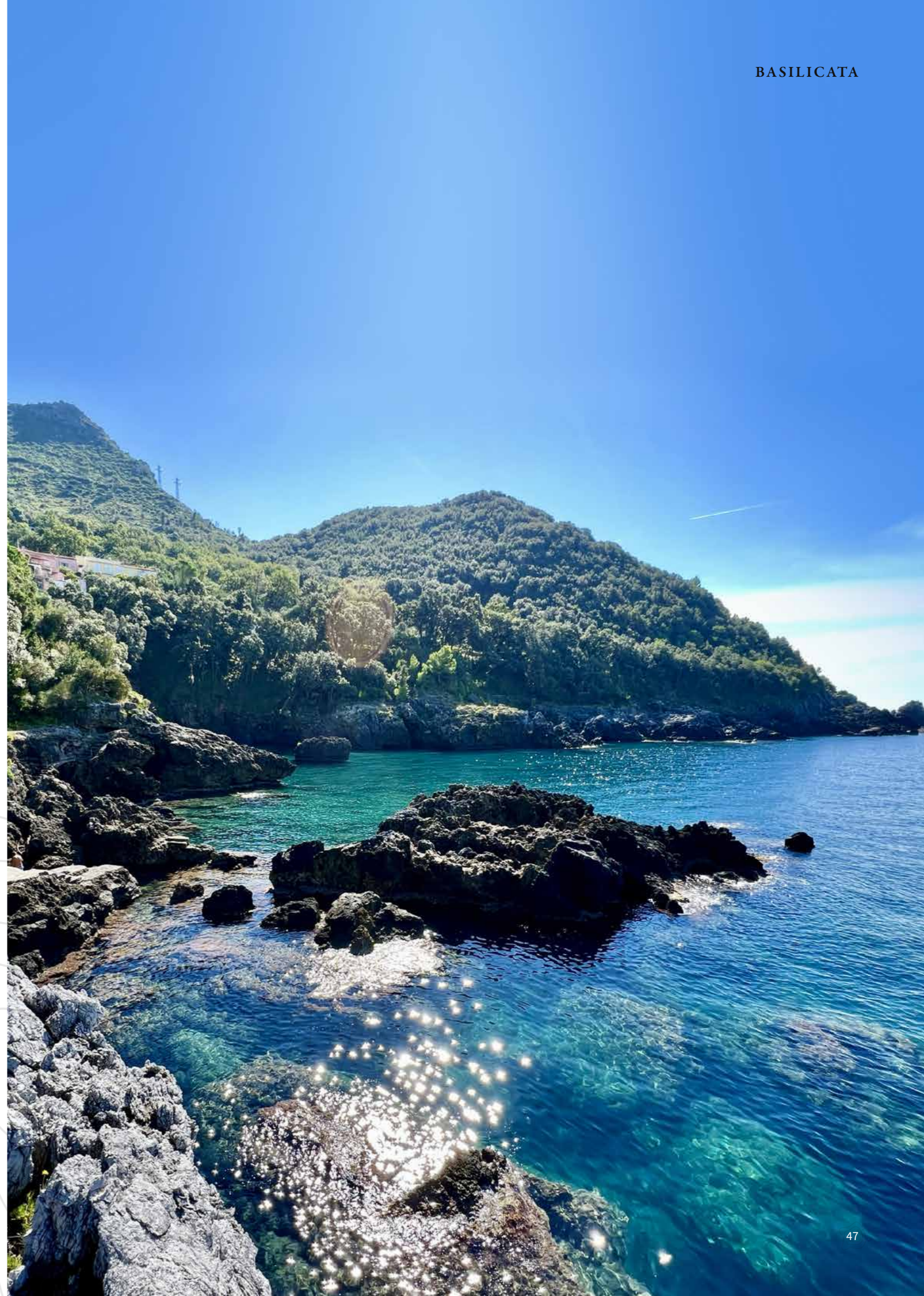
"A place where time stands still", said the owner of our guesthouse. Rabatana overlooks the town of Tursi, which feels like an overcrowded bustling city compared with Rabatana. It's not, that's just to emphasise the peaceful existence of Rabatana.

We are still in the province of Matera, and Tursi is just 45 minutes from Aliano, but as I said above allow some time to see the Calanchi.

Rabatana has an incredible history, and dates back to the year 800. It was built by the Saracens, who ran the town for 400 years whilst others around them were defeated. It was probably due to the unique location of the Borghi.

You'll notice Rabatana is a work in progress, much of the town needs restoration and TLC. But some places have been lovingly restored. We met Antonio, an owner of one of those restored guesthouses and restaurants; Palazzo dei Poeti. He talked of people escaping their busy lives to 'breathe and open their minds' here in Rabatana.

Rabatana is a true hidden gem, and one of my favourite Borghi's so far.





Pisticci

The final borghi in the province of Matera, and just 40 minutes by car from Tursi is Pisticci, the ‘white town of Basilicata’.

At first impression it felt busier than previous Borghi’s, and with a population of nearly 18,000 it’s one of the largest we would be visiting. It’s another town located on a stunning spot perched on top of three hills.

We headed to the old town and the Dirupo District, where you can walk the cobbled streets and get a view of the town. These views even stretch as far as the Ionian Sea.

You can walk up to highest and oldest point of Pisticci, Torrevecchia, a square tower that was once part of the Norman castle. It’s quite a sight and certainly stands out in my drone photography of the town. Amazing. This region is still part of the clay formed Calanchi region, meaning there are more of the ‘badlands’ to explore, but also making it susceptible to landslides. This has been a challenging factor of this region’s history and the rebuilding of Pisticci.

Hot tip: *throughout Basilicata try Amaro Lucano, an Italian liqueur or aperitif usually sipped after dinner. It has a medicinal feel, and certainly warms the insides! Pisticci is the production site of this famous liqueur.*

Acerenza

Our next borghi is around 1.5 hours drive from Pisticci, and you can visit Matera along the way. No article about Basilicata would be complete without referencing Matera, it’s an incredible place, but we are focusing on the lesser-known borghi on this trip.

Acerenza is another one of the smaller Borghi’s on the trip, in the province of Potenza. It’s another Borgo at a high elevation as 833 metres. The elevation combined with the nearby Lake Acerenza gives a unique fog that often engulfs the village, as when we first arrived. Driving through narrow streets not being able to see 5 metres in front of you was certainly a challenge!

Acerenza is nicknamed the Cathedral City, as the imposing towers dominate the view of the ancient town. The Cathedral of Santa Maria is the first place of interest here and a must visit in Acerenza. It’s a Roman Catholic cathedral with a unique crypt dating back to 1524.

The second place you must visit is the Museo Diocesano Acerenza. Featuring many ancient artifacts and treasures from the cathedral and Archbishops. It also features every Archbishop through time, and this kind of history really blows my mind!

Venosa

It took us just under 1 hour to drive to Venosa, in the province of Potenza. It's a town with fantastic history and archaeological importance.

Our first stop was the Castello Aragonese (Aragonese Castle), where they explained that both the open-air archaeological park and archaeological museum below the castle were just €2.50 entry. Fantastic value.

After a look around the castle, we headed to Scavi Archeologici (Archaeological Park), a breathtaking site with remains of the Latin colony of Venusia founded in 291 BC! Let that sink in. The fully restored Abbey of Santissima Trinità (Abbey of the Holy Trinity) is quite a sight to behold, and the Benedictine Abbey dates back to the Norman Era.

We then headed to the museum which has recently been modernised. Sadly, the Jewish catacombs are not open to the public at this time.

Rionero in Vulture

Our final borgo on this trip was Rionero in Vulture, located on the slopes of Monte Vulture and just a short 30-minute drive from Venosa.

It's a town well-known for its mineral water and hiking. And in truth, we spent most of the day hiking to and from Rionero, instead of exploring the town itself.

We started our hike in the Foresta Belvedere (Belvedere Forest),

with plans to head down to Lake Monticchio. We had some fantastic guides explaining about chestnut season and the importance of the forest in traditional medicines. Every step of the way spotting amazing views of Lake Monticchio.

Before reaching the bottom, we stopped at San Michele Abbey, a monastery and place of worship carved into the side of the mountain with spectacular views over the lake. This is a place that really must be seen to be believed. The lake itself was a popular local hangout, especially being the weekend. It was great to see so many people enjoying Lake Monticchio.

Our final stop of the hike before lunch was the Archaeological Park of Sant'Ippolito. You must have permission from a local guide or historian, but it's another fascinating example of the history on offer in the region of Basilicata. And just like that we finished a long day in the Borgo of Rionero, where we just had time to explore Palazzo Fortunato and review the trip for our video. If we had time, I would have also loved to visit the Carcere Borbonico e Museo del Brigantaggio (Bourbon Prison and and Brigandage Museum), so add these to your itinerary.

I felt like we blended in with the locals in the Palazzo, drinking espresso and discussing the day. I am starting to enjoy this kind of lifestyle and will be back in Basilicata again very soon.



Scott is a Travel Blogger, Videographer and Presenter for **Intrepid Escape**, an adventure travel blog encouraging people to 'escape their routine'. He has travelled extensively for 15 years, often basing himself in the UK. He loves off the beaten track travel and anything outdoors, including hiking, skiing, cycling, running and road trips.



9 Calabria Villages

That will surprise you



BY SIMON FALVO | BLOG WILD-ABOUT-TRAVEL.COM

Calabria is one of the most overlooked Italian regions and even those who visit usually spend time somewhere in a beach resort. After all, Calabria has an 800 km coastline and is one of the sunniest areas in Italy. However, it's inland that you'll find many charming towns and the layers that history impressed throughout the centuries. Prehistoric sites, Greek heritage, Roman ruins, Norman castles and other testaments from the past. There are several reasons for that. Geographically, Calabria is characterised by hills and mountains; plains account for only 10 per cent of the region's surface. Historically, after the coastal splendour in Greek and Roman times, the wars and repeated invasions from the Goths, Longobards, Byzantines, and Arabs drove the local residents inland. They built

hilltop villages with a fortress on the highest point to dominate the lowlands, control the coast and block access to incursions from enemies.

Centuries later, things reversed. People increasingly moved from these small towns, often isolated and poorly connected, to the coast. In some cases, the depopulation has been so extreme that the hamlets have become ghost towns. Luckily, in several borghi - as villages and small towns are called in Italian - many residents, including young people, decided to revive their hometown. Driven by passion, they invest their time and work hard, often as volunteers, to enhance their heritage and promote it to visitors.

If you have visited Italy before, especially Italian must-see destinations, you'll quickly discover that Calabria is a





different world. This area has been scarred multiple times over the centuries. Devastating floods and earthquakes left their marks. Isolation and scarce development - industrial and, to a certain extent, touristic - ironically make Calabria so unique. This is one of the Italian regions where you're sure to have an authentic experience, especially in Calabria villages. In these hilltop towns, life has a different pace. Time flows slowly. Human relations and solidarity between the residents are palpable.

In restaurants, there are few chances of being presented with a multilanguage menu displaying some of the best-known Italian dishes, especially abroad. You'll hardly find Carbonara or Lasagne. But you'll discover a whole new world of local specialities, often made with locally-sourced ingredients and following traditional recipes handed down from one generation to another.

Food in Calabria is a serious matter. It involves much more than just eating. It's about sharing and hospitality.

Driving in Calabria, especially inland, is all about curvy roads climbing up and down hills and mountains. And more often than not, roads are in terrible shape. To visit Calabria villages, you must prepare for long drives to cover short distances. However, you'll be rewarded with beautiful landscapes and picture-perfect hilltop villages appearing suddenly along the way.

My Calabria itinerary led me from north to south. I discovered charming villages, learned about the different cultural heritage across the region and breathed the unique atmosphere of travelling off the beaten path.

I spent 10 days in Calabria, but if you have a shorter time, you could focus on one of the main areas: north, centre and south.

Northern Calabria:

Delightful hilltop towns in the Pollino National Park

The Pollino National Park is the largest in Italy and a UNESCO Geopark, spanning the Calabria and Basilicata regions. This vast area encompasses 56 towns, of

which 32 are in Calabria, in the province of Cosenza. There, I visited three townlets, each of them with its own character and historical heritage.



Morano Calabro

the gem of the Pollino

I didn't know it yet, but the drive from Lamezia Terme - where I picked up my little rented Panda car - on the Salerno-Reggio Calabria highway heading north was an introduction to driving in Calabria. The road is often curvy, climbs up and down the hills, and most of the time, speeding is not an option. Once I exited the freeway and approached Morano Calabro, I gasped in surprise. Suddenly, I saw a cone-shaped hill in front of me, with houses clinging to its slopes. The view was mesmerising, and I couldn't help halting the car in an appropriate space and snapping a few photos.

Morano Calabro is one of the Borghi Più Belli d'Italia (Most Beautiful Villages in Italy) and has

also been awarded the Orange Flag by the Italian Touring Club, a quality mark for small towns that embraced sustainable tourism development. As I strolled up the steep, winding alleyways, it didn't take long to see why. I felt charmed by the old stone houses, their balconies or terraces decorated with green succulent plants, able to resist heat and long periods of drought. Don't expect Morano Calabro to be like some of the overpolished villages in other parts of Italy, beautiful but sometimes even excessively shiny. Ornaments are generally unpretentious and spontaneous, conveying love, care and great taste. At the end of September, there are only a handful of tourists,





so you'll primarily meet locals. Elderly people sitting on a bench and chatting, kids going to school or playing around, and shopkeepers on the threshold, speaking with residents. The ruins of the Norman-Swabian castle at the top of the hill are one of Morano Calabro's main attractions. Its origins date back to the Roman empire when it was likely a small fort or a watch tower. Then, during the Middle Ages, the Normans built a castle on the previous Roman foundations. Its present shape stems from 16th-century refurbishments due to the will of prince Pietro Antonio Sanseverino. From Morano Calabro castle ruins, you get spectacular 360-degree views, particularly beautiful at sunset. The town's other attractions are all related to religious buildings. Must-sees include the

stunning Polittico Sanseverino, painted by the Venetian artist Bartolomeo Vivarini in 1477, Church of San Pietro e Paolo and its exquisite Rococo interior, and Santa Maria Maddalena collegiate church, with its distinctive colourful tiled dome. Morano Calabro is best discovered by strolling up and down the narrow meandering lanes. Lovely during the day, they become charming and romantic at night. The village is a perfect base to explore the Pollino National Park, better by hiking or biking. I had a day hike in the area where Calabria meets Basilicata and was impressed by how wild and beautiful this mountain area is. If you get the chance, make sure to see Heldreich's pines, a superb family of pines growing only in a few places in Mediterranean Europe.

Papasidero

home to a unique prehistoric site

About 45 km from Morano Calabro, Papasidero is home to the Grotta del Romito (Romito Cave), one of the most important and oldest prehistoric sites in Italy and Europe. Incredibly, its discovery is very recent and dates back only to 1961. Research from Florence University started soon after, determining that there was a human presence in this area since the Paleolithic era. The cave, located within a narrow canyon, offered protection and shelter, and its interior is superb. Archaeologists found several burial sites outside the cave and one of the most unique engravings: the image of an enormous bovine now extinct: the *Bos Primigenius*.

From the Romito Cave, the 13 km drive to Papasidero village is mostly twists and turns on a road whose conditions have seen better times. I had to focus on driving, but from the corner

of my eyes, I could see how superb the surrounding scenery was. Thus, I made a few stops to admire the verdant hills and an almost untouched landscape. The view of the tiny hilltop town of Avena is delightful, as is the sight of Papasidero once approaching the village.

Papasidero, indeed, isn't as pretty as other hamlets, but there are a couple of spots worth visiting. The main attraction is the Sanctuary of Nostra Signora di Costantinopoli. You rarely get to see a religious building leaning against a rock in an almost unreal setting.

Aside from and beyond its historical, cultural and natural appeal, Papasidero is the place to go if you're passionate about active travel and adrenaline activities. Rafting on the river Lao is becoming increasingly popular thanks to the wild landscape and deep gorges.



Laino Borgo and Laino Castello

murals and a ghost town

One of the northernmost Calabria villages, at the border with the Basilicata region, Laino Borgo is immersed in the Pollino National Park.

Laino Borgo is a place rich in history and centuries-old traditions, surrounded by the rivers Lao and Iannello and by the luxuriant vegetation that adorns its banks.

The ongoing archaeological excavations indicate that the town's origins might date back to the 6th century B.C. when ancient Laos was a prosperous colony of Magna Graecia. While these researches are still underway, there are sure signs of Byzantine and Longobard domination.

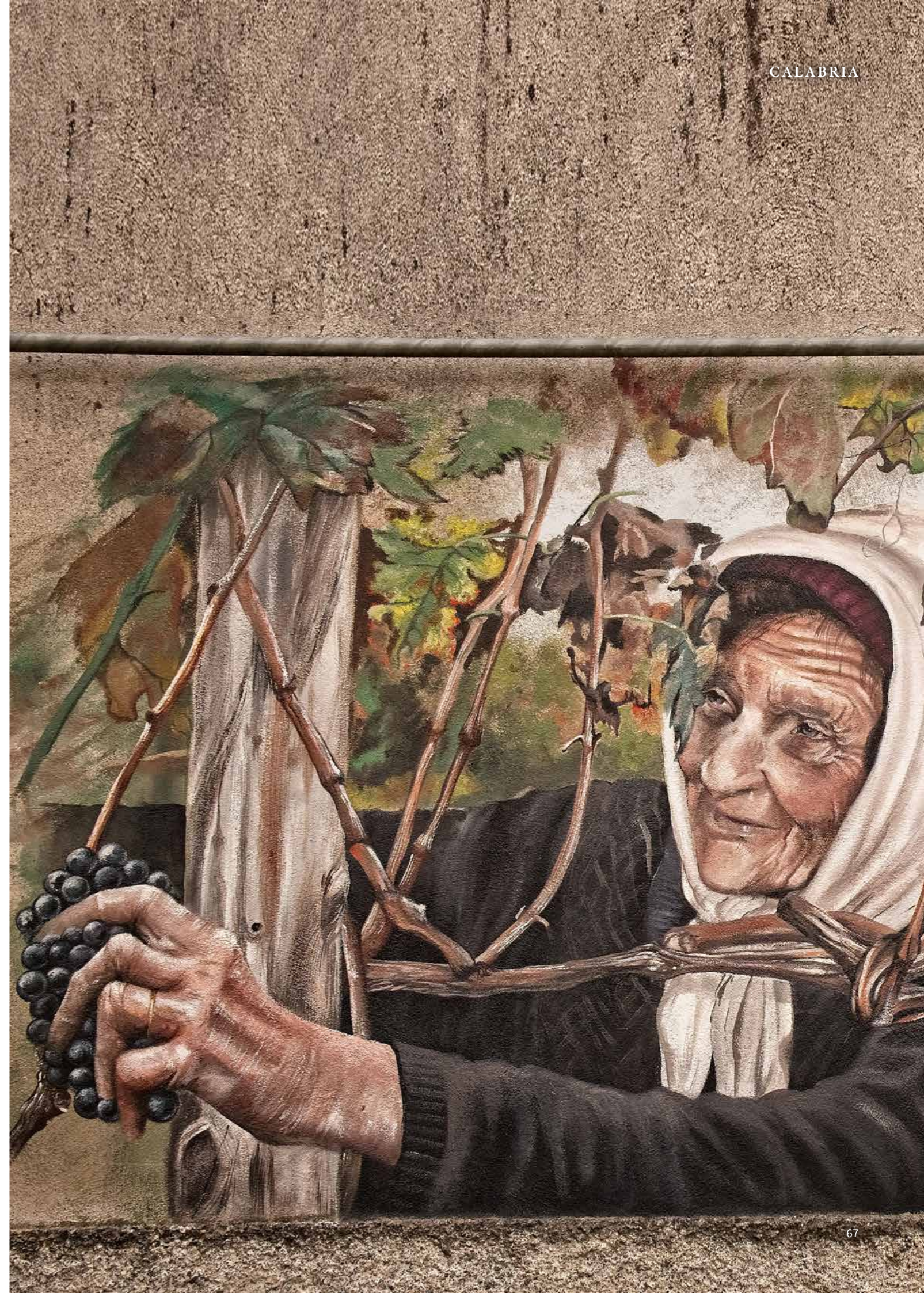
The town's main historical attraction, a couple of kilometres away, is the Sacro Monte di Laino Borgo, generally known as Santuario delle Cappelle (Sanctuary of the Chapels) for its 16 chapels. The Sanctuary, also called Laino Borgo Little Jerusalem, was built in the mid-16th century by Domenico Longo and successively expanded. Longo, a devout from Laino, started the construction after a trip to the Holy Land. At that time, pilgrimages had become difficult and expensive. Longo thus decided to give people an idea of the main sacred places of

Jerusalem through the chapel's decorations.

What sets Laino Borgo apart are the murals scattered throughout the village. The most charming are the ones adorning the alleys close to the river, showing what used to be the traditional local life. Women harvesting, people chatting on a bench, families attending daily chores. I was reminded of my childhood when we used to sit all together to shell beans or cooking tomatoes in a giant cauldron to make preserves that would last for the rest of the year.

If you like active travel, there are many options around Laino Borgo. However, the most popular activity is rafting on the river Lao, in beautiful and uncontaminated scenery.

Sitting on top of a rock, the tiny hamlet of Laino Castello looks like a sentinel, watching Laino Borgo below. It was abandoned in the 1980s due to hydrogeologic and seismic threats and is now a ghost town. However, once a year, during the Christmas period, the village comes to life again with the Living Nativity scene. Locals re-enact the Nativity in the caves and the streets of the abandoned historic centre, and during the event, people can taste local food specialities.



Central Calabria

and the province of Catanzaro

Catanzaro may be the smallest province in Calabria, but it offers a lot to see and do, from gorgeous beaches and crystal-clear water to delightful villages, not to mention the beautiful mountain landscape of the Sila National Park. The Isthmus of Catanzaro,

a narrow valley spanning the Tyrrhenian and the Ionian seas, is the narrowest point of the Italian peninsula. From some areas, on clear days, it's possible to enjoy a sprawling view of the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Ionian Sea, the Aeolian Islands and even the top of Etna.





Squillace

a charming hilltop village

From northern Calabria, I headed southwards, towards the Ionian coast. My first port of call was Squillace, one of the most charming towns in Calabria, perched on a hilltop at 345m above sea level. While its origins date back to ancient Greece, Squillace also appears shrouded in mystery and legends. The village's foundation is sometimes attributed to no less than Ulysses. Others ascribed the creation of Squillace to Menesteeo when he returned from the Trojan war. Like many other Calabria villages, Squillace's development during the Middle Ages is linked to defensive purposes. The town held a strategic position overlooking the gulf and was coveted by the Saracens, the

Arabs and, later, the Normans. People moved inland, on the hills, to escape and control incursions from the sea. There's no medieval village without a castle, and Squillace has its own, rising at the highest point of the village.

The ruins of the ancient fortress, severely damaged by the violent 1783 earthquake, have been lovingly restored, and one can easily imagine how imposing the castle was. As this was not enough, you'll be rewarded with sweeping views after the climb, spreading from the mountains to the cobalt-blue Ionian sea.

Earthquakes didn't spare the cathedral either. While its first construction dates back to the 11th century, the present building was erected in 1798. The facade, inspired by the

Romanesque style, is imposing in its simplicity. While the interior is not particularly remarkable, the cathedral square is the liveliest spot, where you can watch the local people in their day-to-day life.

A few steps from the cathedral I saw what ended up being my favourite attraction in Squillace: the suggestive ruins of Santa Chiara church and monastery. Dating back to the 17th century, Santa Chiara didn't escape the devastating effects of the 1783 earthquake. Still, the ruins hinted at its past splendour and sparked a strong emotion in me. Talking about religious buildings, don't miss Santa Maria della Pietà, a small church concealed in a narrow lane. With its simple gothic structure, it's a treat. Regrettably, I couldn't see

it inside and admire the ancient cross-vaulted ceilings.

If you like pottery, you'll be pleased to see the many artisan shops, mainly on Corso Pepe and in the area near the castle, continuing a cultural heritage dating as far back as Ancient Greece.

Like many other borghi (small towns) in Italy, there's no better way to discover and appreciate Squillace than slowly wandering in its charming alleys, admiring the stone doorways of the once noble palaces and the delightful courtyards. Squillace is also its people: the nonnas standing or sitting in front of their home's door, waiting for someone to have a chat with, the kids coming back from school, and the locals greeting one another in the streets.





Roccelletta di Borgia

and its unique Archaeological Park

While the inland town of Borgia admittedly is of limited interest, except for the cathedral and a few other buildings, the actual attraction is Roccelletta di Borgia. Overlooking the Ionian sea, Roccelletta di Borgia is home to the Scolacium Archaeological Park.

Although not far from Borgia, it took me some time to reach the archaeological site since signs in this area are often confusing. But I'm stubborn, so in the end, I got there! And it was worth the effort.

If you visited Rome, you certainly got an idea of the legacy of ancient Greece and the Roman empire on Italian culture and art. Even the highly admired works of the Renaissance couldn't have existed without the Greek and Roman cultural heritage. The archaeological finds in Scolacium may not be as eye-catching as other Italian landmarks, but they're

undoubtedly worth a visit. Additionally, they are the most important Roman ruins in Calabria.

First of all, the setting is somewhat unusual and charming. The Roman ruins are set amid an old olive grove, with colours ranging from the yellow of the dried fields to the silver-green of the olive trees to the deep blue of the sea. I reckon that Scolacium gets busier in the peak season, but the atmosphere was absolute magic on a September weekday with only a handful of visitors.

Start your visit with the small but insightful Museum. You'll get an introduction to the site's history and find out that although the ruins date back to the Roman age, it had previously been a Greek colony named Skylletion. Furthermore, you'll learn about the excavations after the site was discovered in 1982 and admire some of the findings. After that,



you'll be ready to slowly wander among the olive groves to visit the archaeological remains.

While all of Scolacium Archaeological Park is interesting, two ruins impressed me the most. One of them was the well-preserved Roman theatre. Built on the natural slope of the hill, it could host up to 3500 spectators. The other was the amphitheatre, a little further up. Although there's not much left of the original structure, the setting is beautiful. The ruins, gently laid against the slope like a blanket,

and the deep blue of the sea on the horizon rendered this spot mesmerising.

And then there's the imposing Basilica of Santa Maria della Roccella. Built in the 11th century by the Normans, historians believe it to have been the largest religious building in Calabria. The monumental ruins are impressive, and looking at its Romanesque structure in red bricks, it's easy to imagine what a gorgeous building it must have been. I was so fascinated that I couldn't resist snapping photos and having my camera in full swing.





Badolato

a delightful medieval village

As I drove yet another winding road, Badolato appeared like a fairy-tale village perched atop a rather steep hill. I halted the car at the first suitable spot, grabbed my camera and climbed down to take a few photos. Unfortunately, the town was backlit, but it was impressive all the same.

Badolato is a charming medieval borgo (the Italian name for a small town) deep-rooted in history. It was the Norman adventurer Robert Guiscard - famous for his conquest of southern Italy and Sicily - who commissioned the building of the hilltop castle in 1080.

Over the centuries, due to its strategic position overlooking the sea and allowing it to watch for possible raids from enemies, Badolato ended up under successive rulers' control,

craving such a key location. Like many other villages in the area, Badolato endured the horrible 1783 earthquake, which spread extensive destruction and killed about 5,000 people. Although deeply scarred, the hamlet kept its typical medieval structure, with the crisscrossing meandering lanes.

In the 1980s, Badolato experienced the same fate as many other Italian villages: depopulation. The risks that it might become yet another ghost town were real, and a brilliant initiative was launched: Badolato was put on sale. The opportunity met with maybe unexpected success. Several people, above all from northern Europe, invested in the houses and renovated them. Therefore, don't get surprised if you meet "locals" speaking German or



other foreign languages. One of Badolato's main characteristics is its churches. That might not come as a surprise in a country like Italy, where churches are ubiquitous. Still, 14 religious buildings in a hamlet of about 3,000 residents is a lot! Even if you're not a believer (and I'm not), churches are often worth visiting, if only for their architecture and the artistic masterpieces they often house. My favourite was the church of Immacolata (Chiesa dell'Immacolata), dating back to the 17th century and sitting on a panoramic terrace overlooking the gentle hills and

the azure blue of the Ionian sea. Sadly, I couldn't visit the interior since it was closed when I was there. I always forget that churches have opening hours. Badolato is a town best discovered at a slow pace, getting lost in the meandering alleys and enjoying the atmosphere that feels like stepping back in time. At the end of September, I was surprised to find a sleepy atmosphere with no more than a handful of people. While I'm not too fond of the crowds, I would have expected more people to visit such a charming borgo. But it was also lovely to have the village almost all for myself.



Southern Calabria *and the Greek Heritage*

No region in Italy preserved the Ancient Greece heritage like southern Calabria and the area of the Reggio Calabria province. After 500 years of Greek domination, in the 2nd century B.C., the Romans became the new rulers, followed over the centuries by the Byzantines, Normans, and Bourbons, to mention only a few. Despite the whirlwind of cultures, the Greek heritage survived in

traditions and language.

Over time, a fascinating phenomenon occurred. The contamination between ancient Greek and local dialects gave birth to a new language: Grecanico. Sadly, after having survived for centuries, Grecanico is being increasingly abandoned. But there are still people speaking it and trying to preserve such a unique legacy.





Bova Superiore

a beautiful village with spellbinding views

Considered the heart of Calabria's Grecanica area, Bova Superiore (not to be confused with Bova Marina, by the sea) is a delightful hilltop village in the Aspromonte National Park. Although only 9km from the coast, the hamlet is at an altitude of 820m above sea level. Thus, the drive is quite a climb. Arriving in Bova's main square, you'll be welcomed by the beautiful 740 Ansaldo Breda locomotive from 1911, standing as a symbol of Italian emigration worldwide. Then, as you move your first steps, the first things that will grab your attention are the streets and shop signs in Italian and Greek. Because of Bova's rather unique traits, I suggest you visit the Museum of the Greek-Calabrian language "Gerhard Rohlfs" before you even discover this beautiful town. Opened in 2016, the Museum is dedicated to the German linguist and his lifelong studies of the Greek-Calabrian language and culture, shedding light on the heritage of this area.

A kind local girl offered to guide me and explained the importance of Rohlfs' work while highlighting the main exhibits. At first, I was sceptical that such a Museum might be exciting. After only a few minutes, I proved wrong because there were plenty of photos, objects and tools showing the life and traditions of Greek Calabria. Old pictures of traditional costumes, beautiful textiles that showed the incredible skills of Calabrian women, and lots more.

Bova is one of the Borghi più Belli d'Italia (most beautiful villages in Italy); additionally, the town was awarded the Orange Flag by the Touring Club Italiano, a recognition given to small towns active in quality and sustainable tourism. The borgo is genuinely charming and lovingly kept by its 400 residents. Compared to other villages that come to life only during the tourism season, Bova is lively all year long as the locals enjoy spending as much

time as possible there.

On the hilltop, you'll see the ruins of the 11th-century fortress. It was built by the Normans, who chose the spot due to its strategic position, dominating a vast area. The sweeping vista from the castle is breathtaking. The mountains of Aspromonte at the back, the rolling hills at the front, and the Ionian sea, blue like a sparkling sapphire, further away.

Walking down the winding alleyways, I visited the ghetto, where a small Jewish community lived between the end of the 15th and early 16th centuries. The Giudecca - as the ghetto is called - has been lovingly restored and decorated with beautiful ceramics created by a talented Calabrian artist, Antonio Pujia Veneziano.

Descending further along the meandering streets, I halted every few steps to admire the cathedral, the elegant Palazzo Mesiani and a few other aristocratic buildings. Back to the main square, I strolled to the gorgeous Palazzo dei Nesci Sant'Agata, with its crenellated

arch, built in 1822.

In a nearby alleyway, I followed the signs to the Sentiero della Civiltà Contadina (the Path of Peasant Civilization). It's a lovely open-air museum showing ancient working tools in a delightful setting. With all the modern machinery, we have forgotten how hard the peasants' life was, and the path is an excellent testament to the old farmers' culture.

Traces of the Greek legacy can be tracked down also in the local food. Restaurants' menus combine typical southern Calabria dishes with delicious Greek recipes. One of the most popular joints serves *lestopitta*, a crunchy flatbread filled with ingredients of your choice: cheese, vegetables, or cured meat, all strictly local.

Bova is such a quaint hilltop village that you should spend at least one night to savour its unique atmosphere. After sunset, the hamlet glows under a warm and magical orange hue. And at sunrise, the vista of the rolling hills and the coast is breathtaking.



Pentedattilo

the picture-perfect hamlet

Set against the steep cliffs of Monte Calvario in a picture-perfect setting, Pentedattilo is a magical village. Its name derives from the Greek *pènta-dàktylos*, meaning five fingers, and stems from the shape of the backdrop cliffs, resembling a gigantic hand. Although only 250 m above sea level, the scenery is such that it feels much higher and makes you think of the mountains way more than the sea. The landscape is mesmerising: rugged mountains, rolling hills, green fields and the deep blue sea. Add to this the many prickly pear plants, and you'll get one of Calabria's most iconic - and beautiful - landscapes.

Like many other isolated villages, Pentedattilo was abandoned entirely in the 1960s, becoming a ghost town. Luckily, from the 1980s onwards, a few volunteers from all over Europe decided to get back to the hamlet. Some of the houses got restored, and a few artisan shops opened, but residents are still only a handful. I was greeted by a group of cats - the true rulers - enjoying the sun in front of a charming artisan shop. Giorgio, the shopkeeper and one of the few residents, came to me for a chat, which must be a treat in such an isolated hamlet. "Life is not easy in Pentedattilo", he told me, "as there are not many modern

amenities". Still, difficulties don't deter him and his determination to stay. And thanks to him and the few other residents, the village remains alive.

Pentedattilo is one of those places that needs to be discovered slowly, savouring it like a god's nectar. Step after step, as I climbed up the tiny winding alleyways, I looked at the refurbished stone houses embellished with simple but charming decorations. I stopped by the bench of kisses, overlooking the rolling hills and the sea, offering a spectacular backdrop for a photo. Further uphill, I could admire the façade of San Pietro e Paolo Church, which, luckily, survived the 1783 earthquake.

Shortly after, I got to the castle ruins, sitting on a rock at the top of the village. During the Romans, a fortress towered above the town, strategically placed to check on possible enemy incursions. Centuries later, at the end of the 16th century, the Alberti family, which controlled the hamlet, converted the fortress into a castle. Most of the building was destroyed, but the climb rewarded me with a magnificent vista.

As I got ready to leave, I gave a last glance at this magical town. I left it behind, nurturing the hope that it won't be abandoned once again.





Roghudi Vecchio

a rough drive in a wild landscape

At an altitude of about 530 m above sea level, in the Aspromonte National Park, Roghudi Vecchio - not to be mistaken with Roghudi (Nuovo) - is a rather peculiar ghost town.

The village sits on a steep rock, isolated, in an area where hydrogeological calamities are frequent. Two terrible floods in 1971 and 1973 left widespread destruction and death. The residents were ordered to evacuate the hamlet, which rapidly became a ghost town.

To reach Roghudi Vecchio, you must get ready for a rough drive. There are two ways to get there: from Bova or Melito Porto Salvo, and the road conditions range from very bad to godawful. I drove both of them, and although highly scenic, I strongly advise against the ride from Melito Porto Salvo unless you have a sturdy 4x4.

While the hamlet is not particularly attractive, it's worth visiting for the sweeping views of a wild and marvellous landscape. Perched on a steep spur overlooking the dried bed of the Amendolea river and the rugged Aspromonte mountains, Roghudi Vecchio felt out of this world. Completely alone - except for a few goats - I walked in the narrow lanes between the now crumbling houses, glancing

inside to spot the few signs of life left. The only building slightly refurbished is the tiny church of San Nicola, where the filtering lights create a unique atmosphere.

On the way to Bova, some 5km from Roghudi Vecchio, I took a break to visit Rocca del Drako, a unique Geosite surrounded by the wild scenery of the Aspromonte National Park. A short, easy walk led me to Draco's Rock, a natural sculpture shrouded in mystery. Its shape evokes a squared head, and the two circles carved in the middle suggest eyes. Thus, unsurprisingly, the rock served as an inspiration to many legends. One myth tells that it was home to a dragon protecting a treasure. The dragon asked for a sacrifice to those yearning to possess the precious goods: a black cat, a goat and a child, all males. Needless to say, the treasure was never found.

The Geosite also hosts another natural sculpture called Caldaie del Latte (Milk Boilers). The seven small boulders also inspired a legend linked to the dragon, said to devour children and provoke calamities. To satiate and mollify him, the locals would boil milk in gigantic cauldrons to feed the terrifying monster.

Legends apart, Rocca del Drako is a beautiful site worth a visit.

Calabria Villages: Practical Info

Best time to visit

Calabria is one of the Italian regions with the highest number of sunny days and is, therefore, a year-round destination.

However, summer can be scorching, while in Spring and Autumn, the mild temperatures are more enjoyable. Additionally, the shoulder season is perfect to beat the crowds, although some villages may have limited options in terms of accommodations and food.

Winters are mild in central and southern Calabria but beware of possible snow in the mountains. While the white-blanketed hamlets are undoubtedly charming, the often poor road conditions might pose some challenges.

How to get to Calabria

There are two airports in Calabria: Lamezia Terme and Reggio Calabria. Since this Calabria itinerary covers the region from north to south, you can get in at one of the airports and out from the other.

You can also get to Calabria by high-speed train, which stops in Paola, Lamezia Terme, Villa S. Giovanni and Reggio Calabria.

How to get around

You'll have to hire a car to visit the villages since public transport is minimal. I'm usually a big fan of small, compact cars. However, more than once, I wish I had rented a 4x4 to climb up and down the steep hills, often with roads in really poor conditions.



Travel addict and passionate about photography, **Simon** started Wild About Travel back in 2009. Besides travel writing, Simon holds workshops and trainings, collaborates with tourism boards for digital marketing campaigns and has participated as a speaker at several events.

*Tips for a road trip through
the countryside of*
Campania





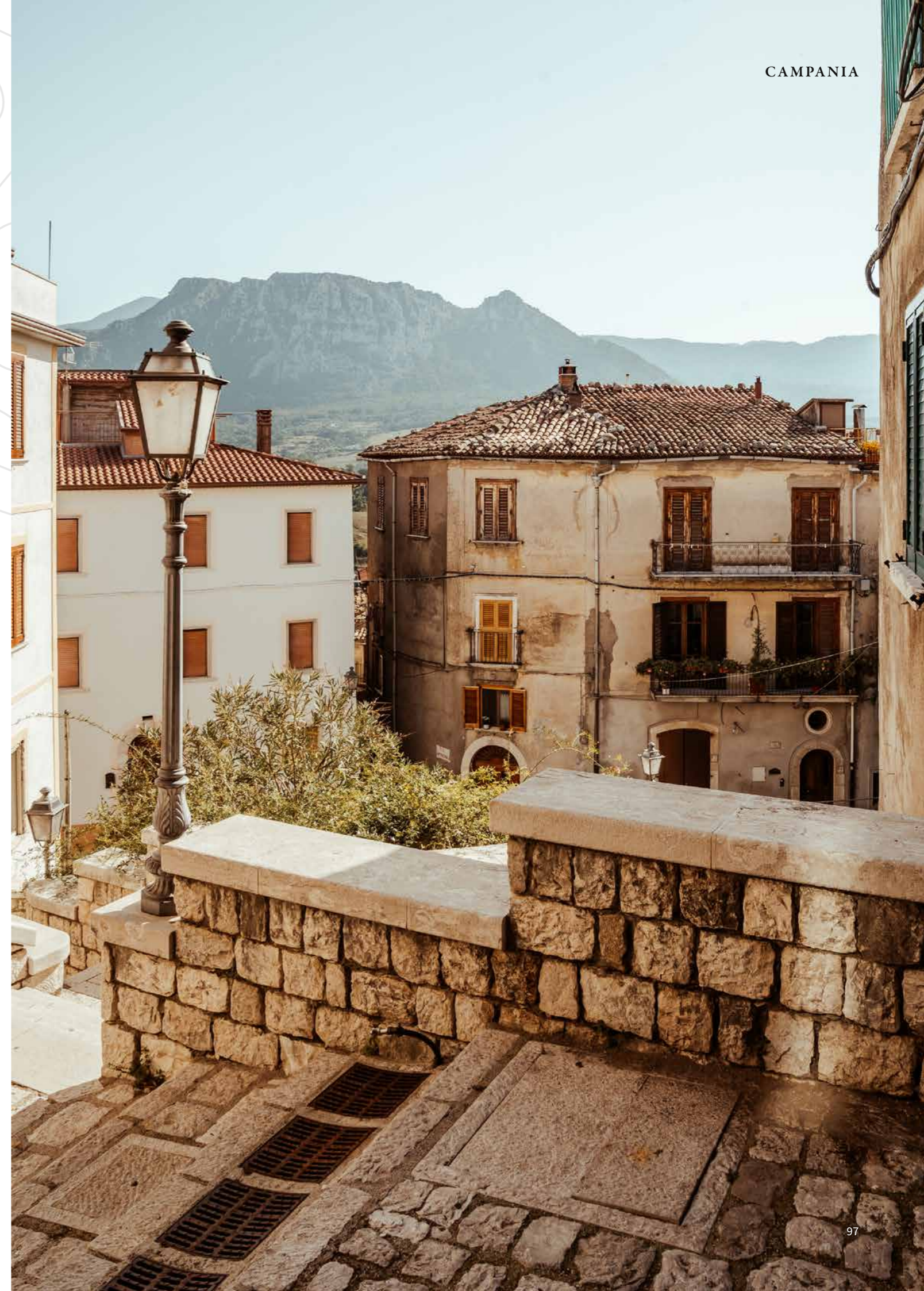
BY NINA SOENTGERATH | BLOG REISEHAPPEN.DE

Campania has been on my bucket list as a travel destination for many years, although whenever I thought about a trip to Campania, ideas like a Naples city break, a romantic holiday on the Amalfi Coast or a visit to Pompeii came to mind. Well, recently I finally made it to Campania. However, on this trip I didn't end up visiting the places I had in mind, and instead went on a road trip through the unknown countryside of the region, where only a few tourists venture to this day. I had practically no expectations for this trip, because to be honest I just didn't know anything about this part of Italy. Campania surprised me completely. I never would have thought that this Southern Italian region would be so green, that I would suddenly find myself on mountain peaks almost 2000 meters high, that the small medieval mountain villages of the region would fascinate me so much, and that locals would be so incredibly hospitable.

In this article you will find all my insider tips for a road trip through the offbeat countryside of Campania, including tips for the most beautiful villages, sights, activities and as always, there are lots of culinary highlights. Have fun reading it - I hope you'll be as enchanted as I was by Campania off the beaten track.

WHERE IS CAMPANIA?

Campania is a region on the west coast of Italy, in the southern part of the country, and it is crossed by the Apennines mountain range. The region is bordered on the west by the Tyrrhenian Sea. In addition, Campania shares borders with Lazio, Molise, Apulia and Basilicata. Naples is the capital of this fertile region, which was once named "Campania felix" (happy countryside in English) by the Romans. Campania is known for its ancient ruins, breathtakingly beautiful coastline, enchanting landscapes, cultural traditions and one of Italy's most chaotic but beautiful cities: Naples.





Benevento

a journey through the historical hilly landscape of Samnium

The first stop on our road trip through Campania was the province of Benevento, which includes the historic hilly region of Samnium, Sannio in Italian. The province is charming with its extensive wine-growing areas, olive groves, wooded mountain ridges and enchanting small mountain villages. Benevento is the ideal destination for those who enjoy hiking and mountain biking.

Those interested in culture will also get their money's worth in this part of Campania.

The most beautiful villages in the province of Benevento

CUSANO MUTRI

The base for our time in the province of Benevento was the small mountain village of Cusano Mutri, which is considered the

pearl of the Matese Regional Park and one of the most beautiful villages in Italy. Cusano Mutri enchanted us with its 100-year history, its warm hospitality, ancient traditions, and traditional flavours.

The historical center of the village is a crazy and at the same time charming labyrinth of small streets and stairs. The best thing to do here is just going with the flow, because wonderful views

and surprises await you around every street corner.

You should not miss Piazza Roma with its imposing stone staircase, the beautiful Piazza Lago and Via San Nicola. The numerous churches in the town are also worth seeing, like the Church of Santi Apostoli Pietro e Paolo, the symbol of Cusano Mutri towering over everything with its bell tower and dome. You should also visit the Church of San Giovanni Battista to get a glimpse of "La Spina Santa", a thorn said to come from the

crown of Jesus Christ and that has often saved the villagers of Cusano Mutri from great suffering. The highlight in Cusano Mutri is the annual Infiorata. On the day of Corpus Christi, the squares, streets and churches of this small mountain village are traditionally decorated with petals and plants, and in the evening there is a big procession. In addition, the Sagra dei Funghi, the festival of the mushrooms, takes place every year at the end of September and it is another highlight in the village's calendar of events.

PIETRAROJA

It takes about 15 minutes by car from Cusano Mutri to reach Pietraroja, a small town whose name is still a mystery to this day. Some suspect that the name comes from the Spanish, where "Piedra roja" means red stone, and refers to the bauxite deposits of the place. Others believe the name derives from the Latin "Petra ruens", meaning "moving stone", in reference to the seismic waves created by earthquakes that are common in the region.



Pietraroja has been of interest to scientists and paleontologists since the 17th century, because the soil in and around Pietraroja is rich in fossils. About 110 million years ago, this small town was not in the mountains but in a lagoon, populated by fish, reptiles and amphibians. In 1981, the well-preserved remains of a baby dinosaur were found here - the first dinosaur find in Italy, which made the small town of Pietraroja famous all over the world. You can find out more about this dinosaur and other finds in the geo-palaeontological park and museum.

CERRETO SANNITA

The medieval town of Cerreto Sannita at the gates of the Matese Regional Park was razed to the ground by a great earthquake in 1688. A tragic event that brought death and destruction, but also the birth of a new Cerreto Sannita. After the earthquake, the forward-thinking feudal lords of the time took a radical decision. Cerreto Sannita was to be rebuilt in a safe place further down the valley, as a modern, open city with an orderly plan and without walls, but with broad avenues and spacious, airy squares. This was in stark contrast to the medieval structure of the old town with its small narrow streets and tall buildings, but was supposed to offer more security in the event of further earthquakes.

One of these airy squares is Piazza San Martino, on which the Collegiate Church of San Martino with its imposing staircase is located. Also worth seeing are numerous Baroque palazzos. These are only two-storey due to the risk of earthquakes, with walls made of square stones on the ground floor, and tuff walls on the second, making the buildings lighter.

When strolling through the town of Cerreto Sannita, affectionately known to locals as "La Piccola Torino", the first thing that catches your eye are the ceramic street signs and the ubiquitous ceramic decorations on park benches and lanterns. The small village of Cerreto Sannita has been known for its ceramic art for centuries. Therefore, one of the most famous sights of the city is the Ceramica Cerretese Museum, where you can learn more about the tradition of ceramic production that flourished after the great earthquake of 1688, and admire the large ceramic collection of the museum.

Also worth seeing are the Cathedral Church and the Church of San Gennaro Vescovo, which houses a museum of sacred art. The feudal prisons are also worth a visit, as well as the old and historic Church of San Rocco, which has an impressive crypt.

Just outside of Cerreto Sannita on the road towards Cusano Mutri you will also find the spectacular Ponte di Annibale, the famous Hannibal Bridge built over the Titerno River during Roman times. According to legend, the Carthaginian general Hannibal crossed this bridge with his elephants during the Second Punic war to hide his treasure.

The most beautiful hikes in Benevento

LA LEONESSA

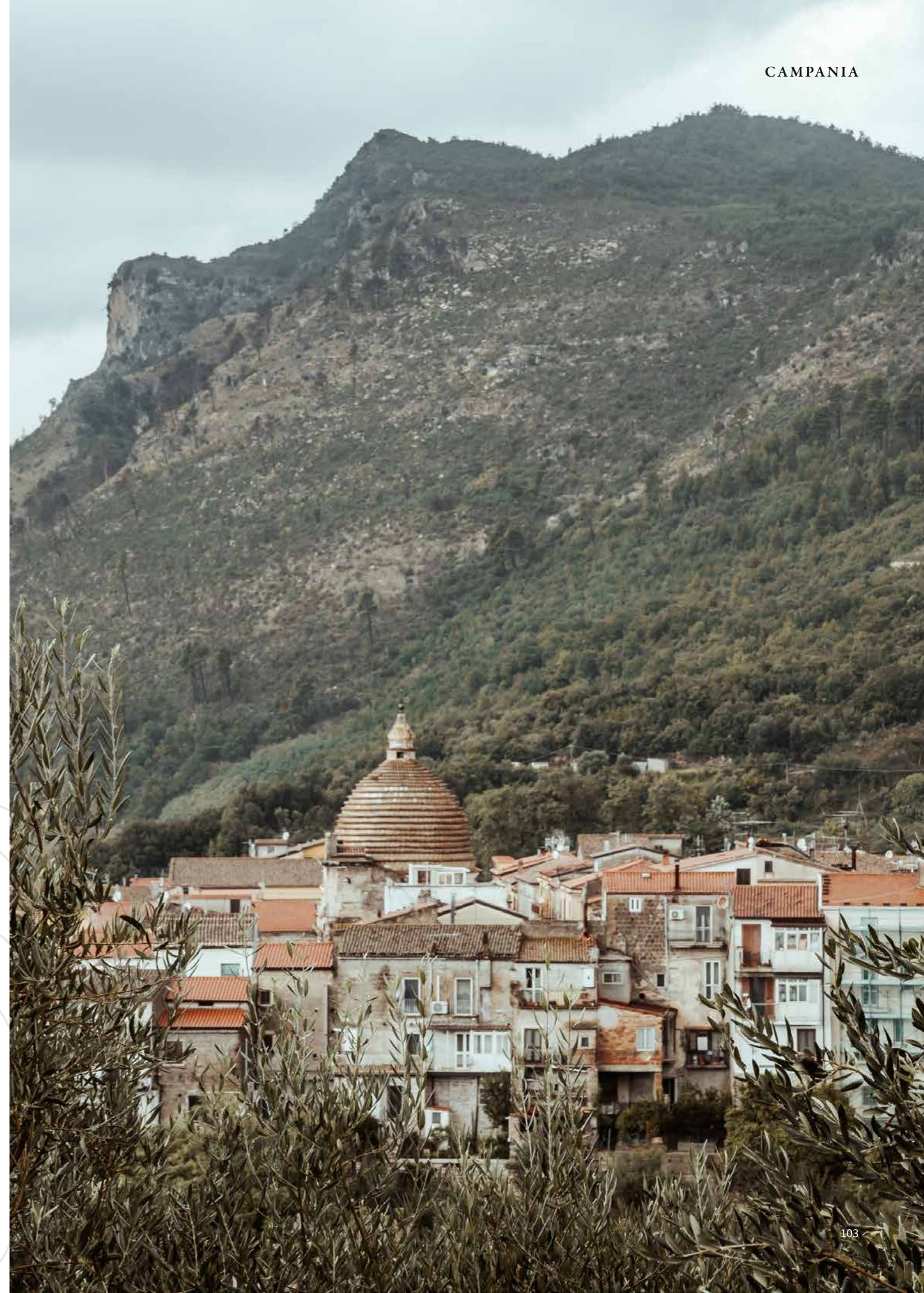
From Cerreto Sannita, a hiking trail approximately 8 km long takes you through the enchanting Telesina Valley and then up to Morgia Sant'Angelo. The imposing rock is also popularly known as "La Leonessa", the lioness. You'll know why once you see the rock. It took us a while because the lioness was hidden in thick fog on the day of our hike, but in the end the weather gods were kind to us when we got to the top, and "La Leonessa" showed its most beautiful side. The resemblance to a lioness was obvious. This colossal feline, shaped by the elements over the centuries, has guarded the lands of Sannio since time immemorial. In the rocky heart of the lioness you will find a small cave, where Pagan gods were once worshipped. However, around 700 AD, the Lombards converted the cave

into a chapel and dedicated it to Archangel Michael. More impressive than this cave is certainly the view that you can enjoy from up there, of the ceramic town of Cerreto Sannita and the Benevento region.

FORRE DI LAVELLO

This short 2-km hike through the Forre di Lavello gorge is certainly one of the most beautiful I have ever done. The scenery in the gorge is simply stunning, and the Forre di Lavello is considered one of the most enchanting places in the Matese Regional Park.

Over millions of years, the Titerno river has dug its way through the limestone cliffs, creating a gorge up to 30 meters deep in places, through which you can now walk following an old path from the Samnite period (10th century BC), with footbridges across the river. Not to be missed along the way is the Grotta delle Fate (Fairy Cave in English), an artificial cave created in the 1960s to view the nearby dam. The path then continues to the Ponte del Mulino, the remains of a stone arch bridge over the Titerno, which was probably built by the Samnites. It was used until the 1950s to reach the old "Zi Fiore" mill. Nowadays, it's a great photo stop. You can also enjoy a magnificent view of the gorge from the old wooden bridge that spans the Forre di Lavello.





The Irpinia

The green province

The second stop of our road trip through Campania was Irpinia, about 100 kilometers from Cusano Mutri, a hilly and mountainous landscape in the province of Avellino and one of Italy's greenest parts. Irpinia is known for its excellent wines and the Pecorino di Carmasciano. However, Irpinia also gained notoriety due to the severe earthquake on November 23th, 1980, which killed more than 2700 people. Earthquakes with a magnitude of 6.89 shook the regions of Campania and Basilicata, but no place was hit as hard as Irpinia. Several towns and villages were completely destroyed at that time. Many were subsequently rebuilt, but others have since become ghost towns.

Irpinia's most beautiful villages and places

CALITRI

Our starting point was the small, colourful town of Calitri, which sits high on a hill and enchanted us with breathtaking views and beautiful murals on the façades of the houses in the village. The Castello di Calitri Diroccato is also worth seeing, housing a ceramics museum inside.

MORRA DE SANCTIS

Morra de Sanctis is a small town perched high above the Ofanto River in the heart of the Avellino province. Due to its location, there is practically no house in Morra de Sanctis from which you cannot enjoy a fantastic view over green Irpinia. Until 1934, Morra de Sanctis was known as Morra Iripino. The town then changed its name to Morra de Sanctis, to pay homage to the well-known literary critic Francesco de Sanctis, who was born here. The house where he was born can still be visited today. Also worth seeing is Palazzo Molinari, probably the most beautiful manor house in Morra. The wonderful frescoes that have been preserved to this day are particularly worth seeing.

The origins of Morra are very old. Archaeological finds show that the village already existed during the Oliveto-Cairano culture in the 6th century BC, but it was probably frequented by groups of hunters and gatherers as early as the Paleolithic period. Numerous archaeological finds, such as ceramics and bow bracelets, bear witness to this. You can admire them in the museum of the Castello Medievale Biondi

Morra, a mansion from the 9th century AD.

You should also pay a visit to the numerous churches in the town, such as the Church of Santi Pietro e Paolo, the Church of San Rocco, the Church of Montecastello, and the Church of Santa Lucia.

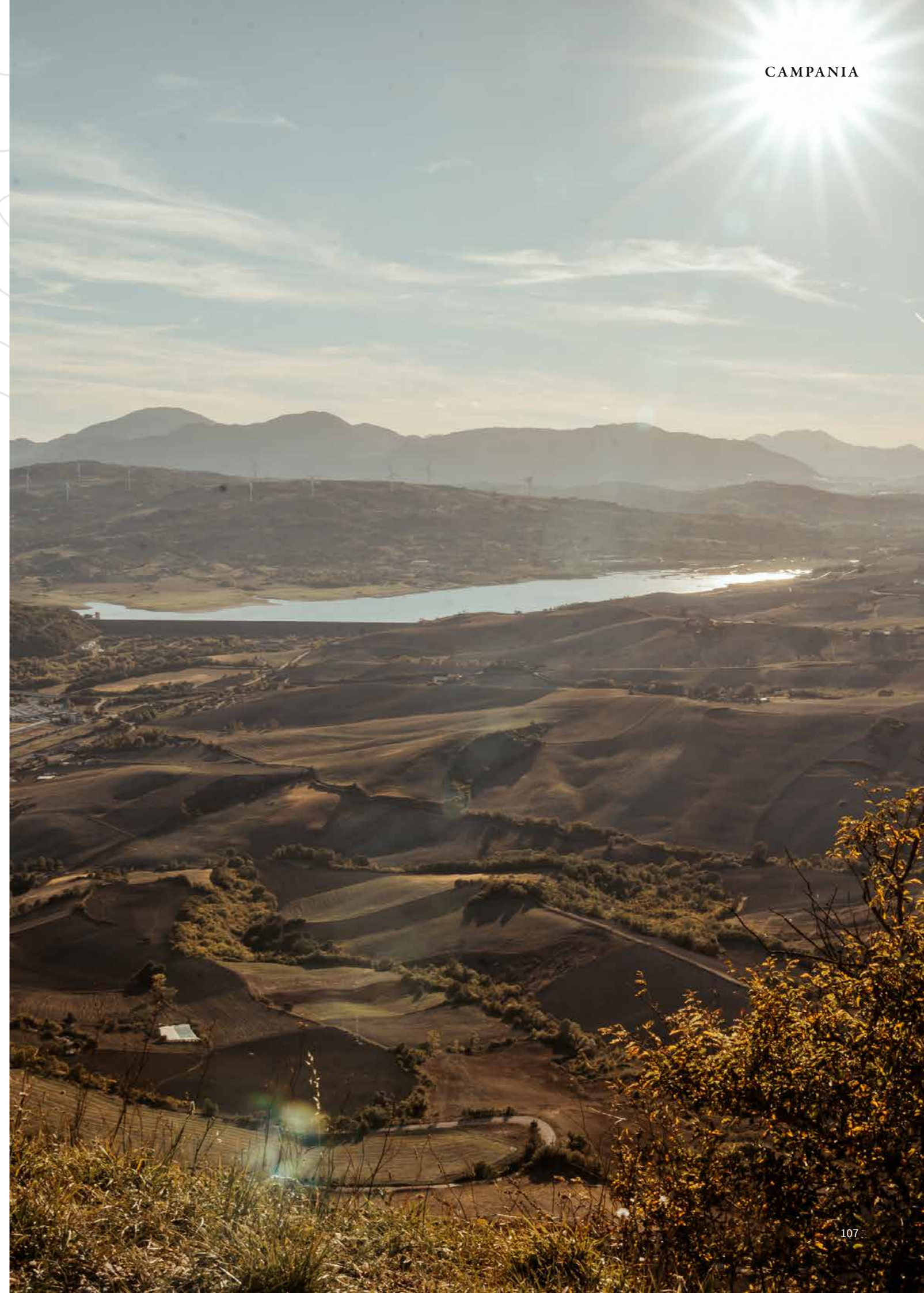
Another historical and culinary feature of Morra that is really worth mentioning are the delicious cod dishes that are still prepared today in the restaurants of Morra de Sanctis according to centuries-old traditions. That may come as a surprise, because Morra de Sanctis is far away from the sea. But salting the cod is a great way to preserve it, something the Normans already knew 1000 years ago - it was them who brought the custom of salting fish to Morra de Sanctis.

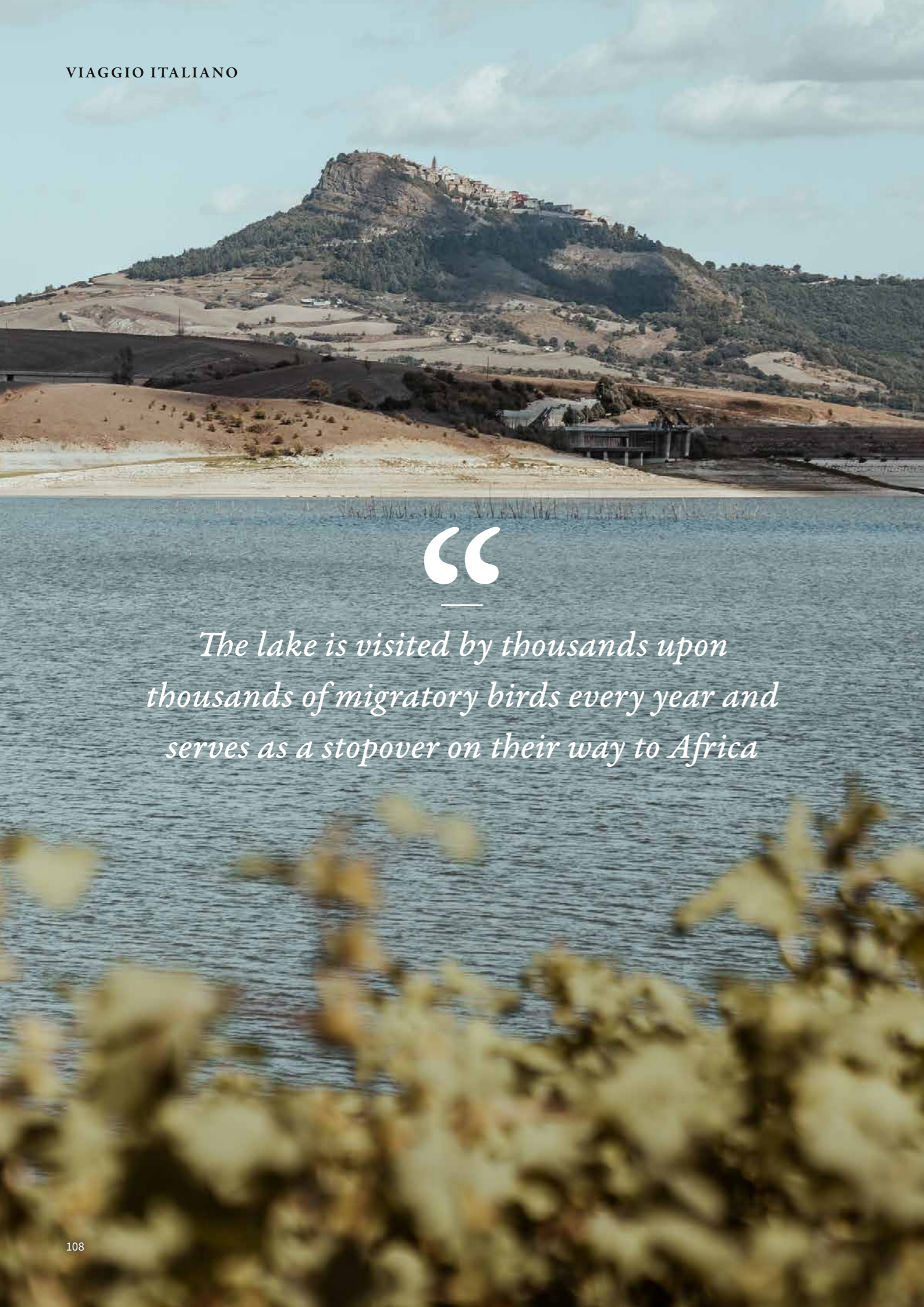
SANT'ANDREA DI CONZA

The small village of Sant'Andrea di Conza, named after the Apostle Andrew, is right on the border with the Basilicata region. You'll notice that at mealtimes - many traditional specialties from Basilicata are served, such as dishes with Peperone Crusco, Caciocavallo cheese or fresh mozzarella. However, there's more in Sant'Andrea di Conza besides delicious specialties that you should definitely try. The small

village also has a lot to offer. What fascinated us the most during our walk through the narrow little streets of the village was the hospitality of the people. All the Santandreani said hello, everyone wanted to have a quick chat as soon as they realized that we were not from there, and they quickly invited us for a beer or an aperol and wouldn't take no for an answer. A stroll through Sant'Andrea di Conza will take you through the charming little streets of the historic center with its medieval archways, such as the Arco della Terra, and pretty little shops. It is also worth visiting the Ex Fornace di Laterizi, the old brickworks of Sant'Andrea di Conza. It offered work for many generations of Santandreani until it was severely damaged by the 1980 earthquake. After extensive renovation work, the old brick factory now shines with new light and it is used as a cultural center. It is also a rare example of industrial archeology in Italy.

It's also worth visiting the old Episcopio (Bishop's Palace) from the 13th century, now housing the town hall. From the two towers of the Bishop's Palace you can enjoy a breathtaking view over Sant'Andrea di Conza. In the garden you will also find a monumental fountain from the 17th century, and a large





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The lake is visited by thousands upon thousands of migratory birds every year and serves as a stopover on their way to Africa

open-air stage where plays are performed almost every evening in summer. Right next to it you will find the remains of the Franciscan monastery of Santa Maria della Consolazione, and nearby there are also ruins of an old water mill from the 18th century. The women of the village still come together in the wash house right next door, to wash their laundry by hand with fresh spring water.

CONZA DELLA CAMPANIA

Just a few minutes from Sant'Andrea di Conza is the village of Conza della Campania. The modern part of the village, located in the valley, is nothing special - but the old village of Conza della Campania, or rather the remains of the village and the Archaeological Park, are really worth seeing.

Conza della Campania was turned into rubble in just 59 seconds during the earthquake that struck Irpinia in 1980. Only the remains of the Santa Maria Assunta Cathedral, some collapsed houses and parts of old walls can still be seen, giving the idea that a beautiful mountain village once stood here.

Nowadays, the true wealth of Conza della Campania is the Archaeological Park of Compsa. After the great earthquake, the ancient Roman city of Compsa was discovered under the

ruins of the village - a Roman amphitheater, a votive altar dedicated to the goddess Venus, a thermal bath, Roman tombs, remains of the forum and the walls of numerous feudal palaces were uncovered after an extensive excavation process. The remains of an even older Samnite settlement were also found in the ruins of the village. To understand the history of Conza della Campania, you should definitely visit the small museum in the Archaeological Park. Here you will find many photos of the former village, but also pictures from the days immediately after the earthquake and various artifacts that were found during the excavations.

CONZA WWF OASIS

In the 1970s, the Ofanto Dam was built between Lioni and Calitri, not far from the town of Conza della Campania, to dam the water from the Ofanto River. This is how the Lago di Conza came into being. Nowadays, this artificial reservoir mainly used for irrigation is the largest lake in Campania.

It has since been placed under conservation by the WWF, as the lake is visited by thousands upon thousands of migratory birds every year and serves as a stopover on their way to Africa. About 100 different species of birds stop at the lake, and can

be observed on a hike around it. At the entrance to the local recreation area there is also a small visitor center where you can find out more about the different bird species and the hiking trails around the lake. The “Cicogna bianca” (White stork) route, for example, is worthwhile. It leads to a viewing platform from which you can watch storks. On the “Sentiero delle Bacheche” theme trail there are several display boards and showcases with information about the animal world around the lake.

ROCCA SAN FELICE

Rocca San Felice rises on a hill and it is one of those typical Irpinian villages that has developed around a castle built in a strategic position.

The remains of the castle include parts of a cistern, the entrance portal and the picturesque old round tower (donjon), and they are the main reason to visit Rocca San Felice. Perched high on a rock above the village, the ruins of the castle tower over everything. From up there, you can enjoy a fantastic view over the town and Irpinia.

Also worth seeing is the beautiful old fountain in Piazza San Felice, and the churches in the town. There is also a small city museum in which you will find numerous artifacts that bear witness to the long history of the city.

LAGO DI MEFITE

Lago di Mefite is not far from Rocca San Felice. According to legend, it is the point where you cross from earth to the underworld. However, the Lago di Mefite is not a lake as you might expect. As soon as you have descended the stairs leading to it, you'll start hearing the earth bubbling and bubbling, while the subsoil seems to be boiling, because Mefite is a sulfur mud lake - which you can also smell, by the way. You should not stay here for too long, and it is best to explore the area with a local guide, because the vapors from this lake in the Ansanto Valley are very dangerous and can even be fatal, as you can see from the many animal carcasses all around the lake. However, the mud from Lago di Mefite is also said to have healing effects. Incidentally, the lake was given the name Mefite by the Hirpiner, who belonged to the Italian Samnite tribe and settled by the lake. These people worshipped the pagan goddess Mefite, who was considered the ruler of life and death, and built a temple by the lake in her honour. Nothing is left of this today, only the name has remained.

THE ABBEY OF SAN GUGLIELMO AL GOLETO

Just a few kilometers away





from Sant'Angelo dei Lombardi is the half-ruined and somehow romantic Abbey of San Guglielmo al Goletto, which is really worth seeing. The Benedictine monastery was built in 1114 by Saint Guglielmo di Vercelli, on the site of a place of worship dedicated to the Roman sun god. The building complex includes three churches - the oldest Romanesque one, a Gothic and a large church from the 18th century. There is also a men's monastery and a women's monastery, founded by Saint Guglielmo di Vercelli, which once even had a defense tower. The abbey was closed under Joseph Bonaparte in 1807 and the remains of Saint Guglielmo di Vercelli were transferred to the pilgrimage site of Montevergine. Over the next 200 years, the once-magnificent Abbey fell into disrepair, and succumbed to vandalism and numerous earthquakes. Nowadays, the big church is just a very impressive ruin. On the other hand, the two-aisled Chapel of San Luca, one of the most valuable architectural monuments in southern Italy, is well preserved. The well-preserved convent is once again inhabited by monks who belong to the missionary religious order founded by Charles de Foucauld.

CAIRANO

The small mountain village of Cairano is set on an imposing cliff between Calitri and Conza della Campania, and actually it may look as if there are no sights worth mentioning. However, I thought it was one of the most beautiful mountain villages that I discovered during my trip through Campania, with its church towering over everything. The small streets of the village are enchanting with their beautiful floral decorations. If you follow the "Sentiero Arcaico", a short hiking trail, you will reach a plateau with a wind organ, where you can enjoy a magnificent view of the Ofanto River and the beautiful village.

QUAGLIETTA

The medieval village of Quaglietta stretches out on a rocky outcrop. The highlight of this small village are the ruins of the castle that was once built by the Lombards to defend themselves against the Saracens. The village of Quaglietta was later built around this castle.

The castle itself was mostly destroyed during the 1980 earthquake, as was the village. Unlike the castle, the village was rebuilt. Nevertheless, a visit to the old castle is worthwhile, because from up there you can enjoy breathtaking views of the beautiful Irpinia landscape.

The Cilento

where nature steals the show

The third and last stop on our road trip through Campania was the charming Cilento area, which stretches between Paestum, Sapri and the Vallo di Diano. Most of Cilento belongs to the Cilento and Vallo di Diano National Park, which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1998. Cliffs, sandy beaches, river valleys, untouched mountains and medieval villages create a varied landscape, making Cilento the perfect place for those looking for a holiday that combines culture and outdoor activities.

The most beautiful villages in Cilento

PADULA

The starting point of our trip through the Cilento was the small town of Padula. The history of Padula goes back to the 9th century, when this mountain village was built on a hilltop with a fortress to protect it from the Saracens. This was gathered by findings from ancient tombs that can be admired today in the Museum of the Certosa (Carthusian Monastery) in Padula. This brings us to the most important sight of Padula. You should not miss visiting the beautiful Charterhouse on a trip to Padula. The grandiose Certosa di San Lorenzo is now

a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and its cloister is said to be the largest in the world.

However, Padula has more to offer than just its famous monastery. A walk through the pretty old town with its picturesque little streets is really worthwhile. There are hardly any tourists here, they usually only come to visit the monastery. There are signs everywhere in the city, with information about all the sights. The sculptures found throughout the old town are particularly pretty.

At the “Belvedere” you will find the statue of Joe Petrosino, one of the most famous residents of the city, who migrated to the United States and became a police officer in New York. In 1909 he was shot on behalf of the Sicilian godfather Cascio Ferro. Today he is considered a pioneer in the fight against organized crime. But there’s more on the Belvedere besides the statue of the famous NYPD policeman. You can also enjoy fantastic views of the gigantic Charterhouse of Padula and the surrounding area. It’s especially romantic at sunset.

You should also definitely visit the birthplace of Joe Petrosino. It now houses a cool little museum dedicated to the brave and famous NYPD cop who fought the mafia.



**SANZA**

Sanza is about 20 kilometers away from Padula, and it is the perfect starting point for numerous hikes and bike tours through the Cilento National Park and Vallo di Diano. You should definitely take a walk through the picturesque little village with its charming flower-filled streets, and have something to eat in one of its small restaurants, because the people of Sanza are known for their warm hospitality.

The numerous palazzi and Piazza San Martino with the towering bell tower are particularly worth seeing. The bell tower is a vestige of the ancient parish church of San Martino, which was destroyed in an earthquake around 800 AD.

CASELLE IN PITTARI

Caselle in Pittari is a small mountain village on a hill connected to Monte Pittari. The village is situated above the river Bussento, which disappears into a sinkhole outside the village and runs underground for 5 kilometers. The Vallivona sinkhole is one of the highlights of Caselle in Pittari, and the nature around the small town is certainly the real star of the area. Caselle in Pittari itself, once built to protect the region against pirates, is also very charming and you should take time to explore the small town with its steep, magical little

streets. The two churches of Santa Maria Assunta in Cielo and San Michele are particularly worth seeing.

All that remains of the old castle that once dominated the village is the ruin of a tower. You cannot climb the tower itself, but from the square in front you can enjoy a fantastic view.

CASALETTO SPARTANO

The name Casaletto Spartano derives from the esparto grass that is widespread in the area, and whose leaves are also used to make rope and paper.

In Casaletto Spartano, in addition to the beautiful small streets of the medieval town, the Church of San Nicola di Bari is particularly worth seeing with its unusual and valuable stucco decoration inside.

A real eye-catcher in the village is the façade of Palazzo Baronale dei Gallotti in the hamlet of Battaglia, just outside of Casaletto, where you can also spend the night.

A hiking trail takes you to the magical waterfalls known as Capelli di Venere (Venus's hair in English). About a kilometer outside of Casaletto Spartano, the Bussentino River turns into picturesque waterfalls. This place is simply beautiful, especially in the evening sun when the play of light and shadow makes it look like a fairy tale. You can almost believe local stories that you can also

see elves and fairies here from time to time.

According to a local legend, Venus, goddess of love and beauty, liked to rest in the cool shade of the waterfall on hot summer days and often fell asleep listening to the sounds of nature. One day, a shepherd came by with his flock and immediately fell madly in love with the beautiful goddess. He watched her for days and became obsessed with her long golden hair. Since he couldn't have her, he wanted at least a strand of her hair, so he could have a piece of her forever. So one night he cut one off, but the goddess woke up, and the shepherd fled with her hair in his hand. The hair immediately turned into water, which rose higher and higher and was about to drown the thief. However, Venus had a kind heart, and turned him into a plant that grows today by the waterfalls born from her hair. The plant the legend refers to is Capelvenere, in English virgin hair fern, which grows luxuriantly around the falls.

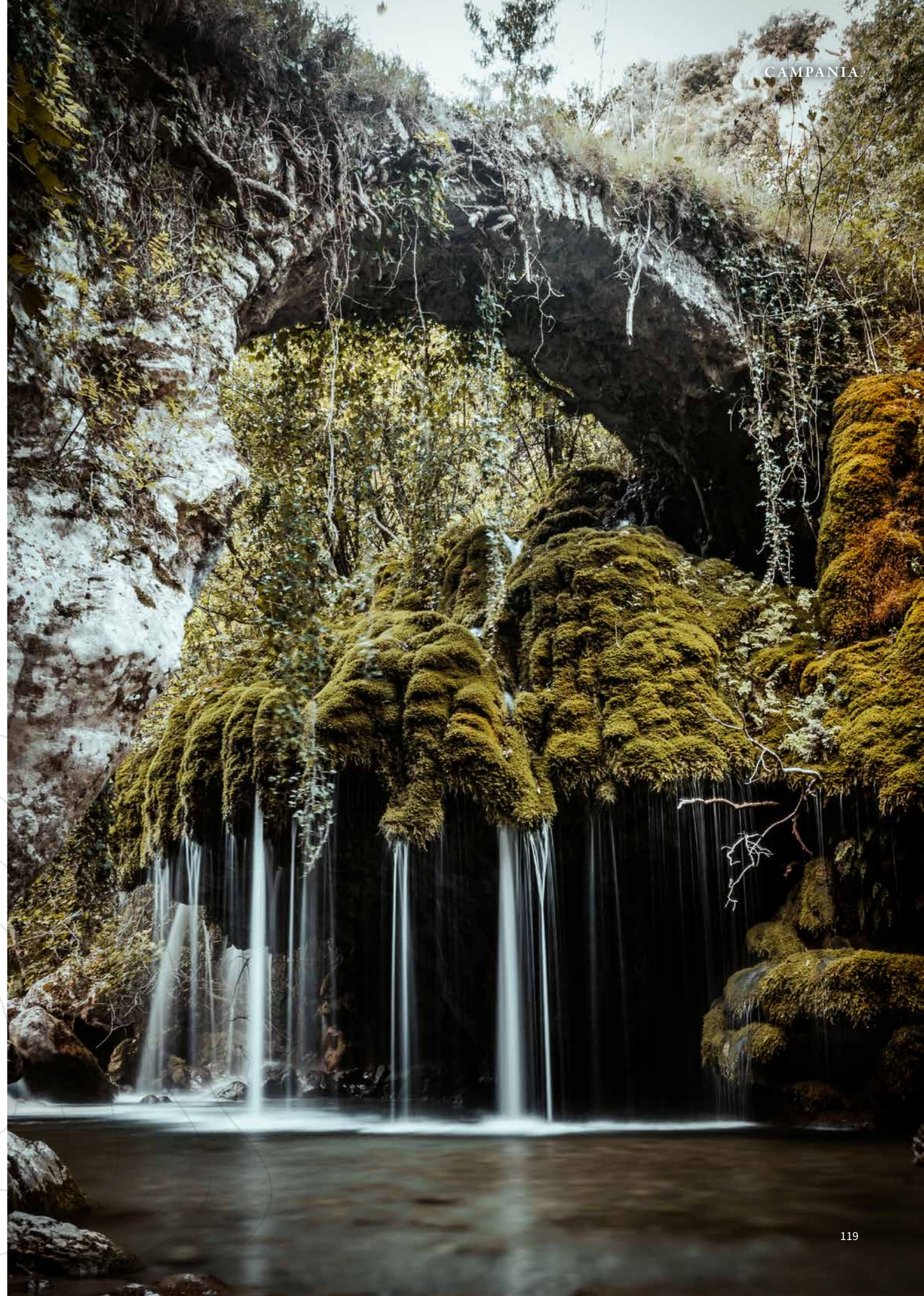
MORIGERATI

The small fortified mountain village of Morigerati was once a place of pilgrimage on the way from Rome to Jerusalem. The small village still has medieval cobblestones, picturesque narrow streets and typical Mediterranean rows of houses with beautiful courtyards.

During a walk through the romantic old town you can discover the Casa Meridiana with its beautiful sundial, but also magical little squares and wonderful views of the Bussento Valley and its untouched nature. The Palazzo Baronale cannot be missed. The castle was once the seat of government of the San Severino family, and it is still inhabited by the heirs to this day. You should also pay a short visit to the pilgrimage church of San Demetrio with its red bell tower. Here you will find the icon of St. Demetrius, who today guards the village that was founded by a Greek Orthodox monastic order.

Also worth seeing is the small but interesting Museo Etnografico della Cultura Contadina, in the former monastery of Sant'Anna. The Ethnographic Museum of Peasant Culture was founded in 1994 by Clorinda and Modestina Florenzano. In its 12 rooms you will find a remarkable exhibition of clothing, everyday utensils and tools, that have been collected since the 1960s. During the tour, also available in German, you will learn more about all these objects and the inhabitants of the village.

Morigerati is also the starting point for a hike through the Grotte del Bussento nature reserve, managed by the WWF. In a large cave, reached via a narrow stone staircase, the Bussento River resurfaces for the





first time, after a mysterious 5 km journey through the depths of the underworld. Then it makes its way through spectacular gorges, home to many protected plants and animals.

The WWF Oasi Visitor Center offers guided hikes through the gorge. It goes over numerous bridges into the cave, where the river reaches the surface. The spectacular landscape is particularly worth seeing, and there is also a historic water mill in the park that is still in function, powered by water from the Bussento River.

TORTORELLA

Tortorella is an enchanting little fortified village on the old Way of Saint James from Jerusalem to Santiago de Compostela, as evidenced by the “Cross of Santiago” found at the entrance. It’s best to just wander through the narrow little streets here. Many surprising discoveries can be made, behind small gates and around corners. The beautiful old fountain in the courtyard of the Marchesale Palace (Palazzo Marchesale is worth seeing, as well as the interesting vegetable gardens ‘intra moenia’ - meaning located within the walls of this mountain village. They were built in ancient times so that the villagers could feed themselves in the event of a siege, when it was not possible to leave the village and cultivate the fields located outside the walls.

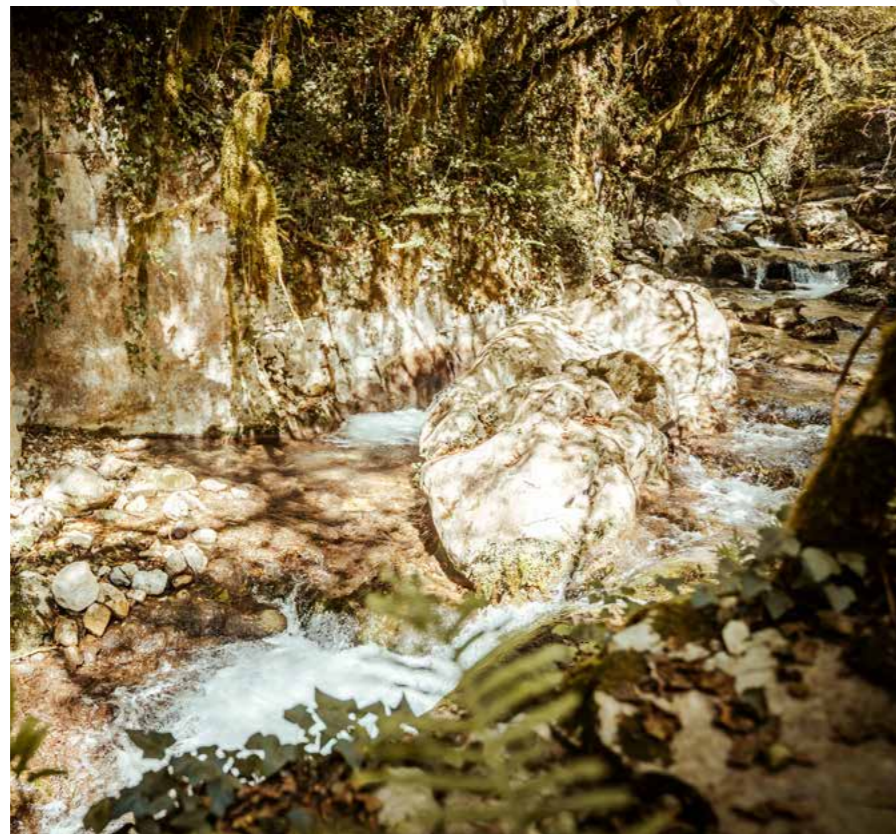
The most beautiful activities in the Cilento

HIKING MONTE CERVATI

At 1899 meters above sea level, Monte Cervati is the highest mountain in the Cilento and Valle di Diano National Park, and also the highest mountain in Campania. The hike up to the summit is tough. Elevation gain is about 750 meters, and it takes about 5/6 hours.

If you have a headlamp with you, you should make a detour through the 500 meter long dark tunnel that leads you to the Vallivona sinkhole, a huge sinkhole in the karst rock formed over millions of years by water finding its way through the mountain. Once you get to the end of the tunnel, it’s like stepping into another world. It’s a bit like being in the middle of the jungle. The 100 meter high cliffs rise majestically around you, the treetops high up blow in the wind, and the small waterfall, which later becomes the Bussento River, murmurs softly. There is something incredibly beautiful and magical about the place.

The path then continues through untouched nature, past rugged rocks and the pilgrimage church of Madonna della Neve, which attracts many pilgrims every year. There is a hut just before, ideal for a wonderful picnic with fresh local produce and a glass



of wine, before tackling the last stretch to the summit.

A short detour to the La Nevera cave is also worthwhile. Look into the cave from above, and you will see that there is still snow even during the summer, sometimes up to 5 meters high. Because of the location and temperature in the cave, which is around 10 meters deep, the snow never melts.

The story goes that even the old Bourbon kings had ice from the cave regularly brought down to the valley with donkeys in summer, and then by ship to Naples, so that they could enjoy their sorbet on hot days.

When you finally reach the summit, you will be rewarded with a breathtaking view of the

entire Cilento with its enchanting medieval villages, the green vineyards, the beautiful chestnut forests and the olive groves - on a clear day you can even see Stromboli in the distance

E-BIKE TOUR ON THE VIA SILENTE FROM SANZA VIA CASELLE IN PITTARI TO CASALETTO SPARTANO

A highlight of our time in the Cilento was the e-bike tour on the Via Silente from Sanza to Casaleto Spartano. We only covered a section of the Via Silente, a circular route that is almost 600 kilometers long and leads you through the entire Cilento National Park in 15 stages.

If you are not a proficient



cyclist, I definitely recommend riding the Via Silente with an e-bike. The route has a lot of up and downhill sections, and it is definitely a physical challenge, but an unforgettable experience nonetheless. Over the 42 kilometers from Sanza to Casaleto Spartano we gained about 700 meters in altitude and in the evening, despite having e-bikes, we were really exhausted.

Despite all the challenges, the tour was simply beautiful. On the route there are always wonderful views of the mountains, the coast and the beautiful mountain villages along the way, and you can also enjoy unbelievable peace and quiet. The name of the cycle path is no coincidence - it combines the words "Cilento" and "Silenzio", meaning silence. There is no trace of the hectic noises of everyday life along the bike path, and in the towns along the way you can see how Italian serenity is lived to perfection.

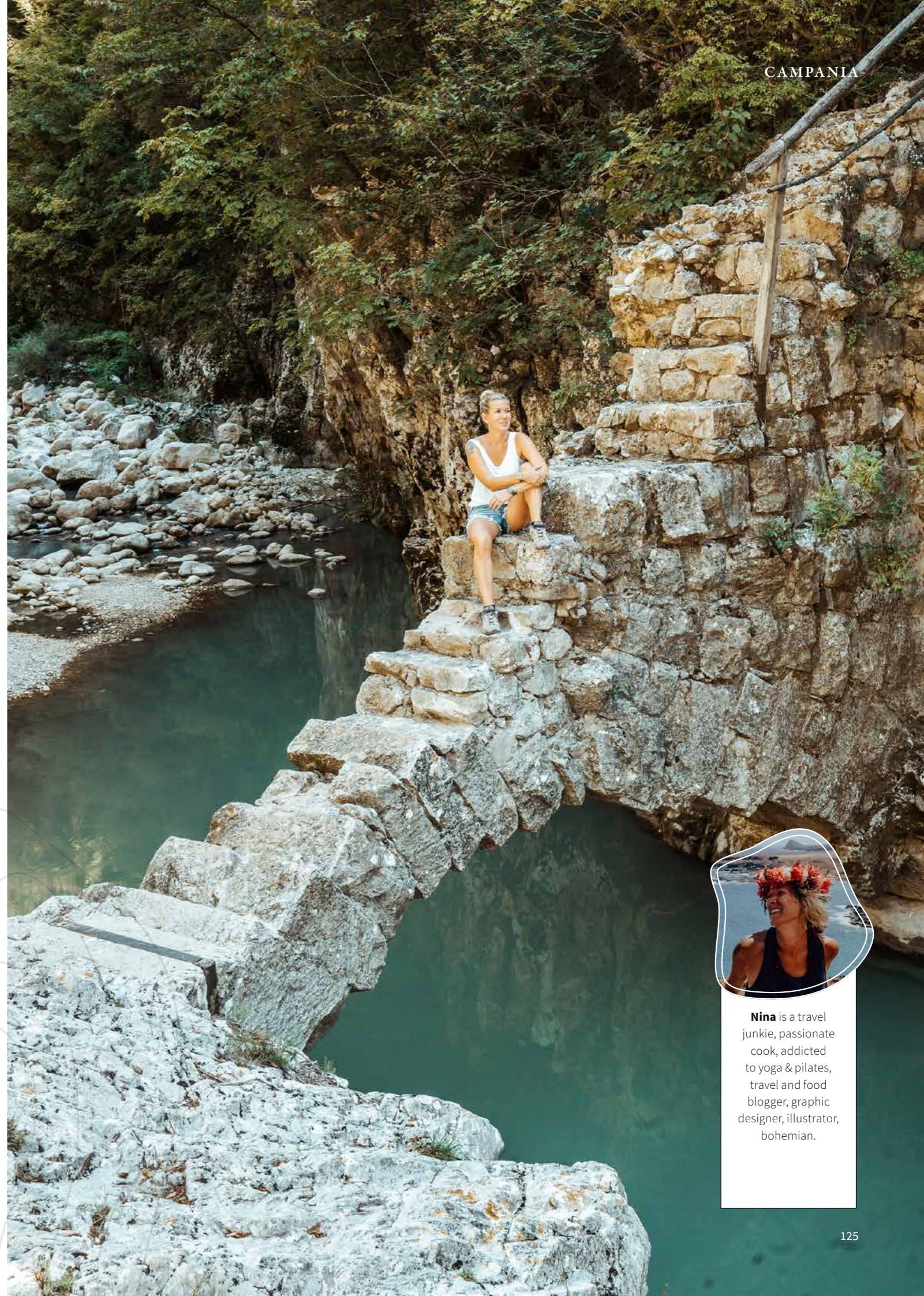
HIKE ON THE CAMMINO DI SAN NILO FROM CASALETTO SPARTANO TO CASELLE IN PITTARI

The Cammino di San Nilo is a long-distance hiking trail of around 100 kilometers through Byzantine sites in Cilento. The trail is divided into 8 stages, beginning in Sapri in the province of Salerno and then

winding its way through the Cilento National Park and Vallo di Diana to Palinuro. In theory, the hike is for everyone, but you should have a decent fitness level, as there are a lot of ups and downs. On the way, there are breathtaking views of lower Cilento and numerous villages inviting you to explore and linger along the way.

We hiked stages 3 and 4, which are quite varied in terms of landscapes. Stage 3 first took us from Casaleto Spartano via Tortorella down to Rio Gerenaso, a tributary of the Bussentino. Through the forest of Farneto we crossed a medieval bridge to Morigerati. From there, the 4th stage continued downhill to WWF Oasi "Grotte del Bussento" mentioned above. Then there are around 600 meters of altitude to climb before reaching the impressive cave of San Michele, and from there continuing to Caselle in Pittari. Alternatively, there is an easier route through the charming little village of Sicili. In Casaleto Spartano, you should definitely visit the Oasi dei Capelli di Venere, described before.

Stages 3 and 4 combined are around 19 kilometers long, making both sections perfectly doable as a day hike. The 3rd stage from Casaleto Spartano to Morigerati is certainly one of the most spectacular, but also one of the most difficult, as there is a lot of climbing.



Nina is a travel junkie, passionate cook, addicted to yoga & pilates, travel and food blogger, graphic designer, illustrator, bohemian.

10 VILLAGES IN

Emilia-Romagna

you will fall in love with



BY ALESSIA VURCHIO & ANTONIO MAISTO
BLOG ITALIANTRIPABROAD.IT

We never expected to love Emilia-Romagna so much. During our road trip, we discovered some of the best villages in Emilia-Romagna - from the romantic village of Castell'Arquato to the incredible cultural borgo of Dozza. In this article, you will find inspiration for your next trip to this underrated region in northern Italy.

Through the valleys in the northern part of the region, you will encounter many villages, often with only a few hundred inhabitants. The Region protects these villages and the local

heritage. Also, consider that Emilia-Romagna is diverse, and the landscape constantly changes - from valleys to hills and mountains, including a beautiful coastline. We also had the pleasure of travelling to the interior of Emilia-Romagna, visiting Fiumalbo, a few kilometers from the Tuscan border. That's where we got to know the true heart of the region, with tasty food, fantastic hikes and wonderful people. So let's start this trip, and explore together some of the most enchanting towns in Emilia-Romagna.





Best time to visit Emilia-Romagna

The best time to visit Emilia Romagna is definitely the off season. Spring and Autumn are ideal to plan a road trip in Emilia-Romagna. We've been exploring the region from the end of September to beginning of October, and we still found warm weather and sunny days along our trip.

Exploring the best villages in the off-season will allow you to escape the tourist crowds, so what are you waiting for?

How to get to Emilia-Romagna

Emilia-Romagna is easy to reach from international airports such as Milan, Bergamo, Verona and Venice.

If you are landing in one of these airports, the distance to Piacenza, the northernmost town in Emilia-Romagna, is about 1 hour and 30 minutes drive on a highway.

However, the most convenient way to get to Emilia Romagna is flying into Bologna, the regional capital. Bologna is an international hub with flights from the main capitals in Europe, including London, Paris and Berlin. On top of that, Bologna is a fantastic city, ideal as a base for your Emilia-Romagna road trip.

How to get around Emilia-Romagna

BY CAR: Driving is one of the best ways to explore the entire region. You can pick up your rental car from Bologna airport, or fly into Milan, pick the car up and drop it off in Bologna with a small surcharge. Remember that driving is the easiest way to reach some villages, so it's well worth the extra expense.

BY PUBLIC TRANSPORT: You can also plan your trip around Emilia-Romagna using public transport - all villages are connected to larger towns by buses or trains, but they may run quite infrequently. In that case, we recommend staying in larger towns (like Piacenza, Ravenna or Bologna) and taking day trips to the villages you want to visit.

Where is Emilia-Romagna?

In the north of Italy, just north of Tuscany and Marche, spanning the Italian peninsula from East to West. The regional capital Bologna is one of the nicest cities to visit, especially for food lovers. Emilia-Romagna is known for its delicious food, tasty wine and for being home to many supercar manufacturers, like Ferrari and Lamborghini. If Emilia-Romagna is not on your Italian bucket list yet, in this article you will find many reasons to visit!



Villages to visit all year round

Pieve di Cento

The friendly village

Pieve di Cento was a lovely surprise for us. We arrived around lunchtime and had the opportunity to meet locals, have a coffee and discuss the news in the main piazza. Then, after grabbing a bite in the local restaurant, we went for a walk around this village and visited Museo delle Storie di Pieve di Cento.

THINGS TO DO IN PIEVE DI CENTO

- Get a coffee in Piazza Guercino
- Visit Museo delle Storie
- Step inside Magi '900 museum

Santarcangelo di Romagna

The slow village

Considered one of the best villages in Emilia Romagna, Santarcangelo di Romagna is known as a 'slow village' and has been awarded the Orange Flag by the Italian Touring Club. If you are visiting this village, you can't rush around. It's kind of not allowed.

Start your day in the local piazza with a good breakfast, then go with the flow. We really loved our time in Santarcangelo, you can spend a couple of days in this cute borgo and fall in love, exploring its gorgeous city center and alternative things to do.

Santarcangelo locals were so

friendly and welcoming that we felt at home. There are many sights to check out - like Piazza Ganganelli, with its predominant triumphal arch in honour of Pope Clement XIV, and the stunning viewpoints all over the city.

While in Santarcangelo, remember to try the local wine. You can't leave this village without enjoying a glass of Sangiovese! In summer, make sure you drive 15 minutes to the seaside, visiting Rimini, Riccione or the rest of the Romagna Riviera for a day trip.

THINGS TO DO IN SANTARCANGELO DI ROMAGNA

- Visit the Arco in Piazza Ganganelli
- Roam around the cute narrow streets of Santarcangelo
- Grab a glass of good Sangiovese wine
- Visit Mutonia Company
- Book a tour of Grotte Tufacee Comunali

Bagno di Romagna

Spa retreat

Our Emilia-Romagna road trip ended in the best way ever. We spent a few days in Bagno di Romagna, checking out interesting walking paths and relaxing at a thermal spa. We stayed at Sant'Agnes Terme, where we had the opportunity to experience their incredible

thermal baths. It was a fantastic way to end our trip in this beautiful region, with a sauna and a massage. However, Bagno di Romagna is more than just thermal spas; you can choose between different hiking paths and discover the beautiful mountains around this cute village.

If you're in shape, hike up Vetta della Croce where you will have an incredible view of Bagno di Romagna or, if you're travelling with kids, walk down Sentiero degli Gnomi, designed for the little ones to connect with nature.

THINGS TO DO IN BAGNO DI ROMAGNA

- Go for a hike and reach Vetta della Croce
- Enjoy fried porcini mushrooms for lunch
- Go for a walk around "Sentiero degli Gnomi"
- Eat some gelato at the local cremeria
- Relax in the spa

Guastalla

Gateway to River Po

Located in the Reggio Emilia province, Guastalla is another lovely village to visit. We watched one of the best sunsets ever from Guastalla, and we recommend you do the same. Leave the city center behind, and make your way to Lido Po, where you can relax, walk or jog along the river. Locals and tourists love to hang out around this area as it is

one of the most incredible and peaceful places where you can admire the sunset.

There's more to Guastalla though - once you reach the heart of the city center, you will be able to admire the stunning Palazzo Ducale. In fact, it is one of the main attractions to visit in Guastalla, thanks to its architecture, history, and culture. The entire city center is traffic-free, and you can roam around without having cars all over the place. That's great, isn't it? Grab a drink in the main street and have fun while talking with locals.

THINGS TO DO IN GUASTALLA

- Palazzo Ducale
- Lido Po (Riverside promenade with bars and restaurants)
- Via San Gonzaga and shopping arcades
- Po River cycle lane and walking path
- Torre Civica

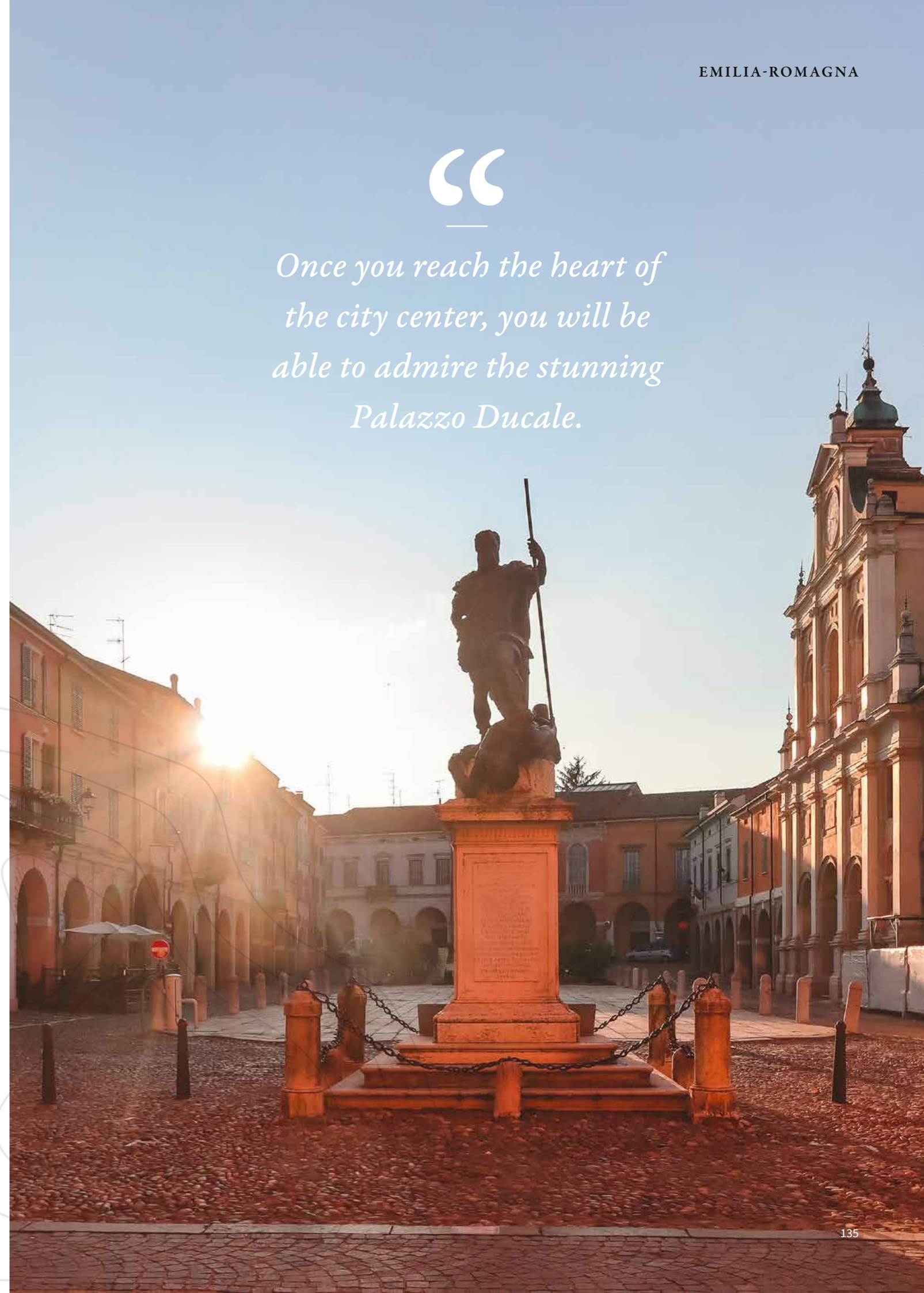
Fontanellato

The village of the Castle on the water

During the entire trip, Toti was super excited to visit Fontanellato. Why? Rocca San Vitale is surrounded by water, making it the perfect spot for night photography. This little village is a short drive from Parma, and you can easily reach it by car. Spending one day in Fontanellato is enough to visit the city centre and to get lost

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Once you reach the heart of the city center, you will be able to admire the stunning Palazzo Ducale.



in Labirinto della Masone, a really cool maze. We had a lot of fun getting lost between the paths inside the Labirinto. Don't worry about getting lost - at the entrance you'll get a bracelet with a phone number to call in case you can't find a way out!

THINGS TO DO IN FONTANELLATO

- Step inside Rocca San Vitale
- Saletta di Diana e Atteone of Parmigianino
- Colourful houses and arcades in Via Costa
- Sanctuary of Beata Vergine del Rosario
- Get lost in Labirinto della Masone

Castell'Arquato Lovers Village

Known as Borgo degli Innamorati, "Lovers Village", Castell'Arquato is one of the most beautiful villages in Emilia-Romagna. We completely fell in love from the first moment we stepped inside the city center. Located in the province of Piacenza, Castell'Arquato overlooks the Po Valley. You can admire a stunning view of this village from the top of Rocca Viscontea fortress. While in Castell'Arquato, you can't miss having a glass of local wine with a delicious "tagliere", which is a selection of local products like cheese, cured meat, prosciutto and typical culatta, a cured meat specialty only found in this part of the region.

TOP THINGS TO DO IN CASTELL'ARQUATO:

- Visit Rocca Viscontea (Tickets are only €5)
- Roam around the cute narrow streets
- Step inside Palazzo del Podestà
- Try local wine
- Visit Luigi Illica Museum

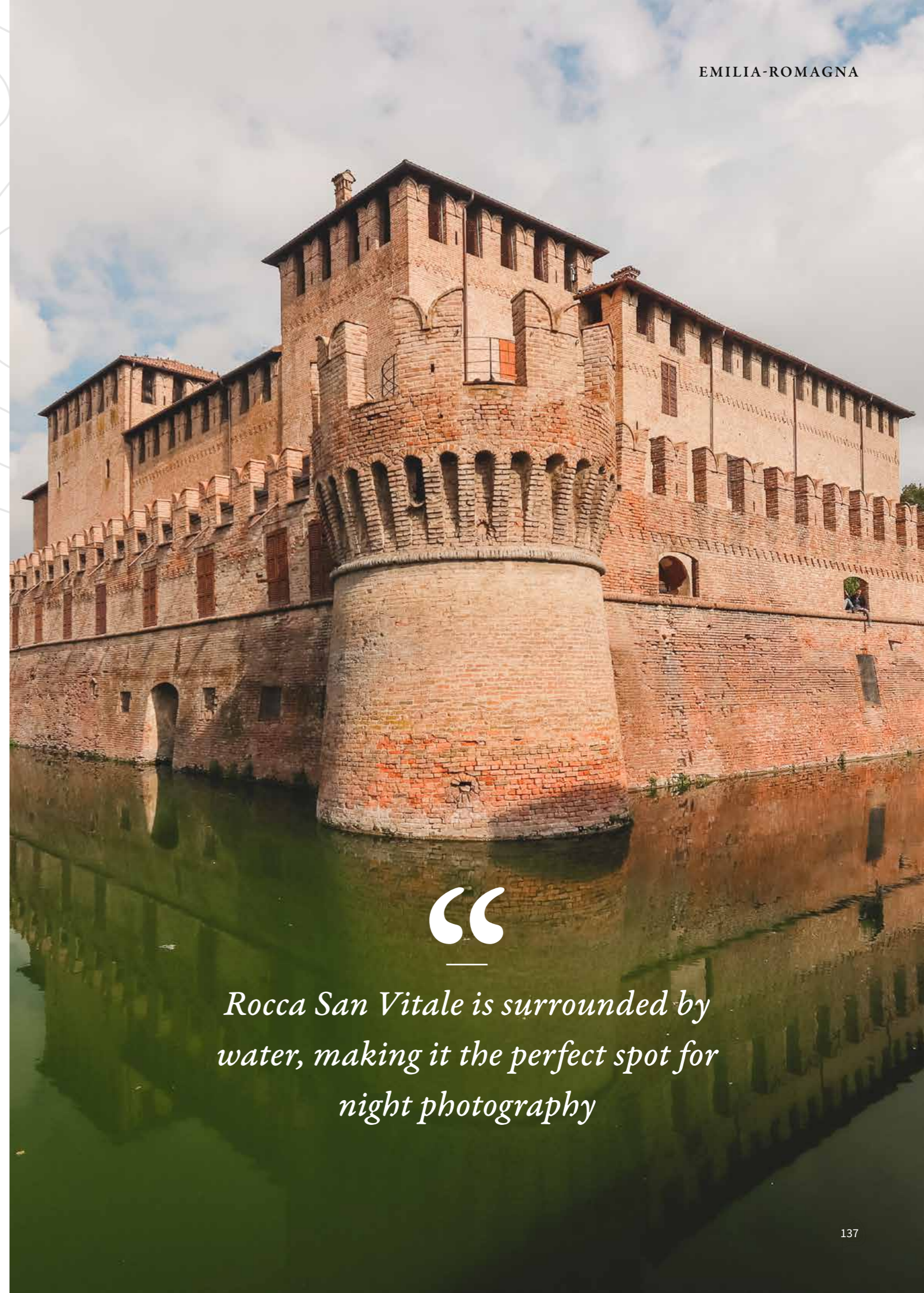
Brisighella

One of our favourite villages. Considered one of the most beautiful villages in Emilia Romagna for a reason, Brisighella was definitely one of our favourites. From its incredible view from the Clock Tower to the exciting history behind Via Degli Asini, Brisighella is such a lively village, really worth visiting. We completely fell in love with the views from the tower and Rocca Manfrediana overlooking the village. It was rainy when we arrived, but Brisighella was still so charming, even covered in clouds.

Via degli Asini is the most charming way to access Brisighella's top three points of interest - the Clock Tower, the Church of San Michele and the Church of San Giovanni Battista.

TOP THINGS TO DO IN BRISIGHELLA:

- Via degli Asini
- Rocca Manfrediana
- Torre dell'Orologio
- Parco del Carnè



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Rocca San Vitale is surrounded by water, making it the perfect spot for night photography



Dozza

The open-air museum

Known as the village of art and culture, Dozza is truly unique and one of the most beautiful villages near Bologna. From Bologna, you can reach Dozza in 20 minutes by car or by taking a bus. This village won't disappoint you with its incredible and colourful street art. You can easily spend 2 days in Dozza, enjoy the peaceful village, go for a hike along Sentiero del Vino and discover all the vineyards along the path, and visit the Rocca Sforzesca fortress dominating the town.

TOP THINGS TO DO IN DOZZA

- *Admire the beautiful street art around Dozza*
- *Visit Rocca Sforzesca*
- *Have a glass of local wine*
- *Hike around "Sentiero del Vino"*

Fiumalbo

On top of the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines

Considered one of the most beautiful villages in the Apennines for a reason, Fiumalbo is 953 meters above the sea level. In fact, the landscape is entirely different from the other villages that we previously mentioned - you will be in the mountains, surrounded by the Apennines. The old town is traffic-free, allowing you to wander freely around the cobblestone alleys. To explore the surroundings of this incredible village, join an e-bike tour and ride along paths that will lead you to stunning views.

THINGS TO DO IN FIUMALBO

- *Roam around the city center*
- *Go on an e-bike tour*

Seaside villages

Cesenatico

Leonardo's Masterpiece

If you have heard about Rimini, you most likely know Cesenatico. In summer, Cesenatico becomes really busy with locals and tourists, thanks to its great bars, cafes and seaside promenade. It doesn't matter when you visit Cesenatico; you will love it even in wintertime.

We recommend going for

a walk along Porto Canale Leonardesco, and admire the picturesque docks lined with boats and colourful buildings as a background.

THINGS TO DO IN CESENATICO

- *Walk along Porto Canale Leonardesco*
- *Go for a swim*
- *Visit Marco Pantani monument*
- *Admire the Galleria Comunale Leonardo da Vinci*



Toti and Ale, an Italian travel couple based in the UK, are the duo behind the award-winning travel blog Italian Trip Abroad and Passport and Stamps. Curiously touring the world in search of interesting stories to tell through photography and articles; following the food routes, discovering traditions and cultural heritage of every destination.



Friuli-Venezia Giulia

The off-beat region

BY LAURENE PHILIPPOT | BLOG.CARNETDESCAPADES.COM

Friuli-Venezia Giulia offers a great variety of options for things to do and see - you can go on cultural visits, find sports activities, enjoy marine landscapes, mountains and vineyards... There is something for all tastes and desires!

The region is also far removed from mass tourism, making it

possible to visit without worrying about the crowds. On top of that, the region is not expensive - so many reasons to come and visit!

The only point to keep in mind is that it is one of the rainiest regions in Italy. This is what I was told, but the weather was great the whole time I was there!

Magnificent villages in Friuli-Venezia Giulia

During my stay in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, I had the chance to visit very pretty villages, some of which are also included in the list of Borghi Più Belli d'Italia - Most Beautiful Villages in Italy, such as Venzone, Polcenigo, and Poffabro.

Venzone

Venzone is a charming village nestled at the foot of the Prealpi Giulie (Julian Prealps) Natural Park, and on the banks of the Tagliamento river, one of the last wild Alpine rivers. Venzone is sadly famous for having been almost completely destroyed during an earthquake in 1976, but is also the symbol of the rebirth of this region following this terrible event. Venzone was rebuilt almost identically, numbering the buildings stone by stone in order to recreate the village as it was. The result was definitely achieved, the village is really lovely!

Venzone is not very big, but it is a pleasure to walk there, it is really charming. Stroll around the town center and don't forget to check the mummies of Venzone, kept in the crypt of the Chapel of San Michele. These bodies were buried in the cathedral between the 14th and 19th centuries, and underwent a process of natural mummification because

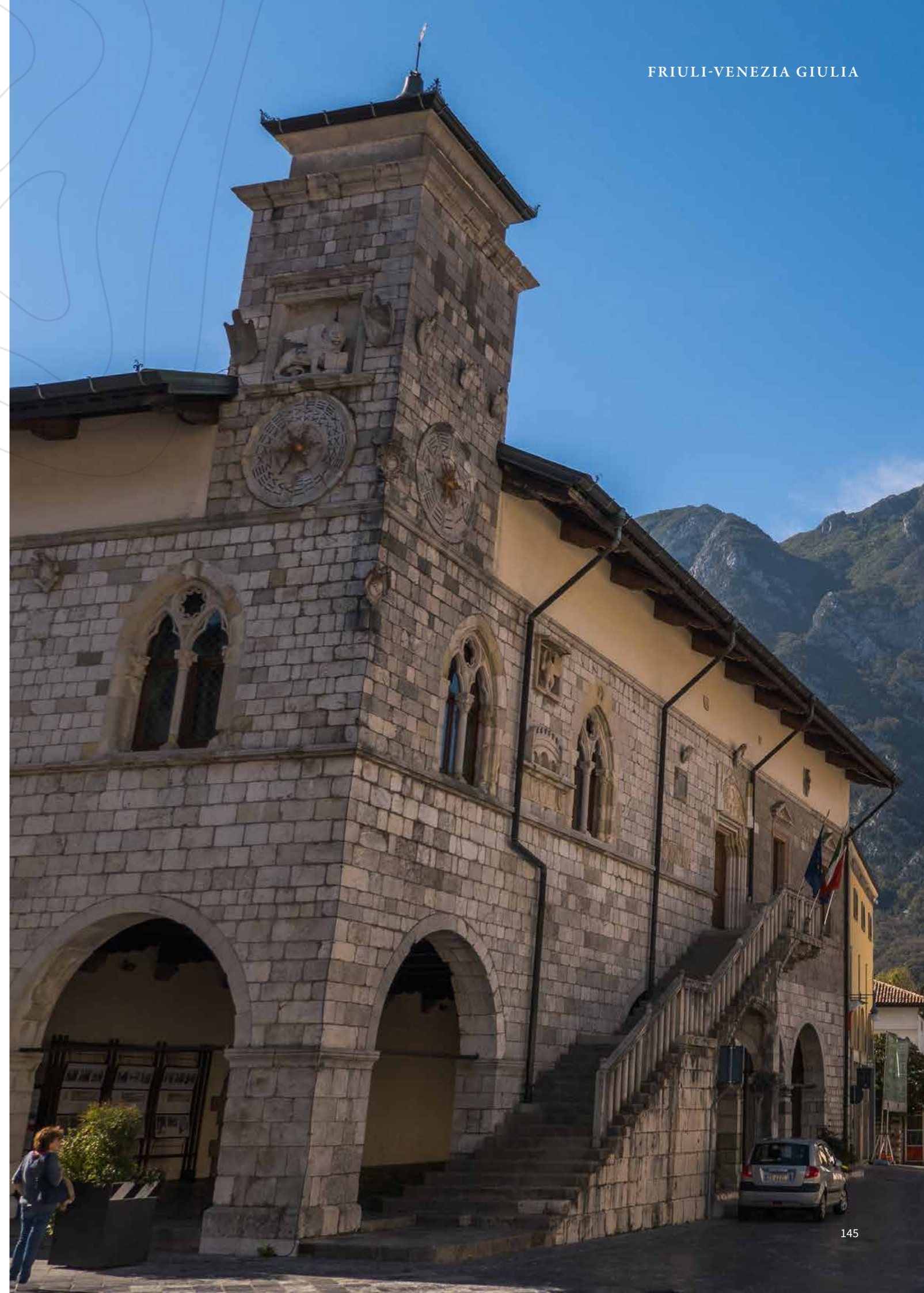
of a fungus that caused the dehydration of tissues, stopping decomposition. I didn't even know that was possible!

If you are looking for a nice view, I recommend leaving the city center of Venzone and walking in the direction of the Chapel of Santa Caterina. It only takes a few minutes on foot, and there will be a superb panorama over Venzone, the river and the surrounding mountains. There is no shortage of walking paths in the area, and I would have liked to have had a little more time to walk them because the area is truly magnificent!

Polcenigo

Polcenigo is also a village that I really liked. However, I did not visit it at the best time, because the recent drought completely dried up the streams and waterways which are part of its charm. However, this did not prevent me from enjoying this village, which is both cute and quite lively, with good foodie stops!

I had fun wandering around its alleys, going up to the castle of Polcenigo to admire the view, and walking in the Parco di San Floriano (St. Florian's Park). Hiking lovers will also find plenty to do around Polcenigo! Just outside Polcenigo are several





interesting sites: the sources of the Livenza river and those of its tributary, the Gorgazzo. These springs have crystal clear turquoise water, they are really worth a look! In Polcenigo you can also find the Palù di Livenza, which is one of the prehistoric dwelling sites on stilts, classified as World Heritage by UNESCO. I found it crazy to imagine that people were already living there around 4900 BC!

During your trip to Friuli-Venezia Giulia, I recommend booking at least one night through Albergo Diffuso, a service that I found brilliant and that you will find in several cities in the region. The concept? Buildings that used to be abandoned are completely renovated, and then offered for rent by Albergo Diffuso. You'll get charming accommodation spaces spread around the villages, well renovated and larger than a hotel room, sometimes with the addition of a small kitchen.

Poffabro

Poffabro is another charming village part of the Borghi Più Belli d'Italia - Most Beautiful Villages in Italy. It is a small mountain village with beautiful old buildings and charming cobbled streets... There are nice surprises around every corner! The location of this village is also superb, perched on a mountainside and offering a magnificent panorama of the surroundings.

The Mountains in Friuli-Venezia Giulia

Discovering the mountains is one of the main reasons to visit Friuli-Venezia Giulia - the Julian Alps and Carnic Alps are both in the region. I must admit that I had never heard of them before, but they are magnificent!

Julian Alps

The Julian Alps are on the border with Slovenia, and I visited a few villages in the area. I was lucky to get there when the Autumn colors had just come out and were particularly vibrant, it was stunning!

Malborghetto-Valbruna and the "Forest Soundtrack"

Malborghetto is a small village in Valcanale, really tiny but with some pretty buildings. Valbruna, the neighbouring village, is also very cute, with a true Alpine atmosphere.

Malborghetto-Valbruna has an unusual hiking trail, the Forest Soundtrack. Why this name? Because the path takes you through forests whose trees lend themselves particularly well to the manufacture of high quality musical instruments. Spruce wood has very special resonance characteristics, making it perfect for violins. It is a pleasure to walk in the middle of this forest, which is magnificent. The route is easy

and is 5.5 km from the center of Valbruna (one way), but can also be shortened if necessary.

Fusine Lakes

The Fusine lakes are two mountain lakes, an upper and a lower lake, along the banks of which you can take pleasant walks. I had the chance to admire them on a very beautiful fall day and couldn't believe the beauty of the colours that I had before my eyes. It was magical, there is no other word! I recommend visiting both, they are very close and quite different from each other.

Montasio Cheese

Montasio cheese is made from cow's milk, and it has a protected designation of origin (PDO). This cheese is notably used in *frico*, a Friulian specialty that you absolutely must try if you visit the region. It is a kind of pancake made with potatoes, onions and Montasio, and it is usually served with polenta. It's very filling, but very good!

Carnic Alps

The Carnic Alps were another wonderful discovery, rising along the border between Italy and Austria.

Hiking in Paluzza

One day, I went for a wonderful hike up to Monte Paularo in Paluzza, in the Zoncolan region. Monte Paularo rises to 2043 m above sea level

and offers panoramic views of the surroundings from its summit, and the whole climb and descent was really fun. The landscapes are magnificent and the region is far away from the tourists crowds - you can hike there in peace and solitude, while enjoying magnificent panoramas. It really made me want to come back for a multi-day hike!

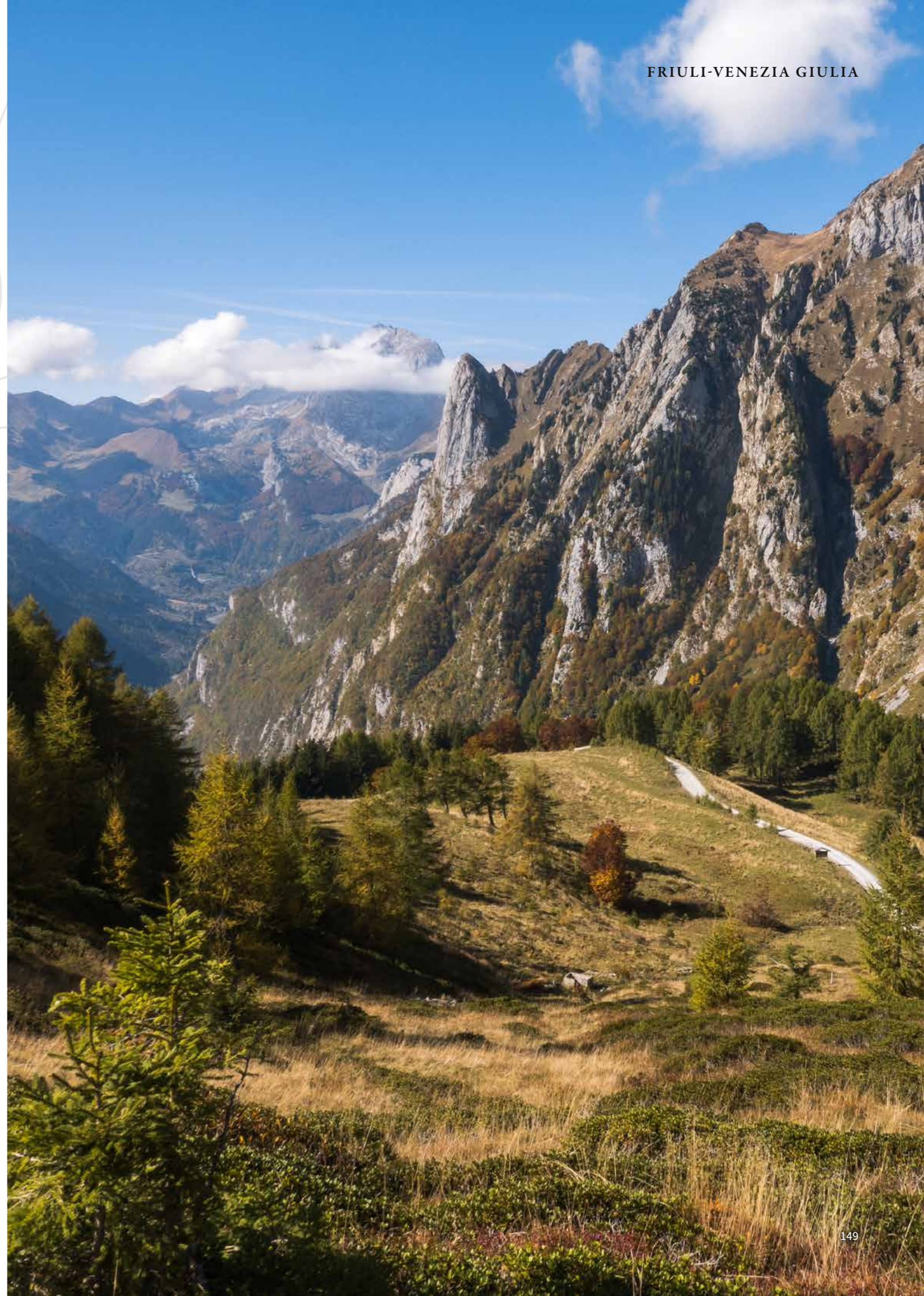
Carnia Specialty: Cjarsons

When it comes to food, don't forget to taste *cjarsons*, a typical Carnia dish. It is a kind of ravioli stuffed with potatoes with cinnamon, raisins and various herbs. An amazing sweet and savoury dish, for which every family in the region has a recipe.

Hiking in Caneva

I also went on a nice hike in Caneva, a village near Polcenigo I mentioned above. The mountains are not as high here - they are Prealps, offering even different landscapes. I told you, there is a great variety in Friuli-Venezia Giulia! Near Caneva, you can see a magnificent forest and Alpine landscapes.

I walked from Malga Cercenedo to Malga Fossa di Bena, 9km for the round trip with 300 m elevation gain, but there are many more hiking trails in the region. You can choose a shorter or longer one, depending on your shape and your desires!





Forra del Cellina Nature Reserve in Barcis

This is another very beautiful place, different from the landscapes mentioned above. The Forra del Cellina Nature Reserve in Barcis, part of the Dolomiti Friulane Natural Park, allows you to admire impressive gorges, with water of a really unique colour!

To make the most of your time reserve, I recommend admiring the gorges from two places - from above, and from the trails running through the gorges themselves. To get to the top, follow the Dint trail, an easy hiking path that offers beautiful views of the gorges below, as well as Lake Barcis, the village and the Dolomites in the distance.

For the walk in the heart of the gorges, make your way to the old Valcellina road, which crosses the canyons of the Cellina and Molassa streams. This road was once used by cars, when the hydroelectric plant was built and then operated, but is now reserved for pedestrians and cyclists. It is only open in summer. For a slightly unusual activity during your walk on the old Valcellina road, you can also walk the Tibetan bridge, a suspension bridge over the gorges. I assure you, unless you are really afraid of heights, it is actually very easy to cross (and very safe because you will be equipped with a harness), and it's a lot of fun!

Following the footsteps of the Romans in Aquileia

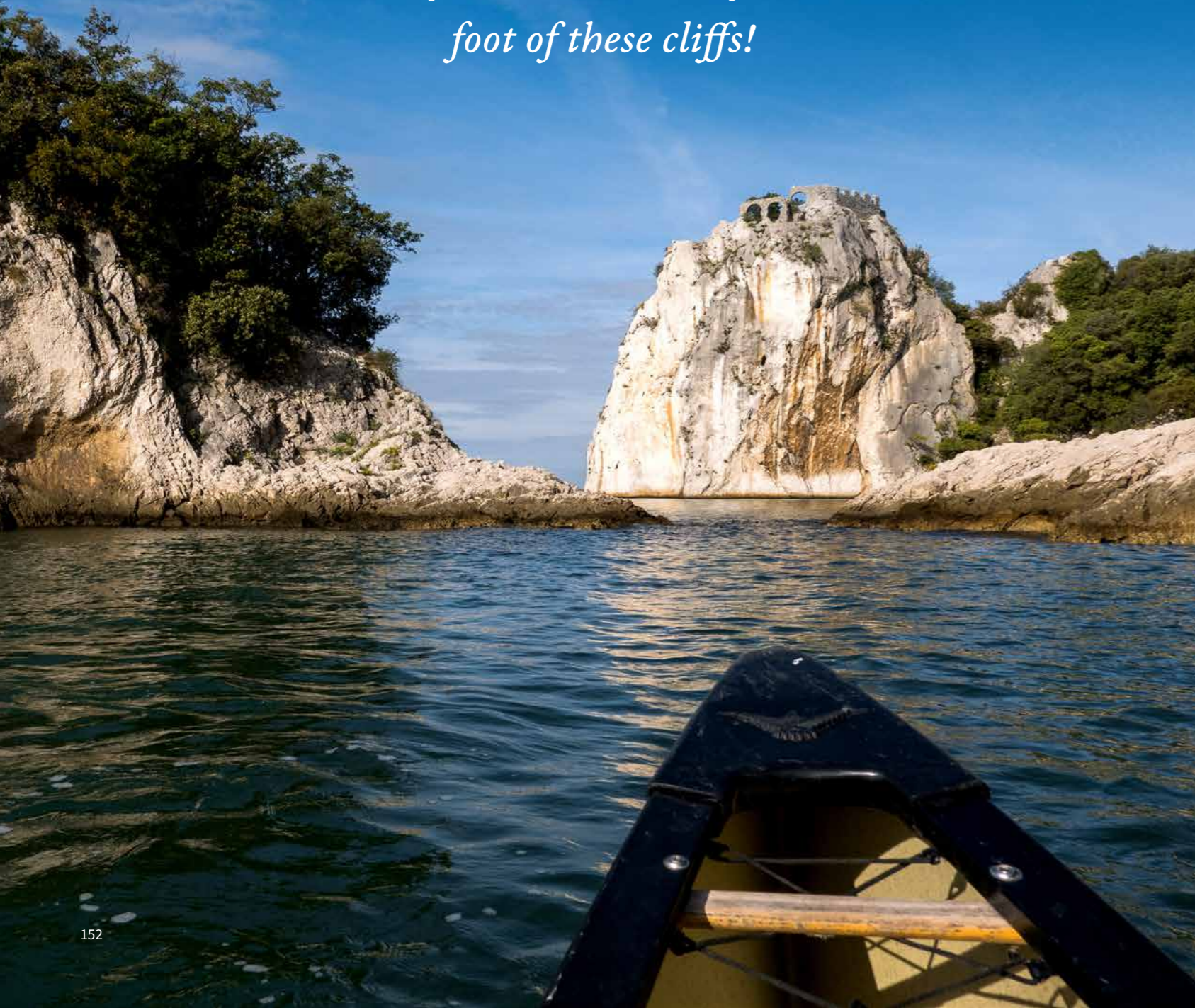
Aquileia is a small town listed as UNESCO World Heritage Site for its rich archaeological heritage. This city is indeed exceptional - it was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire, and it is now considered "the most complete example of an ancient Roman city in the Mediterranean region" (according to UNESCO). Many remains have indeed been found, but we also know that a large part of the city is still buried. Aquileia is therefore both an open-air museum, and an exceptional archaeological site - it really deserves a visit!

I recommend starting your visit at the tourist office to take an audio guide, also downloadable on your smartphone, to be able to get explanations on the different sites to visit in Aquileia. You can admire the remains of an old cemetery, residential houses, a river port and a Roman forum.

The most impressive site is undoubtedly the Patriarchal Basilica of Aquileia (also called the Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta), built in the early Christian period, with incredible mosaics and frescoes that are remarkably well preserved. The mosaics of the Basilica of Aquileia reminded me of those discovered during my visit to Ravenna in Emilia-Romagna.

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The cliffs and the castle of Duino are magnificent to observe from the sea: you feel so small in your canoe when you are at the foot of these cliffs!



Discover the Adriatic Coast

Visit Grado

The Friuli Venezia Giulia region stretches along the Adriatic Sea: it would be a shame not to spend some time by the seaside, wouldn't it? I travelled to Grado, a town on an island, connected to the mainland by two bridges. Grado is a popular seaside resort, and gets busy in summer, but I was there during the off season and it was fairly quiet.

I really liked the historic center of Grado, which is really lovely, with beautiful buildings, charming alleys and welcoming terraces! Grado is indeed worth visiting, especially if you like sports and outdoor activities.

Cycling by the water

One of the things that I really liked about Grado is that riding around by bike is really easy. There are many cycle paths, it's very pleasant and you can enjoy lovely rides along the lagoon. I had a stroll around Valle Cavanata

Regional Nature Reserve, where you can observe many birds, and the Adriatic Sea. A great way to spend time in nature!

Canoeing on the Adriatic Sea

I also recommend planning a canoe trip during your stay in Grado. Many excursions of varying durations can be organized, both on the Adriatic Sea and in the Grado lagoon, and you can choose one according to your desires and your shape.

I went paddling along the cliffs of Duino, between Grado and Trieste, and loved this getaway on the water. The cliffs and the castle of Duino are magnificent to observe from the sea: you feel so small in your canoe when you are at the foot of these cliffs! In addition, it is always great to have a naturalist guide explain what you see. It's a great way to combine discovery and a sports activity!



Discovering the vineyards in Cormons

The Friuli-Venezia Giulia region also has vineyards. Yes, I told you it's really varied! I went to Cormons, a small village nestled in the middle of the vineyards. Cormons is the wine capital of the Friuli region and the gateway to the Collio Goriziano vineyard, an area protected by a DOC (denomination of controlled origin). If you are a wine lover, make sure you visit one of the many winegrowers in the area! The Collio region has pretty rolling hills, whose sandstone soil and exposure are favorable to the production of quality wines. There is a pretty path in Cormons called "Sentiero delle Vigne Alte", which is about 3 km long (6 km round trip) and which you can start either

from the La Subida stable or from Spessa Castle. It is a very easy path, with nice views over the vineyards. I really liked this little walk!

Wine and figs at Caneva

There is another vineyard region around Caneva, along the western border of Friuli-Venezia Giulia. In the vineyards of the area, you can often taste not just wines, but also fig-based products. Spreads, caramelized figs, jams... I never imagined that you could make so many delicacies with figs, and especially that they could accompany so many savoury or sweet dishes! For a beautiful view of the vineyards around Caneva, I advise you to climb to the ruins of Caneva Castle, you will have a superb panorama of the surroundings!



I am **Laurene**, a 37-year-old freelance content creator based in Strasbourg (France). An enthusiastic traveler, I share my discoveries, large and small, with my readers on Carnet d'escapades. My Carnet d'escapades is as varied as my interests – in city living and country life, in gastronomy, culture, nature and sports.

12 BEAUTIFUL
VILLAGES NEAR
Rome
and
across
Lazio





BY DANIEL JAMES CLARKE | [BLOG DANFLYINGSOLO.COM](https://www.blogdanflyingsolo.com)

Spanning out from the Eternal City, the region of Lazio delivers an array of beautiful villages near Rome waiting to be enjoyed. Visitors are far fewer, and they nearly all promise a tranquil escape, especially outside of the summer season. Of course, tearing yourself away from the country's attraction-packed, sightseeing-centric and footfall-heavy capital is a tough decision to make. However, if you're not in the mood for a non-stop city break and instead want to slow down and savour the good things in life, the countless small towns in Italy close to Rome will allow plenty of historical insight served up with a much more laid-back experience.

Recently, I heeded that invitation and set out on my own *Viaggio Italiano* to discover some of the best places near Rome to visit by train, bus, and the occasional taxi. Trying to keep sustainable travel at the forefront of my mind, I discovered even the loftiest hilltop villages were accessible with a little patience and

planning, with plenty of treasures awaiting after the climb.

While each of the five provinces that make up Lazio all offer their own culture, cuisine and plenty of picture-perfect day trips from Rome, I quickly realised that every borghi (plural small Italian villages, and borgo as the singular) promised something in common. The magic of these places was the chance to enjoy a slower pace of life, connect with the local community, and discover countless ancient sites and stories that perhaps a day trip wouldn't allow, so do yourself a favour and stay a while.

Of course, those awarded the 'I Borghi più Belli d'Italia' (most beautiful villages in Italy) title were stunning, but each one I set foot in had its own captivating charm, and I hope you find the chance to craft your own unforgettable journey through Lazio, far from the crowds of Rome.

Here are 12 of the most beautiful villages near Rome I recently discovered, broken up into the five provinces across central, northern and southern Lazio.



Staying central: Province of Rome (Castelli Romani)

Starting closest to the country's capital, the area surrounding the Eternal City is the best option if you seek day trips near Rome rather than an overnight stay or slow-paced rural village escape. Within the greater metropolitan and nearby area, you'll find plenty of beautiful borghi to escape from the city's busy attractions, and reliable public transport connections ensure an easy journey. Parts of this land are called Castelli Romani due to the numerous castles around, meaning you can count on these places to visit near Rome to be packed with history, photogenic panoramas, and plenty of memorable moments without venturing too far into the Lazio region.

Castel Gandolfo

WHY VISIT? Spectacular lake views coupled with the incredible summer residence of the Pope

Castel Gandolfo is often regarded as one of the most beautiful small towns in Italy, something that even the Pope would attest to as it is here he has his summer residence, the Papal Palace.

That was until 2014 when Pope Francis opened the palace and gardens to the public, and

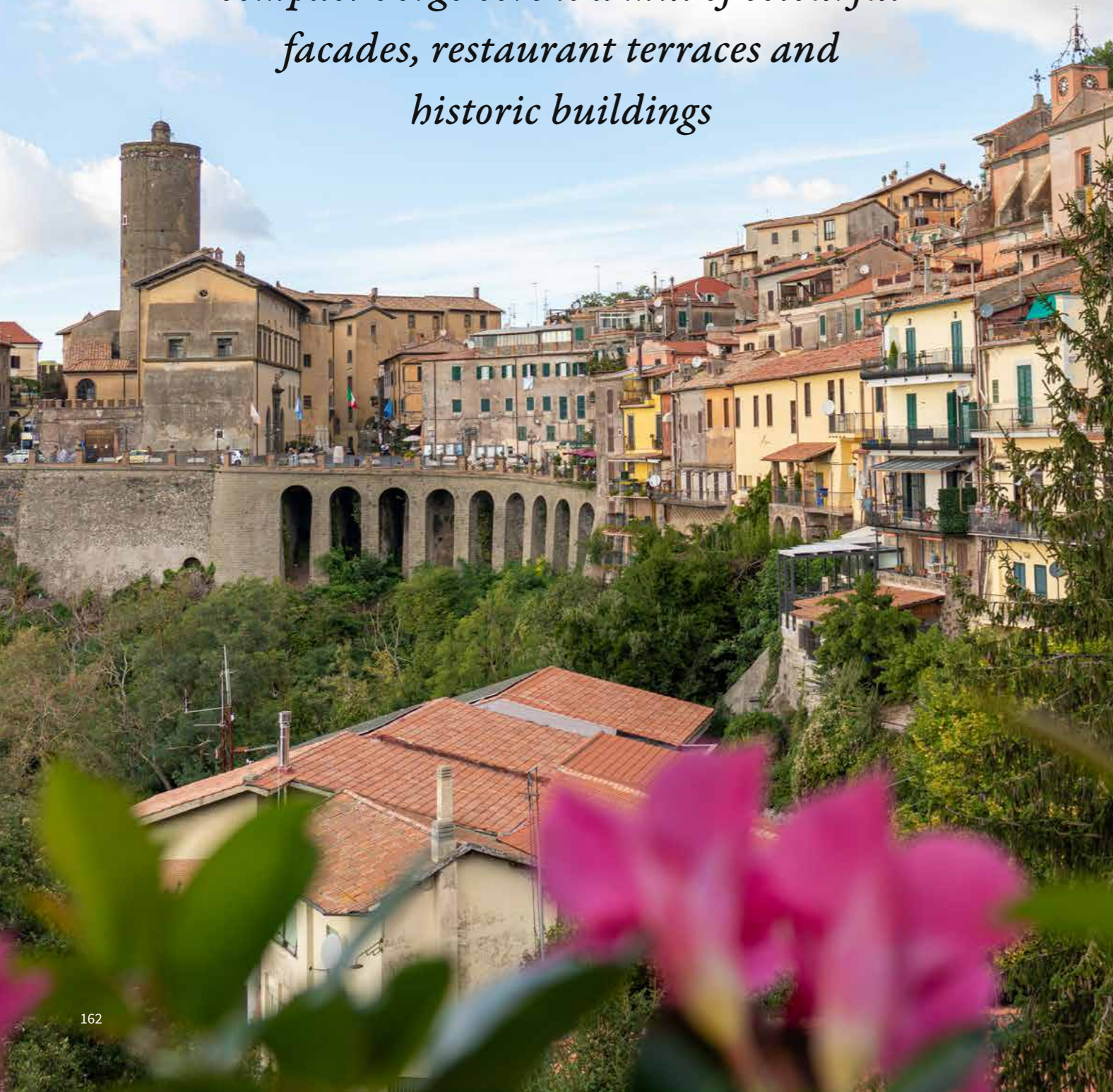
now they are a popular tourist attraction, often combined with a visit to the Vatican city. While I didn't tour them this time (book tickets in advance), I found other ways to enjoy the borgo and spent a few nights here. This, I found, allowed me to enjoy the village in a slumber, as being one of the most popular places near Rome to visit by train on a quick day trip, it can feel quite crowded during the holidays or weekends. Beyond the palaces and churches, I found enough to keep me busy. From taking boat tours and kayaking on Lake Albano, the cerulean-hued and turquoise-fringed volcanic crater lake below, to devouring the regional pasta specialities, such as cellitti coated in a porcini mushroom sauce. The local white wine, Colli Albani, also featured heavily during the evenings spent on my apartment's balcony overlooking the lake.

For such a notable destination, it's relatively small, but certainly not without its charm. While the imposing entrance gates, the 1624-built palace, and impressive churches are all classical, you'll find a contemporary dining scene here, with trendy restaurants, many of which seemed to have been designed with Instagram in mind.



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Perched above the volcanic-crater lake of the same name, the pedestrianised compact borgo core is a mix of colourful facades, restaurant terraces and historic buildings



One of my favourite moments came in La Musa Mosaici, where I learnt to hammer stone pieces and craft a mosaic. While my design certainly wasn't going to compete with the many Roman masterpieces found in Lazio, I came away with a new appreciation for this challenging art form. Nearby, you'll find some of the other most delightful villages near Rome, such as Ariccia, Lanuvio and Nemi, so Castel Gandolfo serves as a decent base for both hamlet hopping, but also exploring Rome if you don't want to stay in the capital proper.

TOP TIP: Avoid the weekends (and peak season) to skip the crowds, and if you want something fun to do, take a 90-minute mosaic class.

HOW TO GET THERE? By train from Rome, the journey to Castel Gandolfo takes around 45-minutes, with a short walk uphill after. By car, if there is no traffic, you'll arrive in under 30-minutes.

Nemi

WHY VISIT? The Roman Ships Museums and the adorable small village by a lake atmosphere

If you want to combine a few of the villages near Rome together, then Castel Gandolfo, Ariccia,

and Nemi are easily blended - especially if you follow the gorgeous walking trail between the two lakes.

Nemi's setting is an absolute beauty. Perched above the volcanic-crater lake of the same name below, the pedestrianised compact borgo core is a mix of colourful facades, restaurant terraces - try the local porchetta (pork) sandwich - and historic buildings. It's also usually much less visited than neighbouring Castel Gandolfo.

Down by the lake, two of Nemi's most famous attractions can be found. The Temple of Diana, a historically significant pilgrimage and worshipping site since the 6th century BC, and the Roman Ship Museum of Nemi.

The Roman ships, once anchored on the lake and used in religious celebrations for Diana, were nearly lost forever after sinking until they found a new home in the Museum during the 1930s. Sadly, a fire in 1944 torched both the Museum and the wooden vessels, and they were finally lost forever. However, inside you'll find displays, recreations, and information on their storied past.

TOP TIP: Don't visit on a Monday, you'll find all the museums closed.

HOW TO GET THERE?

Surprisingly, given it's so close to Rome, it's not so direct to

get here. You'll need to take two buses and allow at least 90-minutes or hike the trail from Castel Gandolfo. By car, you can arrive in less than 40 minutes.

Castel San Pietro Romano

WHY VISIT? Sweeping views across the countryside and eternal city, and a side trip to the amazing National Archaeological Museum of Palestrina

A literal movie star, Castel San Pietro Romano's cinematic mountaintop position (752 metres) has seen it featured in various silver-screen films and plaques across the borgo highlight scenes and the settings. Set atop Mount Ginestro, the panoramas across Rome and beyond – an eternal view over an Eternal City, if you will – are equally as motion picture worthy. Of course, this position was picked for a defensive reason rather than to be camera worthy, but that has sure helped make this spot a popular day trip near Rome.

The 'Akropolis' – as the old central core is known – is protected by 2500-year-old polygonal walls, although the multiple medieval towers that once stood here are long gone. Luckily, the walls of the triangular-shaped storied castle that dominates and defines the village are still mainly intact, and you can peek inside the open-air

slice of history. Named Rocca dei Colonna, it protected this village near Rome in its influential family-run heyday, warding off any unwelcome attacks from Rome and the Vatican.

Nearby, the Cannuccete Valley provides some beautiful walking trails, but the most impressive close-by attraction is the Archaeological Museum of Palestrina.

Reached by following the trail down the hill, this huge palace is a multi-layered and multi-floored museum packed with Roman artefacts and treasures. The mosaics steal the show, though, with the vast and detailed Nile Mosaic of Palestrina (a Hellenistic period floor piece since restored and displayed on a wall) sure to leave you spellbound.

TOP TIP: The €5 to enter Palestrina's museum is worth it alone for the Nile River Mosaic – be sure to go to the top floor (it's a confusing building) so you don't miss it.

HOW TO GET THERE? By public transport from Rome, the best bet is to take a bus to Palestrina and another up the hill if you don't want to do the steep climb. By train, you can go to Zagarolo station and then switch to a bus. Driving takes an hour, with the quickest public transport journeys a little longer.

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Perched above the volcanic-crater lake of the same name, the pedestrianised compact borgo core is a mix of colourful facades, restaurant terraces and historic buildings



Heading south: Province of Latina

The Province of Latina stretches south and towards the coast, packed with some of the best places to visit near Rome. While the provincial capital, Latina, is much more modern than the medieval Italian villages close by, there is plenty of good public transport to be found, and it won't take you long to escape to coastal playgrounds and hilltop towns from the capital. Certainly, these borghi could be day trips from Rome, but they will all invite you to slow down and stay a while, and with plenty of museums, delicious regional produce, and Roman artefacts to discover, you might just want to heed their invitation.

Sermoneta

WHY VISIT?

Incredible medieval village on a hill packed with Caetani family history

Of all the medieval hilltop villages near Rome, Sermoneta has something special. Overlooking the Mediterranean Sea and oozing history from its narrow cobbled streets, the quick journey time and connecting bus make this one of the best day trips from Rome. However, personally, I think it's a magical place to spend a night or two.

Well restored (and in parts, reconstructed), Sermoneta's history is intricately linked with the Caetani family, who built the magnificent grand palace alongside the defensive walls. Walking around, you'll feel like you've stepped into the Middle Ages. From the wooden beamed Loggia dei Mercanti, an old hub of commercial activity constructed in 1446, to the frescoed-heavy interiors of the Chiesa di San Giuseppe (Church of San Giuseppe) and Oratorio dei Battenti, every corner seems to have another treasure to discover.

The Museo C'era Una Volta, housing the endless miniature works of Daniela Caruso, was an astounding find. With fully animated tiny models and scenes of local activities coming to life with the flip of a switch, it's an absolute delight, as was Daniela, who invited me to join her family for lunch.

Of course, the castle is the star and dominates this village near Rome. Built by the Caetani (or Gaetani) family, as was much of the village, it tells the story of this noble Italian family. Hailing from nearby Gaeta, they were hugely successful in politics, most recognised with the election of Pope Boniface VIII in 1294.

TOP TIP: Visit on the weekends

to ensure access inside the castle, and book your visit to The Garden of Ninfa in advance. How to get there? By public transport from Rome, you can take a 30-minute train to Latina station and then a bus (there may be a wait, so plan with the schedules) up to the village. To drive takes a little over an hour.

Gaeta

WHY VISIT? A magical village by the sea with beaches, nightlife and plenty of architecture to enjoy

Gaeta was the only borgo I visited in Lazio that sits on the sparkling cyan waters of the Mediterranean. While the old part is one of the most magical villages near Rome to while away some days, the larger and newer section forms one of the most charming coastal small towns in Italy.

Separated from the beautiful bay of Serapo Beach and the bustling thoroughfare of Via della Indipendenza by Monte Orlando park, the old harbour-side part of Gaeta feels very tucked away.

High above in the wooded land of the mount, incredible viewpoints of Gaeta's castle and borgo can be enjoyed. There's also an impressive sanctuary here, known as the split mountain, where a narrow staircase descends to a chapel before climbing up to a unique

viewpoint set in the cliff's crack. Constructed in the 11th century in honour of Saint Philip Neri, who lived here, the Sanctuary of Montagna Spaccata is just as much about the spectacular nature as prayer.

Inside the borgo proper, there's an enchanting mix of viewpoints, homes above sheer-rock faces, lively and trendy bars with a youthful vibe, and many impressive architectural finds.

At the Santuario Della Santissima Annunziata (Santissima Annunziata Sanctuary), don't miss the jaw-dropping Cappella dell'Immacolata Concezione. This Renaissance Sistine gilded chapel is coated in gold, with impressive paintings by masters Scipione Pulzone and Giovanni Filippo Criscuolo. The Church of Saint Francis of Assisi's tower, with its Islamic details, is equally as striking, while the Church of San Francesco d'Assisi (Church of Saint Francis) towers above, providing perhaps the village's best viewpoint.

TOP TIP: Some museums and churches are only open during certain hours and on certain days, so check and plan ahead.

HOW TO GET THERE? By public transport from Rome, you can take a train to Formia-Gaeta, and then a quick Cotral bus to the old centre. The journey time is around two hours by car and public transport.



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If you are considering places to visit near Rome to stay a while and relax, little Atina will happily oblige.

Further south: Province of Frosinone

Around halfway between Rome and Naples, the Province of Frosinone is the most southern part of Lazio, with the capital city being Frosinone. Perhaps the most famous attraction here is the Abbey of Montecassino, a vast complex atop the hill in Cassino, which, following its destruction in World War Two, has subsequently been rebuilt. I spent most of my time here around the Valle di Comino, where some huge battles took place, but now it's a serene setting of olive groves, mountains, and beautiful small villages near Rome.

This part of Lazio felt the most laid-back and rural, especially away from the larger towns. From sipping on delicious award-winning Cabernet in small

Italian towns to visiting the 'city of Cicero' and devouring pasta in countryside agriturismos (rural farm accommodation), all your away-from-Rome dreams are awaiting here.

Atina

WHY VISIT? Delicious wines, beautiful vineyard views, and a get-away-from-it-all feel

If you are considering places to visit near Rome to stay a while and relax, little Atina will happily oblige. There isn't too much to do here, but the central core of the medieval borgo has a handful of high-quality restaurants and even a few trendy bars (excellent Negronis) to enjoy, and you can even sleep in a palace.





Yes, Atina is one of those villages near Rome you come to get away from it all, and the sublime views of the cloud-hugged valley at sunrise, where mist rises above award-winning vineyards, remind you every morning you've made a good choice.

That's not to say there isn't a lively community here, though, and on Monday mornings, you'll find the streets overflowing with the market, which expands far beyond the main square, as it has been doing since the 16th century.

There's also an archaeological museum, though some of the most ancient and important treasures found here now live in Rome's museum. Many of these artefacts came from Santo Stefano Hill, which rises next to the village, and although you can see the megalithic walls on a hike there, the most impressive site is the valley from the Cappella della

Madonnella hugging its side.

After you've had your fill of palaces (there are a few here, including the 14th-century mosaic-displaying town hill), settle into one of the local vineyards to sip on rich ruby-red Cabernets. Having achieved DOP status (Protected Designation of Origin), you can expect quality wines from these aged vines, and the backdrop adds to the flavour.

TOP TIP: Get up early to hike Santo Stefano Hill at sunrise; the low clouds and magnificent views from the chapel are worth it.

HOW TO GET THERE? By public transport from Rome, you can take a train to Cassino, and then a Cotral bus, the total journey time should be just over three hours. By car, it's a 100-minute drive. From Naples, it's a 90-minute drive.



Heading north: Province of Rieti

The capital of Rieti Province also goes by the same name, and the valley here is a verdant retreat ripe with cycling, horse riding, and hiking adventures – plus some watersport options such as bird watching by the lakes and rafting down the rivers. Once, the whole valley was submerged until the Romans learnt how to drain the water, and they left plenty of legacies. Perhaps the most fascinating for a visitor is Rieti Underground, which you can visit on an evening tour, one of the places to visit near Rome that isn't a borgo.

If you don't have a car and want to explore the province and small Italian towns around, then Rieti is a good base. Alternatively, there are plenty of walking trails to get around, the most famous being the Saint Francis Walk, part of the much longer Via Francigena.

Greccio

WHY VISIT? For the religious sanctuary and nativity scene connections with Saint Francis

Unsurprisingly, many of the villages near Rome have religious connections, but Greccio perhaps has the reason to be proudest. It was here, nearly 800 years ago, that the first-ever nativity scene was

created, shaping Christmas as we know it today.

The Valle Santa (Sacred Valley) in Rieti was a favourite place of San Francesco (Saint Francis of Assisi), who came to this tranquil setting for meditation and prayer. Following in his footsteps nowadays are many pilgrims completing the Saint Francis Walk alongside those who simply seek out the stunning nature without the religious connotations.

You'll find a cluster of spacious streets inside the village, all topped with a grand church boasting magnificent panoramas. There's also a walking trail, the Path of the Artists, through the hamlet, linking religious frescoes and paintings which adorn people's homes together. The historical connection with the birth scene of Jesus is also celebrated, with the Museo Internazionale del Presepe (International Nativity Museum) displaying hand-crafted scenes from all across the world, which, even if you're not overly into religious art, can be appreciated for their detailed work.

On a hill opposite, casting its eye across the borgo, is the Santuario Franciscano del Presepe di Greccio. It's here that Saint Francis came to pray, although in his time, He was sleeping under rocks and seeking silence, and the grand



complex came much later. Inside the small chapel, you can see where he made the Original nativity scene, and a much larger modern church gives the complex its splendour from afar.

TOP TIP: When walking the streets of Greccio, try and spot (and peek inside) the workshops of the nativity scene makers

HOW TO GET THERE? By public transport from Rome, you can either take the bus to Rieti and then change to the Greccio bus, or a train to Terni and then a second train (but note the train station isn't so

close). The quickest journey by public transport is around two and a half hours. By car, Greccio is around two hours from Rome.

Contigliano

WHY VISIT? Quaint, rounded village surrounded by gorgeous valley and river countryside

Contigliano is another of the villages near Rome overlooking the Rieti Valley and is easily combined together with Greccio. In fact, many of the natural attractions and activities, such as horse riding, and birdwatching on the lakes, fall between the two





borghi, meaning they could be combined into a long day trip near Rome, though the gorgeous setting might lure you into staying some nights.

Capping a low hill, Contigliano's medieval streets offer fantastic views over the Rieti Plains, where cannellini beans are grown, and hiking and biking trails crisscross the lush farmlands. With history from the Bronze Age period, and churches dotting the nearby landscape from the Middle Ages, small Contigliano doesn't shy away from sharing its own slice of history.

In the old village core, the streets are a delight to explore – although the compact size means it won't take long. Perhaps the most impressive building, the Collegiata di san Michele Arcangelo, a baroque-style church with a grand facade, is a testament to the community's spirit, as it was constructed using villagers' funds rather than money from the church.

Down in the valley below, the lakes of Riserva dei Laghi Lungo e Ripasottile are a serene spot for a stroll and bird watching, while alongside the crystal-clear waters of the Santa Susanna spring in Rivodutri you'll find a picnic stop haven.

HOW TO GET THERE? By public transport from Rome,

you can either take the bus to Rieti and then change to the Labro bus, or a train to Terni and then a second train, the quickest journey is around two and a half hours. By car, Contigliano is about two hours from Rome.

Labro

WHY VISIT? Stunning setting perched high above a lake with adorable stone streets

The story of Labro's return to glory is an interesting one. After World War Two, this medieval hilltop borgo was falling into disrepair. The traditional stone houses were crumbling, residents were departing for better futures, and it seemed that Labro's destiny was to be like many of the other ghost towns now found across Italy.

Luckily, the fate of this village near Rome changed thanks to the owner of the borgo's castle and her architect husband, who set about restoring the whole hamlet to the original design. With the return of some 400 residents, Labro came back to life and now, entering the historic core, you almost wouldn't know what could have nearly been.

Sadly, the weather wasn't on my side when I visited Labro, but that didn't stop me from being enchanted by this small



town in Italy. Umbrella in hand, I wandered the web of light-stone houses, churches, watchtowers and chapels, seeing how restoration had brought new leases of life, such as churches converted into theatres. Crowning the village is the family-owned Castello Nobili Vitelleschi, which you can enter and tour accompanied by the daughter of the current noble owner.

From the castle's turret, wonderful vistas of the verdant-enveloped Lago di Piediluco span before you while the historical archives hold treasures of their own. Documents from as far back as 1191, even signed

by the pope, form part of the family's collection, alongside a particularly fascinating 17th century handwritten account of the borgo's history.

TOP TIP: Book your visit to the Castello Nobili Vitelleschi and be sure to eat (or visit the delicatessen) of Radici Restaurant.

HOW TO GET THERE? By public transport from Rome, the best connection is to take a bus to Rieti and then change to the Labro bus; the quickest journey is around two and a half hours. By car, Labro is a two-hour drive from Rome.



Further north: Province of Viterbo

The most northern province in Lazio, Viterbo, is awash with cute villages that aren't too far from Rome, and many of the borghi here have Etruscan history. The Etruscan people, who predated the Romans, reached the peak of their civilisation in the 6th century BC, but their story goes back centuries further. After the Romans came, this region was renamed Tuscia, and the countryside and rolling hills certainly give the area a Tuscany-like feel.

First, you should explore the medieval core of the provincial capital Viterbo, one of the best places near Rome to visit by train, before venturing to the beautiful small towns of Italy in the surrounding area. Viterbo is also a good base if you don't have a car, with plenty of local bus connections. Also, consider heading to Civita di Bagnoregio, another breathtaking borgo that, sadly, I didn't have time to visit on this trip.

Vitorchiano

WHY VISIT? Incredible volcanic rock-topped villages dotted with history and statues

One of the most beautiful small towns in Italy (according to me, at least), Vitorchiano is a spectacular place that merges

with the volcanic rock below. Sheer buildings climb up the side decorated with hanging laundry, and the whole thing looks like a movie set.

Set behind crenellated defensive walls is the historic borgo part of Vitorchiano, which has expanded to include a 'newer' town. Inside, ancient houses dating back to the medieval period (and even before) sit on narrow alleyways that somehow always lead you back to the town's square and old clock tower.

Outside the walls, there are two places you shouldn't miss. First, the Valle delle Sculture, which sits below with aged-shaped stones, and second, the Rapa Nui-carved Moai statue, crafted from the local volcanic peperino rock by a family of Easter Islanders. From here, you'll also get a magnificent view of the steep sides of the village.

If you're feeling hungry, be sure to order the most famous local dish, Cavatelli Vitorchianesi, a thick spaghetti-like pasta resembling an earthworm and topped with a rich tomato sauce. As far as villages near Rome go, this one is a real winner!

TOP TIP: If you wish to visit the Town Hall museum, come on the weekend.





HOW TO GET THERE? By public transport from Rome, take a train to Orte or Viterbo and then a bus; the journey takes around two hours. By car, Vitorchiano is 90-minutes from Rome or two and a half hours from Florence.

Bomarzo

WHY VISIT? The nearby Etruscan Pyramid and Sacro Bosco's fascinating statues

The historic part of Bomarzo might be one of the smallest villages near Rome, but in its surroundings, there are some rather unique attractions to discover.

Here, the Etruscans had a stronghold and, before the Romans, shaped the lands. Perhaps the most apparent discovery relating to this period is the Etruscan Pyramid, which was only discovered in 1991. Later, in 2008, Salvatore Fosci, a local of Bomarzo, set about to clear the weeds and vegetation that had kept this ancient site closed off to visitors and started leading tours. Another intriguing attraction, carved from the local peperino stone but built much later, is the Parco dei Mostri (Park of Monsters), also known as the Sacro Bosco.

This garden complex which was shaped by the statues in the 16th century displays the work of sculptor Simone Moschino. Around 40 figures, from the mythical to the obscene, are

dotted around the walking path, each seemingly more imposing than the last.

The compact medieval core of Bomarzo sits above the park, and while it won't take long to explore the streets, a trip here combined with the nearby attractions shows why small-town Italy shouldn't be underestimated.

TOP TIP: Try to ask the Town Hall staff if they will show you some of the grand rooms in the building, which is the Palazzo Orsini.

HOW TO GET THERE? By public transport from Rome, take a train to Orte or Viterbo and then a bus; the journey can take as little as one hour. By car, Bomarzo is 90-minutes from Rome or just over two hours from Florence.

Bassano in Teverina

WHY VISIT? Medieval village vibes coupled with an impeccable hidden tower discovery

Even before a fascinating discovery was made, medieval Bassano in Teverina was already one of Italy's most beautiful small towns. The ancient streets, Roman-built laundry fountains, and 12th-century church are a delight, but there's also a secret here that was nearly lost to time. Inside the 16th-century tower,



a simple structure that rises dramatically next to the hamlet's entrance lies a true hidden gem of Italy. The Torre dell'Orologio wasn't discovered until 1974, when repair works took place, but boy, it was one big discovery. Inside the tower, a perfectly preserved bell tower was found, which had been hidden in plain sight for centuries, unbeknown to the villagers. This incredible and ornate 12th-century find, which would have sat alongside the church, was excavated over the coming years, and now, you can enter inside and climb to the top for sweeping panoramas. However, the true magic is the original architecture.

While parts of this village near Rome were destroyed after the war when a passing train full of

explosives detonated in the valley, much has been reconstructed, with more work planned to ensure the borgo's history is all brought back to life. The new part of the town is also full of life, so you can enjoy the community here without feeling like you're in one of Italy's ghost villages.

TOP TIP: Book your visit to the Torre dell'Orologio in advance with the town's InfoPoint, as you'll need to enter with a guide.

HOW TO GET THERE? By public transport from Rome, take a train to Orte or Viterbo and then a bus; the journey can take as little as one hour. By car, Bassano in Teverina is 90-minutes from Rome or two and a half hours from Florence.



Daniel is a British-born, Portugal-residing travel writer and photographer with a huge passion for his favourite country, Italy. From the mountains of Trentino, to the calm-waters of Sicily, he loves village-hopping around the country, devouring the local dishes, meeting the local community, and finding unexpected gems along the way.



LIGURIA

THE 10 MOST BEAUTIFUL VILLAGES IN **Liguria** *between the sea and the mountains*

BY EMMANUELLE HUBERT | BLOG.AUGOUTDEMMA.BE

Liguria is a charming destination in northern Italy, with green hills dotted with vineyards and olive groves, medieval villages perched on hillsides, and a lively coastline. Close to the French border and easily accessible, the eastern part of Liguria is the most visited, where the famous village of Portofino (the Italian version of Saint-Tropez) is located, as well as the Cinque Terre, a group of small fishermen villages that have become one of the most

Instagrammed places in Italy. However, there's a lot more to Liguria - a multitude of lesser-known but no less charming little villages, which I was able to discover during my last trip to the region.

From the Riviera di Ponente in the west, to the Riviera di Levante in the east, in this article I'll share with you my selection of the 10 most beautiful villages in Liguria I visited, which includes some true gems you have probably never heard of before.

When to visit Liguria?

I have visited Liguria twice: once in the middle of Summer (end of July) and once in early Autumn (early October). The two experiences were very different, and I found the trip more pleasant outside school holidays, both in terms of crowds and especially in terms of temperatures. In July, we had to abandon some of the hikes we wanted to do because of the heat.

Budget conscious travellers will be happy to know that visiting Liguria “off season” is much more affordable in terms of accommodation prices. On the other hand, a lot of restaurants close at the end of the tourist season, or open reduced hours. The same applies to tourist activities such as boat tours, guided tours, etc. In any case, it’s still possible to enjoy most of the villages I’m talking about in the article just by walking around, which is of course possible all year round.

Whatever the period in which you plan to visit Liguria, my advice is to always plan your visits. Reservations for activities and hotels are really the norm here, unlike other Italian regions, even in small villages. Without reserving ahead, you risk missing out on a lot of things.

How long should a trip to Liguria be?

Liguria lends itself to long weekends as well as longer

road trips. If you want to visit all the villages mentioned in this article, allow at least two weeks - they are listed from west to east, the order in which you would visit them if you arrive from the French border.

Liguria has more than 300 kilometers of coastline - if you want to see everything, I obviously recommend dividing your trip in a few ‘stages’ and taking day trips from the village where you will be based for a few nights. Here are the stages of my last Liguria visit:

STAGE 1) the hilltop villages of western Liguria (Dolceacqua, Apricale, Perinaldo)

STAGE 2) the heart of the Riviera di Ponente (Finale Ligure, Varigotti, Borgio Verezzi, Noli)

STAGE 3) the Golfo dei Poeti (Gulf of Poets - Lerici, Tellaro, Ameglia, Montemarcello)

STAGE 4) Portovenere and the Cinque Terre

Travelling in between stages, I made a few stops on the road to discover other villages along the way, such as Cervo, Portofino, Camogli, and Sestri Levante.

For a shorter trip, the best thing to do is choosing just one of these stages and concentrating on discovering that part of Liguria. I would really have a hard time telling you which one I preferred, because each had a very particular charm -



the Franco-Italian culture in the west, the gastronomy and the beaches in the center, the colorful villages in the east...

How to travel around Liguria?

One of the great advantages of Liguria is that the region is very easily accessible by public transport! With the exception of the very isolated village of Perinaldo, all the other villages mentioned in this article can be reached by train or bus.

Trains are the fastest and most convenient way to get around Liguria. I recommend that you download the Trenitalia application to book your tickets very easily from your smartphone. You can easily reach Liguria by train from Milan, Florence, or Nice for example.

You can also get around Liguria by bus. Sometimes it is not possible to buy tickets directly on the bus, you need to buy them in advance in bars and convenience stores.

Getting around by car is far from easy in Liguria. For long distance drives, take the motorway - you have to pay a toll, but you skip the confusing minor roads. The main problem is parking: in some destinations, like Portofino and the Cinque Terre, parking is near impossible, unless you are ready to pay a fortune in parking and/or spend hours looking for a spot.

If you still decide to come by car, here is my advice:

- Download the EasyPark app to pay for parking easily
- Pay close attention to the colour of the lines marking the parking space: those with yellow lines are reserved for locals.
- Also pay attention to the ZTL zones or “traffico limitato” zones, these areas in certain towns and villages are off limits to cars. They are often monitored by cameras, and you’re guaranteed a fine if you decide to cross.

To sum up, I recommend using public transport to get around Liguria - you’ll enjoy your trip even more!

My journey through the most beautiful villages of Liguria, from west to east

So here is my “small” selection of beautiful authentic villages to discover in Liguria, from west to east. There are obviously many more, but I haven’t been able to see them all (yet)!

To find even more inspiration, you can also refer to two labels rewarding the most beautiful villages in Italy, with many Ligurian villages in their lists: the Borghi Più Belli d’Italia (the Most Beautiful Villages in Italy) and the Bandiera Arancione, the Orange Flag awarded by the Italian Touring Club, an





award given for touristic and environmental reasons.

Many villages on my list are included in one and/or the other of these rankings.

Dolceacqua

Our journey begins near the French border, in Dolceacqua, an incredibly well preserved medieval village. Liguria is known for its “caruggi”, twisty streets that have survived time, and Dolceacqua is one of the places where you will find the most picturesque small alleys. One of the peculiarities of Dolceacqua is that part of these streets are covered, and even run underground. This creates a really special atmosphere, since they must be lit, as the light hardly reaches them even during the day. It’s pretty crazy! Dolceacqua is also known internationally for having been the subject of four of Monet’s paintings. The artist chose one of the most beautiful corners of the city, representing the Ponte Vecchio and the village topped by the castle in the background. You’ll find a frame installed in the location where Monet stood painting, and you will quickly see that nothing or almost nothing has changed a century and a half later. You can learn more about Monet’s visit, and the rest of the history of Dolceacqua (and specifically, its special relationship with the Grimaldis of Monaco) by visiting Castello

dei Doria, one of the places not to be missed in Dolceacqua.

Several hikes start from the village, but if you want to see one of the most beautiful scenic views of Dolceacqua without hiking too much, I recommend taking the short path up to the Church of San Bernardo. It’s really stunning, surrounded by olive trees.

Foodies will also be happy in Dolceacqua since the village is full of local specialties, starting with its wine Rossese Dolceacqua, Liguria’s first DOC since 1972, and “michetta”, a traditional small brioche.

Apricale

The small hilltop village of Apricale is just a few kilometers from Dolceacqua, surrounded by mountains. This old village dating from the 10th century is known for its numerous murals. Personally, I called it “the village of cats” because they are really everywhere: in the street, painted on mailboxes, on doors... If you are a cat person like me, you’ll love it!

Apricale also has pretty medieval streets, the famous caruggi, and Castello della Lucertola, an old castle surrounded by hanging gardens, now a museum on the history of Apricale. Opening times are quite limited, but if you find it open, check it out. You will also discover the rather unlikely story of Apricale’s most famous inhabitant: Cristina



Anna Bellomo, also called the “Mata Hari of Apricale”...

The castle and the village church, Chiesa della Purificazione di Maria Vergine, dominate the charming little main square of Apricale, Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II. If you have the opportunity, also taste the specialty of Apricale: pansarola, small fries served with sabayon.

Perinaldo

If you like to walk, you might be happy to know it is possible to reach Perinaldo on foot from Apricale. It's quite a long walk, but it avoids the rather steep road that leads there, where several times I thought

that I was going to get stuck. Whichever option you choose between these two, Perinaldo is really worth a visit!

This small hilltop village is one of the least touristy on this list, and it is known as the village of astronomy. It is the place of origin of a famous Italian scientist and astronomer, Gian Domenico Cassini, who was notably the astronomer of King Louis XIV. In his honour, the village has a lot of street art related to this theme, an observatory and even a miniature solar system on Via Cassini, which is also one of the prettiest alleys in the village.





Finale Ligure

Located in the heart of the Riviera di Ponente, to the west of Genoa, Finale Ligure is a good base to explore this area full of pretty beaches and surrounded by green nature. Finale Ligure actually brings together four different villages: Finale Marina, Finale Pia, Finalborgo and Varigotti.

Finalborgo is the oldest part of Finale Ligure. Located inland, this fortified medieval village is surmounted by a fort which can be visited, and a castle, temporarily closed at the moment. In the Cloisters of Santa Caterina, free of charge, you will find the Archaeological Museum, which will allow you to learn more about the many prehistoric and archaeological sites

discovered around Finale Ligure. You can visit with an audio guide, also available in French. The old theater of Finalborgo, the oldest in Liguria, is also worth a visit - entrance is free.

The other three parts of Finale Ligure are on the seafront. Starting from the west, the first is Finale Marina, the main seaside resort with shops and restaurants. Just after is the village of Finale Pia, developed around an abbey still in activity. Finally, a few kilometers east towards Noli, you'll reach the most charming coastal part of Finale Ligure: Varigotti, an old colourful fishing village and one of the prettiest I have seen in Liguria.

Finale Ligure also has several

beaches which have been awarded the Blue Flag, rewarding the cleanest beaches. I can confirm that bathing in the translucent waters of Finale Ligure was a real pleasure. Even in October, the water was still perfect, and there was not a single algae or piece of rubbish!

Borgio Verezzi

Just west of Finale Ligure you'll reach Borgio Verezzi, which is also a combination of two villages, quite different from one another: Borgio, the modern seaside resort, and the tiny hamlets forming Verezzi on the mountain side.

The most interesting things to see in Borgio are its caves (Grotte di Borgio Verezzi), which are known to be the "most colourful caves in Italy". These caves can only be visited by

guided tour, available in English and Italian.

Verezzi feels much more authentic, with its 4 tiny hamlets (Crosa, Piazza, Roccaro, Pioggio) with stone architecture, separated by old mule paths, "creuze" as they are called locally. The prettiest location is Piazzetta Sant'Agostino with its small church, which offers a panoramic view of the coast.

Climbing a little more, you reach the summit of Mount Orera, which offers many hiking opportunities. Starting from the church of San Martino, I went on a very easy little loop which allowed me to discover several archaeological sites, including an 11th century mill, the site of a settlement dating back to the Bronze age (known as Castellaro), and a dolmen.





Noli

On the other side of Finale Ligure is the ancient Maritime Republic of Noli, a medieval village bordered by a pretty beach and topped by Monte Ursino, an ancient castle. Its center can be easily explored on foot: you will find many medieval buildings there, including several churches, towers and well-preserved fortifications.

As a former Maritime Republic, Noli is still very much focused on fishing today. They continue to maintain an old fishing technique with nets, known as pesca alla sciabica, and you will find a small fisherman's market every morning near Spiaggia dei Pescatori (Fishermen's Beach).

From Noli, you can also go on a very nice hike that connects Noli to Varigotti, the Sentiero del Pellegrino. The path climbs

to the hills surrounding Baia dei Saraceni, and offers stunning views of the coast. It is also possible to make a small but not easy detour to the Grotta dei Falsari, a cave that opens onto the sea.

The Cinque Terre: Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola, Riomaggiore

Classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Cinque Terre are a series of colourful fishing villages, built on steep hills facing the sea, on a very wild stretch of coastline. They are best accessed by boat or train. The villages are also linked by the popular Sentiero Azzurro hiking trails, so you'll need a ticket to access part of the trail. Each village offers something unique, and they are all worth a visit.

Portovenere

Located west of the Golfo dei Poeti (Gulf of Poets), Portovenere is often considered the sixth of the Cinque Terre, since this small colourful village is located right next to them, and it is also part of the same UNESCO-listed complex, alongside its small archipelago of islands.

The village is topped by Castello Doria, a castle offering a panoramic view of the village and the islands. In the lower part of the village, don't miss the Grotto of Byron, a place that inspired the famous English poet, and the Church of San Pietro, perched on a rocky outcrop.

Opposite Portovenere is the Palmaria archipelago, easily accessible by boat from the small port. There are tourist cruises lasting around an hour touring around the archipelago, and fast ferries that drop you off at several places on the island of Palmaria, to enjoy the beaches or hike in the regional natural park that covers the island. The two smaller islands, Tino and Tinetto, can only be seen from the boat.

Lerici

On the other side of the Golfo dei Poeti, Lerici is a seaside resort known to have been very popular with poets and literati over the centuries - Lord Byron, Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio have all visited. The historic center of Lerici is dominated by a 12th century castle, while the bustling

lower town offers plenty of options for eating and drinking. Lerici is surrounded by lesser known coastal villages that are part of the same municipality, as well as several popular beaches. A pleasant seaside stroll will take you easily to San Terenzo, which also has a small castle. Further east are the villages of Fiascherino and Tellaro. I really loved the last one, a small fishing village which has the same charm as the Cinque Terre, without the tourists. Hiking trails in the surrounding mountains will take you to the abandoned villages of Portesone and Barbazzan.

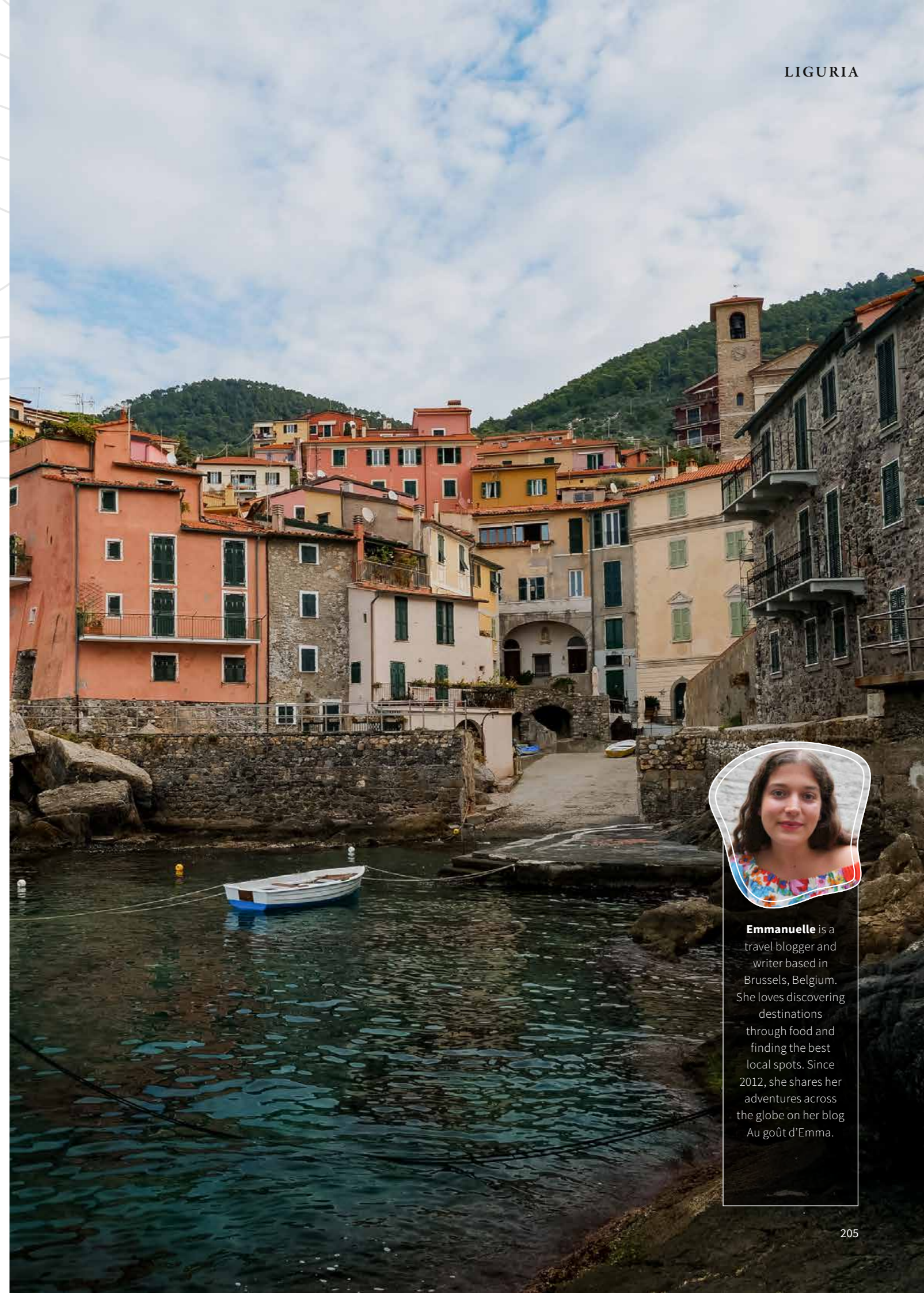
Ameglia

Ameglia brings together a group of small isolated villages, wedged between the Mediterranean and the Magra river, with the Apuan Alps in the background.

The Medieval part of Ameglia is right above the modern village, and it is entirely pedestrianized, which gives it a certain appeal. At the top is the castle of Ameglia, dating back to the 13th century, but only the gardens are open at the moment.

The small hilltop village of Montemarcello is another part of the municipality of Ameglia not to be missed. There is a very authentic atmosphere.

Finally, along the Magra river, you can also stop at the village of Bocca di Magra, where you can see the ruins of a Roman villa.



Emmanuelle is a travel blogger and writer based in Brussels, Belgium. She loves discovering destinations through food and finding the best local spots. Since 2012, she shares her adventures across the globe on her blog *Au goût d'Emma*.



10 Beautiful Places
to Visit in
Lombardy

*One dreamy Italian road trip, ten beautiful borghi in Lombardia
and more gorgeous Italian food than you can shake a bread stick at...*

BY SUZANNE JONES | BLOG THETRAVELBUNNY.COM

I'm just back from an epic tour of Italy, exploring the beautiful borghi of Lombardy, its ancient castles, lakes, mountains and waterfalls. I may also have consumed more than my fair share of incredible Lombardian food and wine. Read on to discover some of the best villages, hamlets and borghi to visit in Lombardy, Italy.

Where is Lombardy?

Lombardy is a region in northern Italy known as Lombardia in Italian. It borders Switzerland to the north and *Emilia-Romagna* to the south. To the east is Trentino-Alto Adige and Veneto and to the west you'll find Piedmont.

The capital of Lombardy is Milan, the cultural and fashion hub of Italy and the area is thought to be the wealthiest in the country.

The Lombardy region is more off the beaten track than other Italian areas. It's much less visited than Veneto, *Tuscany* and Lazio (*Rome*) which makes it less touristy than some parts of Italy.

What is Lombardy famous for?

Lombardy is known for its gorgeous lakes. Although it doesn't have a coastline, it more than makes up for that by having some of the most beautiful lakes in Italy. The territory of

Lombardia also includes the Italian Alps, home to heaps more stunning scenery.

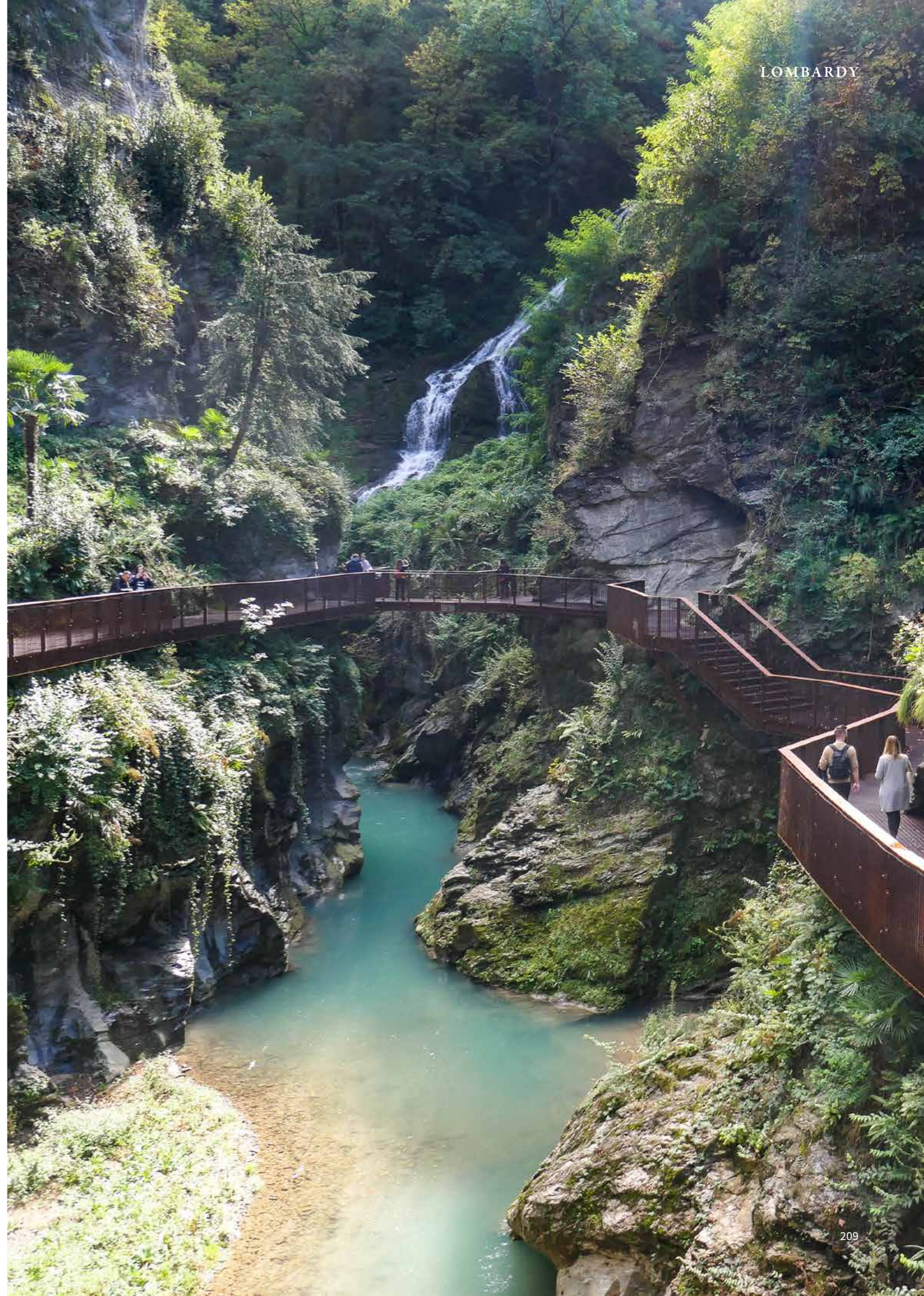
As well as historic villages, towns and cities, Lombardy is home to more UNESCO World Heritage Sites than anywhere else in Italy. The regional gastronomy has an age-old tradition of excellent food and wine production drawn from its rich, fertile landscape. Lombardy is known for its famous Franciacorta sparkling wines, bresaola – a dry cured beef, speciality stuffed pastas, polenta, panettone, cheese and much more.

How to get to Lombardy in Italy?

BY AIR: From outside Italy, Lombardy is easy to reach from all of Europe. Milan is served by three airports; Milan Malpensa, Milan Linate and Orio al Serio International Airport (Bergamo). Choose from a range of budget airlines and frequent flights. We flew from London Gatwick to Milan Malpensa with Wizz Air. Easyjet also have frequent flights to Lombardy.

BY TRAIN: Milan serves as a well located hub for high speed trains across Italy and as a good network for Lombardy.

BY CAR: The A4 connects Turin and Milan with Bergamo, Brescia, the A7 heads south and the A9 goes to Como and the north.



10 Beautiful Places to Visit in Lombardy, Italy

There are so many gorgeous places to visit and amazing things to do in Lombardy that every kind of traveller will find something to love. Whether it's outdoor adventure, nature, amazing food or an immersion in history, art and culture.

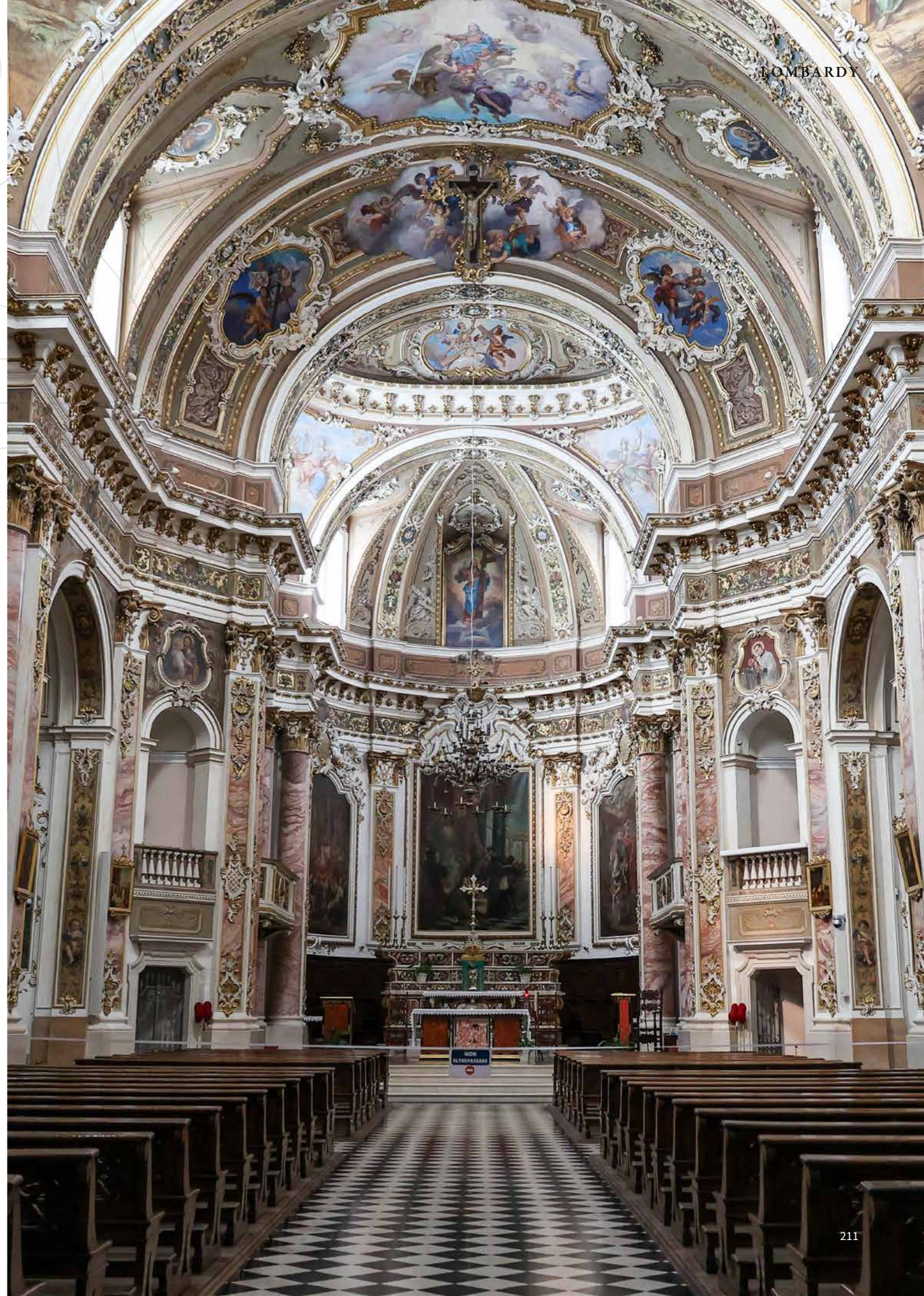
Lombardy's Borghi offer a slower pace of life and an authentic flavour of Italy. I loved exploring these off the beaten track places. They were less touristy and far removed from the busy scenes found in places like Venice, Rome or the packed towns of the Amalfi Coast.

All the villages in this article have been awarded the *Orange*

Flag of the Italian Touring Club, an environmental tourism quality mark for villages offering excellent quality and hospitality. If the borgo is also a member of the most beautiful villages in Italy (*I Borghi più belli d'Italia*), I've mentioned it in the relevant section.

Our route through Lombardy

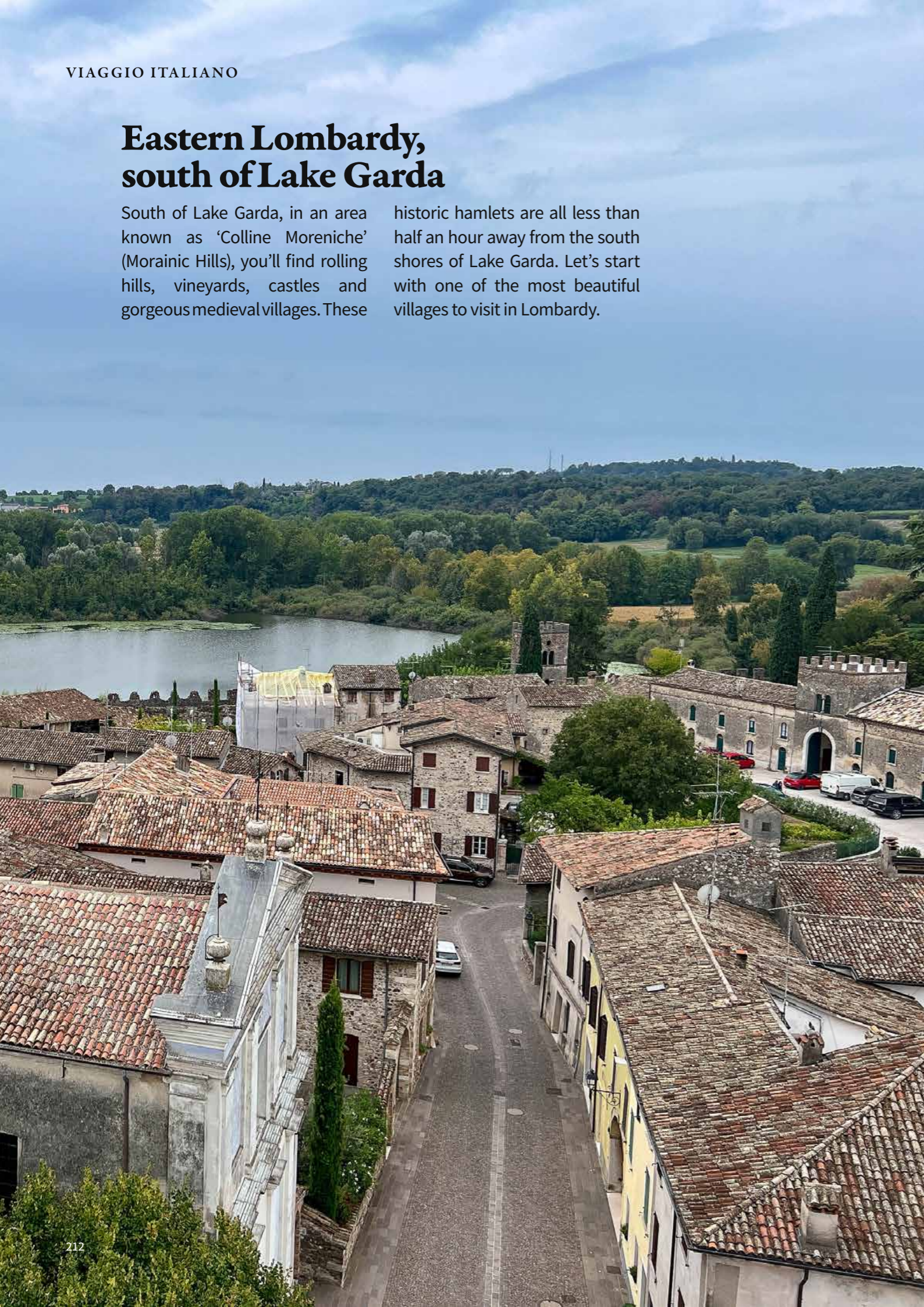
It's logical that I follow our road trip route as I share these beautiful places to visit in Lombardy. We drove to Lake Garda from Milan Malpensa airport and then looped back via Lake Iseo and Lake Como.



Eastern Lombardy, south of Lake Garda

South of Lake Garda, in an area known as 'Colline Moreniche' (Morainic Hills), you'll find rolling hills, vineyards, castles and gorgeous medieval villages. These

historic hamlets are all less than half an hour away from the south shores of Lake Garda. Let's start with one of the most beautiful villages to visit in Lombardy.



Castellaro Lagusello

This charming Lombardian village is a fortified hamlet which sits on a small hill overlooking a natural heart-shaped lake. Surrounded by beautiful countryside, the village has remained unchanged for centuries and you couldn't hope to find a more enchanting place.

Castellaro Lagusello dates back to the 12th century when it was built by the Della Scala (Scaliger) dynasty due to its strategic position.

Many of the castle walls and their walkways are still intact and four of the original ten towers remain along with archways which form the entrance to the hamlet. The best way to explore the village is to wander through its medieval lanes and cobblestoned alleyways. I loved photographing its ancient archways and pretty piazzas.

Catch a glimpse of the heart-shaped lake by climbing the Bell Tower. From this vantage point you'll also see over the terracotta rooftops of the borgo and out over the surrounding countryside and vineyards.

The parish church of San Nicola di Bari houses paintings by Agostino Ugolini and Cignaroli. Don't miss

the 15th-century painted and gilded wooden sculpture of the Madonna and Child.

A short 4.5 km hike or bike ride around the perimeter of the village through the Complesso Morenico (Moraine Complex) of Castellaro Lagusello brings lovely views of the village as well as some Bronze Age discoveries. There's evidence of pile dwellings forming a settlement by the lake. The pile dwellings form part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site covering 19 similar sites in Italy. Castellaro Lagusello is officially one of the most beautiful villages in Italy (*I Borghi più belli d'Italia*) and I can see why. The village has also been awarded the Orange Flag (Bandiere Arancioni) by *Orange Flag of the Italian Touring Club* in recognition of its excellence and quality in tourism.

HOW TO GET TO CASTELLARO LAGUSELLO

The closest major city is Verona at 34.1 km (21.2 miles) away. Castellaro Lagusello is 13.3 km (8.3 miles) from Peschiera del Garda train station - about 23 minutes by car. A hire car is your best option and will also enable you to get to the other villages which are nearby.



Solferino

The 'Spy of Italy' sits on a high hill watching over the village of Solferino and the surrounding landscape. La Rocca is a thousand year old stone tower which sits in woodland and offers outstanding views from the rooftop terrace 23-metres up.

To see the amazing views of Piazza Castello and the the ancient walls of Orazio Gonzaga stronghold below, you'll have to climb La Rocca first. It isn't actually too testing because the way to the top is via wooden ramps

Lined with maps, portraits and relics from the 1859 Battle of Solferino, the opulent Sala dei Sovrani (Sovereigns Room) near the top is worth stopping at for its magnificent portraits. Once at the top the views are incredible over vineyards, foothills and, on a clear day, out to Lake Garda.

At the base of La Rocca is the Red Cross Memorial. The Red Cross was formed after the Battle of Solferino in 1859 by Henry

Dunant, a Swiss businessman, who was horrified at the loss of nearly 40,000 lives during the battle. I had no idea the Red Cross Foundation was this old and learnt loads about this incredible organisation during our visit to Solferino.

For history lovers the museum in the village is a fascinating insight into three of Italy's Battles of Independence. An ossuary dedicated to the lives lost in 1859 makes for a peaceful and reflective visit.

A combined tickets offers entry to La Rocca, Soferino Museum and San Martino tower, a short distance away, for €10.

HOW TO GET TO SOLFERINO, LOMBARDY

The closest major city is Verona at 43.5 km (27 miles) away. The nearest train station is Peschiera railway station. A hire car is your best option and will also enable you to get to the other villages which are nearby.



Ponti sul Mincio

Start your day in Ponti sul Mincio with a coffee in colourful Piazza Parolini, the focal point of the village. The delightful hamlet is enveloped by the verdant valleys and rolling hills of Mincio Regional Park and as well as the gorgeous countryside there's history to discover too.

Scagliero Castle is an imposing hilltop fortification which guards the village below it. We entered the castle via a beautiful war memorial made up of four stone monoliths and headed to the tower. The views over the village rooftops and over Mincio Park are worth the climb. It's hoped that after renovations the entire walkway along the walls will be open to visitors.

The best way to explore Mincio Park is by bike along the Mantua-Peschiera cycle path. We enjoyed a bike ride through quiet country lanes, vineyards and woodland

along mainly flat paths with a few easy undulations. The cycle path took us through some of the most gorgeous scenery in Italy and runs for over 40km right up to the shores of Lake Garda.

Fort Ardietti sits on the cycle path and makes for an interesting visit. The fort built in 1848 remains in excellent condition and we explored the dormitories, cells and casemates as well as wonderful views over the gorgeous scenery of Mincio Park.

HOW TO GET TO PONTI SUL MINCIO

The closest major city is Verona at 32 km (19.9 miles) away. The nearest train station is Peschiera railway station. From there take the number 46 bus which will take around 15-minutes. Alternatively a hire car will enable you to easily visit the other villages in this article.



West of Lake Iseo, Bergamo

Part two of our tour of Lombardy took us west from the Morainic Hills to Sarnico sitting by the water's edge on Lake Iseo. This was followed by a foray into the Bergamo Alps and the pretty mountain villages of Clusone and Gromo.



Sarnico

Lake Iseo is the fourth largest of Italy's great northern lakes after Lake Como, Lake Garda and Lake Maggiore. It's visited mainly by Italian tourists and sits between Garda and Como. Glistening Lake Iseo is far less crowded than its sister lakes with a relaxed vibe and authentic feel. It's surrounded by tree-lined hills and rugged scenery. We loved exploring this pretty lakeside town and its centro storico.

The first thing we did was hike the Forcella-Molere trail which runs high above Lake Iseo through woodland which was just beginning to wear its autumn hues. The trail runs along a ridge 400 meters above the lake, it was quite a steep climb from the village but the views were spectacular.

The historic centre of Sarnico is incredibly pretty with medieval lanes and ancient architecture mixed in with the new. If, like me, you love sampling local produce then check out the shops selling the local Franciacorta sparkling wine, cured meats and cheeses. You could pack up a picnic to take with you on your hike.

In the centre is the Church of San Martino with its white Baroque exterior. We were wowed when we stepped inside and encountered the most beautiful of interiors covered in frescoes. Lungolago means lakefront in Italian and we took a delightful stroll along the waterside just

as the sun was setting. The sky turned pink and the town began to light up reflecting over the lake. The perfect pre-dinner activity before dining at one of the lakeside restaurants.

Boating, kayaking and paddle boarding as well as swimming are some of the activities on offer on Lake Iseo.

There are some lovely small beaches, perfect for relaxing in the sunshine during the summer.

HOW TO GET TO SARNICO

The closest major town is Bergamo 33 km (20.5 miles) away. The bus from Bergamo to the bus station in Sarnico takes around 1.5 hours.

Clusone

From Sarnico we drove along the side of Lake Iseo with views of beautiful Monte Isola as we wound our way along the winding roads. Then, heading north we arrived at the pretty village of Clusone in the heart of the Seriana Valley surrounded by pine forests. I loved exploring this intriguing medieval village where you'll find a colourful fresco around every cobbled corner. But we'll start with the star of the show; the Fanzago planetary clock.

This amazing clock, which sits on Clusone's town hall, was built by mathematician Pietro Fanzago in 1583. It still keeps excellent time and is wound daily, by hand. The clock displays the

days, months, duration of hours of daylight and darkness, phases of the moon and position of the sun and moon in the zodiac. The clock has only one hand which travels anti-clockwise.

When it comes to telling the time, it takes a bit of working out. Once you know that the morning is to the east on the right-hand side and the afternoon is to the west on the left-hand side of the clock it's quite obvious. It took me a while!

At the top of the village you'll find Basilica dell'Assunta with its sweeping staircases, statues and terraces and views across the rooftops and the valley. Inside are some impressive frescoes, paintings and an ornate marble altar but the most intriguing attraction sits on the wall of the Oratorio dei Disciplini opposite the basilica.

The 'Triumph of Death' is an eerie fresco painted between 1484 and 1485 and one of the best preserved of the macabre theme in Europe. Below it the 'Dance of the Macabre' shows a procession of the living hand in hand with skeletons.

A third fresco, of which very little remains portrays the Last Judgement. I found the frescoes very bizarre but strangely mesmerising. It's not all doom and gloom because inside there are more beautiful frescoes depicting the life of Jesus.

I'd recommend taking a tour of the village, which we did, to

learn more about the hamlet's long history. You can do this through the tourist office which is located under the Fanzago clock. Clusone is one of the most fascinating villages in Lombardy, and it even has its own biscotto, produced since 1920. These delicious sweet treats are similar to macarons dipped in dark chocolate. Definitely try some during your visit, or better still treat yourself to a box to take home, although they might not last that long.

HOW TO GET TO CLUSONE

The closest major city to Clusone is Bergamo which is 34.4 km (21.4 miles) away. There's an hourly bus from Bergamo which will take around an hour. If you have a car then the drive is around 35-minutes. There's a large free car park a 5-minute walk from the town centre.

Gromo

Lombardy is famous for its ancient villages and Gromo is one of the best. This delightful little Borgo is officially one of one of the most beautiful villages in Italy (*I Borghi più belli d'Italia*) and I completely agree. This fortified hamlet, a cluster of stone towers and dwellings sits on the side of a mountain in a dramatic valley lined with fir trees. Piazza Dante is the main square where you'll find the town hall and most of Gromo's highlights.

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This amazing clock, which sits on Clusone's town hall, was built by mathematician Pietro Fanzago in 1583.





To discover the hamlet's history visit the Museo delle Armi Bianche e delle Pergamene (Museum of White Arms and Parchments). In the middle ages Gromo was known as 'Little Toledo' due to its production of sidearms, swords and shields. The area's mines and forges produced some of the best weaponry and people travelled from all over Europe to trade.

If you've never had lunch in a castle now's your chance to put that right. Ginami Castle is now home to restaurant Posta al Castello and serves tasty local cuisine as well as commanding views over the whole valley. Gromo is part of Bergamo Orobie Regional Park sitting in one of the most beautiful valleys in the area. It's heaven for outdoor

lovers and I'd recommend spending an hour or two hiking the trail along the gushing Serio River. We saw a heron and loads of birdlife. There's also a new cycle path.

Gromo is definitely one of the most beautiful places to visit in Lombardy, and quite unlike anywhere else you'll visit in Italy.

HOW TO GET TO GROMO

The closest major city is Bergamo at 40.4 km (25.1 miles) away. The S60 bus runs from Bergamo which takes around 1hr 45. There's a stop at Clusone so you could combine a visit to both. Driving will take around 45 minutes from Bergamo - there's free car parking at the bottom of the town. Park up and take the steps up to Piazza Dante.

Almenno san Bartolomeo

There's a very special church in Almenno san Bartolomeo. Rotonda di San Tomè is a charming and unusual Romanesque church. This round church one of only eight rotunda churches in the world was built between 1130 and 1150.

On equinox and solstice days, if the weather's right, sunlight enters through one of the openings and either illuminates the altar or projects the image of a cross on the wall opposite. The nearby Romanesque Park has some excellent hiking and bike trails.

You can discover four other beautiful churches in the area with a range of frescoes and unique features.

Our visit to the Tino Sana

Woodworking Museum and journey into the world of wood absolutely wowed us! We weren't expecting such a fabulous museum and the backstory about the Tino Sana, the man behind the museum was just as interesting.

I highly recommend a visit to the museum but do check opening times on the [Tino Sana website](#) as they are often only open in the mornings.

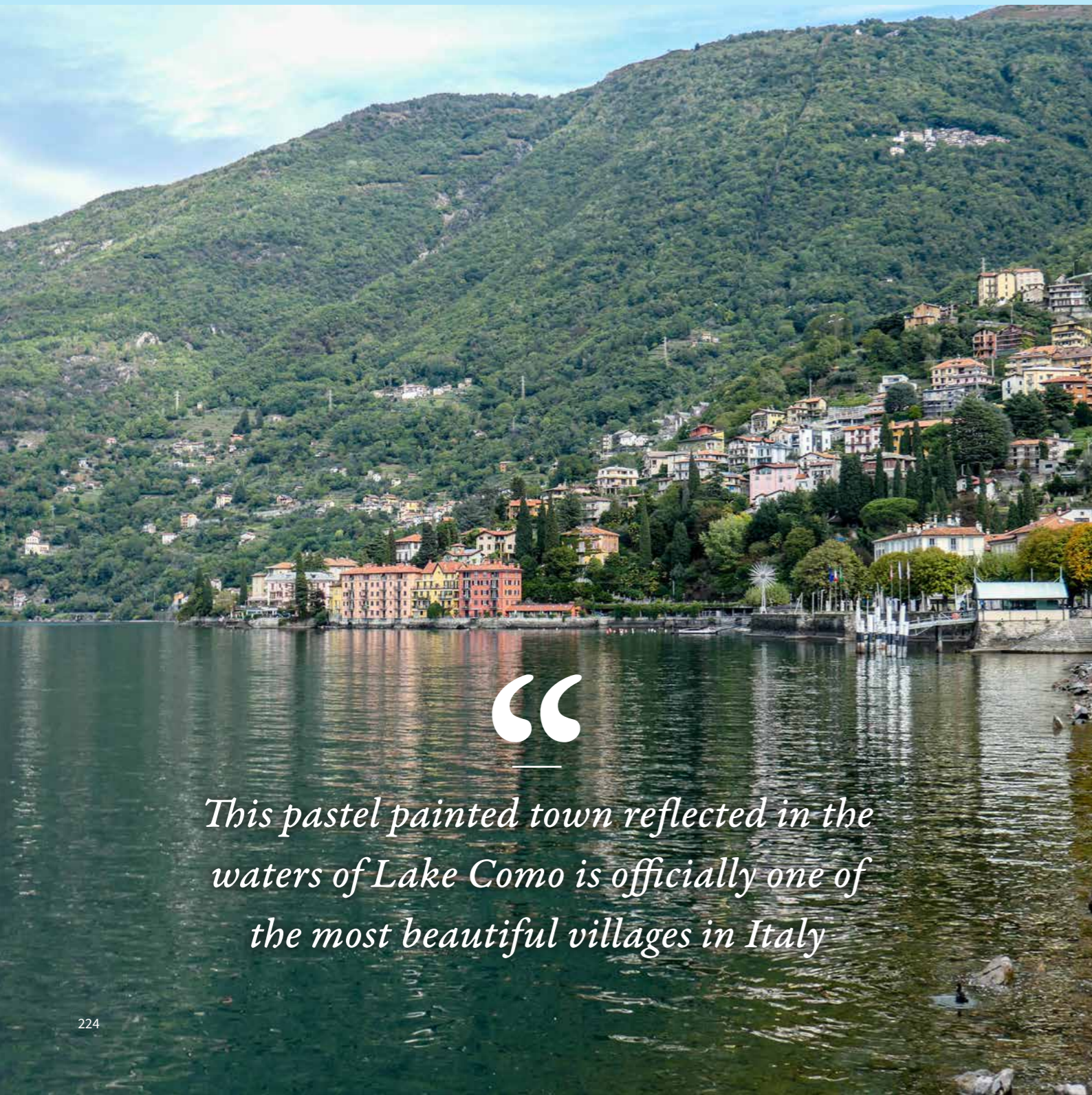
HOW TO GET TO ALMENNO SAN BARTOLOMEO

The closest major city is Bergamo at 13 km (8.1 miles) away which is less than 15 minutes by car. There is a limited bus service from Bergamo which takes 46 minutes although there are only 3 buses per day.

Northern Lombardy and explorations around Lake Como

You'd have to look hard to find anything more picture-perfect than a charming Italian village overlooking a lake, although an Italian village in a gorgeous mountain setting with a river and waterfalls runs a close second.

I'm bringing you both so it's not a choice you'll have to make. Plus there's a third incredibly tiny borgo I just had to share with you. What's more, they're all within easy striking distance of each other.



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This pastel painted town reflected in the waters of Lake Como is officially one of the most beautiful villages in Italy

Bellano

Oh, Bellano you beauty! This pastel painted town reflected in the waters of Lake Como is officially one of the most beautiful villages in Italy (Borghi più belli d'Italia). I can see why. The main attraction in Bellano is L'Orrido, a deep gorge that splits the village in two. The gorge was created about 15 million years ago by the rushing waters of the Pioverna River and the Adda glacier. We walked over the gorge on a series of walkways and bridges feeling the thunderous rush of water beneath our feet.

The water has eroded and smoothed the rocks to form dramatic gullies and canyons. There's a pretty waterfall, turquoise pools and a tropical feel with ferns sprouting from the canyon walls.

From the top of the gorge we accessed the famous "Sentiero del Viandante" and ancient mule track which runs for 68 km connecting the villages of the valley. As you can imagine the views are spectacular. We hiked a small stretch but wished we'd had time to do more.

The ferry terminal in Bellano means you can visit many of Como's other nearby lakeside towns and villages although we found a much reduced service

in early October.

Whilst in Bellano take time for lakeside strolls, relaxing on the small beaches and explore the ancient archways, medieval houses and baroque piazzas. The black and white marbled church of San Nazzaro and Celso in Piazza san Giorgio is worth a peek as is the Church of San Marta opposite where you can see the wooden 'gruppo della pietà' by Giovanni Angelo Del Maino.

HOW TO GET TO BELLANO

The closest major city is Milan at 81.3 km (50.5 miles). If you're driving this will take around 1.5 hours (with tolls). There's plenty of paid parking once you reach Bellano.

Bellano has a train station, Bellano Tartavalle Terme, which serves regional trains on the Lecco-Colico-Sondrio route as well as the RegioExpress trains operating between Milan-Lecco-Sondrio-Tirano. There is a regular bus service to and from Bellano from the surrounding towns and major cities.

Bellano also has a ferry terminal which is convenient if you're staying in a nearby town. Check the [Navigazione Laghi website](#) for boat times. When we visited in early October there was a reduced service.

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*I know we shouldn't have
favourites but I absolutely fell
in love with Chiavenna*



Chiavenna

I've saved the best for last and fittingly, Chiavenna was also the last stop on our tour of Lombardy's villages. I know we shouldn't have favourites but I absolutely fell in love with Chiavenna which has to be one of the most beautiful places to visit in Lombardy.

Chiavenna sits north of Lake Como at the foot of the Maloja Pass. The town is surrounded by a horseshoe of mountains with dazzling scenery in every direction. It sits on the Mera River with an ancient bridge and colourful buildings lining the

water's edge. Oh, and there're waterfalls too. Hooked yet?

I loved our visit to the beautiful *Palazzo Vertemate Franchi*. This stunning summer palace is alive with exquisite frescoes, inlaid wooden ceilings and beautiful grounds. The fact that we visited on a glorious day just added to the magic and our wonderful guide Aurora brought the history of the villa to life.

A few minute's drive away are the Acquafraggia Waterfalls, the centrepiece of a nature reserve with a range of hiking trails. The double waterfall drops 150 metres into the Mera River and

is absolutely spectacular. We absolutely loved the traditional foods of Chiavenna and had a memorable meal in one of the Crotti restaurants, *Crotto Ubiali*. The Crotti are small caves in the hillside which have a constant breeze circulating through them called the Sorél. It has a steady year round temperature of 4-8 degrees, nature's natural refrigerators, perfect for preserving cheese, cured meats, bresaola, and of course wine.

We sat on the sunny terrace and feasted on a meal of cold cuts, deep-fried Bitto cheese, polenta zola, succulent ribs and Gnocchetti di Chiavenna – my absolute favourite meal of our visit to Lombardy.

And then there's Bresaola. As luck would have it we were in Chiavenna for the annual Bresaola festival (Di della Bresaola). Yes, more food! We took a tour of the village stopping at each of the Bresaola stalls sampling paper thin slices of lean, tender beef which had been rubbed with salt and herbs and aged for 2-3 months. The flavours were outstanding.

During your visit you should also explore the historical centre of Chiavenna. Discover the cloistered grounds and bell tower of San Lorenzo Monastery and the giant Ollare stone font. A visit the Paradise Botanical Archaeological Park which sits across two hills high above the

valley offers outstanding views over the town.

HOW TO GET TO CHIAVENNA

The nearest major city is Milan at 124 km (75 miles) and it's a scenic 2-hour drive to Chiavenna following the eastern shore of Lake Como.

The train journey takes about 2.5 hours from Milan and you'll need to change trains at Colico. Only regional trains reach Chiavenna so bookings are not needed. The train from Bellano takes just over 1.5 hours.

Corenno Plinio

I'm ending with this teeny tiny borgo which was a short walk from where we stayed in Dervio, a few miles up from Bellano, on the lakeside. It was so pretty that it seemed wrong not to share. I'll be honest, there's not much to do here except spend time wandering through the gorgeous medieval alleyways which is like stepping into the past. On the lake there's the tiniest of harbours and the most beautiful of views. Italian charm at its absolute best.

I hope this article has given you a taste of Lombardy and inspired you to visit its villages for yourself. There's a vast range of things to see and do and far more than I could possibly share with you here but I hope this has given you an idea of the possibilities that Lombardy holds.



Suzanne is the creator behind The Travelbunny, a website that explores worldwide destinations, local cuisines and unique cultural experiences. She has worked in the travel industry for 20-years and well as combining her travels with a love of food, the outdoors and nature, Suzanne is an avid photographer.



13 Beautiful Places
to Visit in
Marche

From exploring beautiful medieval villages and delving into the Frasassi Caves, to truffle hunting in Acqualagna and hiking in Lame Rosse, these are the best places to visit in Marche, Italy



BY CHLOE GUNNING & MACCA SHERIFI
 BLOG WANDERLUSTCHLOE.COM | ANADVENTUROUSWORLD.COM

The Marche region isn't one of Italy's most touristy areas. It's got an authentic feel and a slow pace of life. It feels worlds away from the crowds of Venice or Rome, or the chaotic roads in Naples! In the Marche region in Central Italy, daily life revolves around family, agriculture and food. As a tourist, I loved it! This was my eleventh trip to Italy. I've visited plenty of touristy cities and regions, in addition to a few very special hidden gems. For this trip I was excited to dive deep into a region I knew very little about.

What Is Marche Famous For?

Le Marche (pronounced Mar-kay by the locals) is popular for three reasons: the historic hilltop towns known as borghi, the regional gastronomy which includes fresh truffles and local pastas, and the spectacular Frasassi Caves. In terms of the landscapes, Le Marche is a really varied region of Italy, spanning 9,344 km². To the east is the Adriatic Sea,

along which the majority of people live (which includes the region's capital Ancona). There you'll find the sandy beaches and resorts that are popular for summer holidays.

The rest of the Marche region is covered in pretty countryside and rolling hills, with more dramatic mountainous scenery on the western side. Throughout you'll find rivers, lakes gorges and caves. Essentially, Le Marche offers the best of Italy in one region! My favourite thing? The fact it's really not that touristy, so if you plan a trip out of peak summer, you could have some of these stunning places all to yourself!

Where Is Marche?

Le Marche is located in Central Italy. To the north are Emilia-Romagna and San Marino, and to the south is Abruzzo. To the west of Marche are Tuscany, Umbria and Lazio. The region is further divided into five provinces: Ancona, Ascoli Piceno, Fermo, Macerata, Pesaro and Urbino.



How To Get There?

If you're travelling from outside Italy, the easiest airport for the Marche region is Ancona. Ryanair offers direct flights from London Stansted. There are also ferries from Greece, Croatia and Albania to Ancona. Alternatively, you can catch a train or drive to the region. The E55 motorway goes right through Marche. This is a huge route which stretches from

Helsingborg in Sweden all the way to Kalamáta in Greece!

How Long To Spend In Marche?

This really depends on how much you want to do! I'd suggest a minimum of 5-6 days, ideally splitting your time between the east of the region and the west, for a great mix of coast and mountain time.

13 Most Beautiful Places To Visit In Marche, Italy

Now you have a little background on what to expect from this region, it's time to share the most beautiful places to visit in Marche! From fortified towns and beaches, to gorges and caves, you're guaranteed to find some spots that appeal to you.

Frasassi Caves

I've visited amazing caves all over the world, but the Frasassi Caves win the award for being the most impressive! They were discovered by a group of young cavers in 1971, and shortly after were opened as a tourist attraction.

To visit, you'll need to book a ticket for a guided tour. These run throughout the day. Most are in Italian but there are a few in English (our English tour was at 11.40am but check in advance!)

On the tour you'll learn all about the discovery of the caves, the geology of the formations and plenty of fascinating facts too. The first room is the Ancona Room which is absolutely vast. It feels cavernous and empty, while paradoxically being filled with huge stalagmites and stalactites. I was amazed to hear that the room is large enough to fit the Duomo of Milan inside! It felt big, but not on that sort of

scale. The light definitely plays tricks on you!

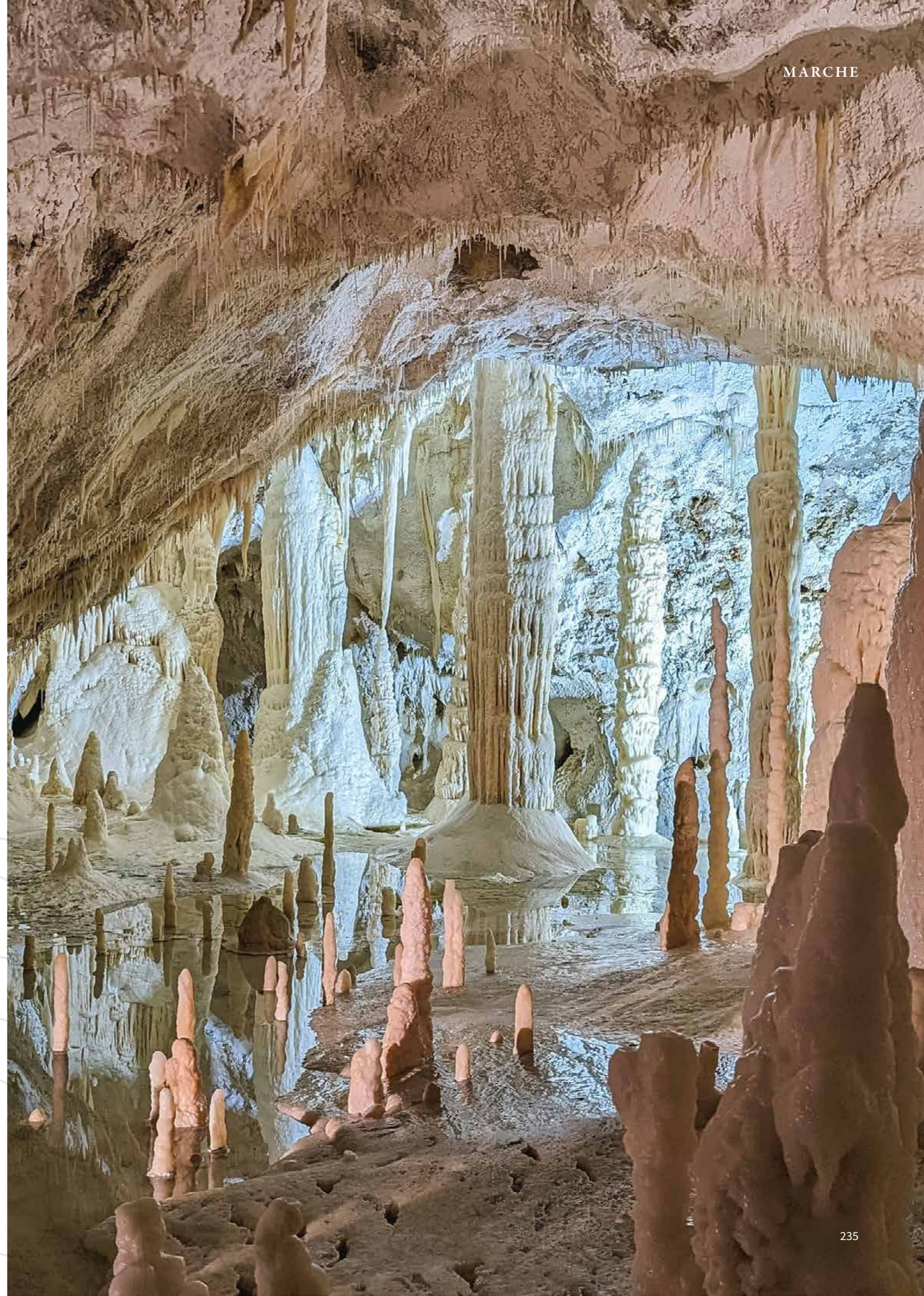
There are five rooms you can visit on a guided tour. Another favourite of mine was the Sala Candeline (Candle Hall), where thin stalagmites sit on top of a natural lake, creating amazing reflections.

The Frasassi Caves also hold special caving tours (think hard hats and practical shoes!) for those feeling more adventurous! I can definitely see why this is one of Italy's top tourist attractions. The Frasassi Caves are without a doubt one of the most beautiful places to visit in Marche.

Frasassi Gorge

As you drive towards the caves, you'll pass through this amazing gorge. On one side of the road flows the River Sentino, which is a vibrant shade of green. There are plenty of stunning spots for photography in this area, particularly by this bridge.

A highlight in this area is the Tempio del Valadier, a temple which is in a unique location, inside one of the gorge's caves. It dates back to 1828 and has a unique octagonal-shape. There are also a few places you can go rock climbing and rafting close by, so it's ideal for adventure lovers visiting Marche!





In the small town close to the caves is the stunning Romanesque church, San Vittore delle Chiuse. This church has a backdrop of Frasassi Gorge, which I thought was absolutely beautiful.

Gradara

I mentioned that Marche is famous for its spectacular hilltop towns and villages, and Gradara is one of the best. With the nickname “Capital of the Middle Ages”, it attracts tourists because of its 12th century castle and medieval city walls. I’d recommend going inside Gradara’s fortress as it’ll give you a better understanding of the town’s history. You’ll also find out about the tragic love story of Paolo and Francesca from the 1200s, which is associated with castle. As a quick lowdown, Francesca married Gianciotto, but fell in love with his younger brother Paolo. Gianciotto found out and killed them both. Then Italian poet Dante immortalised this tale in his Divine Comedy a century later.

There are references to this story throughout Gradara, with osteria’s bearing their names, a ‘lover’s walk’ you can follow through the town, and even the Paolo and Francesca woods just below the castle.

Walking Gradara’s medieval city walls offers lots of amazing

views over the town and the countryside. There are a few towers along the route, giving the elevation you need to really take in the majestic size and shape of that fortress. You’ll also get a good view of the clock tower by the entrance to the town.

Lake Fiastra

Lago di Fiastra is another of the most beautiful places to visit in Marche, Italy. This stunning lake is located towards the southeast of the region, within the Sibillini Mountains Natural Park. It’s surrounded by pretty mountain peaks and rugged scenery, with the pristine lake in the centre.

Lake Fiastra’s water is pristine, glittering with a turquoise shade when the sun is shining. In peak summer months, you can rent kayaks and pedalos here. It’s also a popular spot for swimming, sunbathing and fishing. We hiked around the perimeter, stopping to take plenty of photos along the way.

Lame Rosse

If you’re enamoured by the beautiful photos of Lake Fiastra, you’ll be excited to hear that this is also the starting point for a very special hike. The hike from Lago di Fiastra to Lame Rosse takes you from a panoramic viewpoint by the lake, through woodlands and forests, to the

epic russet rocks of Lame Rosse. Lame Rosse is a collection of rock formations in a shade of orange, that look quite unlike any landscape you expect to see on Planet Earth! They'd be more fitting on Mars! The view reminded me of others I'd seen in the Atacama Desert in Chile and in Cappadocia in Turkey. The hike from the car park took us around one hour. It has a few steep sections, in particular the final stretch when you start to see the rocks. Here, there's a looser scree on the steep ground, making it a challenging final hundred metres!

Acqualagna

If you're a foodie like me, you'll have ordered a few truffle dishes over the years. The luxurious fungus is a sought-after delicacy, and adds a rich flavour to any recipe. Acqualagna in the Marche region is known as the truffle capital. There are nine varieties of truffle found in Italy, and four are found in the Marche region. In the countryside surrounding the truffle-mad town are several cultivated truffle grounds. These are areas where symbiotic plants and trees have been planted, in the hope of encouraging black and white truffles to grow. We went on a truffle tour with a local truffle hunter named Paolo and his two dogs. He gave such a fascinating insight into how the

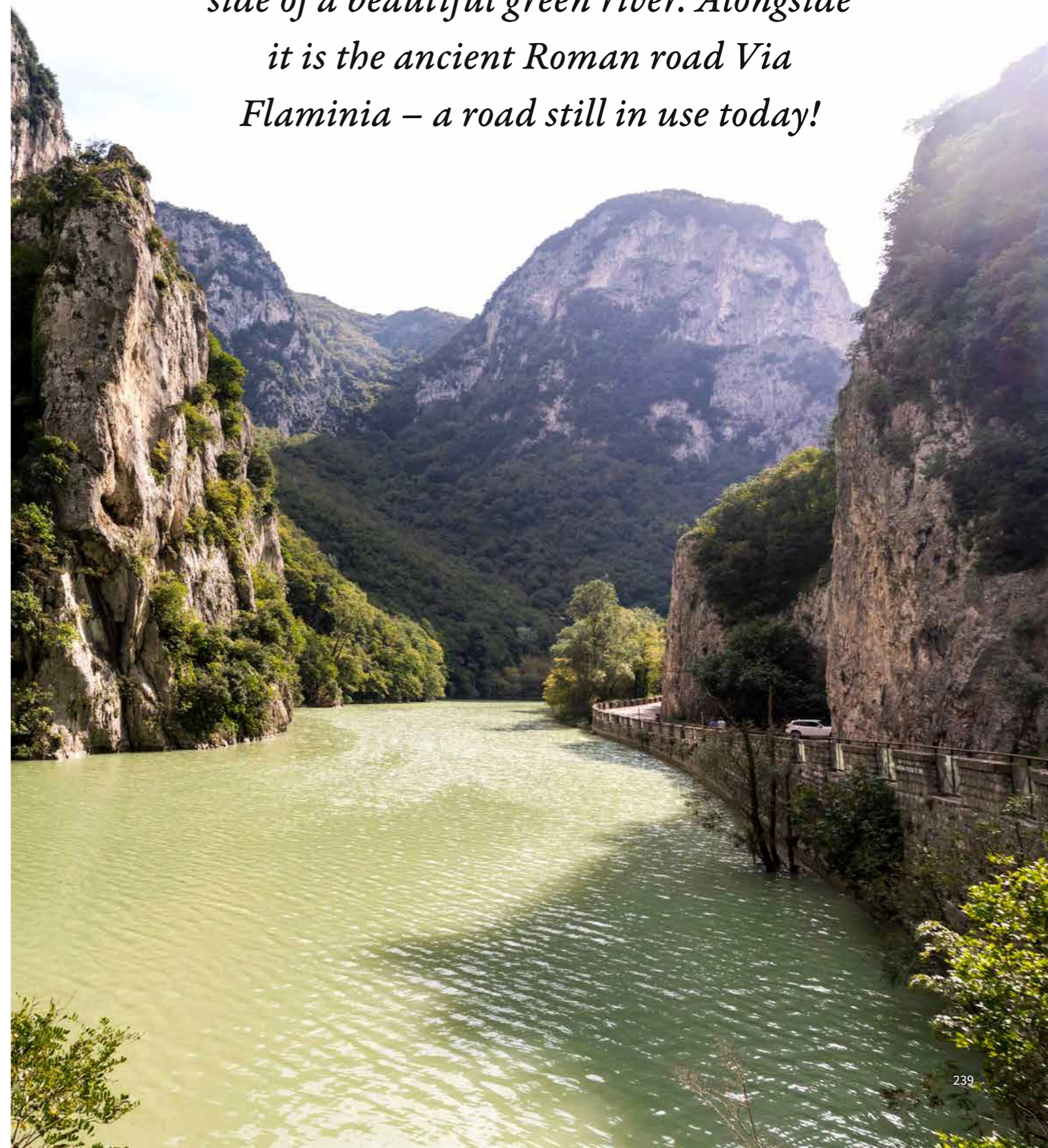
truffles grow, what they need, and how they're discovered. The dogs are trained for a year or two, and can sense when the truffles are ready to be dug up. Within a few minutes of arriving in the truffle ground, the pups had sniffed out a beautiful black truffle. They were so quick! This happened over and over again, until Paolo had a bag of 6 or 7 black truffles. After learning about the unique ingredient, we simply had to go and try some! We visited Paolo's family restaurant and ordered some delicious plates of truffle pasta. I've never seen so much shaved truffle on one dish! I guess when you can pop out and find them on your own truffle ground, you can be a little more generous!

Furlo Pass

If you're visiting Acqualagna, I'd recommend spending an hour or two at the Gola del Furlo. This is a large canyon with huge rocks either side of a beautiful green river. Alongside it is the ancient Roman road Via Flaminia – a road still in use today! You can park at one end and stroll along, taking in the views of the water and the huge steep cliffs. It's worth noting though that the entire walking route follows the road, so it's not exactly a nature walk as some of the photos might have you thinking!

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A large canyon with huge rocks either side of a beautiful green river. Alongside it is the ancient Roman road Via Flaminia – a road still in use today!



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This traditional hilltop town is so pretty, with its yellow stone buildings giving the impression of being layered on top of one another



We visited in autumn when unfortunately a lot of the activities had finished for the season. However, I'd love to kayak here. It's a stunning spot and I saw some amazing photos of people on the water!

Serra San Quirico

Serra San Quirico is another of the most beautiful places to visit in Marche. This traditional hilltop town is so pretty, with its yellow stone buildings giving the impression of being layered on top of one another. It's not a place packed full of things to do. It's just a pretty spot where life moves slowly.

There are picturesque views of the countryside all around too. During the season we visited, there were horse chestnut trees cascading conkers all over the streets and white doves fluttering through the air. It definitely had a bit of magic to it!

I loved exploring the cobbled streets, taking in the views of ancient stone archways and pretty piazzas. For history lovers there are historic churches and towers to admire. But, to be honest I'd just recommend a little stop here to appreciate the beauty of the town!

Fossombrone

This pretty Marche town is located right on the Metauro River, with a famous bridge

and ancient colourful buildings dotted along the riverside. It's a gorgeous spot for photos, particularly if you cross the river and walk down to the water's edge to view the town through the archway of the bridge.

Parco San Bartolo

Have you heard about the Strada Panoramica? It's a 23.4 km route that leads from Gabicce Mare to Pesaro on Marche's northern coast. It runs through Parco San Bartolo, a gorgeous area for nature, with sweeping cliffs, pristine hidden beaches and vineyards. The road undulates and features a lot of hairpin bends and is popular with drivers, cyclists and adrenaline-loving motorcyclists!

We went on a beautiful coastal walk in this part of the Marche region, starting just outside the pretty village of Casteldimezzo and walking to Fiorenzuola di Focara. Gazing out at the tranquil turquoise waters, I couldn't quite believe we had the route pretty much to ourselves. It feels like such a hidden gem in Marche!

Torre Di Palme

Torre Di Palme is without a doubt one of the prettiest villages in Marche. Unlike some of the other gorgeous towns I've mentioned (e.g., Gradara and Serra San Quirico), this one

is really close to the Adriatic so offers sparkling sea views. I found this place absolutely enchanting. With its narrow alleys, terraces dotted with traditional Italian restaurants, historic churches and vivid magenta sprays of bougainvillea cascading down the ancient buildings, it has charm in abundance. I'd recommend walking to the panoramic terrace at the far end of the town, where you can really admire the sea views.

Moresco

You'll spot Moresco from miles away before you reach the tiny place itself. It's another fortified medieval town, perched on top of a hill. It's absolutely stunning, with a huge octagonal tower at the forefront, and old walls snaking their way around the edge. Below Moresco are rolling hills peppered with vineyards, farmland and other small villages. Other things to do near Moresco include a trip to Cantina Di Ruscio winery. You can pop into the shop for a quick taste, or book onto an official wine tasting experience.

You could also walk from Moresco to Monterubbiano, the neighbouring town. This has a cute central area with a main piazza and a great little spot for an aperitivo.

Sarnarno Waterfalls

Just outside the picturesque town of Sarnarno, on the edge of the Sibillini Mountains Natural Park, are several waterfalls. One of the most spectacular is Cascata dell'Antico Mulino del Piano. The path from the main road to the waterfall only takes around 10 minutes on foot. It's steep, so go at an easy pace, especially on the way back up! On the way down you'll pass the 15th century mill after which the waterfall is named. There are steps to the waterfall itself, and from there you can take some amazing photos! This is definitely one of the most beautiful places to visit in Marche, Italy, and it's lovely that it's so close to the famous ski town of Sarnarno too. Many people swim here in the warmer months, or follow the Via delle Cascate Perdute trail, which connects three of the towns' waterfalls.





I hope you've enjoyed reading about some of the best places to visit in Marche. To be honest, after such a lovely trip to the region, it was difficult to narrow this list down to just a few! If you're looking for other beautiful places to visit in Marche, here are a few more to add to your list:

- **GENGA** (near Frasassi Caves)
- **CAMPOFILONE** (famed for its maccheroncini pasta)
- **PESARO** (home of Rossini)
- **FERMO** (with its Duomo and Piazza del Popolo)
- **MONTE CONERO** (near Ancona)
- **URBINO** (a UNESCO World Heritage Site where you can see the works of Piero della Francesca)
- **RECANATI** (with associations to 18th century poet Giacomo Leopardi)
- **MONTE VETTORE** (the highest mountain in the Sibillini Mountain range)



Chloe and Macca run the award-winning travel blogs Wanderlust Chloe and An Adventurous World. They're passionate about sharing stories and travel guides from destinations around the world, and inspiring others to follow in their footsteps. Italy is a country they have travelled extensively over the years. From exploring the lakes and mountains in the north, to sailing around Sicily and feasting in Puglia, Italy is a country that draws them back time and time again.



THE 7 NICEST VILLAGES

IN

Molise

The last undiscovered region



BY MILOU VAN ROON | BLOG EXPLORISTA.NL

Do you think Italy is too touristy?! Not if you try your best to find lesser-visited spots. That's how I ended up in Molise – the last undiscovered region of Italy. So undiscovered that Italians have joked for years that the region doesn't really exist. It does indeed, although tourists are a rarity there, and you don't really have big cities either. That is precisely the charm of Molise: the region is full of cute little villages, lovely bars and restaurants, and beautiful nature. These were my favourite villages.

Agnone

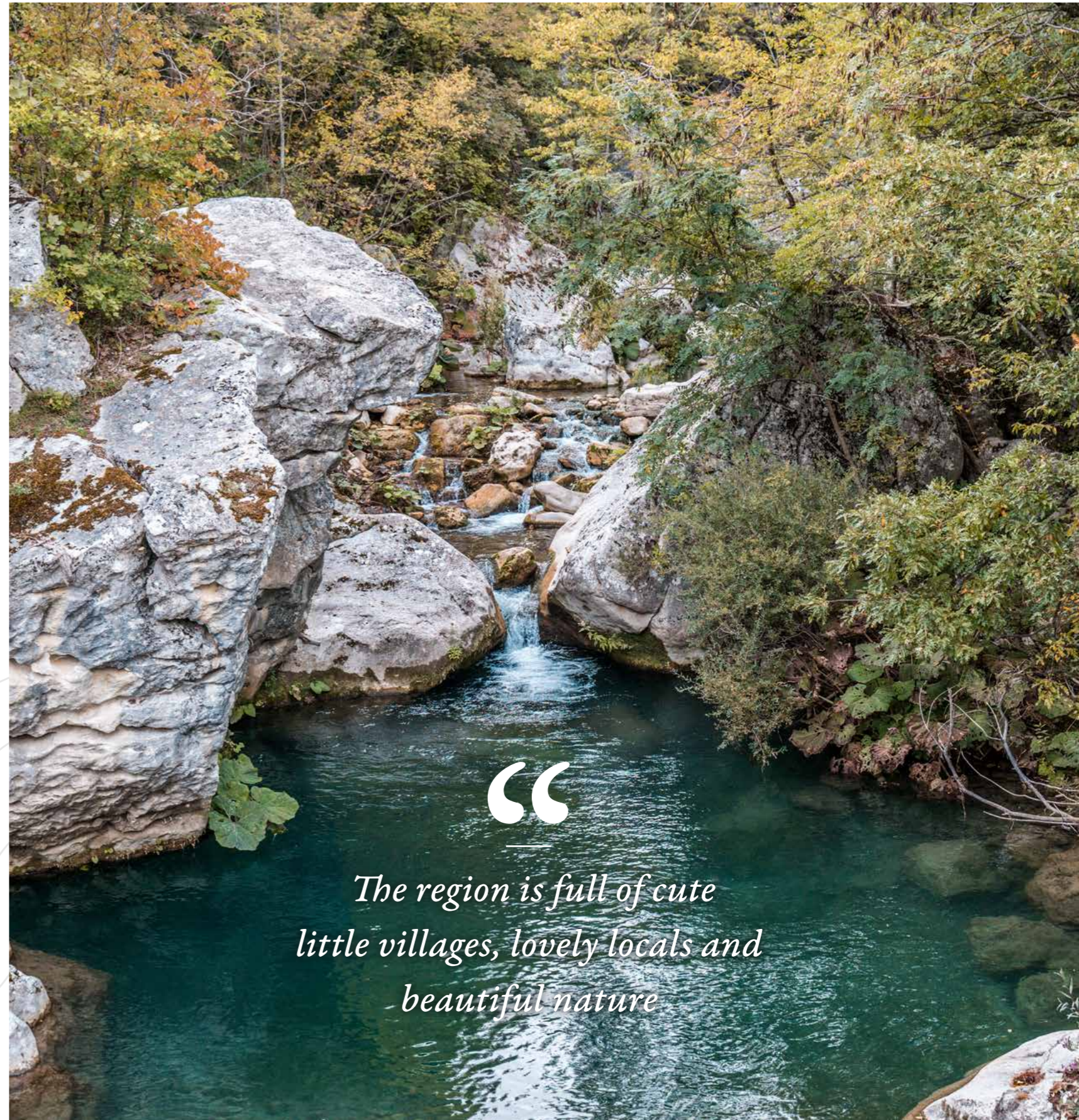
My favourite village in Molise was Agnone. And not just because of the sights, but because of the people who live there. In general I found the people in Molise very sweet and helpful, especially in Agnone. Although not many people spoke English, that didn't stop anyone from helping me or sharing their enthusiasm for their village.

For example, I was spontaneously given a free tour of the Marinelli bell foundry, Agnone's most important institution, because I did not know that you had to book English tours in advance. This is Italy's oldest family business, which has been casting bells since the 14th century. The bell foundry is still active, and during the tour you can see craftsmen at

work. It is magical to admire the traditional process, and you can feel the history and respect for tradition as you walk around.

I was invited to meet the mayor at the town hall, who spoke extensively about the history of Agnone. And in the beautiful library of the Church and Convent of San Francesco, I was enthusiastically shown around by tour guide Antonio. He said that the library is one of the most important in the world because of its collection on the development of printing. In the past, Agnone had a strong connection with Venice, and for this reason many important historical books ended up in Agnone. Even if you don't care much about printing, the building is still worth a visit for its beautiful hand-painted ceilings with Baroque religious images.

The next day I ran into Antonio at a viewpoint. I was taking pictures of the beautiful valley, with vineyards, beautiful forests and a bubbling brook. And when I turned around, I suddenly saw Antonio standing in the doorway of his house. He happily started chatting to me in Italian, which I don't understand, of course, and invited me in. The hospitality in this village was really incredible! The nearby Cascade del Verrino are also worth a visit. The beautiful waterfalls are a short drive away, and when I was there, I had them all to myself.



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The region is full of cute little villages, lovely locals and beautiful nature

Trivento

When I arrived in Trivento, I decided to fully enjoy the village feeling. And so I leisurely strolled up the steps of the Church of San Nicola, stopping every now and then to take a photo, or take off my coat because of the warm October sun.

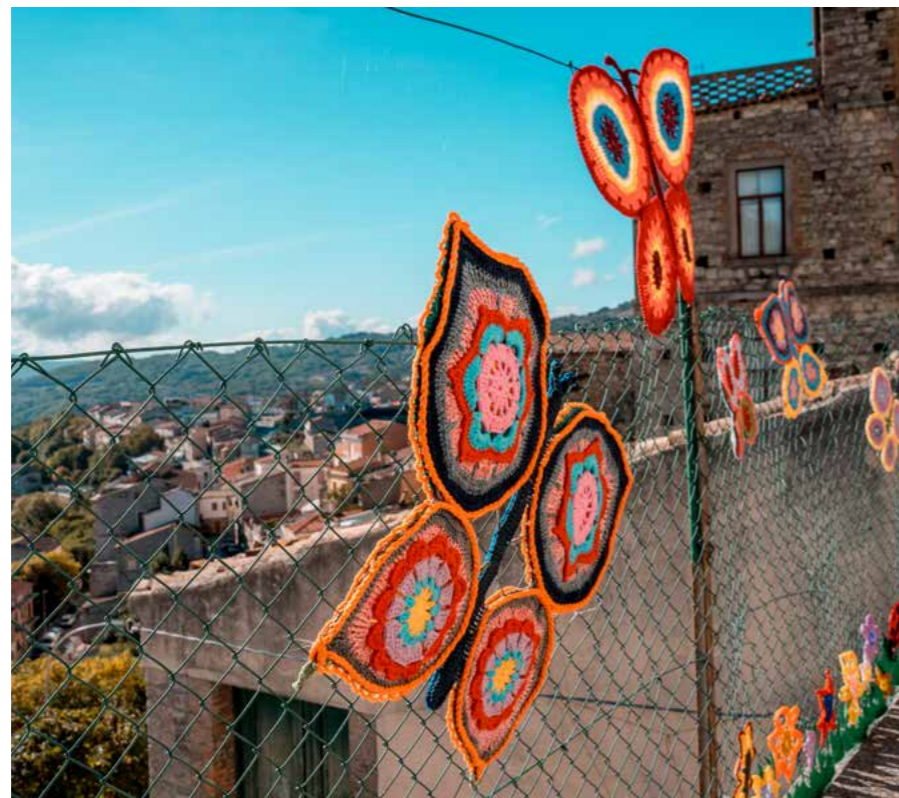
The first thing I came across was the Balcone di Largo Porta Maggiore viewpoint, where you can see a crocheted Christmas tree all year round. In fact, it's not the only time you see colourful yarns in the village. Trivento is in fact the "capital of crochet street art", and holds a "yarn bombing festival" every year.

That's not the only street art you'll come across, there are also some modern murals that

contrast enormously with the historic old town, but look extra cool for that.

Trivento is really centuries old, the first people to live there were the Samnites, who settled as early as 1000 BC. In the village you will find various Roman remains, including paving stones with inscriptions.

The best way to discover Trivento is to stroll around. Close to the Romanesque cathedral I suddenly heard singing, and moments later a group of nuns came around the corner, hand-in-hand with a group of children singing cheerfully. They waved at me as I walked. I wondered, where do you still find scenes like this? In the small villages of Molise.





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*My favorite aspect of sleepy
Capracotta was its location
high in the Apennines*

Capracotta

My favorite aspect of sleepy Capracotta was its location high in the Apennines. The ride there was truly spectacular. The car slowly made its way up the back roads, and around every bend there was another beautiful view over the valley. Cows grazed slowly in the meadows along the road, their bells ringing in the wind. A bird of prey flew overhead.

After the last bend, Capracotta came into sight, surrounded by forests in the most beautiful Autumn yellows and reds. A gift of the passing seasons. The main attraction towered above the rest of the village: the cathedral of Capracotta. Not only is it worth a visit because of the beautiful view that you can enjoy over the rest of the village, but also because of the special art inside - abstract paintings depicting the various key moments in the crucifixion of Jesus. I have never come across a church with such modern art, and I was surprised to find it in a small village like Capracotta.

Just outside Capracotta, you will find the Giardino della Flora Appenninica di Capracotta. Located at an altitude of 1500 meters, it is a botanical garden committed to the protection of local plant and flower species. It is one of the highest botanical gardens in Italy. From there, you also have a beautiful and dramatic view of Capracotta.

Pescopennataro

The village of Pescopennataro only has 349 inhabitants. Perhaps it was a bit optimistic to think that I would find a restaurant open for lunch on a weekday in October. Luckily, the people there were also very nice.

The curious owner of a grocery store opened his doors especially for us. He called some restaurants in the area to ask if they were open, and when they weren't, he grabbed some bread, ham and cheese and started making a picnic for us. He added some grapes and a drink and pointed us to the church on top of the hill. "There you have a beautiful view for lunch."

And so we climbed a steep hill with our bag full of food. The church itself was closed, but that didn't matter much to us. We came for the view, and it turned out to be amazing. There I was, quietly nibbling on my sandwich, looking out over the forested mountains on one side, and the Adriatic Sea on the other. There was no one else all around.

After lunch, we strolled through the streets before driving back to Agnone, a quick half hour drive. In the evening, we walked into a random restaurant in Agnone, and who did we see sitting there? The owner of the Pescopennataro grocery store. That's how small the world in Molise is.



Larino

As you walk through the sleepy center of Larino, you might not think that the village was once one of the most important Roman cities, with over 100,000 inhabitants. Indeed, it was - located on the junction between Abruzzo and Puglia, Larino was an important place for trade. You can see that Larino, or Larinum as it was then called, was an important Roman city by visiting the ruins of the amphitheater. There were only about two hundred amphitheaters in the entire Roman Empire, and the one in Larino could hold about 5,000 spectators.

In the Museo Civico you can still find many remains from the Roman period, of which the mosaic floors are the most important. Another activity is to visit the Museo Diocesano di Larino where you can play an escape game based on a true love story from the 17th century. Through the story you will learn more about the history of Larino. The game will soon be available in English. Just around the corner, you'll see a placard reminding you that Larino is also important from a religious point of view: the world's first seminary was founded here.

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You might not think that the village was once one of the most important Roman cities, with over 100,000 inhabitants





Guglionesi

I spent only a few hours in tiny Guglionesi. Although the village only has 5,000 inhabitants, I found surprisingly many people who speak English. Perhaps because we were closer to the sea, Termoli is only half an hour away.

The main attractions in Guglionesi are the churches. The Church of Saint Maria Maggiore has a beautiful crypt with frescoes, the Church of Sant'Antonio da Padova has a colorful Baroque interior, and the Chiesa di San Nicola (Church of San Nicola) stands out for its sober Romanesque style. In each church there is a statue of the saint the church is dedicated to.

From the Belvedere you have a beautiful view of the area, with rolling fields full of olive trees. When I was there, in October, it was all about the olive harvest. Almost every family has a few olive trees, which are harvested in October and from which olive oil is made. And if you don't have olive trees? Then you just buy olive oil from your friends.

Termoli

Termoli is perhaps the most famous town in Molise. Traditionally it was a fishing village, now it is a popular seaside resort. I only had two hours between my bus and train to discover the city center, but that turned out to be enough.

Termoli dates back to the Middle Ages, and the town has connections to Dubrovnik and Constantinople. That is how the bones of Timothy, an apostle of Paul, ended up in the cathedral of Termoli. This important religious heritage was only found after the restoration in 1945, when the church was damaged by German bombs.

Besides exploring the center at your leisure, one of the coolest activities is Termoli Sotterranea, where you'll discover the tunnels under Termoli. During a guided tour you will learn all about the history of the city by showing what lies hidden beneath the surface.



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*With a car you also have the chance
to discover the beautiful nature
around the villages*



Important information:

BEST TIME TO VISIT:

Just outside the high season. Avoid August because of the amount of tourists, but if you come in May/June or September/October you will have wonderful temperatures and almost all the sights to yourself. Autumn is especially good - the weather is still warm, and the trees have beautiful colours.

HOW DO YOU GET THERE?

The best way to discover Molise is with a rental car. Public transport is available, but not to every village, and often only 2 or 3 times a day. With a car you also have the chance to discover the beautiful nature around the villages. Still using public transport? Then the greater Campobasso and Termoli are the best places to base yourself.



Milou is a Dutch travel blogger who also runs a female-only tour agency. When she's not on the back of a camel, sipping champagne on a sailing boat, or trying to sleep on an airplane, she likes to read, paint, and try new restaurants.



Exploring Piedmont

BY KEITH JENKINS | [BLOG VELVETESCAPE.COM](https://blog.velvetescape.com)

Piedmont is a region of northwest Italy bordering France and Switzerland, with Turin as its capital and largest city. Piedmont was high on my list of places in Italy to visit. Friends of mine who'd been there were convinced that I would love Piedmont's scenery and cuisine. When I received an invitation by the Italian Tourist Board to explore rural Piedmont, I didn't have to think twice! Based on their suggestions, I created a Piedmont road trip itinerary that covered the Italian

Alps in the west, the province of Verbano-Cusio-Ossola in the north, and the Monferrato hills in the east.

It turned out to be a wondrous trip along majestic mountains, glistening lakes, pristine forests, and villages and towns bursting with charm. I had a fantastic time exploring these places, enjoying the amazing food and wines, and meeting the friendliest people along the way. Follow me on my road trip through some of the most beautiful places in Piedmont.



Beautiful places to visit in Piedmont

I arrived in Turin and started my 10-day Piedmont road trip by driving west to Val Chisone in the Italian Alps. After spending 3 nights there, I headed north to the province of Verbano-Cusio-Ossola. I based myself in the province's largest town,

Domodossola, for 3 nights. The final leg of my trip took me to the Monferrato hills, east of Turin, where I stayed for another 3 nights before returning to Turin. Here are the places I visited in Piedmont, along with some of my most memorable experiences...



Val Chisone

One of several valleys in western Piedmont, Val Chisone is less than a two-hour drive from Turin. I chose Pragelato as a base for several days due to its central location. As I explored the valley, I was continuously in awe of its imposing peaks and forested slopes. I visited numerous villages and historical attractions, went on beautiful hikes, and discovered an area with distinct customs and traditions. Here are the best places to visit in Val Chisone:

FENESTRELLE

As I drove into the valley along the SP23R road, I soon spotted a massive structure draping the slopes of the mountains: the Fenestrelle Fortress, the largest alpine fortification in Europe. The fortress overlooks the village of Fenestrelle and was built in the 18th and 19th centuries by the Savoy to protect Turin from

French forces. It consists of several forts with a total surface area of 1.3 million square meters and extends almost 700 meters in altitude (from 1,100 – 1,800 meters)! A covered staircase with 4,000 steps links the forts. I also visited the village of Fenestrelle, where I stopped at a local restaurant for lunch. Local culinary specialties include tajarin pasta (often cooked with butter and sage), beef, trout, game (wild boar and deer), and when they're in season, porcini mushrooms.

USSEAUX

Usseaux is arguably the most charming village in Val Chisone. It's small (with less than 200 inhabitants) but it was a joy to stroll around its ancient streets and lanes, colourfully decorated with potted plants and flowers. Usseaux is famous for its more than 40 murals depicting Alpine life and fauna, and it

was fun spotting them. The village, perched on a slope and boasting panoramic views of the mountains and valley, is incredibly photogenic.

Across the Chisone River from Usseaux lies Lago del Laux, one of the most accessible mountain lakes in the area. Framed by towering firs and an imposing mountain, the emerald-coloured lake is absolutely stunning.

LAUX

The hamlet of Laux, located a short walk from Lago del Laux, is one of the most authentic and best preserved Alpine villages in Val Chisone. Walking down its main street, lined by gorgeous stone houses with wooden balconies, is like taking a step back in time!

PRAGELATO

Pragelato is a village that consists of several communes stretched out along the SP23R road. Due to its central location in Val Chisone, I decided to make Pragelato my base for 3 nights. The village hosted several events during the 2006 Turin Winter Olympics, including the ski-jumping events. In the summer months, the area is popular with hikers and mountain-bikers, who come to explore the countless trails. One thing that immediately struck me as I strolled around the communes of Pragelato is its Alpine architecture: stone

houses, with hanging balconies, and sweeping, wooden roofs. I found some of the loveliest houses in Pragelato-Rua and Pragelato-Traverses.

I also saw numerous workshops where wooden figurines and furniture are created, an age-old wood-carving tradition that can be seen throughout the valley. In Pragelato-Rivet, along with its woodcraft galleries, I also discovered the Museo del Costume Tradizionale (Costume Museum) which showcases the traditional costumes of the valley, with their rich and intricate embroidery.

VAL TRONCEA

Near Pragelato lies the beautiful Val Troncea Nature Park. I spent one morning hiking in the park, along a gushing river lined by the slopes of massive mountains blanketed by pine and larch trees. It was absolutely breathtaking!

SESTRIERE

I also visited the village of Sestriere, a famous ski resort about a 15-minute drive from Pragelato. Many of the ski events of the 2006 Turin Winter Olympics were held there.

It's also a popular hiking and mountain-biking area in the summer. Of its many trails, the Strada dell'Assietta, a 34 kilometre long dirt road, is perhaps the most famous. It runs along a mountain ridge and lies almost entirely above 2,000 meters.





VALLE ARGENTERA

From Sestriere, I followed the SP215 road to nearby Valle Argentera. It's a scenic drive that first descends into the valley, offering stunning mountain views, then up to a plateau. Surrounded by impressive peaks and thickly-forested slopes, the plateau is a lovely area for a walk.

Orta San Giulio

From Val Chisone, I drove about 3 hours, first past Turin, then northwards to the province of Verbano-Cusio-Ossola in northern Piedmont. I decided to stop for lunch at the village of Orta San Giulio, a historic village on the shores of Lago d'Orta. Located on a forested promontory with stunning lake views, Orta San Giulio turned out to be a sure highlight of this trip! Facing the village lies the island

of Isola San Giulio, home to a Benedictine monastery, which can be visited by boat from Orta San Giulio.

I'd only planned to stay in Orta San Giulio for a few hours, which was not enough to visit the island. Instead, I spent my time strolling around the village and enjoying lunch at the main square, Piazza Mario Motta.

Another attraction is Sacro Monte di Orta, one of nine 17th century 'sacred mounts' or calvaries in Piedmont and Lombardy which are listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites. I later visited two other 'sacred mounts'; in Domodossola and Crea.

Before leaving the village, I made a quick stop at Villa Crespi, a 19th century palace in a Moorish-revival style. Now a luxury hotel, the villa's ornate exterior, with its single minaret, is a wondrous sight!

Verbano-Cusio-Ossola (northern Piedmont)

The province of Verbano-Cusio-Ossola in northern Piedmont is an area of huge, forest-clad mountains, gorgeous lakes and alluring towns and villages.

The most famous landmark in northern Piedmont is undoubtedly Lago Maggiore, but I soon found many historic, cultural and natural attractions west of the great lake. These are some of the most beautiful places I visited in northern Piedmont:

DOMODOSSOLA

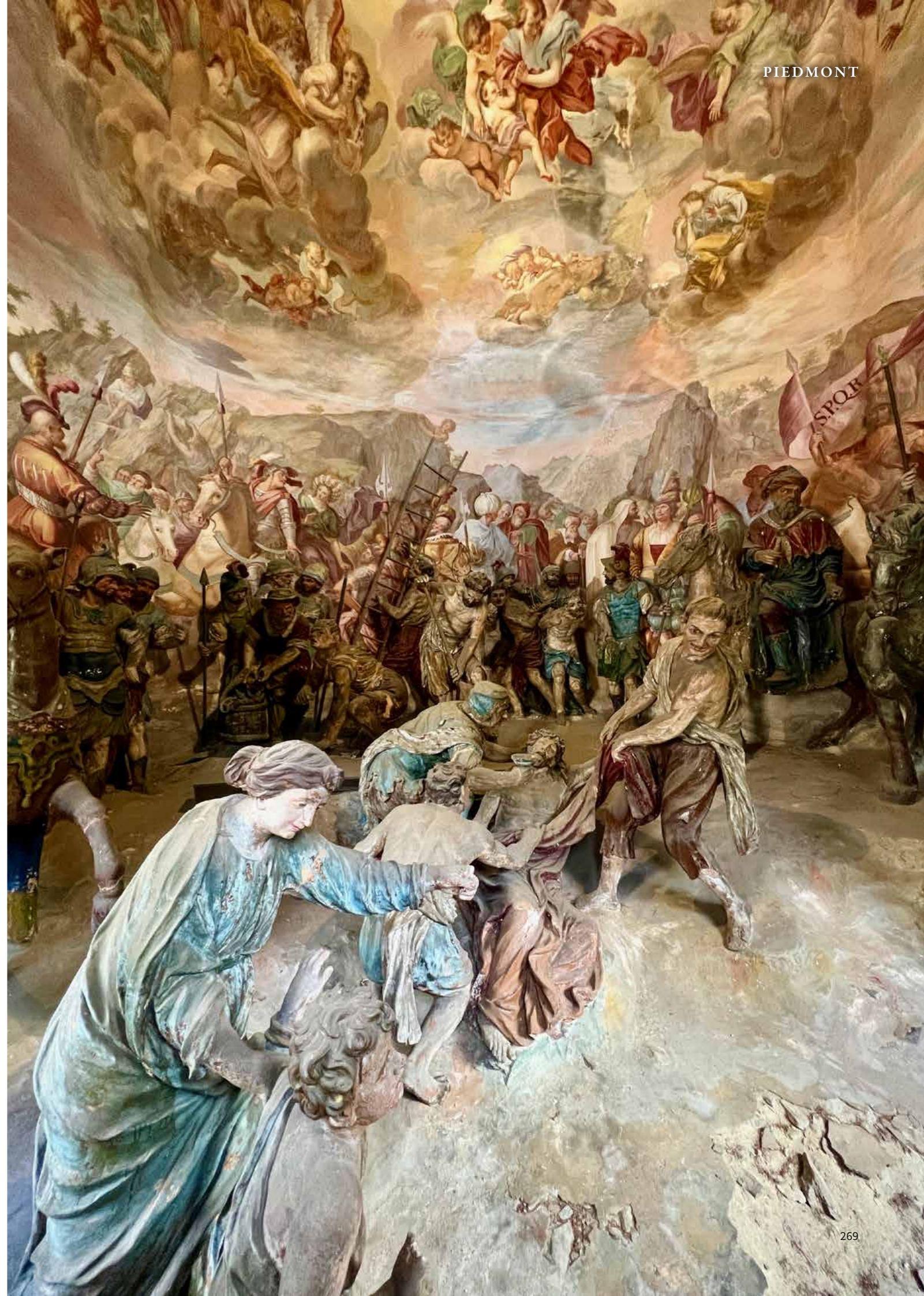
I made Domodossola, the largest and most important town in the province, my base for a few days and was delighted with my choice when I got there. Surrounded by mountains, it's a bustling town with a well-preserved historic centre full of medieval houses

and Renaissance-style palazzi. In addition, there's a vibrant café scene and a large variety of restaurants and shops.

The focal point of the historic centre is the beautiful Piazza Mercato. I loved sitting at a terrace on Piazza Mercato to soak up the vibes. It's a lively place, and on Sundays, the square and adjacent streets transform into a big outdoor market.

There are quite a lot of things to see in Domodossola, like the beautiful porticoes just off Piazza Mercato, various palaces such as Palazzo San Francesco (now an art museum), the historic houses in Via Fermo Carina, the medieval watch tower in Via Monte Grappa, and impressive churches including the one dedicated to Saints Gervasio and Protasio.

Another attraction is the Sacro Monte Calvario di Domodossola (Sacred Mount Calvary), one of





the nine UNESCO Heritage listed ‘sacri monti’ (sacred mounts) in Piedmont and Lombardy. This 17th century calvary consists of a series of churches and chapels atop a hill overlooking the town. It was a steep climb to the calvary but the stunning frescoes in the chapels and amazing views made it absolutely worthwhile.

VOGOGNA

One afternoon, I hopped into the car for the 15-minute drive to Vogogna, the only village in the province which still has its 14th century medieval appearance intact. Backed by the Ossola mountains, and with a maze of quaint cobbled lanes and ancient buildings, Vogogna is very picturesque. Some of the places I visited included the atmospheric Piazzetta del Pozzo, Pretorio (a small Gothic palace), and the Visconti Castle, with its 14th century tower.

VIGEZINA – CENTOVALLI RAILWAY

When I mentioned to a friend that I was going to Domodossola, she insisted I check out the Vigezzina – Centovalli Railway. This narrow-gauge train links Domodossola and Locarno in Switzerland. It’s a scenic ride that winds through the mountains, stopping along the way at various mountain villages. I booked a return trip to Santa Maria Maggiore, a 45-minute journey that’s packed with (cliff-

hanging) twists and turns, tunnels and bridges. Along the way, we passed gorges, forests, rustic villages, farms and vineyards.

SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE

I disembarked at Santa Maria Maggiore and found a serene village with stately villas. The main attractions include intriguing Museo dello Spazzacamino, the only museum in Italy dedicated to chimney sweeps (located in the beautiful Villa Antonia) and a small perfume museum, Casa del Profumo.

MERGOZZO

I dedicated a full day to exploring places of interest around Lago Maggiore. My first stop was the village of Mergozzo. Its setting, at the edge of a small lake (Lago di Mergozzo) and flanked by the forested slopes of Mont’Orfano, is simply stunning! The village itself is a gorgeous cluster of stone houses and charming alleys whilst the lake is a popular place for swimming, kayaking and stand-up paddling (as no motorised boats are allowed). The historic attractions of Mergozzo include Santa Marta Church; the Parish Church of Santa Maria Assunta, with its beautiful 18th century ‘Colonnade of the Chapels’; and the Mergozzo Castle. I loved clambering around Mergozzo’s stepped lanes and discovering



its hidden alleys. Tucked away in one of the alleys, I stumbled upon a little bakery that makes fugascina, a biscuit that's only made in Mergozzo. I got to taste this absolutely delicious, buttery, crunchy biscuit and bought a few bags of it to bring home with me.

In Mergozzo, I learned about a hiking trail, called the Sentiero Azzurro, that winds its way through the forests and along the lakeshore to the hamlet of Montorfano. At the end of the trail in Montorfano, I visited the 11th century Romanesque church of San Giovanni Battista.

STRESA

After a delicious lakeside lunch in Mergozzo, I continued along the shores of Lago Maggiore. It was a short but very scenic drive and I soon arrived in Stresa, a lakeside town that faces the Borromean Islands. I found a parking spot and went for a walk along the

waterfront. The stretch known as 'Panoramic' had marvellous views of Lago Maggiore and the Borromean Islands.

In the 19th century, Stresa was transformed from a sleepy fishing village into a glamorous resort town for European aristocrats. Much of this glamour can still be seen today in its historic hotels and opulent 19th century villas such as the Grand Hotel Des Iles Borromees (a palatial Art Nouveau hotel), Regina Palace Hotel, and the elegant Palazzo Bolongaro.

VILLA TARANTO BOTANICAL GARDENS

I ended my day trip to Lago Maggiore with a walk around the Botanical Gardens of Villa Taranto in the town of Verbania. These historic gardens were created by the Scottish Captain McEacharn in 1931 and are famous for its rich diversity of plants and trees.





Monferrato

The last leg of my Piedmont road trip brought me to Monferrato, about a 1.5-hour drive from Domodossola. I was especially looking forward to this part of the trip as I'd heard so many accounts of its dreamy landscapes, and amazing food and wines! It's such a beautiful area that UNESCO declared the landscapes of Monferrato a World Heritage site in 2014! Monferrato is divided in two geographical areas: Basso Monferrato (Lower Monferrato) and Alto Monferrato (Upper Monferrato). Here are some of the most beautiful places to visit in Basso Monferrato:

CELLA MONTE

The first village I visited in Monferrato was Cella Monte where I had an unforgettable introduction to the area's wonderfully friendly people and their glorious food and wines! Before entering the village, I noticed a sign pointing to a local agriturismo. I was famished so I decided to head there for a quick lunch. I didn't have a reservation, and despite being full, the kind owners offered me a table on the terrace. What followed was a four-course culinary experience (with multiple second servings) I will not easily forget! The family spoiled me with simply outstanding food and wine from their estate, all served with big, happy smiles. The agnolotti and vitello tonnato, typical

Piedmontese specialties, were some of the best I've ever had!

The next day, I returned to Cella Monte and found a medieval village with cobble streets, ancient manor houses, hidden courtyards and quiet lanes. As I walked around, I noticed the haphazard mix of stone, bricks and mortar in the walls.

I later learned at the village's Ecomuseo della Pietra da Cantoni about pietra da cantoni, a type of sandstone that can be found throughout the Monferrato area. Through the centuries, the locals dug into the soft sandstone to create cellars, storage rooms and tunnels called infernot. These infernot can still be seen in many villages and wineries.

In the historic centre of Cella Monte, I stumbled upon a winery called Cinque Quinti, located in a striking manor house. Curious about this place, I knocked on the door. The owner invited me in and we toured the winery and its infernot. After the tour, I had a delicious wine-tasting in the courtyard.

OZZANO MONFERRATO

Ozzano Monferrato was my base for a few days as I explored the area. I stayed in a gorgeous B&B located in a historic manor with expansive gardens.

It was in Ozzano Monferrato that I first heard about the 'balconies' of the Monferrato villages. Situated on hilltops, many of the villages have 'balconies'



or panoramic viewpoints. As I clambered around the cobbled slopes of Ozzano Monferrato to the castle, I found a gorgeous viewpoint in front of the San Salvatore church. During my stay, I discovered several other 'balconies' with amazing vistas of the Monferrato landscapes. There are numerous wineries around Ozzano Monferrato such as the Angelini Paolo winery but my favourite experience was at Cantine Valpane.

The wine-maker, Pietro, and his brother-in-law, Roberto, welcomed me in when I arrived. After touring the historic winery, they sat me down for a fabulous wine tasting.

The wines were absolutely sublime! I was especially entranced by the local variety, Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese. Its colour, a translucent crimson, like liquid rubies, was simply mesmerising.

The Barbera del Monferrato was just as extraordinary, with a fragrant bouquet and exuberant notes of red fruits.

SACRO MONTE DI CREA

About a 15-minute drive from Ozzano Monferrato lies the majestic Sacro Monte di Crea (Sacred Mountain of Crea), the third of nine UNESCO World Heritage listed sacred mounts that I visited on this trip. It was a foggy morning but my stroll around the churches and chapels atop the forest-clad mountain was simply enchanting. The highlight was the 'Paradise Chapel' with its rather haunting statues and frescoes.

TREVILLE

I first noticed Treville on my way back to Ozzano Monferrato one evening during sunset. I pulled over to take in the view of the hills cast in a warm, orangey



glow. In the distance, I noticed a village topped by a pompous-looking structure, like a beacon overlooking the area. A quick check on Google Maps revealed that this was the village of Treville. I made it a point to visit Treville the next day. Just a 5-minute drive from Ozzano Monferrato, I found a lovely village topped by the imposing Sant'Ambrogio church. I also found another 'balcony' here with stunning views. On clear days, the entire range of the Italian Alps can be seen from this balcony!

ROSIGNANO MONFERRATO

Across the valley from Cella Monte lies the village of Rosignano Monferrato. The Capoluogo or 'Chief Village' atop the hill is a maze of ancient streets and historic monuments. The main sights include the 12th century Romanesque Church of Sant'Antonio, the Town Hall with its infernot (open to the public) and the 15th century San Vittore Church. Rosignano also has several 'balconies' scattered around the village, with some pretty spectacular views.

CASALE MONFERRATO

Casale Monferrato lies on the banks of the River Po and has a rich history dating back to Roman times. Exploring this beautiful town one afternoon was another highlight of my trip around Monferrato. I started my walk at the Castello,

a formidable 15th century hexagonal structure surrounded by a moat. Across the road stands the beautiful Baroque-style Santa Caterina church. From there, I entered the historic centre through the Via Aurelio Saffi. - The Torre Civica (Civic Tower), which has its origins in the 11th century, stands prominently on one side of the street. Further up, the street leads to Piazza Mazzini, the main square, and continues to the breathtaking Cathedral. Founded in the 8th century, the Cathedral was rebuilt in the 12th century in a beautiful Romanesque style.

Another top historic sight is the 16th century Synagogue, which is reputed to be one of Europe's finest. Tucked away in an alley, the Synagogue has a plain exterior but inside (book in advance), I found an exquisite Baroque interior with elaborate carvings and paintings.

I loved strolling around Casale's beautiful streets, such as Via Roma, with its elegant porticoes and the striking Neoclassical façade of Santa Croce. Another gorgeous street is Via Goffredo Mameli, with its palaces such as the Palazzo Gozani di Treville and the Palazzo Gozani di San Giorgio, now the Town Hall.

I had dinner at the restaurant located inside Palazzo Gozani di Treville, which gave me the opportunity to see the palazzo's gorgeous Rococo atrium and frescoed rooms.





This Piedmont road trip was absolutely amazing. I only covered a small portion of the region so I'm very sure I'll return soon!



Keith is the publisher of the award-winning travel blog, Velvet Escape. He's happiest when immersing himself in a place through its architecture, history, food and wines. Not surprisingly, Keith has been visiting Italy every year for the past 20+ years.

How to get to Piedmont

Piedmont's largest city, Turin, is a regional rail and air hub, with connections to major cities in Europe. Piedmont is also easily accessible from Milan by rail and road. To get to the smaller villages and nature parks mentioned in this guide, and for more convenience, I recommend hiring a car.



A DIFFERENT
SIDE
OF

Puglia



*Caves, Hill Towns, &
History by the Sea*

BY EMILY GOUGH & ANDREW SIM
BLOG ALONGDUSTYROADS.COM

As one heads left off the autostrada at Foggia and takes the winding roads high up into the hills of Puglia, it's easy to think you've transported yourself much, much further north.

The salted sea becomes a distant memory, and the pale green olive groves and whitewashed buildings are left behind as the landscapes of this notoriously flat southern region of Italy begin to rise and resemble something a little more like the contours of Tuscany or Umbria. Puglia - the part of Italy between the two seas where you can find the stiletto heel of its 'boot' - is best known for its popular east coast towns, cities, and swimming spots come summertime.

We first visited back in 2016, and it's responsible for kickstarting our passion for travel in Italy. We visited again in 2018, experiencing it in the curious period before spring begins to bloom, and had long planned to head back for another summer there once we'd got better acquainted with other parts of Italy.

The opportunity arose this September, with the chance to return to Puglia coming soon after our Emily's language school stint in Bologna and our

two-week Calabrian road trip.

Is there such a thing as too much Italy in a single summer? Not a chance.

The trip would be split in two distinct parts: a week of revisiting our old favourites and searching out some new on the (now) well-established south-east coast, followed by a week experiencing lesser-known, lesser-visited villages and small towns of Puglia as part of a project by the Italian Tourism Board.

The purpose? To showcase the the range of slow, meaningful travel experiences available across the country's twenty regions, beyond the better known cities.

And this is why, after the dolce vita delights of *Monopoli*, *Polignano a Mare*, Otranto, *Ostuni*, and Santa Maria di Leuca, we headed northwest toward the rolling green hills of Foggia, toward windmills standing like sentries in the valley dips, wheatfields, and a trio of charming hidden-away villages perched on the foothills of the Apennine mountains.

This is where we wandered in search of a different side of Puglia.

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the landscapes of this notoriously flat southern region of Italy begin to rise and resemble something a little more like the contours of Tuscany or Umbria

The Hill Towns

Biccari, Roseto Valfortore & Faeto

When Italian hill towns and villages are featured in the international press, it's usually to talk about a €1 house sale. The schemes, where a mayor offers real estate at bargain-basement prices in a dream location, always generate an easy headline and fair amount of buzz (who wouldn't want a house in Italy?), but the intent behind them is serious. A combination of depopulation and lack of economic opportunities is threatening the viability of these historic communities, and something has to be done to reverse the trend. Offering

outsiders the chance to invest, move, and create a new life or business (any sale usually requires a financial commitment far beyond €1) in the village is one part of the strategy; another is tourism.

Linked by a narrow winding road through the forests and farms, Biccari, Roseto Valfortore, and Faeto are relatively isolated, but can be strung together with hiking and cycling activities - or truffle foraging in the right season - for a slower type of tourism, and a Puglia experience immersed in nature and set to the rhythm of authentic village life.



Biccari

Surrounded by forest and peaks, Biccari is an excellent base for those who wish to enjoy the outdoors in Puglia and the Dauni mountain range. It attracted a lot of attention for its own house sale in 2019, as well as other moves to enhance tourism.

There's a network of walking and cycling trails criss-crossing the countryside, picnic spots in open forest, and a popular lake and nature park, all within a short distance from its historical centre.

The village is also part of the Monti della Daunia 'strada dell'Olio Extravergine di Oliva D.O.P Dauno' itinerary,

celebrating this region's production of olive oil. It's possible to taste and purchase from one of three producers in the village: Frantoio Vicarum, Oleificio Checchia and Oleificio Sant'Antonio.

A short drive away, and a sensible stop to pair with a day trip to Biccari, is Lago di Pescara. The lake itself is in a picturesque spot - quite reminiscent of the Scottish Highlands - with picnic benches and a short loop walk around the water. However, we recommend using it as the startpoint for a hike to Monte Cornacchia, the region's highest point (1,151 metres) and known as the 'roof of Puglia'.



Roseto Valfortore

In a valley of the Fortore river, wild roses bloom in late spring. The roses and the river valley come together to give name to Roseto Valfortore, a beautiful village cut and created from a distinctive local stone by master masons.

One of the 'I Borghi più belli d'Italia' (Most Beautiful Villages in Italy), it won't come as a surprise that Roseto Valfortore is easy on the eye, and this is a place that city dwellers come to get away from it all in the summertime in the fresh mountain air.

With less than a thousand residents, it's a quiet community with a wonderfully preserved historical centre to explore

slowly. Enter through the imposing 'Arco della Terra' - the principal gateway to the right of the Palazzo Marchesale - and walk its streets during the afternoon 'riposo' and you really could be forgiven for feeling like you've stepped back several centuries.

We'd be surprised if we're the only ones who find it looks more like villages in France than what you expect to find the Italian south though!

In the early evenings, we would always stop for a drink or two at Bar Italia where multiple generations of the village gather to play cards, drink, and socialise.

Faeto

A thirty-minute drive away from Biccari and Roseto, in the little village of Faeto you will hear snippets of a language that is only spoken in three places in the world: here, the opposite village just across the valley and, bizarrely, Toronto.

Signs in the village bear both Faetar-Cigliàje and Italian, the former an evolution of the Franco-Provençal language brought by French troops in the 12th century. The existence and survival of such linguistic exceptionalism is quite remarkable, and a testament to the tight bonds of community here in the hills, as well as the village's historic isolation.

Pugliese make a point of coming

to Faeto on weekends due to its stellar reputation for the black pig, and the village has TWO annual festivals in celebration of the hairy animal which thrives in the natural mountain forests and cooler climate at this altitude.

Due to its privileged mountain setting, there are a few excellent viewpoints in Faeto, with the best found on the Belvedere balcony. Built in 1927 to honour the villagers who fought in World War 1, from here you can see the villages of Celle di San Vito and Casteluccio, the hills and forests, and the long flat countryside of lower Puglia extending to the sea on the horizon.

The Cave Towns

Ginosa, Laterza & Mottola

We moved down from the hills to a part of Puglia where the land is shaped by scars.

Scars from the deep cuts and crevices of ravines and canyons formed millions of years ago, and the pockmarks of hundreds of human cave settlements carved within the soft tufa rock slopes.

Like many others, we had driven through this on our first *Puglia road trip* in order to dip just across the border into the landlocked region of Basilicata. The reason was to visit *Matera*, the city of caves whose fame has grown exponentially since its designation as European Capital

of Culture in 2019 and filming location for James Bond.

However, there's actually no reason to leave Puglia in search of caves.

Ginosa, Laterza, and Mottola - three relatively off-the-beaten track canyon towns set within the Terra delle Gravine Regional Natural Park - were also the base of cave communities for centuries. Alongside a collection of beautifully preserved fresco chapels, they offer the chance to reassess what it means to be a 'cave man' as well as enjoy excellent hiking, food, and culture.

Ginosa

Ginosa's ravine and caves are undergoing development for tourism, but beyond a new walkway and some fencing, still remain largely untouched by modernity. Due to this, and the significantly lower visitor numbers in contrast to Matera, a walk between and across both sides of its ravine feels more akin to a nature experience and a raw process of individual discovery. Rivolta, the area on the right hand side of the dip, hosts a collection of 66 caves on five levels, and is considered one of the most important rock villages in all of Italy. We think it's also the most obvious to get your head around how these structures - extended and shaped by residents to suit their own needs - would have actually functioned as viable abodes for people over centuries. Indeed, there's a level of sophistication and ingenuity to the design of these cave houses - cisterns, ovens, chimneys, gardens, oil and wine presses - which underpinned how life was planned and lived here. Harsh certainly, but not one that was simply endured. On the other side, amongst the overgrowth, butterflies

and scent of wild thyme, more caves can be explored in the Casale area. It provides the best vantage point to appreciate the layout of Rivolta on the opposite side and enjoy the perspective of the ravine and cave layers underpinning and blending into 'new' Ginosa.

If you are fortunate enough to bump into Carmelo, the self-appointed caretaker of the caves who lives by the cathedral, he is only too happy to show the curious around. He only speaks Italian, but we spent a wonderful hour with him and his sister, learning about how life would have been in the caves, and they're just the sweetest people.

We spent four nights in Ginosa, using it as a base to explore the other towns in this geologically distinct part of Puglia, and we really liked it. Compact yet lively, it offers pretty little whitewashed streets on a par with those in the Valle d'Itria and is a short drive from the enjoyable stretch of beach and Ionian Sea at the Marina di Ginosa.

You'd be a fool not to pop into a local bakery to taste the traditional 'sleeping bun' of Ginosa!





Mottola

As with Ginosà, cave communities existed here in its canyons for thousands of years - for necessity, protection, concealment, or a combination of all three - but few left such an indelible artistic impression on the stone as Mottola's own secluded 'Sistine Chapel'.

Situated at the edge of a ravine and in close proximity to railtracks, San Nicola is accessible only with a guide, and its secluded setting a drive outside the town offers little indication of the rich, spiritual and artistic heritage within this church carved and caressed out of a cave.

It was part of the cave village of Casalrotto, which dates it principally to the 11th-13th

centuries, but lay undisturbed and unlit for many years. This is part of the reason why its frescoes remain so rich and vibrant, and they are particularly notable for the diversity of styles and influences evident in them: Byzantines, the Crusades, as well as local Puglian methods.

It is only possible to visit inside San Nicola with an official local guide (who has the key!), and it's recommended to reserve ahead of your visit (best to contact Infopoint Mottola, run by Mottola Tourist Information Centre). The guide will meet you in the town, and then you drive out together to the site, with a stop the Chiesa Rupestre di San Gregorio along the way.

Laterza

Perched on the side of Europe's largest canyon, Laterza is the best place to find perspective on the scale of the ravines crisscrossing this area of Puglia, and better appreciate how they have shaped existence here.

Stretching for 12 kms, 500 metres wide at its widest point, and covered in lush vegetation, its 'Gravina di Laterza' should really be better known, and is an excellent location in Puglia for those looking to get out on a hike. Oasi Lipu is a good option for a day hike in the right conditions, with a challenging yet manageable 7 km hike deep into and out of the Laterza ravine, starting from its panoramic viewpoint small visitor information centre. For

keen walkers looking for a slow travel experience of the Terra delle Gravine Regional Natural Park or to link up the towns and region in an alternative manner, Laterza is also on two multi-day walking routes: Stage 6 of the Via Ellenica and Stage 8 of Via Appia/Appia Way.

The pretty town also has a rich heritage for ceramics and is witnessing a slow cultural revival. Our stroll on a quiet afternoon led to several artisan workshops and galleries in old caves, whilst there's also the new MUMA - Majolica Museum in the upper floor of the Palazzo Marchesale for an insight into the craft and distinctive Majolica of Laterza's style.

East Puglia's Architect & Archaeologist

Puglia is famous for its stellar coastline, with bronzed bodies on beaches, colourful parasols in busy lidos, and drippings of la dolce vita a common sight all along the way from Bari down to Brindisi and beyond in summertime.

The final stops on our week exploring lesser-known Puglia were actually in a cluster by one of the most famous beaches and most popular Instagram

spots, but offered perspectives and historical insights often overlooked if a beach day and plate of orecchiette is all that's in store.

Linked and shaped by a common cause of threats and opportunities arriving from the eastern coast, both Acaya and Roca Vecchia have been reevaluated, restored, and rejuvenated to offer an alternative way to understand this area of the Adriatic.



Acaya

Halfway between the Adriatic Sea and city of Lecce, Acaya is one of few remaining fortified villages in Puglia.

Very small, with a permanent population of just 500 people, most traffic comes from passing cyclists on multi-day excursions and day trip tour groups stopping by to understand and appreciate the long-term but short-lived vision of Gian Giacomo dell'Acaya. Repeated attacks and the Ottoman sacking of Otranto in 1480 led to a full-scale reappraisal of Puglia's military defences by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, and Gian Giacomo was viewed as the ideal candidate to develop a new type of fortress amongst the fields and olive groves of his family's feudal holding.

Giacomo's vision wasn't simply defensive but rather, in the spirit of the Renaissance, to create an idealised, modernised version of a fortified hamlet: impregnable and capable of sustaining itself through

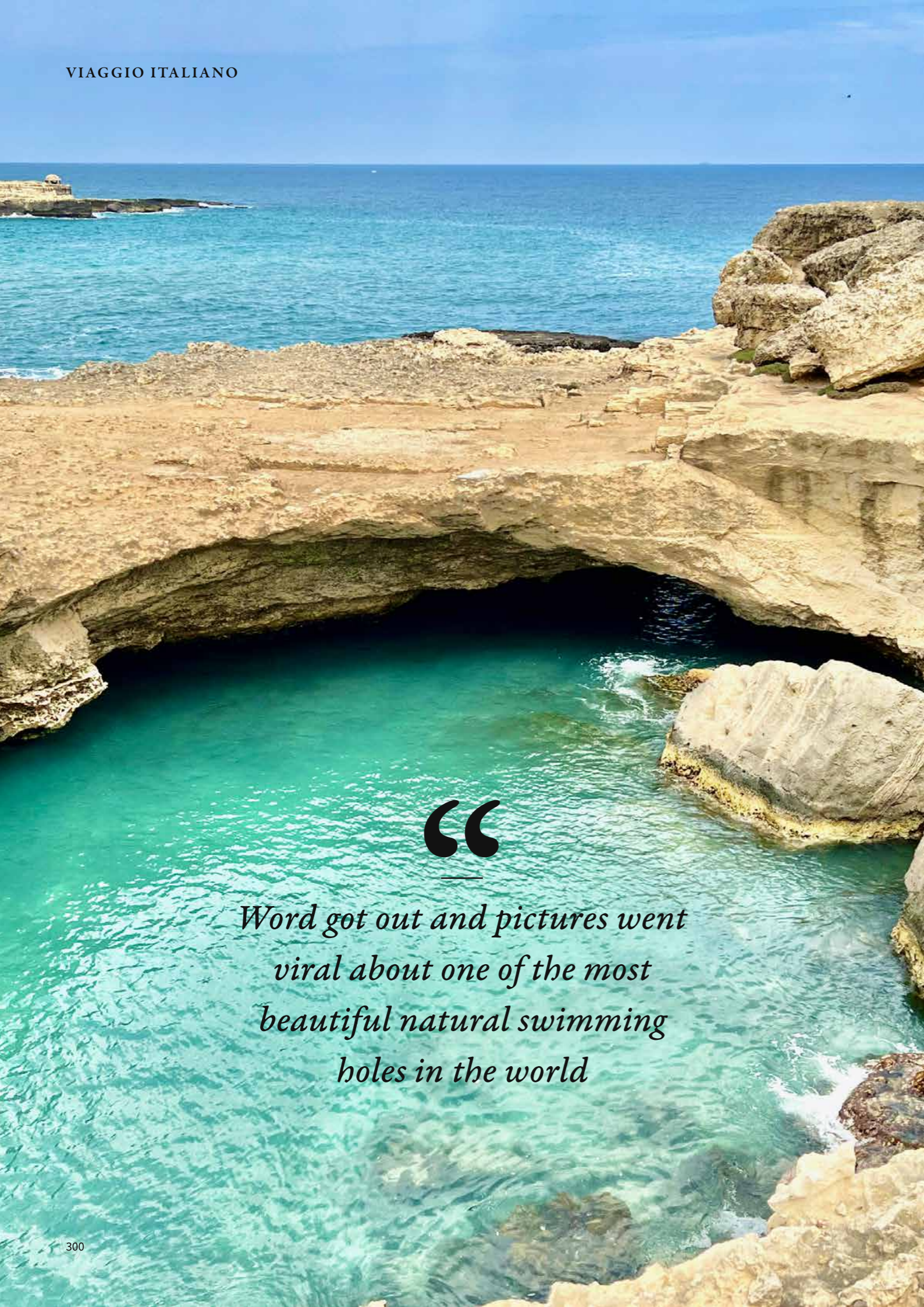
sieges, creating industry and growth, but also serving the needs and livelihoods of its rural population.

The result was the 'new' village of Acaya, with its squat castle, moats, fortified walls, and its rational parallel streets planned to thwart incursions.

For today's visitor, it's far easier to penetrate Acaya's defences through the Porta di Acaya than Giacomo may have planned! After a long period of neglect, the castle has undergone tasteful and extensive renovation works in the last two decades, and now hosts temporary exhibitions and cultural events. Entry is €5, but note that you have to plan ahead around the castle's quite specific opening days and hours, which alter according to the time of year.

There are only a handful of businesses in Acaya, so options may be limited during your visit to a single cafe and a single restaurant.





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Word got out and pictures went viral about one of the most beautiful natural swimming holes in the world

Roca Vecchia & Torre dell'Orso

It's a short drive through the countryside to go from the architect to the archaeologist. In a small peninsula twenty kilometres north of Otranto, in the very place where hundreds would come each day to jump, dive, and leap into a photogenic swimming hole, mysteries are being uncovered and new stories revealed about a very, very ancient people.

Visit just a few years ago, and it would have been difficult to distinguish this part of rocky shore and short cliffs from others you'd pass on the Adriatic Coast. Then, word got out and pictures went viral about one of the most beautiful natural swimming holes in the world and, in lockstep with Puglia's rising popularity amongst non-Italian tourists, Grotta della Poesia became a must-visit spot on itineraries.

However, such fame and footfall rang alarm bells for those who valued the site for a very different reason.

Grotta della Poesia is part of the wider Roca Vecchia, where in 1983 Professor Coismo Pagliara discovered walls covered with inscriptions and etchings from distinct and

disparate civilisations. Situated in a strategic maritime corridor, just 70km across the water from the shores of Illyria (parts of Albania, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina today), the extensive evidence uncovered since then shows that Roca Vecchia would have been an important place of sanctuary, trade, and cultural exchange for those navigating the central Mediterranean and arriving from Greece. Inhabited from the Neolithic Age (at least two millennia BC) to the second century BC, it is regarded as one of the most important protohistoric locations in Italy. For one reason or another though, not much was done until 2019 to prevent dozens, then hundreds, then thousands walking in and around it each summer to sunbathe on the rocks and swim in Grotta della Poesia.

Now though, Roca Vecchia is gated, ticketed, and transformed into a protected archaeological site for continued digs, academic research, and visitors. As a result, one of the most Instagram-famous locations in Puglia has undergone a significant change to create the region's newest and most



prominent archaeological sites (but from what we saw, some people aren't aware of the change and ban on swimming until they arrive at the gate in their bathing suits!)

This area is on most Puglia itineraries, but for those that prefer nature over history, the WWF Riserva Naturale Le Cesine would be a good addition to either visit above. A superb spot for birdwatchers, this 348-hectare protected natural reserve is a haven for birds, including flamingoes, and other

native trees, flora, and wildlife. And, conveniently, once you're done with the past, you can give yourself the afternoon off on the long stretch of sandy beach at Torre dell'Orso. Fringed by pine forest, and enclosed by cliffs on both sides, it ranks as one of the best beaches in Puglia. Watersports are popular here - including kayak hire, adrenaline fueled banana boat adventures and even wakeboarding - and the conditions for swimming in the azure waters are generally excellent.



Along Dusty Roads is the award-winning travel blog by British couple, **Andrew & Emily**. Established in 2014, it promotes slow, sustainable and responsible experiences for the curious modern day explorer, and emboldens its readers to 'travel more, travel better.'



Sardinia

While the promise of la dolce vita and tranquil turquoise waters lapping at white sand beaches attracts visitors to Italy's second largest island, Sardinia is so much more. With idyllic villages, ancient archaeological sites, and fascinating culture and traditions, Sardinia truly does have it all.



BY JENNIFER DOMBROVSKI & TIM DAVIS
BLOG LUXEADVENTURETRAVELER.COM

Sardinia has something to offer for any type of traveler. In fact, the abundance of activities and places to potentially see is almost overwhelming. But a trip through some of some of Italy's – most authentic and beautiful villages will leave a lasting impression.

How to Get to Sardinia

There are a few ways to get to Sardinia. Most visitors, especially international visitors, arrive at one of Sardinia's three main airports: Cagliari Elmas Airport, Olbia Airport, and Alghero Fertilia Airport. Many of the budget airlines also operate multiple daily flights from mainland Italy's major cities like Rome and Milan.

If you have more time, travel by car by ferry from mainland Italy, France or Barcelona to reach one of Sardinia's five ferry ports in 10-12 hours. We arrived in Sardinia at Santa Teresa Gallura via Bonifacio, Corsica in 1 hour on Ichnusa Lines, and traveled back home to France directly from Porto Torres to Toulon in 10 hours on *Corsica Ferries* overnight.

Cabins can sleep 2 – 4 people and have a bathroom complete with shower, making sailing overnight comfortable. You basically board in the late evening and wake-up in your destination.

No matter whether you arrive at one of Sardinia's airports

or via ferry from mainland Europe, you'll want a car to most conveniently explore Sardinia. While it is possible to get around some areas of Sardinia with public transportation, the Mediterranean island is really best visited with a car.

The Best Time to Visit

Think of Sardinia and days of lounging on its picture-perfect beaches come to mind for many, making Sardinia most visited from June to September. But Sardinia offers plenty of things to do beyond the beach year-round. Sardinia is at its liveliest as tourists descend upon the sun-drenched beaches from June to September. These peak months also offer a calendar chock full of festivals and events. But temperatures also soar, and the most popular spots get crowded.

If you're after more of a crowd-free holiday, consider visiting Sardinia in the shoulder season from the end of September to the end of October. Both air and sea temperatures are still warm, making Sardinia perfect for both water sports and hiking. You'll find some things a bit more limited, for instance restaurants and tours may reduce operating hours. But plan accordingly, and you can enjoy Sardinia practically to yourself.





Posada

One of Italy's most beautiful villages, Posada sits atop a hill with its colorful houses seemingly tumbling down the hillside in the north east of Sardinia. The hillside village is crowned with the now mostly ruined Castello della Fava, and offers stunning views over the Regional Natural Park of the Tepilora Oasis, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

Posada is one of Sardinia's oldest villages, continuously inhabited since the Phoenicians. Once you lay eyes on the views of the nearby coast and surrounding lands, it's clear why Posada was such a sought after village with many battles for it through its history.

Though wandering through the maze of narrow streets of the historic center is one postcard perfect medieval scene after another, the highlight of the village is a visit to the Castello della Fava. Mostly all that remains is the tower, but the ruins and climb to the top of the tower offer breathtaking views over the Rio Posada, Regional Natural Park of the Tepilora Oasis and the unspoiled beaches of the coast.

Climbing the staircases and steep streets of Posada will most definitely work up an appetite. We had one of our best meals in Sardinia here and promise you won't be disappointed.

Galtellì

Located about 1 hour drive from Posada, Galtellì is one of Sardinia's best preserved villages. Earning the distinction as one of the Borghi Autentici d'Italia (most authentic villages of Italy), Galtellì's modern fame is linked to Italian novelist and Nobel Prize for Literature winner Grazia Deledda. With her award-winning novel *Canne al Vento* (Reeds in the Wind), Deledda became the first Italian woman and second woman ever to win a Nobel Prize for Literature.

The village, at the foot of panoramic Monte Tuttavista, takes great pride in Grazia Deledda choosing to set her novel in the streets of Galtellì.

Pick up a map from the tourist information office in the historic heart and follow a self-guided walking tour of points of interest from Deledda's novel interspersed with the numerous churches of Galtellì.

You also won't want to miss the *Museo Etnografico Sa Domo 'e Sos Marras*. The museum is a series of rooms with a themed collection of 18th century objects showing what life for the Galtellinese was like in that period. It's set in a restored 18th century villa where one of Galtellì's most prominent noble families once lived, and the curators take the time to guide visitors through the collection.



Orgosolo

Located in the vast mountainous Barbagia of central Sardinia, Orgosolo is one of Sardinia's most unique villages. The remote and hard to access village was long known as a haven for outlaws and bandits, earning it a reputation for an anti-authoritarian attitude.

That attitude was demonstrated when in June 1969, nearly all of Orgosolo's citizens started a non-violent protest against the Italian government. The people of Orgosolo had been given notice that the shepherds should move their flocks elsewhere so that the Italian military could create a shooting range on their common land. But the locals wouldn't stand for their land being stolen, and after only a few days the Italian military gave up the idea and moved on from the area.

Not long after the peaceful protests, the anarchist theater group from Milan called Dioniso immortalized the revolution with a mural painting on the

wall of a building right in the heart of Orgosolo. Until 1975, the mural remained the only street art in the village.

Then a local teacher got the idea to teach his students about the 30th anniversary of the Partisan Struggle and Liberation from Nazi-Fascist Oppression with an art project. Initially his assignment was to create awareness for the anniversary with drawings on paper, but before too long students were painting their murals on every available surface of the villages' buildings.

Today there are more than 150 murals, serving like a visual history lesson on the facades and rolladens of Orgosolo. You can reserve an audio guide and pick it up along with a map from a kiosk on the main square. The self-guided *Orgosolo murals tour* takes around 90 minutes if you listen to the short explanations about the meaning of every mural. You have the audio guide for 4 hours, which was plenty of time for us to listen





to the majority of the mural explanations and take a break for lunch.

You'll note that most of the murals have a political message. Many depict the traditional way of life of the shepherds or the citizens' political views of the Nazi-Fascist oppression. But a number of murals depicting more recent events around the world have been added in recent years. In particular, a mural of the Twin Towers with smoke billowing out of the two gaping holes before crashing to the ground on that horrible date in September 2001 caught our attention.

From Orgosolo, you can also visit Gorropu Canyon in the Supramonte. It's one of the deepest canyons in Europe, and

the base camp *Chintula* offers a number of ways to explore it for nearly any fitness level. For us, a 4x4 tour down into the canyon and a hike to one of the canyon's scenic pools was the perfect way to explore Gorropu in half a day. And the guided tour is even dog friendly.

Our hike weaved through holm oak woods, past ancient nuraghi and typical shepherds houses that have been preserved, and on to a boulder strewn trail as we descended down to one of the scenic pools at the bottom of the soaring 500-meter-high canyon. We didn't spot any of the golden eagles that are known to soar over the canyon, but we saw plenty of the semi-wild pigs.





Laconi

Laconi is an underrated gem of a village tucked into central Sardinia's heart. Famous as the birthplace of Sardinia's most revered saint – Saint Ignatius – the village is worth the inland detour.

The village itself is small, but packed with charm. Considered a botanist's paradise, I think every local pledged to plant a garden. And those gardens take form in creative planters on window sills, on the exterior stone walls and balconies. You can spend hours alone just wandering the cobble streets and taking in all the charming details.

On the edge of the village sits the gem of Laconi: Parco Aymerich. It's Sardinia's largest urban park, and its 22 hectares includes hiking trails, waterfalls, a pond, a ruined castle and many exotic plants including unique orchids, rainbow eucalyptus, and a Lebanon cedar.

Laconi also offers the perfect growing conditions for black truffles, and has become Sardinia's most famous truffle growing area. Truffle season is from December to June, and Laconi celebrates every June with a festival dedicated to all things truffle.

Isili

Located just a 20-minute drive from Laconi is the village of Isili. It's famous for both the many – more than 50 to be exact – nuraghe in the area and Isili's artificial lake. Make the drive and spend a day exploring the nuraghe and medieval church on an island in the middle of Lago San Sebastiano.

Nuraghe are ancient structures from the Nuragic people dating back to between 1900 and 730 BC. These unique structures can be found all over Sardinia, and have become the symbol of the island. Some of the most impressive are concentrated around Isili, indicating the area has been inhabited for many millennia.

Not to be missed is Nuraghe Is Paras, located right on the edge of the village of Isili. Considered to be the most elegant remaining nuragic structure in Sardinia, Nuraghe Is Paras was once upon a time the tallest dome in the world. The central tower remains largely intact, standing at 12 meters in height. Also not to be missed is exploring Isili's Lago San Sebastiano. It's an artificial lake that was created by the construction

of the dam Is Barrocos on the Mannu River, leaving behind a Medieval church atop a high rocky island right in the middle of the lake.

It's a popular spot for locals to come and kayak, practice dragon boat rowing or even rent pedalos. We opted for renting a pedalo, which you can pedal over to the island. A short, but steep climb up leads you to the church dating from the 1500s.

It hasn't been used as a place of worship in more than 200 years, though. There's a local legend that tells the tale of a suitor disrupting a wedding at the church on the clifftop. The wedding couple both tragically fell to their deaths from the cliff during the fight with the suitor. Then the rejected suitor was also thrown to his own death by the angry mob of wedding guests. The church was never used again as a place of worship after the tragedy.

It's probably nothing more than a tale, and the church was simply abandoned. But no matter what the reason the church ceased to be a place of worship, it undisputedly offers a beautiful view over the lake and surrounding landscape.





Sadali

Sadali is one of those villages that's almost small enough that you could blink and miss it, but you certainly wouldn't want to. One of Italy's most beautiful villages, this village of just 1000 inhabitants is unique in Italy. A natural waterfall flows right in the heart of the village, a distinction no other place in Italy can claim.

The village was built up around this waterfall. As the legend says, a traveler carrying a statue of Saint Valentine was so transfixed by the waterfall when passing through that he stopped to watch the water flow for a while. When we went to leave, he couldn't budge the statue. It seemed Saint Valentine had chosen this spot, and a church was built nearby.

The waterfall is just one in the Sadali area. It's part of a

large network of underground water sources flowing in the surrounding mountains. Hidden nearby in the heart of the Barbagia di Seulo, and through the thick Addolì forest where there are tales of fairies living, there's another magical waterfall. Su Stampu de Su Turrunu is at the bottom of a canyon, and it's unique because the river disappearing into a hole in the ground up on the plateau caused the karst to fall away. Now this waterfall quite literally pours out of a hole in the cliff.

While hiking to see Su Stampu de Su Turrunu, you won't want to miss the *Grotta Is Janas*. The six-room cave system is a gem of the Sadali area, and you can visit on a guided tour of the rooms so far discovered in the cave system.

Tratalias

When it comes to Italy, you might not think of abandoned ghost towns – but Italy has quite a few of them. Tratalias, located just a short distance from Sant’Antioco in Sardinia’s south west, is among the best-preserved ghost towns and worth a visit.

Unlike Craco, one of Italy’s most famous ghost towns in Basilicata that I’ve visited, Tratalias wasn’t abandoned after a landslide that left it in ruins. In fact, Tratalias’s residents faced a nearly 20-year battle to save their homes before finally giving up and rebuilding a new village nearby. The Monte Pranu dam was built in 1954, which created the artificial Lago Monte Pranu. The dam, redirection of the water of the Rio Palmas and the artificial lake caused the dangerous resurgence of aquifers. Ultimately, it led to the degradation of the buildings and many hygienic problems in

Tratalias. In 1971, the residents were finally forced to pick up and rebuild their lives elsewhere.

The town was actually once one of the main towns of the Sulcis and even served for several hundred years as the seat of the bishop, before the diocese was transferred to Iglesias in 1503. As the seat of the bishop, Tratalias has an impressive cathedral. It’s considered to be the most beautiful and intact Romanesque monument in Sardinia, and certainly a highlight of Tratalias.

Aside from the former cathedral, a number of buildings and homes have been restored to turn Tratalias into an open-air museum of sorts. Even a few shops, a museum, a B&B and a restaurant have taken up residence in the abandoned town. None of these were open during our visit on a Sunday afternoon, but it just lent to the eeriness of being the only soul around.





Sant'Antioco

An island off the south-west tip of Sardinia, Sant'Antioco is connected to the "mainland" by an artificial isthmus thought to have been built by the Romans. It takes 20 minutes to cross the island by car, and around one hour to drive entirely around it. But despite its small size, it offers almost an endless choice of things to do.

Arriving in Sant'Antioco practically the first sight is its seaside promenade, a lovely spot for a stroll – no doubt bustling in the summer season when the island's population swells in size. In the morning, you'll find fishermen selling their day's catch straight from their tiny boats.

Climbing up the uphill streets toward Sant'Antioco cathedral, you come to Sulky – founded by the Phoenicians in 770 BC, now mostly left in ruins. At the top of this hill overlooking the colorful houses of Sant'Antioco tumbling down toward the sea, you'll also find pre-Nuragic and Nuragic remains and a Roman catacomb complex. It's all worth spending several hours exploring.

Sant'Antioco is home to some of the few remaining un-grafted vineyards left in Europe, and Carignano del Sulcis is thought to have been cultivated in Sant'Antioco as far back as when the Phoenicians inhabited the island. The sandy soils of Sant'Antioco provide both the

perfect conditions for grapes to thrive, as well as a natural protection against the devastating phylloxera that nearly wiped out winemaking in Europe.

Wine isn't the only product made locally in Sant'Antioco. Salt has also been mined in the salt marshes just across the isthmus. And another thing not to miss is a sunset fat e-bike tour of the Saline (salt works).

After riding through the marshes, with pink flamingos munching on the small shrimp that thrive in these super salty waters, we arrived in another world. With Sant'Antioco's famous mistral (wind) whipping and the sea of white salt, it almost felt like this should be the Arctic. But the warm evening was a reminder that we were just in the otherworldly salt marshes.

As the sun began to set, that sea of white turned to a canvas of pinks, golds and blue reflected from the sea and sunset. It's truly a sight that has to be seen. Of course, with Sant'Antioco home to some of Sardinia's most beautiful beaches, you'll want to spend some time exploring them. The long expanse of powdery white sand at the Spiaggia Coaquaddus is majestic, and the shallow turquoise waters are perfect for a calm swim. For sunset, head to the local beloved golden sand cove of Cala Sapone.

Carloforte

Even further west, but just a 30-minute ferry ride from Calasetta on Sant'Antioco, lies Isola San Pietro. There's just one town on the island and it's the charming Carloforte, which looks and feels more like the towns of Cinque Terre than those of Sardinia. And there's a reason for that – Isola San Pietro was settled in 1738 by Genoese fishermen who had colonized the Tunisian town of Tabarka. With the Ligurian dialect still spoken even today and Ligurian traditions still strong, it's like a little slice of Italy's Liguria exists just off the coast of Sardinia.

Carloforte is a maze of narrow, picturesque alleys. Steep staircases lead from one street to the next, seemingly stacked on top of one another. The town is truly a photographer's dream. In fact, the staircase leading up to the arch on Via Solferino is Carloforte's most visited spot. The mysterious arch has inspired painters, photographers, poets and singers. Locals know neither when or why it was built, but the arch is thought to have been the entrance to the garden of the private home of one of Carloforte's richest families. Carloforte was founded as a

fishing town, and just a short distance from Carloforte is the point where bluefin tuna (known as Carloforte red tuna) enter the Mediterranean from the Atlantic. Tuna has been fished here in a traditional watch since Carloforte's founding, and still is to this day. It's processed locally at the Tonnara (tuna processing plant), which is one of the oldest in the Mediterranean.

While we didn't have the chance to tour the plant, where you can have a tasting of kilometer zero Carloforte tinned tuna, we did make sure to taste the famous red tuna.

The sea plays a large role in the daily life of Carloforte. And Isola San Pietro's coastline simply must be seen. With much of the rocky, jagged coastline inaccessible by car, the best way to see the island is by boat. And even those without a boating license can rent small boats suitable for circumnavigating the island from the local port, which is exactly what we did.

You'll get a lesson on sailing the boat and some tips for the best coves to anchor in. There's rules for the distance you must keep from the coast, but you can anchor off-shore for a swim and to enjoy a picnic lunch.



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The mining masterpiece of Porto Flavia – built directly into the cliff, and is considered a masterpiece of mining engineering.



Buggerru

Mining was once the industry that drove the economy of Sardinia's southwest. The village of Buggerru is both a getaway to some of the dreamiest beaches of the island and a gateway to the treasures the mining industry left behind.

Built up around the mining industry, the village of Buggerru has a fraction of the population it had in its heyday. But these days, tourism is the main industry and Buggerru is an excellent jumping off point to tour the former mines, spend a day in the crystal-clear waters of the postcard perfect Cala Domestica, and take a boat tour of the coast's breathtaking caves and inlets. The first order of business in Buggerru simply must be a boat tour of the coast. The boat will glide in and out of many of the caves like the magnificent Blue Grotto and Grotta delle Spigole, before circling the impressive Pan di Zucchero and finally approaching the mining masterpiece of Porto Flavia. It's built directly into the cliff, and is considered a masterpiece of mining engineering.

After a morning tour of the coast, spend the afternoon soaking up the sun and taking a dip at Cala Domestica. The

cove tucked between two cliffs is overlooked by an 18th century Spanish tower. The protected bay almost always has no waves, and incredibly crystal-clear water. A short scramble along the rock-strewn path along the right side of Cala Domestica also leads through a tiny tunnel dug out by miners, revealing a second hidden beach known as La Caletta. It's truly one of the most picturesque beaches of south west Sardinia and can't be missed.



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Winding roads through the forest, where goats and cows outnumber passing cars. Life in the shade of a huge mountain. Maze-like villages, with staircases climbing the hillsides. A castle built into a rock, with subterranean passages and a watchtower. And there's more - Baroque churches, a Bronze Age necropolis, medieval pilgrimage routes, and countless cannoli.

THIS
IS
Sicily
*But probably not the
Sicily you know or imagine...*



BY MARGHERITA RAGG AND NICK BURNS
BLOG THECROWDEDPLANET.COM

Small villages (known in Italian as ‘borghi’) in Sicily are places where time flows slower (perhaps a little too slow at times for this city girl). Tourists are still a rarity - that means services may sometimes be lacking, but rest assured your experience will be authentic.

These are places where you have no alternative to experiencing local life, quite simply because there are no tourist restaurants with menus in 5 languages, no souvenir shops, no umbrella-toting tourist guides.

It may sometimes feel like a struggle – roads are a nightmare, Google Maps is totally useless, and bars and restaurants are often closed in the off-season. You’ll be rewarded with warm local welcomes, more delicious

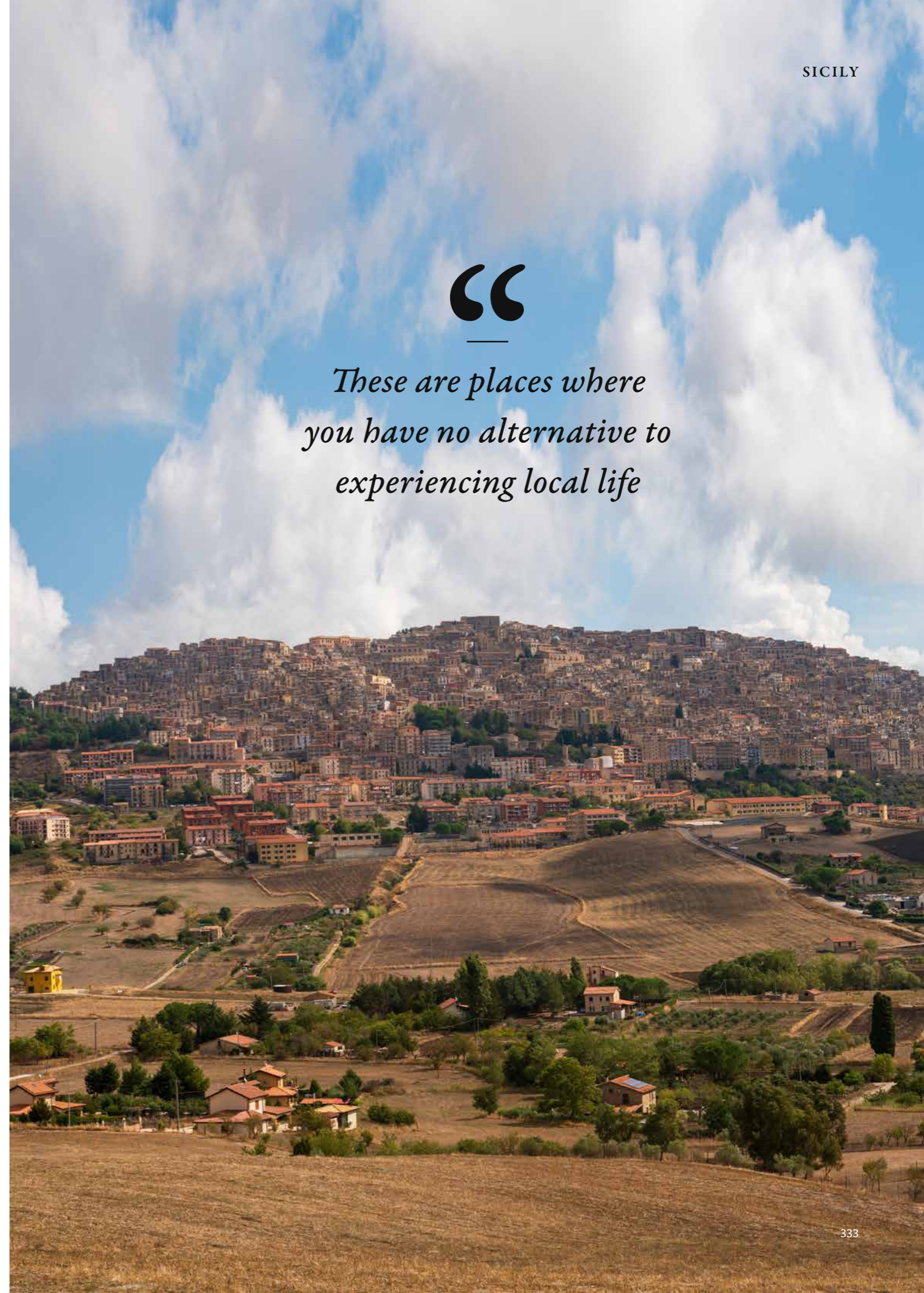
food than you’ll possibly be able to eat, and the feeling of being one of the few ‘outsiders’ there - and in a country like Italy, this is a very rare experience to have.

The 9 small Sicilian villages featured in this article can be divided into three groups of three, with one village to be used as a ‘base’ and two others that can be visited as day trips. All these villages belong to the Borghi Più Belli d’Italia (Most Beautiful Villages in Italy) list, and we visited them all over a 10-day itinerary of Sicily’s interior. A week would probably be enough if you are pressed for time. Otherwise, you can choose one group of villages, and visit that over the course of a long weekend.

So, let’s start discovering the best small villages in Sicily!

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*These are places where
you have no alternative to
experiencing local life*



Best Villages in North East Sicily

Montalbano Elicona

Montalbano Elicona appeared to us like a mirage, after driving for hours on potholed roads in the shade of Mount Etna, and then across misty forests in the Nebrodi mountain range. At first, you'll see the stocky silhouette of the 12th-century castle, overlooking the village as it has done for centuries - and then, the houses and streets of Montalbano itself, stretching all around.

The star attraction in Montalbano Elicona is definitely the castle, with a horseshoe-shaped building surrounding a square tower on a rocky outcrop, built during the Norman domination of Sicily as a lookout over the surrounding mountains. There is also a water cistern and a chapel, housing the grave of Arnau de Vilanova, a theologian and alchemist at the Kingdom of Aragon, who ruled Sicily between the 13th and 15th centuries.

You can visit the horseshoe-shaped building, offering historical information and an exhibition of Medieval armour, weapons, and clothing, but the Norman tower was closed to the public at the time of our visit.

If viewpoints are what you're looking for, the best ones in Montalbano Elicona are at the top of Via Etna (for views over the

castle and village) and the end of Via Mastropaolo (for views over the northern coast of Sicily and the Aeolian Islands). The latter is one of the most beautiful spots in Sicily in my opinion!

Just outside Montalbano Elicona there are two other pretty cool things to see. Just outside the village you'll find several 'tholos', mysterious tiny dome-shaped buildings, kind of a dry-stone version of the igloo, dating back to early Greek times.

There's an itinerary connecting the various tholos, but some of the paths were very overgrown. The easiest one to visit is 2 km outside Montalbano on the way to Catania.

7 km outside of town you'll find the Altipiano dell'Argimusco, a plateau with a collection of megalithic rocks of mysterious origin. Nobody really knows whether they were brought there by the legendary giants inhabiting Sicily in ancient times, or if they are simply the result of erosion. An hour-long itinerary connects the various rock formations - it's fun to discover all the hidden shapes!

With three days in Montalbano Elicona, you'll have time to visit two other interesting borghi (villages) located within day-trip distance - Novara and Castiglione di Sicilia.





Novara di Sicilia

Novara di Sicilia lays at the border between the Peloritani and Nebrodi Mountains, in a scenic location overlooking the coast and Aeolian Islands. Not far from the village, you can go on a great hike to the Rocca Salvatesta, a rocky outcrop also known as 'Il Cervino di Sicilia' (Sicily's Matterhorn) because of its shape. It takes 2/3 hours to hike there and back from Novara - you can either take a path starting right in the centre of town, or drive out to a spot marked on Google Maps as 'Parcheggio Rocca Salvatesta' and follow the path from there. The village itself is a picturesque tangle of crooked streets, palazzos with carved façades, churches, and houses. There's a ruined castle on the highest point of town, right next to a really nice restaurant where you can sample maiorchino, Novara's very own cheese, made with a blend of cow and goat's milk.

If you happen to be in Novara di Sicilia on Carnival Sunday, an ancient game called Maiorchina takes place - cheese wheels are rolled along a set itinerary, and it's important for them to arrive in one piece. The game was originally a way to 'test' the quality of the cheese - only the best and most compact wheels would survive the race without breaking.

Hidden in a courtyard in the lower part of this Sicilian village you'll find another unique marvel - the Giorginaro horizontal water mill, the only surviving one of a set of 14 watermills active for centuries across the valley.

This mill was lovingly restored by a local family who now leads tours, where they'll also show the mill in action. If there's no one when you get there, call the phone number on the gate and somebody will turn up soon. Don't forget to leave an offer and/or buy some flour!

Castiglione di Sicilia

At first glance, Castiglione di Sicilia looks completely different compared to the other Sicilian borghi visited so far. Instead of the usual honey-coloured sandstone, you'll see dark lava stone in many buildings - revealing the presence of a (usually) silent yet ever-present neighbour, mighty Etna.

Castiglione di Sicilia is one of the 20 comuni (municipalities) of the Etna protected area, and even part of the volcano's summit falls under its jurisdiction. From there, you can arrange hikes and tours all over the mountain, including the summit craters. Sadly it was cloudy on the day we visited, so we decided to focus on lower altitudes - and Castiglione di Sicilia didn't disappoint!

A truly unique sight in this village is the Castello di Lauria, a castle named after a naval officer in the service of the Kingdom of Aragon, located in the highest part of town. There are wonderful views on the walk up to the entrance, over Etna and the Alcantara river valley, but the real marvel is to be found inside - part of the castle houses the Enoteca Regionale, a wine bar collecting some of the best labels by producers in the Etna region.

The wine bar opens at 10.30 am, which may sound early for a glass of wine - but trust me, there's

nothing better than a glass on the terrace with views over Etna to get your appetite going!

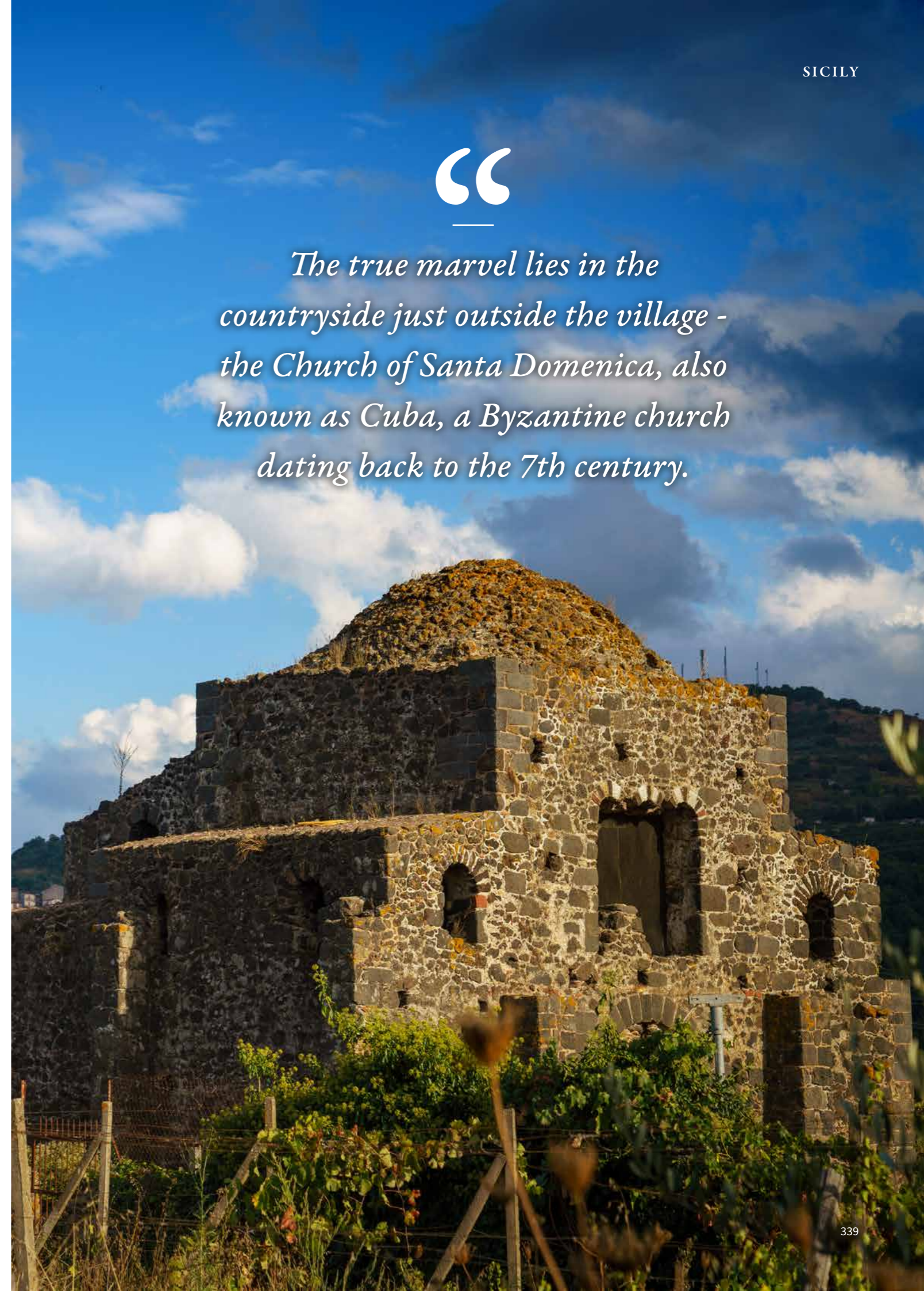
Castiglione di Sicilia also houses some impressive churches, including the Church of Santi Pietro e Paolo with part of the original external city walls in its structure, and Church of Sant'Antonio Abate with a beautiful Baroque façade. However, if you ask me, the most beautiful one is in the countryside just outside the village - the Church of Santa Domenica, also known as Cuba, a Byzantine church dating back to the 7th century, a simple square room topped by a dome built in lava stone.

This hidden village is also located close to one of the coolest natural attractions in this part of Sicily - the Gole dell'Alcantara (Alcantara Gorge), with towering basalt blocks surrounding a crystal-clear river, created by millennia of volcanic eruptions and erosion by the fast-flowing waters of the river.

The entrance to the Alcantara Gorge is about 20 minutes from Castiglione di Sicilia. This place gets VERY busy in summer, but luckily there's an alternative: the Piccole Gole (small gorge), just a few minutes from Chiesa di Santa Domenica. Just follow the path heading towards the river, until you get to this place. And guess what - it's not even marked on Google Maps!

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The true marvel lies in the countryside just outside the village - the Church of Santa Domenica, also known as Cuba, a Byzantine church dating back to the 7th century.



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If you can only pick one village to visit in the interior of Sicily, we recommend Gangi

Best Villages in Sicily near the Madonie

Gangi

If you can only pick one village to visit in the interior of Sicily, we recommend Gangi. This borgo seems to be hewn directly out of the mountain, a collection of little cube-shaped buildings crowding the sides of Mount Barone like the mythological Tower of Babel, made even more beautiful by mighty Mount Etna visible just behind (when it's clear).

Most of Gangi follows a crazy street plan developed to make use of as much space as possible right on the mountain. Don't try to find your way around using navigation apps - they simply won't work. However, Gangi is small enough that you'll always find what you're looking for (eventually).

Start your exploration in Piazza del Popolo, where you'll find the Cathedral dedicated to San Nicola di Bari. We recommend buying a ticket for a guided tour, as this church contains some really interesting things to see. First, you'll get to see a monumental Last Judgment painting, located in the apse, by local painter Giuseppe Salerno. It's interesting to notice the painting is in fact a Parusia - the moment immediately preceding the Last Judgment, just like Michelangelo's famous *Sistine Chapel in the Vatican Museums*.

The tour continues down into the crypt, housing the Fossa dei Parrini, dozens of mummified priests that died between the 17th and 19th century, all set in individual niches and in various degrees of preservation. If dead bodies bother you, skip this part. The final stop of this cathedral tour is Torre dei Ventimiglia, a Gothic church used as a belltower, but originally constructed as a watchtower.

There's plenty to see and do in Gangi - there are three museums to visit, as well as stunning Palazzo Bongiorno with its painted ceilings, which is free to enter. However, the most fun thing to do is simply wander around, getting lost between winding staircases and narrow alleyways, cobbled lanes opening up to scenic viewpoints.

In 2014, Gangi won the award of 'Borgo dei Borghi' - meaning 'Village of Villages', an award given to villages that are especially beautiful and unique. It was the village in Sicily we enjoyed the most, not just because it's really pretty, but also for its chilled atmosphere and the beauty of its surroundings. You can't miss it!

Petralia Soprana

The Madonie mountains were crossed by a branch of Sicily's *Via Francigena*, a pilgrimage route connecting Palermo with Messina, where pilgrims sailed to the Italian mainland and continued their walk to reach Rome. In recent years, four Sicilian pilgrimage routes have been mapped - collectively, they are known as Vie Francigene di Sicilia, covering approximately 1000 km of hiking routes across the island.

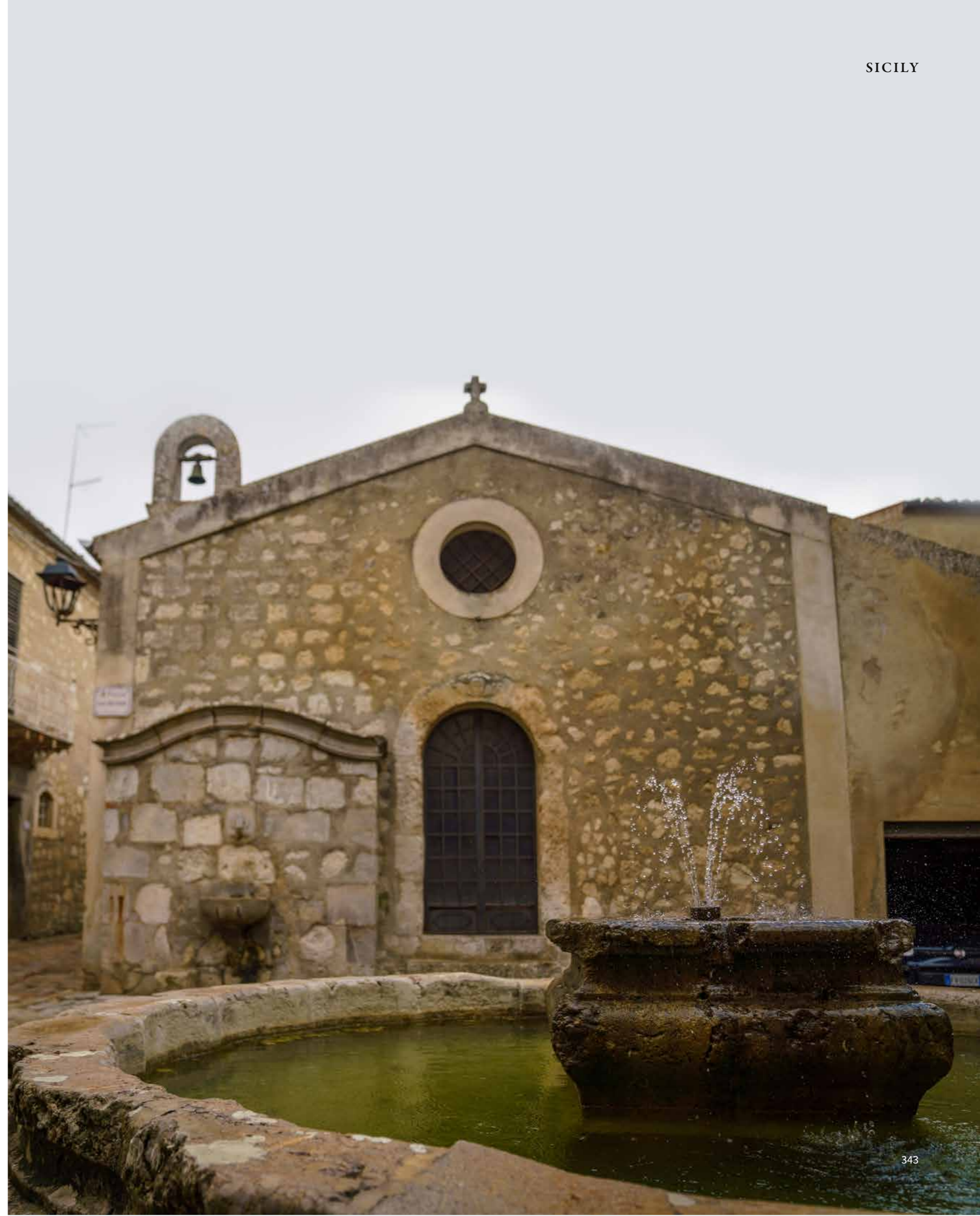
A fun way to get from Gangi to Petralia Soprana, another beautiful small village in Sicily, is hiking one of the stages of the Via Francigena Palermo-Messina. The 'proper' stage is actually the other way round, from Petralia Soprana to Gangi, but it's easy enough to follow in reverse.

It took us about 3 hours and a half to hike 13 km, with approx 700 meters in elevation. The itinerary leads you out of Gangi

at first, down the sides of the mountain, and then along minor roads, until a steep climb will take you to the first viewpoint where you can see Petralia Soprana. The second part of the hike follows unpaved country roads, with not a soul in sight - first, you'll descend to a stream and then climb up again, until you hit the cobbled streets of Petralia Soprana.

One of the main draws of Petralia Soprana are the scenic views over the Madonie mountains, stretching all the way to Gangi and Etna. Alas, we visited on a gloomy day, and there was construction work on the road leading to the Loreto viewpoint, so we couldn't see the views.

In any case, it's worth paying a visit to the tardo Baroque Church of Santa Maria di Loreto, and to the cathedral dedicated to Saints Pietro and Paolo, with an impressive wooden crucifix by Frate Umile da Petralia.



Sperlinga

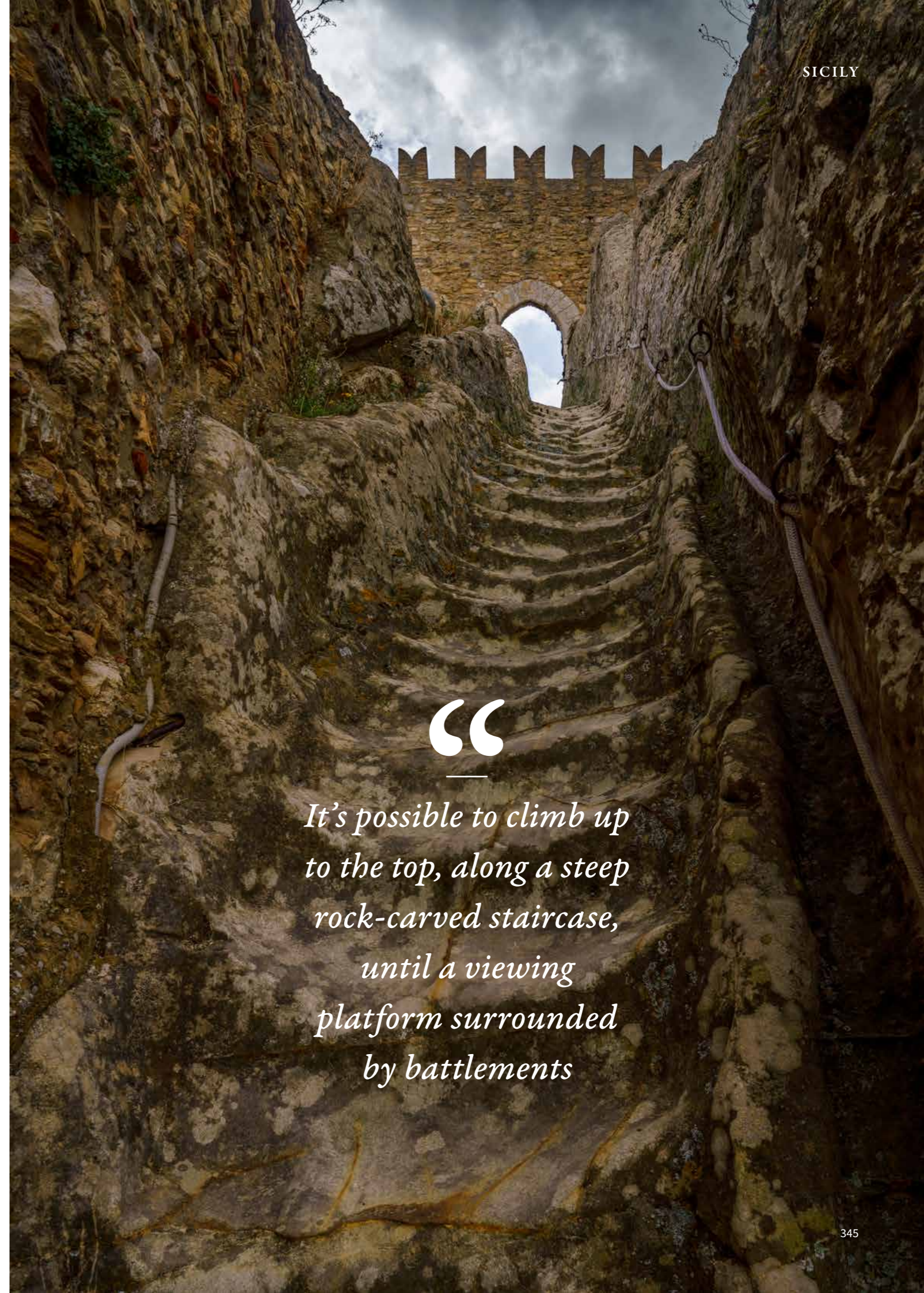
Another stage of the Via Francigena Palermo-Messina connects Gangi with Sperlinga, at the border between the Madonie and Nebrodi mountains. The stage is approximately 20 km long, with 1100 meters altitude difference - so it probably takes you most of the day to get there. The name 'Sperlinga' derives from the Latin spelunca, meaning cave - the territory is full of natural caves, and part of the village grew by expanding this existing system of caves. We started our visit at the castle, Castello di Sperlinga. In low season, you can buy your entrance ticket at Bar il Castello, and visit the castle independently. Part of the castle is dug into the sandstone, and part was built by the Normans in the 11th century. The 'above ground' section of the castle includes a small ethno-anthropological museum with farming equipment and information about life in the past, and a photo exhibition with Sperlinga in the worlds and pictures of famous travellers, from Al-Idrissi to Escher and Robert Capa. The underground section of the castle is even more spectacular

and adventurous to visit - you climb down a rickety wooden staircase and move from one rock-hewn room into another, admiring carved niches and wells, and observing the village below framed by windows sculpted from the rock.

It's also possible to climb up to the top, along a steep rock-carved staircase, until a viewing platform surrounded by battlements.

A short distance from the castle, it's also possible to walk around freely around the 'Borgo Rupestre' (rock village). The caves of Sperlinga were inhabited by locals until about 50 years ago, and are now mainly used as storage space. It's a little version of the *Sassi of Matera* - few of the cave houses have been restored, and we heard that one is being inhabited by an elderly lady, but hopefully increased tourist attention will lead to a renovation of this unique part of the village.

One last curious fact - Sperlinga is one of the few remaining places in Sicily where people still speak Gallo-Italic, a dialect from Northern Italy, dating back almost 1000 years when the area was settled with people from Piedmont and Lombardy.



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It's possible to climb up to the top, along a steep rock-carved staircase, until a viewing platform surrounded by battlements

Best Baroque Villages in Sicily

Ferla

The beautiful UNESCO-listed Baroque towns of South East Sicily are very well known, and visited by thousands of visitors each year. However, did you know that besides towns in the 'official circuit' like Noto, Scicli and Ragusa, there are many more small villages in Sicily where you can appreciate marvellous Baroque architecture?

One of these places is Ferla in the Iblei mountains, in the province of Siracusa. At first glance, the village doesn't look like much, just a sleepy Sicilian borgo surrounded by olive trees and dry stone walls. You just need to take a walk down Via Vittorio Emanuele, and you'll change your mind.

Start from the top, and gradually walk down - this is Ferla's Via Sacra, housing 5 impressive Baroque churches. Right at the top, there's the Church of Santa Maria, slightly elevated from the road and housing a wooden crucifix just above the altar. Then, you'll encounter the real marvel, overlooking the main square in the village - Sant'Antonio, with a curved

concave façade topped by two belltowers, until the one on the left collapsed after an earthquake in 1908.

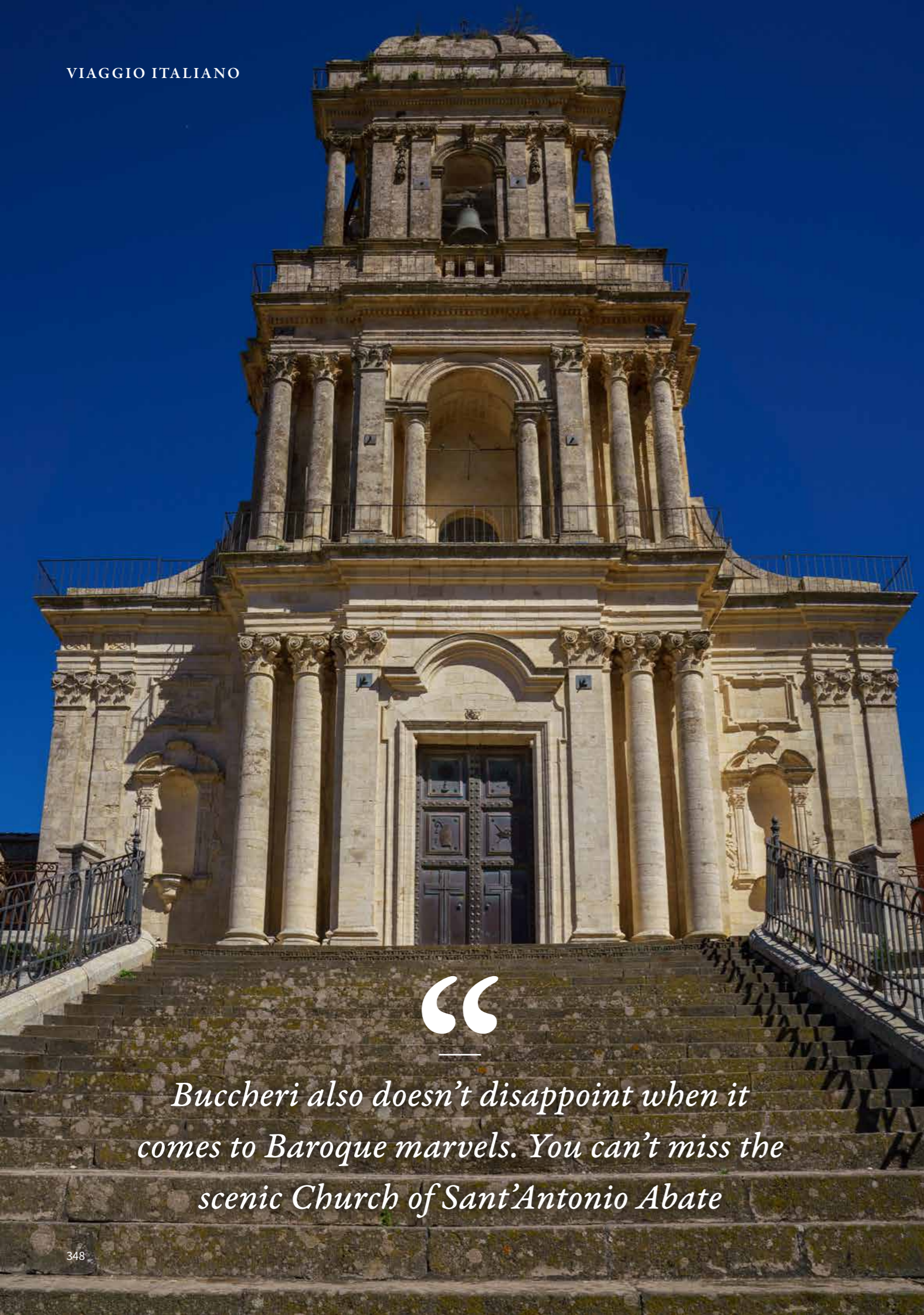
Further down there's the Chiesa Madre, with the city's coat of arms on the façade and lavish Baroque decoration inside, and the Church of San Sebastiano, the largest in town, with a statue of Saint Sebastian's martyrdom right above the entrance portal. Right across the square you'll notice the Church of the Carmine, presenting both Doric and Ionic architectural elements reinterpreted in Baroque style.

Ferla is also known for being one of the access points to the Pantalica Necropolis, a collection of Bronze Age rock-cut tombs built by Sicily's indigenous people. The tombs are spread all over the sides of a canyon created by the Anapo and Calcinara river, making the site really interesting from a nature point of view. The best-known tombs are in the Necropolis Nord, but we recommend planning a longer tour to include the Anaktoron, the only building in the site built with rocks, evidence of influence by the Mycenaean civilization.

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You'll encounter the real marvel, overlooking the main square in the village - Sant'Antonio





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Buccheri also doesn't disappoint when it comes to Baroque marvels. You can't miss the scenic Church of Sant'Antonio Abate



Buccheri

The quiet, scenic roads of the Iblei mountains are perfect to explore by bicycle - a fun day trip is riding from Ferla to Buccheri, an easy 12 km ride each way, uphill all the way there and down on the way back.

At 820 meters above sea level, Buccheri is the highest town in the Iblei, and snow was once a common occurrence. This led to the development of a unique industry - snow was collected and turned into ice in the neviere, small dome-shaped buildings with a hole at the top, and a 'door' of sorts from where the ice blocks were taken out. Snow and ice from Buccheri were sold all over Sicily and even Malta to make gelato and granite, and this commerce continued until the 1950s.

There are over 20 neviere all over the forest surrounding Buccheri, but it's hard to find their exact location and once again Google Maps doesn't help. The easiest neviere to see is located right at the entrance of town when coming from Ferla, on the edge of the Borgo looking down from Via Piave.

Buccheri also doesn't disappoint when it comes to Baroque marvels. You can't miss the scenic Church of Sant'Antonio Abate, with a monumental staircase just in front of it and views all over the rooftops of the village. A short distance away there's the Church of Santa Maria Maddalena, with a honey-coloured façade with statues and Corinthian columns, and a Baroque statue of Mary Magdalene on the main altar.

Militello in Val di Catania

Militello is not a borgo! It's a small town!

When we told local people that Militello in Val di Catania was going to be one of our destinations, this was often the comment. True, Militello is definitely larger than most of the Sicilian small villages included in this list, and it lacks that 'quaint Borgo' look at times, but it definitely delivers when it comes to Baroque architecture.. Militello is also one of the few places where you can see a building predating the 1693 earthquake that levelled much of southeast Sicily, after which the famous Baroque churches and buildings came to light. The Santa Maria La Vetere (meaning 'old') church was first built in the 12th century, but some features were added later - like the striking Renaissance entrance portal, with original colouring on some reliefs.

Under the main nave, we could also see the remains of a necropolis, including some tombs topped by a grate where bodies were left to dry of their fluids and organs. It may not be for everyone, but I find all these details so interesting!

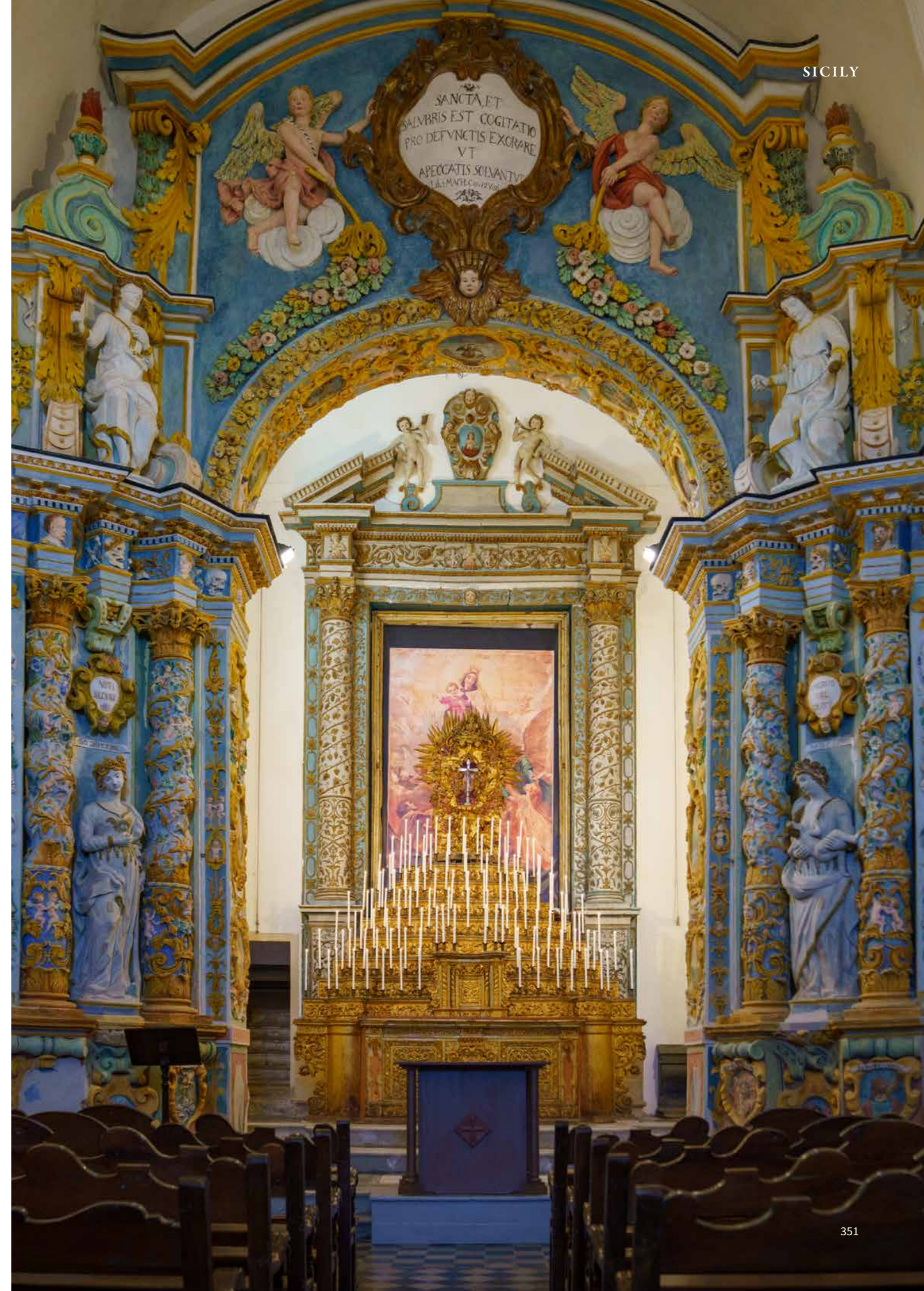
It's worth visiting Militello with a guide, as many churches are closed to the public, and

guides either have the keys, or can make arrangements for someone to open.

Going with a guide is the only way to see two real gems - the Purgatorio Church (Church of the Purgatory), with a gilded reproduction of the Purgatory mountain on the main altar, and the Church of Santa Maria della Catena, with lavish Baroque stuccos inside and a series of statues, only depicting female saints.

The two largest churches in Militello are perfect examples of the stunning Baroque architecture that warranted the town's inclusion in the UNESCO heritage list. The Chiesa Madre has an interesting museum housed in the crypt, including a collection of sacred art from before and after the earthquake, as well as unusual finds like a book about chess printed in 1609, believed to be the first to detail the famous technique that became known as the 'Sicilian defense'.

Santa Maria della Stella also has a spellbinding exterior, but you need to walk in to see the real marvel - a ceramic altarpiece by Andrea della Robbia, portraying the Nativity. This artwork used to be placed in Santa Maria La Vetere in the 16th century, and luckily survived the quake without major damage and was moved to the new church, where it stands to this day.



Best Villages in Sicily: Practical Info

Best Time to Visit

Sicily is definitely a year-round destination, but every season comes with its pros and cons. Spring and Autumn are probably the best times to visit Sicily overall, especially the interior - temperatures are mild, prices are low and you won't find crowds. The weather may be unstable, but it's still a good time to visit. Winter is also good, but some roads between villages are in poor condition, and it may be challenging to drive.

Summer is peak tourist season, not just along the coast but also in the interior of Sicily, with many returning émigres coming back to visit family. It also gets very hot - the upside is that there are many cool events, both religious and non-religious.

How to Get to Sicily

Flying is the easiest way to reach Sicily from Italy and beyond. These Sicilian villages are closer to Catania airport - but if you are also planning to visit Western Sicily, you could fly into Palermo, visit Gangi and nearby villages first, then make your way to Montalbano Elicona and Ferla. You can also reach Sicily by train from Calabria or by boat from Naples - a true adventure, and something definitely worth doing if you have time!

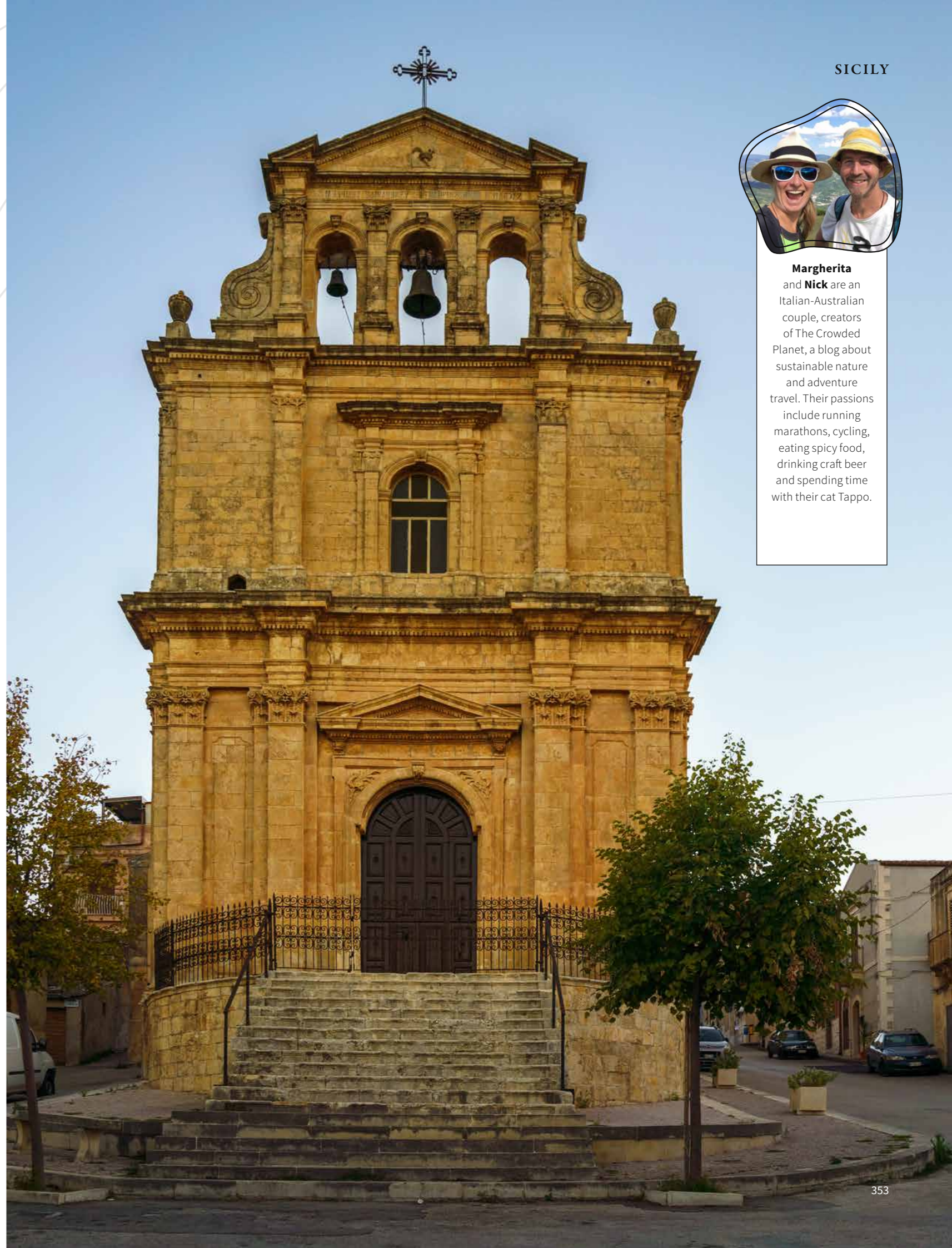
How to Get Around

All these villages can be reached by public transport, but it would take a *loooong* time. We recommend renting a SMALL car - if you're an SUV person, forget it and book a Fiat Panda instead. Trust me, village streets are really narrow and you don't want to get stuck!



Margherita

and **Nick** are an Italian-Australian couple, creators of The Crowded Planet, a blog about sustainable nature and adventure travel. Their passions include running marathons, cycling, eating spicy food, drinking craft beer and spending time with their cat Tappo.





9 AMAZING Tuscan Villages

*That you didn't
know, but have to visit*

BY SARA RODRIGUEZ | BLOG MINDFULTRAVELBYSARA.COM

There are many places to visit in Tuscany, but in this post I will take you to some of the most unknown and surprising villages in this Italian region.

On a journey through Tuscany you cannot fail to include the cities of Pisa, Florence, Lucca or Siena; as well as some well-known Tuscan towns like San Gimignano, Bagno Vignoni or Montepulciano.

But to discover fairytale

atmospheres, charming corners, landscapes full of cypresses and vineyards, incredible sunsets and unique cuisine, make sure you include these lesser-known Tuscan villages in your itinerary. I'm sure they will surprise you, and you probably have never heard of some of them before. So, without further ado, let's start discovering these villages that are going to make you fall in love with Tuscany.

9 beautiful Tuscan villages for an unforgettable trip

Pitigliano

When you arrive in Pitigliano, you will fall in love at first sight with this enchanting medieval town. Without a doubt, it's one of the most charming villages in Tuscany.

Did you know that this town in South Maremma was built on a promontory on a large rock of volcanic tuff?

The Etruscans built their necropolises in this part of Tuscany, and you can find paths and excavations in the middle of the forest, right outside Pitigliano. This village is also known as Little Jerusalem, because of the large Jewish community that settled there since the 15th century.

WHAT TO SEE AND DO IN PITIGLIANO

There is a lot to see in Pitigliano, but here are the most important sights:

- The Jewish Ghetto and the Synagogue, where you will get to know a very important part of the history of Pitigliano.
- The Cathedral of San Pietro e Paolo in Piazza S. Gregorio VII.
- Orsini Palace, the former home of Romano Orsini.
- Church of Santa Maria e San Rocco.
- Porta della Cittadella and the walls that surround part of the town.
- Viewpoint of the Chiesa della Madonna delle Grazie, just before entering the town

Something you can't stop doing is wandering around the town, and discovering the best scenic viewpoints to enjoy the sunset. Also, if you visit Pitigliano, you cannot miss the nearby villages of Sovana and Sorano, and the incredible Saturnia Hot Springs, just 30 minutes away by car - definitely deserving to be mentioned as the best things to see in Tuscany.



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In less than half an hour you will have seen everything, and you will fall in love with Sovana as I did



Sovana

The small town of Sovana, just 10 minutes by car from Pitigliano, will take you back to the times of the Etruscans, since its history is linked to an ancient Etruscan town.

As soon as you park in Sovana (just at the entrance to the town there is a paid parking lot), I recommend taking a walk along the main street.

In less than half an hour you will have seen everything, and you will fall in love with Sovana as I did.

WHAT TO SEE IN SOVANA

- Rocca Aldobrandesca Fortress, where the ruins of the imposing Rocca Aldobrandesca from the 11th century are located.
- Museo di San Mamiliano, where you can see “Il Tesoro di Sovana”, 500 gold coins from the 5th century.
- Palazzo Bourbon del Monte, also known as Palazzo Pretorio.
- The Church of Santa Maria Maggiore, with very well preserved frescoes.
- The Palazzo Comunale, which is located in the center of the main square of Sovana.
- The birthplace of Hildebrando di Soana, who was Pope Gregory VII between 1073 and 1085.
- The Co-Cathedral of San Pietro e Paolo, one of the most important Romanesque-Gothic buildings in Tuscany.

On the outskirts of Sovana, you cannot miss the Città del Tufo Archaeological Park, where you will be able to discover the Sovana Necropolis, with 2,500-year-old Etruscan tombs, including the famous Tomba Ildebranda.

In this archaeological park you can also enter its Vie Cave, huge corridors bordered by walls of up to 20 meters, excavated in the volcanic tuff. They are really impressive!

Sorano

The medieval town of Sorano is located less than 15 minutes from Sovana and Pitigliano, and is also known as “the Matera of Tuscany”, for its rocky landscapes. In addition, it was awarded the Bandiera Arancione (Orange Flag) by the Touring Club.

Just before entering the town, in Via Ildebrando da Sovana, 49, you will have incredible views of all of Sorano from afar.

If you visit Sorano, I recommend wandering around and getting lost in its cobbled alleys. It is a very charming town, and it will give you the feeling that you have been teleported to the past.

WHAT TO SEE IN SORANO

- The Ottocentesco Aqueduct, located at the entrance of the town.
- The Collegiate Church of San Nicola, where a baptismal font from 1563 stands out.

- The old Jewish ghetto and its synagogue.
- Masso Leopoldino, with incredible views of the fortress and all of Sorano.
- Cortilone.
- Orsini Fortress, an impressive fortified structure, built by the Aldobrandeschi family.
- Porta dei Merli.

After an intense day getting to know these beautiful Tuscan villages, there is nothing better than visiting the Terme di Sorano, and relaxing in its thermal water pool and spa. These thermal baths are located about 10 minutes by car from Sorano.

Querceto

The small medieval town of Querceto, with only 35 inhabitants, is located near Montecatini Val di Cecina, surrounded by nature and vineyards, and it totally feels like a fairytale! Visiting it is one of the essential things to do in Tuscany. Querceto is very small, but I have to say that it is one of the most beautiful villages in Tuscany. Its history dates back to the 13th century, and it is linked to the noble Ginori-Lisci family. Throughout history, Querceto had great military importance due to its location and the area's resources. Querceto Castle has always been owned by noble families, up to the Counts Ginori-Lisci, current owners of the fortress.

If you visit Querceto, be sure to stroll through its cobblestone streets, enjoy the silence, the nature and the friendliness of its people.

I also recommend organizing a tasting of the organic wines produced in the village since 1999, and visiting the small cellars located in old houses in the town.

There's another reason why wine production is worth mentioning. In Querceto there is a biogas plant, harnessing gas from grape fermentation, and transforming it into renewable energy for the town, and for more than 1,200 families.

To end your visit to Querceto and its surroundings, don't miss the Romanesque church dedicated to San Giovanni Battista, outside the old fortress.

Montecatini Val di Cecina

This beautiful village dating back from the Middle Ages is located in Val di Cecina, and it is another of the lesser known Tuscan villages that you cannot miss.

WHAT TO SEE IN MONTECATINI VAL DI CECINA

- Stroll through the historic center and its cobbled streets
- Piazza della Repubblica
- Piazza Giuseppe Garibaldi
- Parish Church of San Biagio
- Palazzo Pretoriano, 14th century



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Right in the village, there are fumaroles, steam jets, and water that boils out of the ground. It is incredible!

- Torre dei Belforti, the highest point of in town
- Museo delle Miniere, in the location of an old copper mine

If you want to try some products from this part of Tuscany, I recommend Montescudaio DOC wine and the Pecorino delle Balze di Volterra PDO Cheese. Did you know that its rennet is made from the wild thistle flower?

And not only is the town beautiful, but its surroundings are also well worth it.

From Montecatini Val di Cecina you can visit Querceto, go hiking or horse riding in the Berignone Nature Reserve, take a guided tour of the Rocca Sillana (Sillana Fort), or get closer to the walled city of Volterra.

Sasso Pisano

Sasso Pisano is one of the villages in Tuscany that surprised me the most. And not because it is one of the most beautiful, but because of its location.

It is located in the middle of one of the most important geothermal areas in Europe, which they call the Valle del Diavolo (Devil's Valley).

You will be as surprised as I was when you see that right in the village, there are fumaroles, steam jets, and water that boils out of the ground. It is incredible! It is even said that Dante Alighieri was inspired by this place when

he describes Hell in the Divine Comedy. And it doesn't surprise me, because these smoky lands seem to be from another planet.

This geothermal area was formerly used for thermal baths (and in Sasso Pisano you can bathe in the Biolago - Bagnone); but currently, several geothermal plants have been built to provide heating to neighbouring towns.

If you want to follow an easy path that will take you to the fumaroles, I recommend that you choose the Percorso delle Fumarole e Biancane, just steps away from the car park, where you can see smoke rising from the rocks.

Right next to the Vapori di Birra restaurant there's also an enclosure where you can see boiling water coming out of the ground, as well as a great jet of smoke. And if you are as lucky as I was, you will see a confused fox wandering around!

If you are interested in geothermal energy, don't forget to pay a visit to Geomuseo delle Biancane, in the neighbouring town of Lagoni.

Fivizzano

Fivizzano is a medieval mountain village located in the Tuscan region of Lunigiana, between the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines and the Apuan Alps. The green landscapes of this area are incredible!

This town is very important as it is linked to the Malaspina family and later to the Medici. Also, it was where Jacopo da Fivizzano built and used the first typewriter.

WHAT TO SEE IN FIVIZZANO

- Piazza Medicea is the most important in this Tuscan town, where you can see a fountain, several historic buildings and the church of Santi Jacopo e Antonio (also known as Santuario della Beata Vergine dell'Adorazione).
- Museo della Stampa (Printing Museum), located in the Fantoni Palace, where you can learn about the history of printing, and visit the room where the Grand Duke Leopold II of Tuscany awarded Fivizzano the title of Noble City. (The museum is temporarily closed at the moment)
- The wall of Fivizzano, since we must not forget that it is a medieval town and was located in a strategic place.
- Farmacia Clementi, one of the oldest pharmacies in Tuscany, where the famous China Clementi elixir is prepared. The original recipe was created in 1884, and it is still sold to this day.

To see Fivizzano well, I recommend parking in the free car park in Piazza Alcide De

Gasperi.

You cannot leave the town without visiting the Fortezza della Verrucola, dating back to the beginning of the 12th century. It is right next to Fivizzano, and well worth a visit. If you find the castle open, go inside and ask its friendly owner if he can show you around. He is the son of the famous Italian sculptor Pietro Cascella who lives in the castle, and he is also an artist.

Fosdinovo

Fosdinovo is another charming Tuscan town you shouldn't miss, and since 2014 it has been awarded the Bandiera Arancione - Orange Flag title by the Italian Touring Club.

Fosdinovo is home to one of the most beautiful and best-preserved castles in the region: Castello Malaspina (Malaspina Castle).

To visit this castle-fortress, I recommend joining the 50-minute guided tour. It costs 10 euros and you can book it on their website.

You will be teleported to the past, learn the bloody history of the Malaspina family, and the secrets of the castle: from its famous ghost Bianca, to the bones that are buried between the walls, the passageways that were used in ancient times, the room where Dante Alighieri stayed, and more!



There's more! After knowing all its legends, if you want more, you can stay in the castle for the night. After visiting the castle, I recommend you walk through the town of Fosdinovo, getting lost in its streets and discovering some of the most important sights, such as:

- The Church of San Remigio (Duomo of Fosdinovo) from the 13th century, where the tomb of Galeotto I Malaspina is located.
- The Oratorio dei Bianchi, with a white marble facade that surprises all travelers.
- The small Oratorio dei Rossi, connected to the Church of San Remigio, housing the Cristo Agonizzante, a 17th-century wooden crucifix.
- The Fosdinovo Panoramic Point, where you can get incredible views all the way to the coast.

If you like castles and fortresses, just 35 minutes by car from Fosdinovo you will find the Castello di Pallerone and the Fortezza della Brunella, in the town of Aulla.

Colonnata

Following our journey in search of the most beautiful and unusual Tuscan villages, we came across Colonnata, in the province of Carrara, between the peaks of the Apuan Alps.

Marble, known locally as 'white gold', is very important to this medieval village. To explain why you can't miss Colonnata, I'm going to tell you a little more about this important rock.

Have you ever heard of Carrara marble? It is the most famous marble in the world! Artists from all over Italy including Canova, Donatello and Giovanni Pisano used it for their masterpieces. Even Michelangelo came here to find the perfect block of marble to carve his famous David.

In Colonnata, you can visit the white marble quarries on a tour to learn more about how marble is extracted, and marvel at the tunnels and unique landscapes of this part of Tuscany.

And if you like street art, in Cava Gioia there is a mural representing Michelangelo's David, by renowned artist Eduardo Kobra.

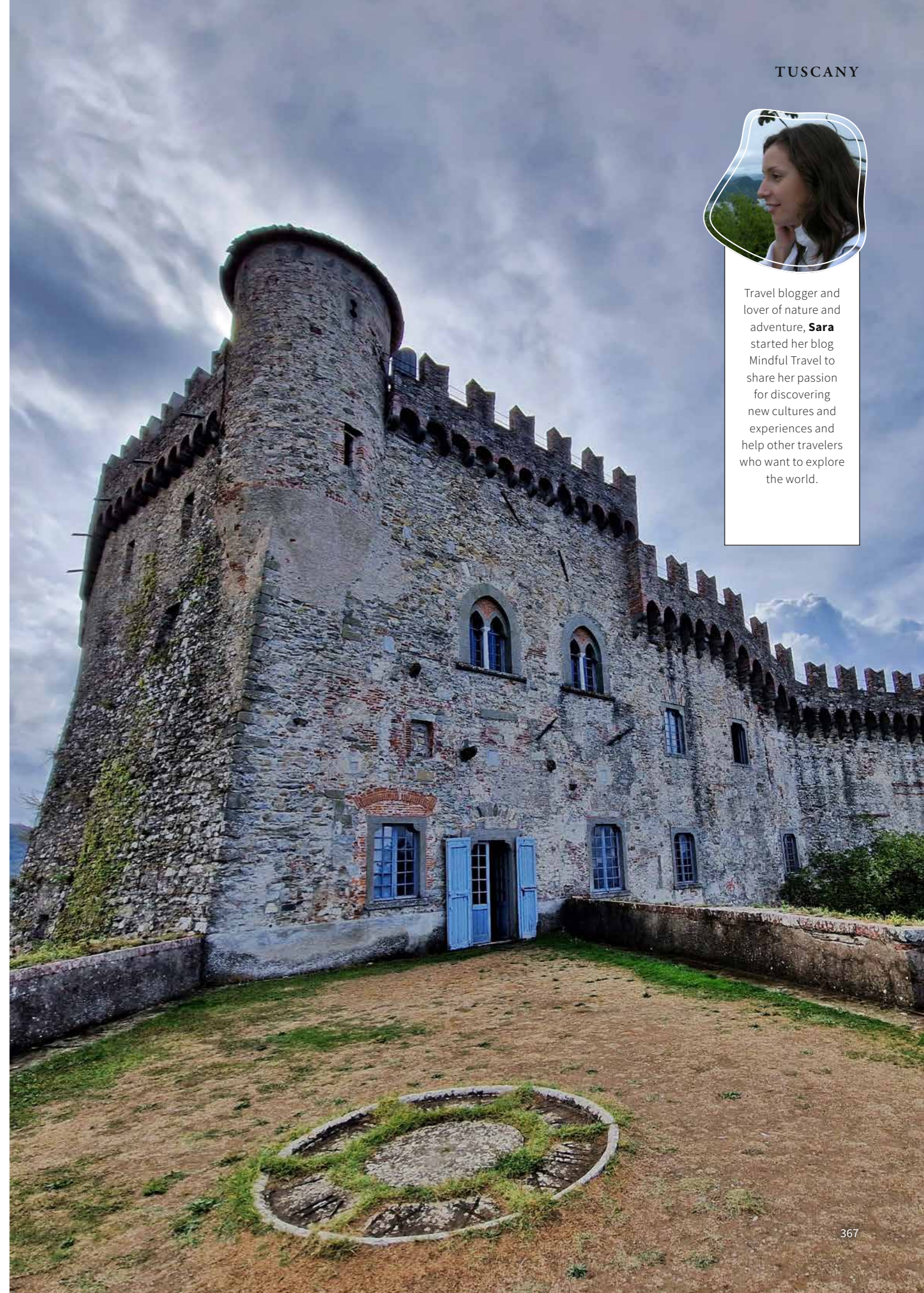
I recommend walking through the town until you reach the Church of San Bartolomeo. Right next to it, is the Monumento al Cavatore (Monument to Marble Mining) by the artist Alberto Sparapani.

Finally, you can't leave Colonnata without trying the delicious Lardo di Colonnata PGI, served finely sliced on hot toast, and drizzled with olive oil. It's really delicious!

From the town you can also take several hiking trails, to enjoy nature and the Apuan Alps.



Travel blogger and lover of nature and adventure, **Sara** started her blog Mindful Travel to share her passion for discovering new cultures and experiences and help other travelers who want to explore the world.





BEST THINGS TO DO IN
Trentino
Besides Skiing



BY GRETA OMOBONI | BLOG GRETASTRAVELS.COM

Trentino, in Northern Italy, is famous for its beautiful mountains and world class skiing slopes. It's a particularly popular winter destination in Italy, as thousands of Italians flock to its Alpine towns to hit the slopes. But there's more to Trentino than amazing ski opportunities. I recently teamed up with the Italian National Tourist Board for a "Viaggio Italiano", a project to discover all the most beautiful small villages in Trentino. I spent ten days in September travelling across this gorgeous mountain regions, exploring towns like Mezzano, San Lorenzo Dorsino, Luserna, Rango and many more.

Adventuring around the Alps in summer, while discovering some off the beaten track towns was an amazing experience. In this article I have outlined some of the best things you can do in Trentino, besides skiing! Especially if you're visiting in summer, this Italian mountain region has plenty of fun outdoors activities on offer. Whether you want to go hiking, mountain biking, or generally just spending time in nature, there are lots of places in Trentino where you can do so. So what are you waiting for, let's dive in and discover the best of Trentino!



Awesome things to do in Trentino

Go hiking

I couldn't write an article about the best things to do in Trentino and not mention the great hiking opportunities. The mountains of Trentino are covered in amazing hiking trails, of all levels of training and difficulty.

Whether you're searching for a challenging climb or a relaxing stroll in the woods, in Trentino you'll find trails for your level. Needless to say, the dramatic alpine views are going to be amazing whatever hiking route you choose.

During my Viaggio Italiano I had the pleasure of hiking a variety of different trails. We started off in Mezzano, where we did the Cordognè to San Giovanni loop trail.

It's a fairly easy hike, which rewards you with stunning views of the Pale di San Martino, one of the most famous mountain sights in Trentino.

It's an easy 5km loop, with minimal elevation change (around 180m), which can be done in 2 to 2.5 hours.

The trail is very varied, going from sections where you are entirely surrounded by trees to others where you're strolling through open green fields.

We went hiking also in Vigo di Fassa, where we did the trail from Ciampedie to Gardeccia. In Vigo di Fassa there are countless trails, since there the ski slopes

and infrastructure get converted to hiking trails in summer.

You can use the cable cars to reach the top of the mountains, and from there go hiking along the top of the peaks.

The trail we did was very panoramic and fairly easy, but there are trails for all difficulty levels if you want something more challenging.

If you want to do a hike that's a bit different from the usual, then you have to add the hike to the grottoes of Castello Tesino, near Pieve Tesino, to your Trentino bucket list.

It's a 3.5 hour hike, of which 1.5 hours are spent inside these unique caves, and you have to do it with a guide.

But dramatic mountain views aren't the only thing you can expect from hikes in Trentino. In Luserna, in the Alpe Cimbra area of Trentino, you'll find a variety of thematic trails for every age.

There is a trail called "Sentiero Cimbro dell'Immaginario", perfect to hike with children. This 6.6km trail is dotted with beautiful wooden statues, this trail teaches you about the history and legends of this part of Trentino.

Another trail, called "Dalle Storie alla Storia", is a 5km trail for anyone with an interest in history. This historic path is marked with historic shapes and statues, which share historical





testimonies from local people about the great wars that took place in Europe and throughout these mountains.

In a different part of Trentino, in Rango in the Garda Trentino region, you can find another fun thematic trail, called the “Sentiero della Noce”.

This 7km is dedicated to the “noce bleggiana”, a type of walnut that you can find only in this part of Trentino.

It takes around 2 hours to hike. It’s fairly easy, with little elevation change, and will take you through picturesque towns and villages where the bleggiana walnut still plays a very important role.

Go mountain biking

Similarly to hiking, mountain biking is another great outdoors activity that you can do in Trentino.

Especially with e-bikes, which are becoming increasingly popular, you can discover parts of the mountains that you wouldn’t otherwise reach on foot or by car. My favourite bike experience that we did in Trentino was the KilometroZero UNESCO Bike Tour that we did in the Terme di Comano area.

It’s a food tasting bike tour, which focuses on local delicacies that have travelled zero kilometres to reach your dining table.

The idea is also that the calorie intake at the end of the day will

be zero, as you will have cycled and burned off all the extra calories of the food you taste during the bike tour.

We also had the opportunity to cycle in Vigo di Fassa. Besides the many fun mountain biking trails, in Vigo di Fassa you can also ride along the 50km cycling lane that goes through the whole Val di Fassa and Val di Fiemme.

It’s a great trail as it has little elevation change, and is easily accessible to all cycling levels.

Whether you want to go on a hard core mountain biking trail, or for a leisurely stroll along the cycling lane, in Vigo di Fassa you have the options to do so.

There is no shortage of beautiful bike trails in Trentino, but another stunning place where you can go cycling is Lago di Tenno. This beautiful turquoise lake is the perfect backdrop for a relaxing cycle through the woods.

Get your adrenaline pumping with adventure activities

Hiking and mountain biking aren’t the only outdoors activities that you can do in Trentino. The mountains offer a huge variety of thrilling activities for the adventure lovers.

In Trentino you can do all sorts of activities like canyoning, horse riding, paragliding, rock climbing, rafting and more. Close to the village of Mezzano, you can go canyoning in the



beautiful Val Noana. Canyoning is a very fun adventure that involves sliding down natural water slides, swimming in pools of crystalline water and climbing along the course of the Noana Torrent. It's a fun way to enjoy the beautiful natural landscape from a different angle, and fully immerse yourself in the alpine lakes and rivers.

Rafting isn't quite as immersive, as you'll be on a boat instead of swimming through the rivers, but it's still a very entertaining and thrilling experience.

In Vigo di Fassa they do a lot of paragliding, especially in September. Summer is the popular season for hiking and mountain biking, but early autumn is perfect to fly high. The more marked temperature difference between day and night creates stronger air currents, which make it perfect for flying high above Val di

Fassa, and enjoying the stunning mountain views.

Another adventurous activity you can't miss in Trentino is horse riding. We did it at Ranch dei Lupi, near Pieve Tesino, but there are loads of horse riding schools all over Trentino where you can try it.

We did a 2-hour excursion that took us to explore the surrounding mountains, fields and towns.

It's a great way to see more of the beautiful mountains, but also to do an activity that connects you to nature and another creature.

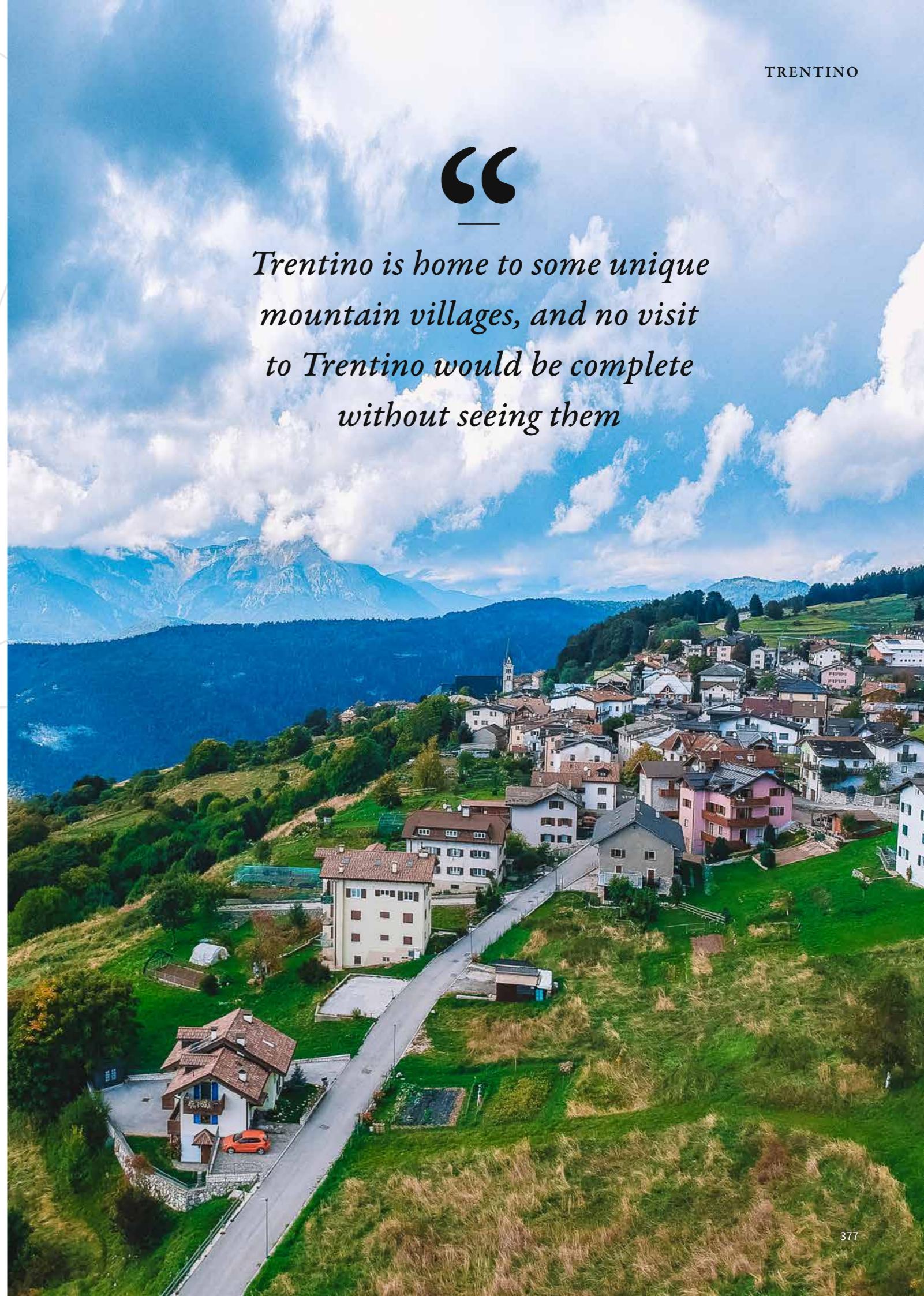
Discover the medieval mountain "borghi"

But the beautiful mountain scenery and fun outdoors adventures aren't the only thing to see and do in Trentino.

Trentino is home to some unique mountain villages, and no visit to Trentino would be complete without seeing them.

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Trentino is home to some unique mountain villages, and no visit to Trentino would be complete without seeing them





There's an official list of the "Borghi più belli d'Italia" (the most beautiful villages in Italy), and quite a few villages in Trentino made the list.

The first village we visited was Mezzano, one of the villages that feature on this list of beautiful borghi in Italy, and it's easy to see why.

This cute mountain village has the most picturesque streets, and even acts as an open-air museum. In Mezzano you will find an art display called "Cataste & Canzei". These are 26 art displays dotted all over the town, made with wooden stacks.

Created by a variety of artists, they're representative of the long mountain winters of the past, and showcase different aspects of mountain life.

It's a beautiful village to wander around and discover while you hunt for the 26 art pieces! If you want to learn more about the village, look out for "La Sedia Rossa", a red chair with a bell next to it.

If you ring the bell, a local will show up and tell you about the history and customs of Mezzano.

Another beautiful village you have to visit in Trentino is San Lorenzo Dorsino. This village is a bit unusual, in that it doesn't have a defined historic town centre.

Instead, there are multiple centres, as they all used to be separate villages back in the day, which merged into a bigger town over time as population grew.

There is a trail called "Sette passi per le sette ville", which will take you to explore all the different hamlets in San Lorenzo.

Besides discovering its gorgeous picturesque streets and rock-lined houses, I loved San Lorenzo as it was very lively. We did a tour called "Il borgo dai mille volti", and had the opportunity to meet local people while exploring the town. Meeting first hand people that have lived in San Lorenzo Dorsino their whole life, and hearing their stories about life in the mountains was an amazing experience.

The medieval borgo of Canale di Tenno features on the list of most beautiful borghi in Italy, and it's easy to see why.

Unlike San Lorenzo Dorsino, which is very spread out, Tenno is very compact and fits the more "traditional" definition of borgo. There are no distinct village walls, but all the medieval houses are very close to each other.

As you enter the borgo, you will feel like you're stepping back in time. The tiny cobbled streets are entirely pedestrian, with tiny windows and balconies overlooking directly on the street. The strong medieval feeling that this borgo gives is made even stronger by events they run in the village, like the Rustico Medioevo in August and the Christmas market in winter.

Rango is another traditional



medieval borgo, with all the ancient houses and village centre gathered close to each other.

The narrow alleys and cobble streets are lined with ancient looking doorways and pops of colourful flowers. As you wander around town, you'll also find a few piazzas with their water fountains.

In Rango you can also see very clearly the traditional architecture of the time. Where the lower levels of the houses were built in stone to preserve heat, and the lofts built in wood.

This because the upper floors were used to store hay throughout the long winters. The lots were built in wood so that air could enter more easily and the hay could breathe.

Balbido isn't a very big village, but it's a pretty special one. Dotted all over the town you will find beautiful murals painted on the walls of ordinary houses.

Some of the murals show scenes of daily mountain life, whilst others depict the legends and stories of this area of Trentino. The murals have turned Balbido into an open-air museum.

Balbido is just a short walk away from Rango. After visiting Rango, you can just walk over to Balbido, and spend some time seeing how many murals you can spot.

Another lovely village we visited was Pieve Tesino, another member of the "Borghi più belli d'Italia" compilation.

It might not be as quaint as Tenno and Rango, with their rocky facades and medieval vibes, but it's still a very picturesque village with its cobble streets and pastel coloured houses.

It also has a pretty distinctive and unique history, with elements of the past still visible in town. For example, to this day, you can still see vegetable gardens inside the town, a common occurrence in this part of Trentino.



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With its beautiful views, stunning mountain scenery and cute streets, it's easy to see why Luserna is on the list of most beautiful borghi in Italy



Pieve Tesino also played a very important role in the history of the European Union, which you can find out all about at the Casa Museo de Gasperi.

With its beautiful views, stunning mountain scenery and cute streets, it's easy to see why Luserna is on the list of most beautiful borghi in Italy.

From pretty much everywhere in the town you get awesome views over the valley below. It's a very scenic town, with a lot to offer also from a historical and cultural point of view.

In Luserna you can visit a really interesting Casa Museo, as well as the Centro Documentazione (more on that in a bit!) It's a great village to visit if, besides seeing a pretty town, you also want to learn about the history of this area.

Vigo di Fassa isn't on the list of the most beautiful borghi in Italy, but that doesn't make it any less

worthy of a visit. The village itself is very pretty, but the main selling point are the stunning mountains that surround it.

In Vigo di Fassa you can spend some time wandering the streets of this cute village, and then head into the mountains for some awesome outdoors adventures.

In this village you'll also find cable cars and ski slopes. Whether you're visiting in summer or winter, you'll always find some fun outdoors adventures waiting for you in Vigo di Fassa.

Learn about the history of Trentino

When you're in a place of such stunning natural beauty, it's tempting to just stick to outdoor adventures, without really learning much about the history and culture of it.

Trentino has a very strong cultural identity and a very



important history, which you should learn about if you visit this popular Italian region.

We visited a number of museums during our Viaggio Italiano, but the one that most stood out to me was the Casa Museo de Gasperi.

Built in the house where Alcide de Gasperi was born, this museum is dedicated to educating visitors about the life and views of Alcide de Gasperi, one of the Founding Fathers of the European Union.

Seeing how growing up in a small mountain village, of what at the time was still the Austro-Hungarian Empire, influenced the political views and decisions of Alcide de Gasperi was fascinating.

Always in Pieve Tesino, there's another fascinating museum, called the Museo Per Via. The museum tells the story of how, in the late 1800s, the people

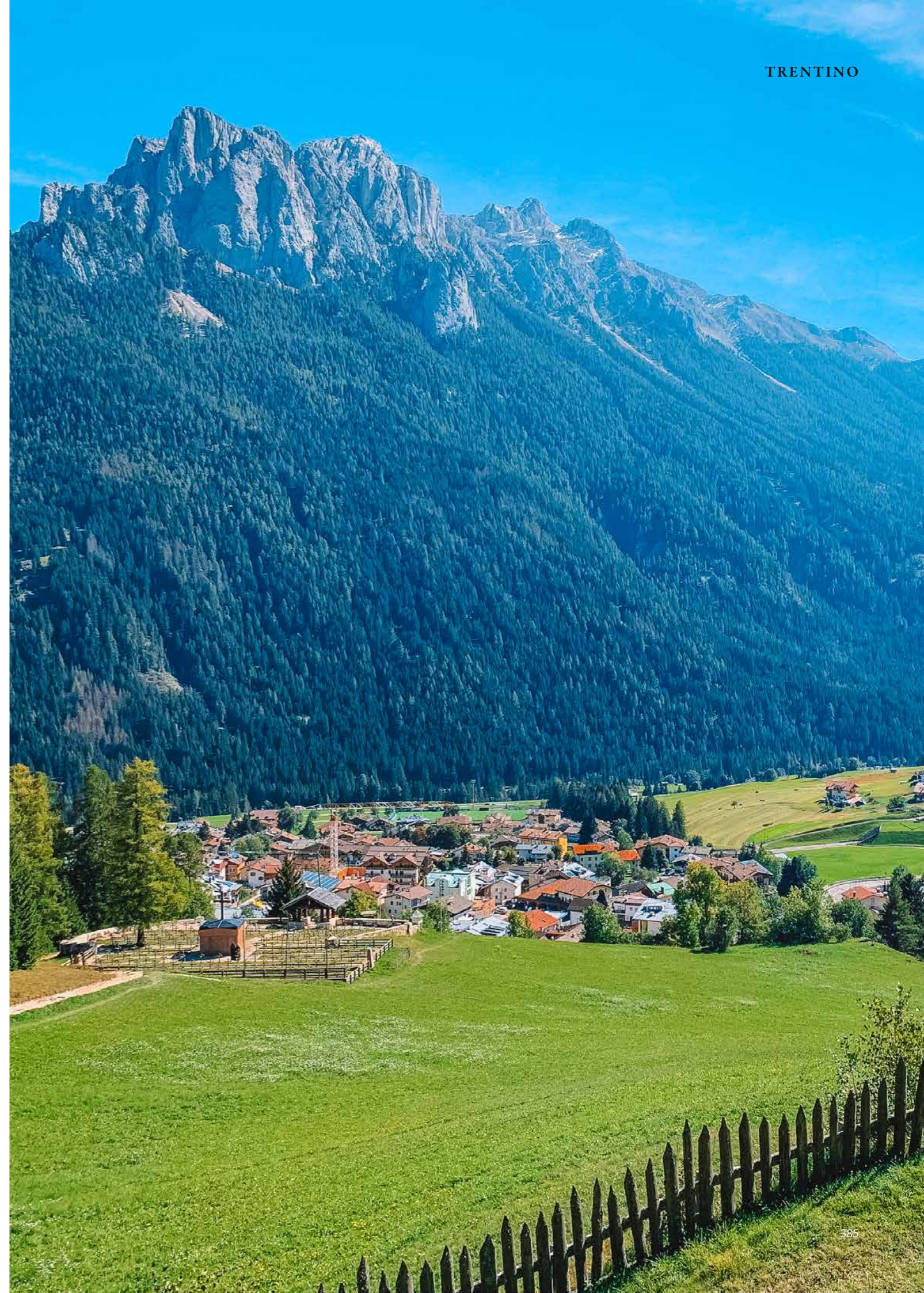
from Tesino used to travel all over Europe selling prints.

Seeing what life was like back in the day, and the history of these travelling salesmen is really interesting, as its not the typical job you'd think people from a small mountain village would be doing.

Another really interesting museum was the Museo Ladin de Fascia, in Vigo di Fassa. It's an interactive museum dedicated to the "Ladino" community (the people that live in that part of Trentino).

Starting all the way back in prehistoric times, and looking at how societies, beliefs, languages, religions and traditions have developed over the centuries.

If you want to go back all the way to the prehistoric times, there's a fascinating museum close to Rango; the Museo delle Palafitte di Fivè.





This museum is divided in three parts; the actual Museum, the Parco Arceo Natura, and the archeological area.

All three parts are dedicated to ancient dwellings on stilts that were found in the area, which date as far back as 3,800 BCE.

In the archeological area you can see the remaining stilts that were discovered, whilst in the Parco Arceo Natura you can see reconstructions of what they used to look like.

In the Museum you will find more detailed information about the research that was carried out to uncover them and the societies that lived there. You should visit all three for a complete experience and understanding. Luserna, in the Alpe Cimbra, is a small village, but with a rich history and many museums to highlight it.

In Luserna you can visit the “Centro Documentazione Luserna”, which has lots of different and interesting exhibitions, both permanent and temporary.

From exhibitions about World War I to displays on wild cats, or from exhibitions about life in Luserna in the past to photo displays of jobs that no longer exist, the “Centro Documentazione Luserna” is a great place to learn lots of different things.

In Luserna you’ll also find the Casa Museo Haus Von Prökk, a house from the 1800s that was preserved and is kept perfectly intact.

That way visitors can see exactly the layout of houses back then, as well as the sort of furniture and tools they kept.

It offers a valuable insight into daily mountain life in the past, in a very authentic manner.

There are no reconstructions here, just a genuine house of the time, maintained to show a glimpse into daily life.

It was so interesting to see how, despite all being part of the same Italian region, different mountain areas developed such strong personal identities, which are still observed to this day. Seeing the marked difference in dress, behaviour and especially language between Tesino, Ladino and Cimbri, is something I wasn't expecting.

Discover the delicious local cuisine

Another big part of local culture and identity comes with the cuisine.

In Trentino you can eat pasta and pizza like everywhere else in Italy, but you should definitely try some of the traditional dishes that are specific only to this region.

And if that isn't local enough, there are certain foods that are only made in specific towns or valleys of Trentino.

For example, in San Lorenzo Dorsino we had the pleasure of trying *ciuğa*, a type of salami only made in this village.

Back in the day it was made with pork scraps and turnips, since it was filling, cheap, and meant that no food was thrown out.

Today the recipe is a little different, with higher quality pork meat and a higher pork to turnip ratio. It's a recipe unique to San

Lorenzo Dorsino, and is made nowhere else in Italy or the world. It has a strong unique flavour, and is a must-try when you visit San Lorenzo Dorsino!

Similarly, in Vigo di Fassa we had the pleasure of trying the cheese "Puzzone di Moena". It's original from Moena, a village near Vigo di Fassa, but it's a popular product in the whole Val di Fassa valley.

As the name suggests, it's a very strong cheese with a pungent smell.

In general the cuisine in Trentino is characterised by very hearty and warm dishes, as that's the food that had to sustain people through the long and cold winter days in the past.

Today, it's a great insight into what life in the mountains was like back then.

Some of the local dishes that you can taste in Trentino include *canederli*, big round dumplings with bread, cheese and speck, potato *tortel*, sort of like potato pancakes, polenta, warm soups and deer.

It's a cuisine that reflects how harsh winters used to be in the mountains (quite different from mild Italian winters in the rest of the country).

It shares memories of a time when nothing was thrown out, and even scraps were turned into delicacies, and when a big hearty meal had to give you energy for a long day working the mountain fields.



Final thoughts

There you have it, the ultimate guide to the best things to do in Trentino, which don't involve skiing or snow sports!

Growing up in Milan, I spent most of my childhood skiing in Trentino, but it wasn't till a recent summer trip to Trentino that I started appreciating the beauty of the mountains during the Italian summer months.

I'm very glad I was able to participate in this Viaggio Italiano, as it allowed me to explore some

beautiful off the beaten track Italian borghi. Trentino is a region I thought I knew well already, but I discovered so much more beyond what I already knew.

Trentino is a stunning region, with beautiful mountain landscapes, picturesque medieval villages and a rich history and culture.

I hope you will find this guide useful in planning your Italy itinerary, and that it made you want to add Trentino to your Italy bucket list!



Greta is a full time traveller and blogger. She quit her corporate job in 2017 to dedicate herself to Greta's Travels, where she shares travel itineraries, city guides, hike overviews and more. With a special love for tropical and beach destinations, you can usually find her shooting a sunset, catching a wave, hiking a mountain or trying the local cuisine.

21 AWESOME
THINGS TO
DO IN

Umbria

Italy's green heart





BY TERESA GOMEZ | BLOG BROGANABROAD.COM

Located in the heart of Italy, and nestled between the Apennine Mountains, and the regions of Tuscany, Lazio, and Marche, Umbria is one of the smallest and least known Italian regions. It is the only region in the country that doesn't have a coastline or a border with another country. Surrounded by mountains, hills, valleys, and plains, this central region has managed to preserve its ancient traditions, which are some of the oldest in Italy.

Umbria is known as Italy's Green Heart, not only because of its central location but also because of its green landscapes and lush vegetation.

It is a land of medieval hill towns, many of them with Etruscan origins, which were built as fortresses to protect themselves from foreign invaders. They are often surrounded by thick defensive walls and look impenetrable. There are never ending options

for things to do in Umbria that will help you discover this fascinating region. And there is something for every kind of traveller too.

Whether you are interested in enjoying the outdoors and active adventure, sampling mouthwatering local delicacies, or discovering a treasure trove of art and culture, Umbria has got you covered.

An Overview of Umbria

Umbria is named after the ancient Umbri tribe who dominated the area from around 1,000 BC, and it has had a number of civilisations leave their mark.

The Etruscans, who were the Umbris' biggest rivals, together with the Romans, who came later, had a very big impact in Umbria. In the Middle Ages, the region joined the Papal States, and, the Renaissance was an



important period of prosperity in the areas of culture, art, business and politics.

Today, Umbria's capital, Perugia, is considered one of the *most beautiful cities in Italy*. But I want to look beyond the big cities and focus on the lesser-known areas of Umbria.

Despite being one of the smallest regions in Italy, Umbria is blessed with a large number of medieval hill towns. They are magical places that transport you back in time, and also give you an insight to a slower pace of life that is to be savoured day by day.

Umbria is, in fact, all about *slow travel*, slow food, and soaking in all those experiences in Italy's Green Heart.

Best time to Visit

The best time to visit Umbria is from April to June and from September to October.

It doesn't tend to get unbearably hot in the summer, however temperatures are more comfortable in the spring and autumn. Travelling in the shoulder seasons also has the advantage that you avoid the crowds.

In spring you will get to enjoy the lush green landscapes at their most vibrant, with fields bursting into colour with wildflowers. Umbria is known as 'the Green Heart of Italy' for a reason.

Autumn is the time of the grape and olive harvest, and it's also

truffle and porcini season, so it's perfect if you are interested in food festivals. There are plenty of them across the region that celebrate the most precious local products.

How to get to Umbria

San Francesco d'Assisi International Airport in Perugia has connections with a lot of major European cities, including London, from where you can fly with British Airways or Ryanair. Alternatively, Rome and Florence airports are just over two hours away by car or by train.

Getting around

You can travel around Umbria by public transport between the main towns and villages. However, I would recommend hiring a car in order to make the most of your time and to not be limited by public transport schedules.

Where to stay

I loved driving around Umbria and exploring the different areas. Despite being a small region, some of the roads can be narrow and winding, so it can take a bit longer to get to places. So my recommendation would be to pick more than one place to base yourself in Umbria, according to the areas you are planning to explore.



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This old-world charm has earned Montone the accolades of one of the most beautiful villages in Italy

Amazing Things to do in Umbria

Get lost in the medieval hilltop town of Montone

Montone is a charming Umbrian village that dates back to the 9th century. It rises proudly on a hill over the valley of the Carpina River and the Upper Tiber Valley. It is a classical medieval village that has been preserved and has remained unchanged for centuries.

The steep and narrow streets paved in flagstones, and the ancient architecture of the village will make you feel like you are in an open-air museum. But Montone is no museum. Montone is very much alive with a strong sense of community. The streets lined up with blue and yellow flags offer a glimpse of a recent festival. Windows framed by flower boxes, and doors flanked by potted urban gardens give you a sense of the pride locals have for their village. This old-world charm has earned Montone the accolades of one of the most beautiful villages in Italy (*I Borghi più belli d'Italia*), and the prestigious *Orange Flag of the Italian Touring Club*, an environmental tourism quality mark awarded to villages with excellent quality offer and hospitality.

Places not to miss in Montone include Piazza Fortebraccio, the beating heart of the village, the 14th century Torre

dell'Orologio (Clock Tower) and prison, the wonderful viewpoint in Piazza San Francesco, and the Municipal Museum within the former Convent of San Francesco.

Stay and eat in the home of a medieval historical figure

Montone was the home of Andrea Braccio Fortebracci, Captain of Fortune and one of the greatest Italian commanders of mercenary troops of the Middle Ages.

His old residence is an elegant palace from the 1100 that has been lovingly restored and converted into a charming boutique hotel.

So why not stay in the heart of one of the most beautiful villages in Italy, in the home of the historic figure who had the vision of a united Italy, over 400 years before it actually happened?

The current owner of this lovely hotel is Chef Giancarlo Polito, who is also the owner of the osteria located within the same building. Chef Polito's cuisine is creative, delicate and respectful of the past, and eating his food creations is an experience in itself. He is a true spokesman for Umbrian cuisine and holds a very close relationship with local producers. His menus feature essentials of the region such as olive oil, truffles, free-



range meats, and game. There's even a dedicated olive oil menu with the best oils from the region, including Chef Polito's own branded olive oil, which, at the time of my visit, had been pressed only two days before. The wine selection is also very impressive, with over 400 labels.

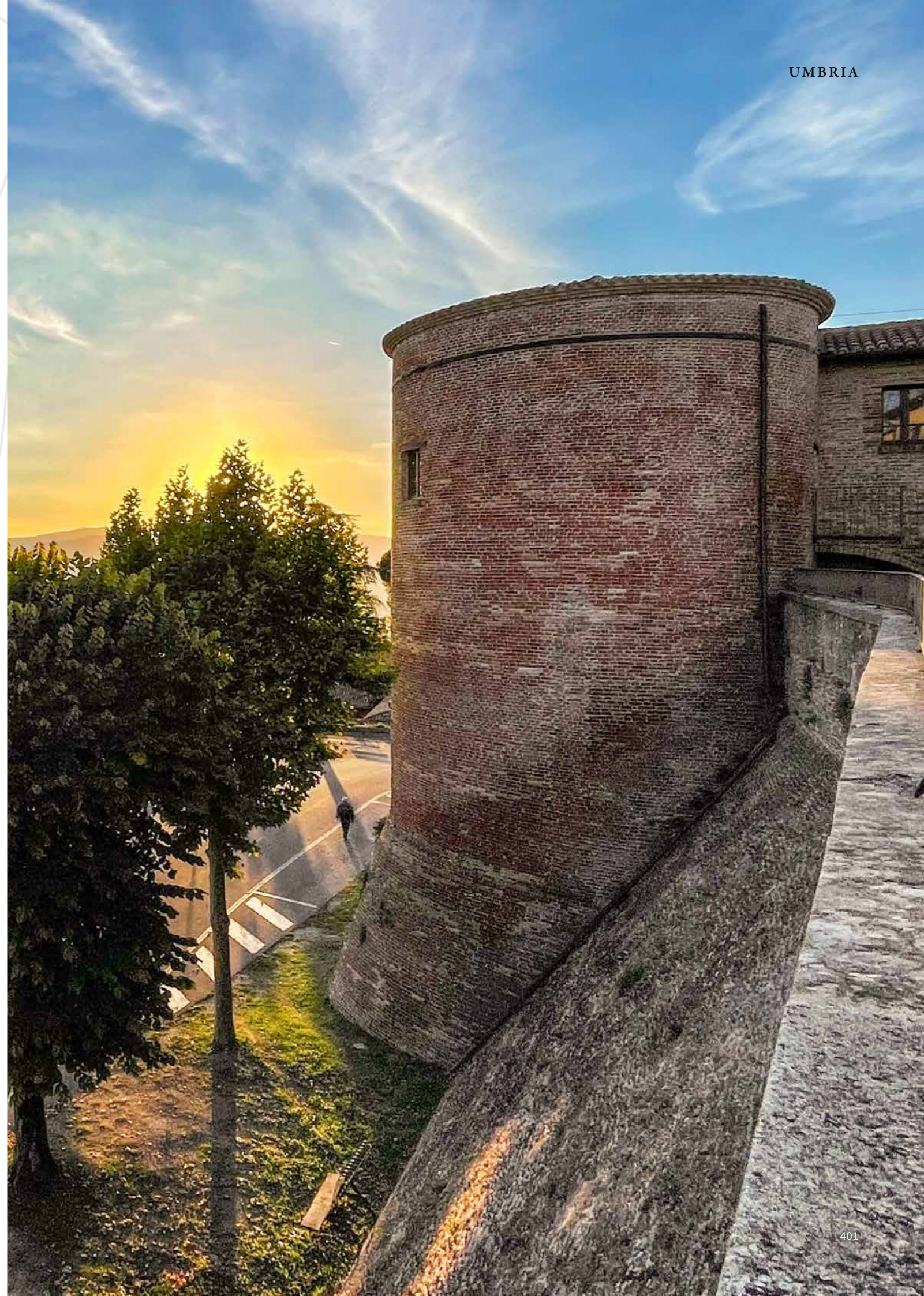
Make Umbrian pasta

No visit to Italy is complete without a pasta making class, and Chef Giancarlo Polito also offers the opportunity to step into his kitchen and do just that! But come with an open mind. Traditional Umbrian cuisine has very rustic roots and it's often called 'cucina povera', or peasant cooking. It uses minimal ingredients and methods of preparation that rely on readily available local products such as grains, vegetables, herbs, and olive oil. This minimal approach is

reflected in the pasta dishes that are traditional to Umbria. I learnt about 'cucina povera' in the kitchen of Chef Polito, where together we made frascarelli, a type of pasta made with only flour and water. No eggs. Frascarelli were traditionally made with leftover flour, after servants made egg pasta for their masters. It is often referred to as the world's easiest pasta. And as easy as it is, it is really fun to make and even more delicious to eat after.

Discover the hidden medieval pathways of Citerna

Perched strategically on top of a hill overlooking the Upper Tiber Valley and very close to the border with Tuscany, Citerna is a village with a history covering multiple civilisations. During the Middle Ages it was heavily contested by local ruling



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Originally a fortress built in the Middle Ages, Castello Bufalini was turned into a grand castle by the Bufalini family



families, and a large part of the village dates back to that time. One of the things that Citerna is famous for is its unique medieval walkway or *Camminamento Medievale*, a set of covered passageways dating back to the Middle Ages.

These passageways follow an ancient walking route that goes below the buildings that make up the defensive walls of the village. As you walk through the dark passages, the views through the arches or loggias over the Umbrian hills are stunning, so make sure you stop every so often to take them in. Walking through these passageways at sunset is absolutely magical.

Visit Bufalini Castle in San Giustino

San Giustino is located right next to the border with Tuscany, and it's famous for the imposing castle that sits in the heart of this ancient village.

Originally a fortress built in the Middle Ages, Castello Bufalini was turned into a grand castle by the Bufalini family. The renovations that gave its current appearance occurred in the 16th century, and resulted in a commanding yet elegant castle with a refined garden.

The garden was completely remodelled at the end of the 17th century, with the creation of rose gardens, green galleries, fountains

and niches with mosaics, and a box hedge labyrinth.

You can still find these features in the garden today, including the 400-year-old box maze and hedges trimmed in the shape of the Bufalini family's coat of arms. The interior of the castle is just as opulent, with a grand Great Hall containing a throne, and a rich Baroque room called *Galleria delle Donne Forti* (Gallery of Strong Women), which celebrates both historical and contemporary prominent female figures. This was, of course, my favourite room.

It is only open for visits on weekends, but I was there on a weekday and was really fortunate to have been given a tour of the castle and gardens by Elio, the castle caretaker, who very kindly offered to show me around.

Learn about Italy's last anarchist republic in Cospaia

Just outside of the village of San Giustino, we can find a place with a curious history. This place is the minuscule former Republic of Cospaia, a strip of land just 4 kilometres long and 700 metres wide.

This Republic was the result of a human error when establishing the borders between the Papal States and the Grand Duchy of Tuscany back in 1440. This error created an independent and

anarchic 'no man's land' that lasted over 400 years.

The Republic of Cospaia was the very first place in Italy where tobacco was planted with seed brought from Spain. This new crop brought a lot of prosperity to the area, and tobacco became an integral part of San Giustino's industries.

However, tobacco was banned in the Papal States, so the Republic of Cospaia attracted a lot of smugglers. Today, you can relive those times by walking the Sentiero del Contrabbandiere (Smugglers Trail) that goes through Cospaia.

If you are interested in learning more about the tobacco industry in the area, you can visit the Museo Storico e Scientifico del Tabacco (Museum of the Science and History of Tobacco), where you can learn how it changed the local landscape and economic opportunities in the area.

See Alberto Burri's works in Città di Castello

Città di Castello is the birthplace of world-renowned artist Alberto Burri, one of the most prominent abstract painters of the 20th century.

His work has been exhibited in some of the best galleries all over the world, and now they can also be enjoyed in his hometown.

In 1978, Burri designed his own

museum across two sites in Città di Castello. The first site is Palazzo Albizzini, an elegant Renaissance building from the second half of the 15th century, which opened to the public in 1981.

The second site is the Ex-Seccatoi del Tabacco, a set of former tobacco drying hangers that have been repurposed as a striking art gallery.

Both sites are part of the Palazzo Albizzini "Collezione Burri" Foundation, and, with about 130 of his art pieces, it is the most comprehensive collection of Burri's work.

These galleries are two of the best places to visit in Umbria for modern art lovers.

Walk through the narrowest alley in Italy in Città della Pieve

Perched on a hilltop at 500m above sea level, Città della Pieve is steeped in history, charm and stunning views over Lake Trasimeno.

It's a delightful medieval village with Etruscan origins, with a welcoming feel and warmth that is accentuated by the amber hue of its historic buildings. This has earned it the Orange Flag of the Italian Touring Club for historical landscape conservation.

One of my favourite things to do in Città della Pieve was to just wander around its narrow streets and alleys, discovering hidden corners and the many



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*My favourite viewpoint
was the panoramic balcony
that hugs the outside of the
Church of San Pietro*

viewpoints over the countryside of Umbria, Lazio and Tuscany.

There are actually two routes that you can follow that will cover the most interesting points.

One of these routes is the Percorso dei Vicoli (Alleys Walk), which will take you through the most quaint and interesting alleyways, including the famous Vicolo Baciadonne, one of the narrowest streets in Italy.

The Vicolo Baciadonne (Kisswomen Alley) is believed to have originated because of a dispute between neighbours, and the name is a result of the wild imagination of Città della Pieve's residents.

The second route is the Percorso del Paesaggio (Landscape Walk), which will take you around the village following the ancient walls. Sunsets in Città della Pieve are spectacular, so my suggestion would be to follow this route as the sun goes down when you can see the countryside change colour and the village warm tones turn fiery.

My favourite viewpoint was the panoramic balcony that hugs the outside of the Church of San Pietro.

Sample the world's most expensive spice in Città della Pieve

Città della Pieve is a great destination for foodies, particularly if you like spices. Città della Pieve is famous for

the cultivation of saffron, which has been harvested by hand from crocus flowers since at least the 13th century.

Initially, saffron was used as a tanning agent for linen, silk, wool, and it was even used in paintings. The renowned Renaissance painter Pietro Vannucci, more famously known as 'Perugino', is known to have used saffron on his canvas and frescoes.

While in Città della Pieve, tasting dishes that use high quality and locally grown saffron, such as saffron risotto, is one of the top things to do in Umbria.

Also, if you happen to be in the area in mid-October, don't miss the Zafferiamo festival, a celebration of the most expensive spice in the world. There are food stalls, workshops, demonstrations of saffron flower processing techniques, and plenty of tasting opportunities.

Admire the works of Perugino in Città della Pieve and Panicale

Pietro Vannucci, widely known as Perugino, was born in Città della Pieve in 1446, and was one of the most important Renaissance painters in the late 15th century and early 16th century.

He was a student of Piero della Francesca and Andrea del Verrocchio, together with Botticelli and Leonardo Da Vinci, and later became Raphael's master.

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Piazza Umberto I: Where we find a 15th century cistern turned into a fountain in the 1900s, and the location of the local market for centuries.



Perugino was famous for the elegance in his paintings, and for the effective use of symmetry and perspective to give balance and a three-dimensional effect to his images.

The Cathedral of San Gervasio e Protasio in Città della Pieve houses two of his pieces - the Baptism of Jesus (1510) and the Glory of Virgin Mary between the Patron Saints, Gervasius and Protasius, Holding the Town Standard, and Saint Peter and Saint Paul (1514).

The Oratory of Santa Maria dei Bianchi, also in Città della Pieve, is another place where you can find his work.

The Adoration of the Magi (1504), is a striking fresco that's seven metres wide and six and a half metres high. What's even more impressive is that it was completed in only 28 days.

But to see one of the most beautiful frescoes by Perugino in the whole of Umbria, we need to travel to Panicale, about 25 minutes' drive from Città della Pieve.

Just outside the walls of this cute medieval village, we find the Church of San Sebastiano, which houses the magnificent The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian (1505).

This church is also home to the Madonna Enthroned Among Musical Angels, which has been attributed to Raphael, Perugino's student.

Explore Panicale, the most beautiful terrace on Lake Trasimeno

With its original medieval structure intact, Panicale is part of The Most Beautiful Villages in Italy (I Borghi più belli d'Italia) and also boasts the Orange Flag of the Italian Touring Club, as recognition of its cultural and landscape legacies.

With less than 150 residents, Panicale may be bijoux, but it certainly packs a punch when it comes to history, things to discover, and of course, beauty. It is said to be the most beautiful terrace overlooking Lake Trasimeno.

At the centre of the village there are three squares at three different levels.

Through the Porta Perugina, at the lower level, we have Piazza Umberto I. Here it's where we find a 15th century cistern turned into a fountain in the 1900s, and the location of the local market for centuries.

The middle level square is where the Collegiate Church of San Michele Arcangelo can be found. This 11th century church is home to the Adoration of the Shepherds, a painting by Renaissance artist G. Battista Caporali, who was a pupil of Perugino.

The third level, and highest point in the village, is Piazza Masolino, from where there are stunning views of the Umbrian and Tuscan countryside. Here is

where you find the 14th century Palazzo del Podestà, which today houses the Historic and Legal Archives.

Exploring Panicale is one of the top things to do in Umbria, and the best way to do it is by wandering around its concentric streets.

You will come across the Porta Fiorentina, the two remaining towers of the old castle and the Church of Sant'Agostino, home to the Museo del Tulle "Anita Belleschi Grifoni" (Embroidery Museum).

Learn about Ars Panicalensis, an art unique to Panicale

In Panicale you will find the deconsecrated Church of Sant'Agostino, home to the Anita Belleschi Grifoni Museum of Embroidery on Tulle, or Ars Panicalensis.

This type of embroidery originated with local nuns in the 18th century and is an art unique to Panicale.

The museum was named after Anita Belleschi Grifoni, who brought the art to the forefront by setting up an embroidered tulle school at the beginning of the 20th century, after the nuns had left the village.

The museum recounts the history of Ars Panicalensis and the exhibits include artefacts from the school, and a very long bridal veil among other items.

Panicale tulle is highly priced and it has been worn by many illustrious people, including the Savoys, the former Italian royal family.

Attend a show in one of Italy's smallest theatres in Panicale

Despite being a tiny little village, Panicale offers a lot of things to do in Umbria, and one of those things is a little bit unexpected for a village of this size.

Panicale has a theatre - the Cesare Caporali Theatre. Built in the 17th century by a group of residents, it was originally made of wood, but it has been renovated since. With only 140 seats, including 24 boxes, it is one of the smallest theatres in Italy.

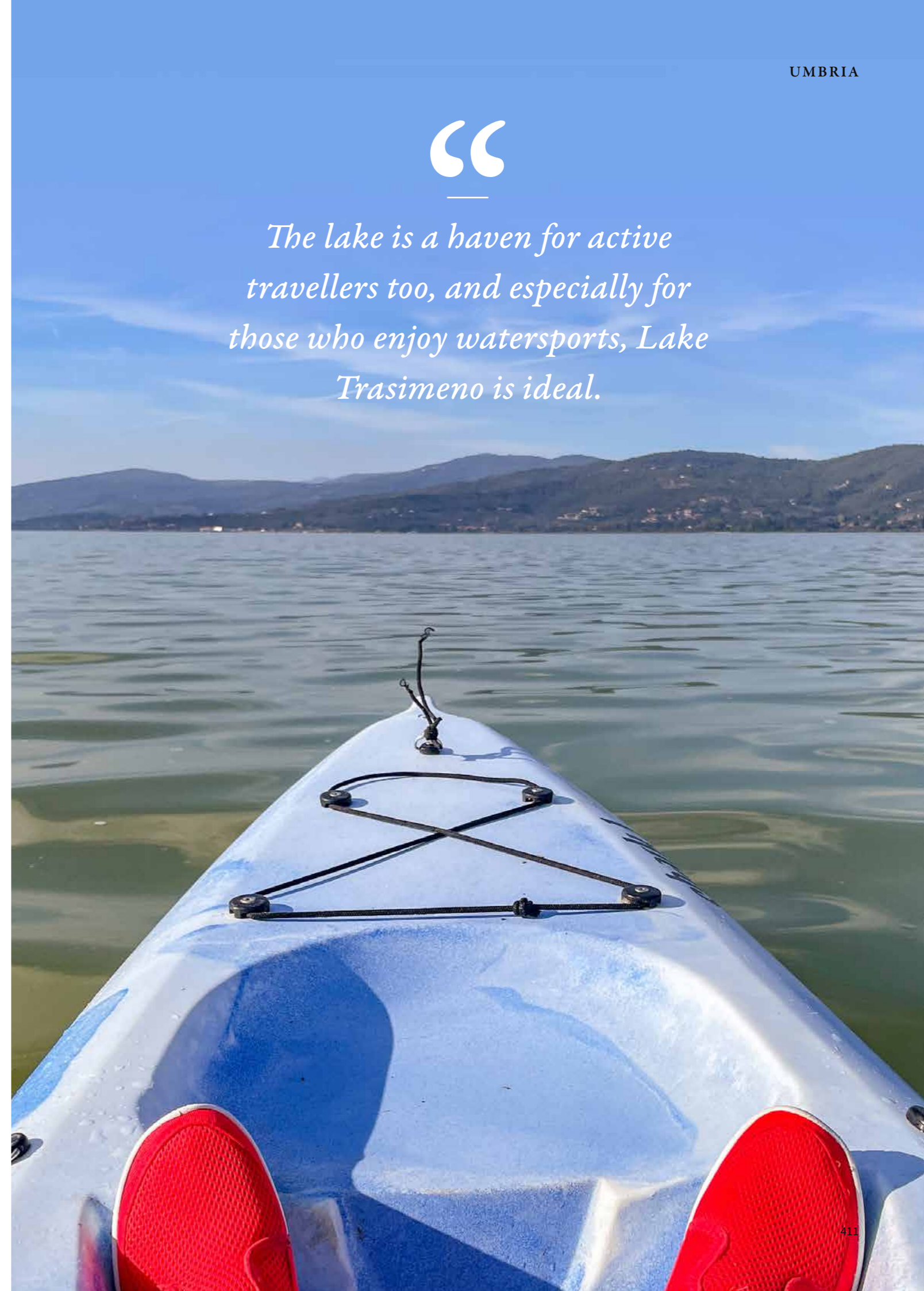
If you happen to be in Panicale when one of the weekly shows is on, I would highly recommend getting a ticket. There are not many theatres that resemble an opulent opera house in miniature, like the Cesare Caporali Theatre does.

Go kayaking on Lake Trasimeno

Even though Umbria doesn't have direct access to a coastline, it has Lake Trasimeno to make up for it. Lake Trasimeno is the largest lake in central Italy and the fourth largest in the country, only slightly smaller than Lake Como, but a lot less known. It's

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The lake is a haven for active travellers too, and especially for those who enjoy watersports, Lake Trasimeno is ideal.



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La Rocca is a 5th-6th century fortress that has the most spectacular 360 degree views of Lake Trasimeno, the village, and the countryside around it



a true natural paradise and a haven for a great variety of birds and other wildlife.

The lake is surrounded by a backdrop of rolling hills, sunflower fields, vineyards and olive groves. This idyllic landscape was once inhabited by the Etruscans, and today it's surrounded by lakeside and hilltop medieval towns with a lot of history to discover.

The lake is a haven for active travellers too, and especially for those who enjoy watersports, Lake Trasimeno is ideal.

I joined a tour departing from the village of Monte del Lago, where I hired a kayak and went out to explore the lake. It was incredibly calm and it was great to see birds such as duck, comrants, herons, and egrets.

I followed the shore towards the village of Passignano di Trasimeno, but you can also visit Polvese Island, the largest island in the lake. It's a great way to spend a sunny morning or afternoon, and one of the best things to do in Umbria for active travellers.

Climb La Rocca di Passignano for the best views of Lake Trasimeno

Passignano sul Trasimeno is an ancient fishing village located on the shores of Lake Trasimeno. Surrounded by vines and olive

trees, it is part of the network of the most beautiful villages in Italy (I Borghi più Belli d'Italia).

There is a very strong sense of history around Passignano, particularly in the oldest quarter, which dates back to medieval times.

The gates and towers that flanked the original walls have been preserved almost intact, including the rare triangular Torre di Ponente, which still bears the village's coat of arms. One of the top things to do in Umbria, not just in Passignano, is to climb to the highest point in the village, La Rocca.

La Rocca is a 5th-6th century fortress that has the most spectacular 360 degree views of Lake Trasimeno, the village, and the countryside around it. It is truly breathtaking and it's pretty magical if you find yourself at the top when the church bells go off on the hour.

Within La Rocca you can also find a small Boat Museum, which tells you about the history and tradition of the Trasimeno fishing boats.

Get lost in the secret alleys and arches of Stroncone

Perched on top of a hill at 450 metres above sea level, and surrounded by olive groves, Stroncone is an incredibly charming medieval village. It was founded in the 10th century,



during the so-called 'fortifications period', and it still preserves many of its ancient features.

Narrow meandering streets, beautiful stone doorways, and an ancient well are all surrounded by the imposing city walls that have protected this small village from its most ferocious enemies.

Arriving in Stroncone, you are greeted by a beautiful 16th century fountain built just outside the main city gate in the Piazza della Libertà.

Walk through the gate and you will feel like you're entering a fortress. The first thing you will see will be a small courtyard-like square with a medieval well, and the Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato.

This is the starting point for exploring this labyrinth of a village. And getting lost is, without a doubt, the best way to discover Stroncone's hidden corners.

Stroncone is a place of magic, and as you wander through its narrow winding streets, you sense the fierce independence this town has developed. It's very easy to lose your bearings as you twist and turn walking through steep steps and under hidden ancient gates and arches.

With so much character tightly packed in a small number of streets, it's really surprising Stroncone still remains so off the beaten path. It's a true hidden gem in Umbria, a region full of hidden gems waiting to be discovered.

Taste truffles, Umbria's black gold, in Stroncone

Umbria is one of the main truffle producing regions in Italy, and with truffles, and especially Umbrian truffles, becoming famous all around the world, people are flocking in to try this delicious wonder of nature.

The most popular variety of black truffles is the Norcia and Spoleto Truffle, which can be found along the river Nera, in the hills behind Spoleto, in the Monti Martani, around Trevi, and on Mount Subasio, between November and March.

It's often referred to as Umbria's black gold, and it's generally cooked before serving. They are normally used as a condiment for pasta as well as in game dishes.

If you are a foodie, black truffle is one of the things you must eat in Umbria, especially if you are in Stroncone or the River Nera area. Try it in pasta such as *ciriole al tartufo*.

If you'd like to do more than just eat truffles, and you'd like to live and understand the truffle hunting process, you can join a truffle hunting experience.

Visit Marmore Waterfalls, the tallest man-made waterfall in the world

The Marmore Waterfalls are one of the most popular attractions

in Umbria for a reason. It's a very impressive sight and one of the top things to do in Umbria.

They were built by the Romans in the 3rd century BC to drain the marshes above the River Nera, and are a true feat of engineering. The biggest waterfall is 165 metres high, and it's the tallest man-made waterfall in the world. It is created by the water of the River Velino flowing into the River Nera, forming a number of waterfalls at different levels along the way.

There are a number of trails that you can follow within the park with viewpoints along the way so you can admire the waterfall's different tiers.

You can spend a couple of hours here, but my recommendation would be to spend at least half a day. There are walking trails that take you to the best views and angles of the falls, and plenty of picnic spots, so you can bring a pack lunch with you.

The water has been used to generate hydroelectric power since the 19th century, so the water flow is controlled by being 'turned on and off' every day in order to generate energy.

Time your visit for when it opens to see the flow at its peak - from 12pm to 1pm, and again from 4pm to 5pm.

Discover the medieval castle of Arrone

Located in the heart of the Valnerina, the valley of the River Nera, Arrone is a fortified village built on top of a craggy rock in the 9th century.

The village owes its name to the Arrone, a Roman noble family that escaped the devastation of the Saracens and Hungarians.

This charming medieval village is part of the network of the most beautiful villages in Italy (I Borghi più Belli d'Italia).

Arrone is divided into two areas, the upper and older part, known as "La Terra", which is where the original medieval castle was, and the Rione Santa Maria, which is the area that connects the castle to Mount Arrone.

In order to reach the older part of Arrone, you have to climb up a set of winding tiny alleyways and steep cobblestones that have the most spectacular views over the Apennine Mountains, and the hilltop villages of Montefranco and Casteldilago.

At the top of the village, the castle area is enclosed by ancient walls, where we find the Church of San Giovanni Battista. This modest Gothic building from the 13th-14th century is





home to a set of very impressive 15th century frescoes that were commissioned by local families to protect them from diseases and misfortunes.

The highest point of the village is the Torre Civica, a square clock tower and the only remaining building from the fortress built by the Arrone family.

The tower is known as the Torre degli Ulivi (Olive Tree Tower) because of the ancient olive tree growing on top of it, and it has become the symbol of Arrone.

Explore the outdoor murals of Calvi dell'Umbria

Calvi dell'Umbria is another true hidden gem, not only in Umbria, but in Italy too. This quaint hilltop village is truly off the tourist trail, and its narrow and winding streets hide a little secret waiting to be discovered. Located very close to the border

with Lazio, Calvi dell'Umbria is a medieval village with origins that date back to the Bronze Age, although the first mention of it is from the 9th century.

My favourite thing to do in Calvi was wandering the cobblestoned streets, through winding alleyways and lanes so steep, steps had to be built to make it easier to go up and down. The streets take you through vaults, arches, and the ruins of the city walls and towers. As I explored the hidden corners of Calvi, I discovered that the village has been turned into an open air gallery. The streets and the walls of the ancient houses are adorned with colourful murals of nativity scenes.

Calvi is known as the 'Città Presepe' (Christmas Nativity Town) thanks to a 16th century Monumental Nativity Scene that can be found in the Oratory of Sant'Antonio. So well-known Italian and international artists have been coming to Calvi to paint

their interpretation of a nativity scene every year since 1982.

With over 50 works of art, the village has been transformed into an outdoors art gallery, and to see them all you need to get lost in the maze-like streets. It's the best way to discover this surprising secret Calvi hides.

Marvel at the stunning Duomo di Orvieto

Perched high up on a tufa cliff, Orvieto's origins go back to the Etruscan civilization, almost 3,000 years ago.

After being destroyed and abandoned by the Romans for over 700 years, Orvieto was repopulated and rebuilt, eventually becoming a rich and powerful city in the 13th and 14th century.

Orvieto's art and cultural heritage is one of the richest in Italy. The Duomo (or Cathedral) is one of the most magnificent examples of Gothic architecture in the country, and a must visit to anyone travelling around Umbria. The façade is absolutely stunning, with beautiful mosaics and bas-reliefs. It's a real treat to admire! Inside, the visual impact is pretty spectacular, thanks to the linear two-toned marble, that emphasises the walls and the columns.

Discover Orvieto Underground

Orvieto sits on top of a unique system of underground tunnels that date back to the Middle Ages. Discovered in the last 30 years, so far 1,200 tunnels have been found, but it's believed that there can be as many as 1,000 more.

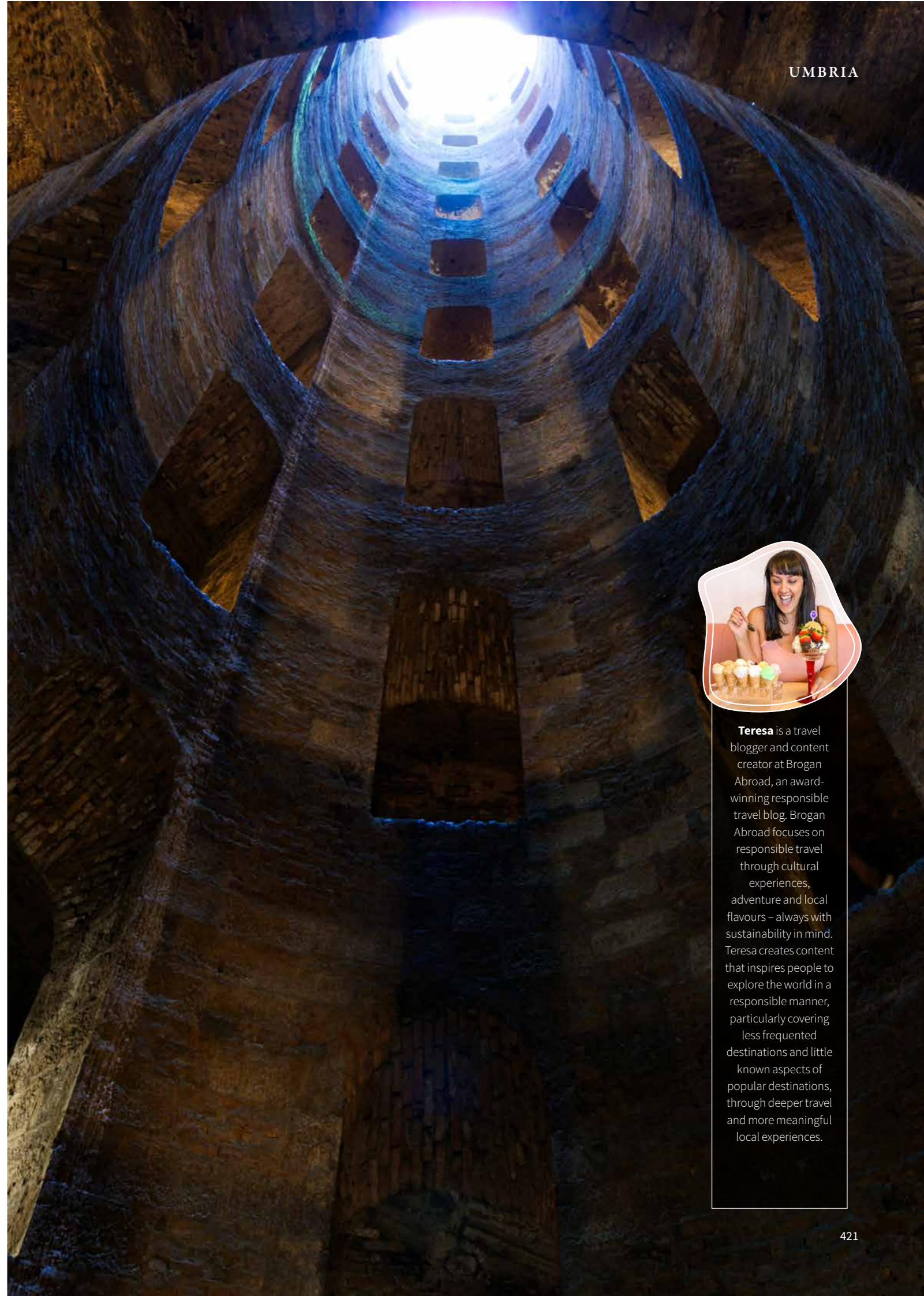
These tunnels were excavated in order to make more room in a city that was growing fast and running out of space on the cliff above the ground.

It is possible to visit these tunnels on a guided tour where you can see the remains of an old olive oil mill, an Etruscan well, medieval rainwater cisterns, and dovecotes, which were used to keep pigeons for food.

It's a fascinating hidden world that is slowly being rediscovered, giving us a glimpse of what life used to be like in medieval Orvieto.

If you enjoy all things underground, don't miss the Pozzo della Cava and the Pozzo di San Patrizio (Well of St Patrick, right).

And if you are spending a couple of days in Orvieto, it may be worth getting an Orvieto City Card, which gives you access to 9 local landmarks, including the Duomo, the Well of St Patrick, and Orvieto Underground among other important sights.



Teresa is a travel blogger and content creator at Brogan Abroad, an award-winning responsible travel blog. Brogan Abroad focuses on responsible travel through cultural experiences, adventure and local flavours – always with sustainability in mind. Teresa creates content that inspires people to explore the world in a responsible manner, particularly covering less frequented destinations and little known aspects of popular destinations, through deeper travel and more meaningful local experiences.



The best things to do IN THE Aosta Valley

BY LAUREL ROBBINS
BLOG MONKEYSANDMOUNTAINS.COM

Valle D'Aosta, (The Aosta Valley), in Northern Italy is most famous for its extreme outdoor activities. However, there are so many other things to do in the Aosta Valley, from easy hikes, to exploring medieval villages and the ancient Roman Road.

Who Will Enjoy the Aosta Valley?

With its snow-capped peaks, it's easy to think that the only things to do in the Aosta Valley are hard-core adventures, or that you'd only come here to ski, given there are an incredible 24 ski resorts and 822 km of ski runs in the Aosta Valley.

My first time in the Aosta Valley was several years ago when I hiked the epic Tour du Mont Blanc, stopping in the popular resort town of *Courmayeur*. And if you're looking for harder outdoor adventures, you certainly can't beat the Aosta Valley.

But there's a softer side to this region as well. One that will appear to travellers who:

- Love being in nature but still want the comforts of a warm bed and the chance to sample regional cuisine.
- Love the ambiance and quiet of small mountain villages.
- Enjoy hiking for a couple of hours (but not the entire day)
- Are fascinated by history, especially the Roman Road

So let's get started. We'll focus on nine villages and towns in the Aosta Valley and things to do there...

Gressoney-Saint-Jean and Gressoney-La-Trinite

Gressoney is the home of the Walser people, which sets it apart from other regions in the Aosta Valley with the distinctive Walser architecture, traditional costumes and language.

They originated in the Swiss Canton of Valais and speak German, or Titsch, as it has evolved in the Gressoney region. The Walser people were known as trading folk and were shepherds. You'll definitely want to check out a Walser settlement.

Gressoney-Saint-Jean is certified with the Orange Flag (the environmental tourism quality mark) from the Italian Touring Club.

What to Do in Gressoney

Your first stop should be at the friendly tourist office, which has a ton of information and can provide maps.

VISIT CASTEL SAVOIA

For me, one of the highlights of Gressoney is a visit to the fairytale castle of Castel Savoia. It was built by Margherita of Savoy, who became so enchanted with Gressoney that she built a castle, complete with botanical gardens. To really experience the beauty of Gressoney, I recommend the *Passeggiata della Regina* (Queen's Walk) from Lake Gover to Castle Savoia. You'll get a

view over Gressoney Saint-Jean and will pass the Underworld Waterfalls until you reach Savoy Castle. Return the same way for epic views of Monte Rosa (4634 m), the second-highest peak in the Alps and in Western Europe after Mont Blanc (Monte Bianco in Italian)

If it's spring or summer, you'll also want to check out the castle's botanical garden.

You can only visit Castel Savoia on a guided tour. The views of Monte Rosa are incredible. I also loved seeing the photos of Margherita of Savoy climbing the Monte Rosa Massif)

VISIT THE TRADITIONAL WALSER SETTLEMENTS

Another highlight is visiting one of the traditional Walser settlements. There are a few different ones you can visit, but the one I recommend the most because it's the largest and the views are amazing is the one of Alpenzu Grande.

If you cannot visit it, then the tourist office can show you a map with the location of the other Walser settlements. If you're visiting in the winter or summer, also check out the Walser Ecomuseum in Gressoney-La-Trinite, where you discover the Walser culture by exploring three 18th-century buildings.





Easy Hikes Near Gressoney

HIKE TO THE ALPENZU GRANDE

If you only did one hike near Gressoney, I'd recommend hiking to the Alpenzu Grande, one of the most important Walser settlements. I love hikes that include culture and history like this one does.

According to my local guide Nicola, he said it's the same language as what's spoken in Zermatt, but if you go to Zurich while there are still similarities, it becomes more difficult to understand each other.

The Walser community was mainly made up of shepherds. Indeed, the only two other people I saw on my hike were two shepherds tending to their cows in the pasture.

Their houses are incredible examples of architecture designed for maximum functionality in harsh conditions. The Alpenzu Grande village is an excellent representation of this. The current buildings date back to 1668!

While the buildings are privately owned, so you can't enter them, you can, however, eat or stay at the Rifugio Alpenzu in the summer season.

The only way to reach the village is on foot. It's 45 minutes to an hour, depending on which route you take. You can either start from Gressoney-Saint-John (nicer but slightly longer way) or Gressoney-La-Trinite, the way that I took since it's a shorter and more direct route.

Ask the tourist office in Gressoney for a map showing you the starting points for the hike. Once you reach it, it's well-signed.

If you can't get enough of the Walser villages, continue your hike from the Alpenzu Grande to the Alpenzu Piccolo, a smaller Walser settlement. You'll see a sign for it, but I'd recommend having the route in GPS or at least a paper map of it.

INSIDER TIP FOR VISITING THE ALPENZU GRANDE:

Hike a bit just above the village to get a bird's-eye view of the village and of Gressoney.

Bard

Bard is recognized as one of the most beautiful villages in Italy (I Borghi più Belli d'Italia), and it's easy to see why.

The medieval village of just 120 people has buildings that date back to the 15th and 16th centuries, although evidence from rock carvings shows that the area has been inhabited long before that.

You get clues as to the village's history from the frescos, the ones at Casa Challant are especially notable. Look for the date that's carved into the village's oldest water fountain.

The Roman Road was built first. The village was built after that, with imposing gates at each end of the village.

With a mountain on one side and the Dora Baltea River on the other side, the only way for traders and anyone else who wanted to pass by was through the village. Hence, the noble Bard family imposed a toll on anyone that wanted to pass, making them very rich.

Today, the famous pilgrimage route, the Via Francigena, passes through the village, similar to traders from centuries ago. But only now, they don't need to pay a toll.

What to Do in Bard

VISIT FORT BARD

Anyone visiting Bard will visit Fort

Bard, and it's easy to see why. The imposing Fort Bard overlooks the village, which dates back to the 19th century. There had previously been a castle there, but when Napoleon attacked expecting an easy takeover with his army of 40,000 vs 400. Despite the unfair numbers, it took him two weeks, he retaliated by completely destroying the castle.

At Fort Bard, there are numerous museums and changing exhibitions. You could easily spend a day exploring everything. I also highly recommend the scenic walk down from the castle to the village. It's incredible and was one of the highlights of my trip.

DISCOVER THE VILLAGE OF BARD

While so many visitors just go to the fort, this is a huge mistake. I encourage you to do a self-guided tour of the gorgeous village. There are signs at the entrance. You'll just need your Smartphone. While you're there, consider stopping at one of the restaurants, bar or wine shops. Your support really makes a difference and keeps small villages alive!

INSIDER TIPS

You'll also want to go through the village gates to the stone bridge. It dates back to 1250 and, for centuries, was the only





way to reach the village. It's stunning, and it's one of the best places to get a photo of the fort. On the opposite side of the village, past the church and old hotel, opposite the staff parking, you'll want to go up the rocks on the same side of the valley as the fort. You'll find rock carvings upon close inspection that date back to prehistoric times! If you want to get pregnant, go down the fertility slide. It's said to have magical properties, although I personally can't comment on that. You'll also want to continue on the Marmita dels Gigants. It's a deep hole (so be careful) that legend says was created by giants, but in reality, was

created by the moving glaciers. Most tourists miss these last two spots, but they're absolutely fascinating.

Hikes in Bard

Bard is very small at just 3km², so while it isn't known for its hiking, I highly recommend the walk up (if you're feeling energetic) to Fort Bard. Or at the very least, the walk down. You'll get spectacular views over Bard. You'll also find two short hiking trails at the entrance to Bard (close to the bar), which I'm told provide fantastic views over Bard and Fort Bard, but unfortunately I didn't have time to hike them.

Donnas

Donnas is perhaps best known for being the first DOC wine of the Aosta Valley and trust me, you're going to want to try it, but there's so much more to Donnas. I fell in love with this town!

What To Do in Donnas

VISIT THE VINEYARDS AND WINE MUSEUM OF DONNAS

Let's start with what Donnas is most famous for - its wine. If it's a weekend, check out the Museo Del Vino e della Viticoltura (a wine museum). It's only open on weekends but gives you a good overview of the wine production in Donnas.

You'll also want to visit the vineyards and check the grape's progress for yourself, ideally on foot (more on that in the hiking section below).

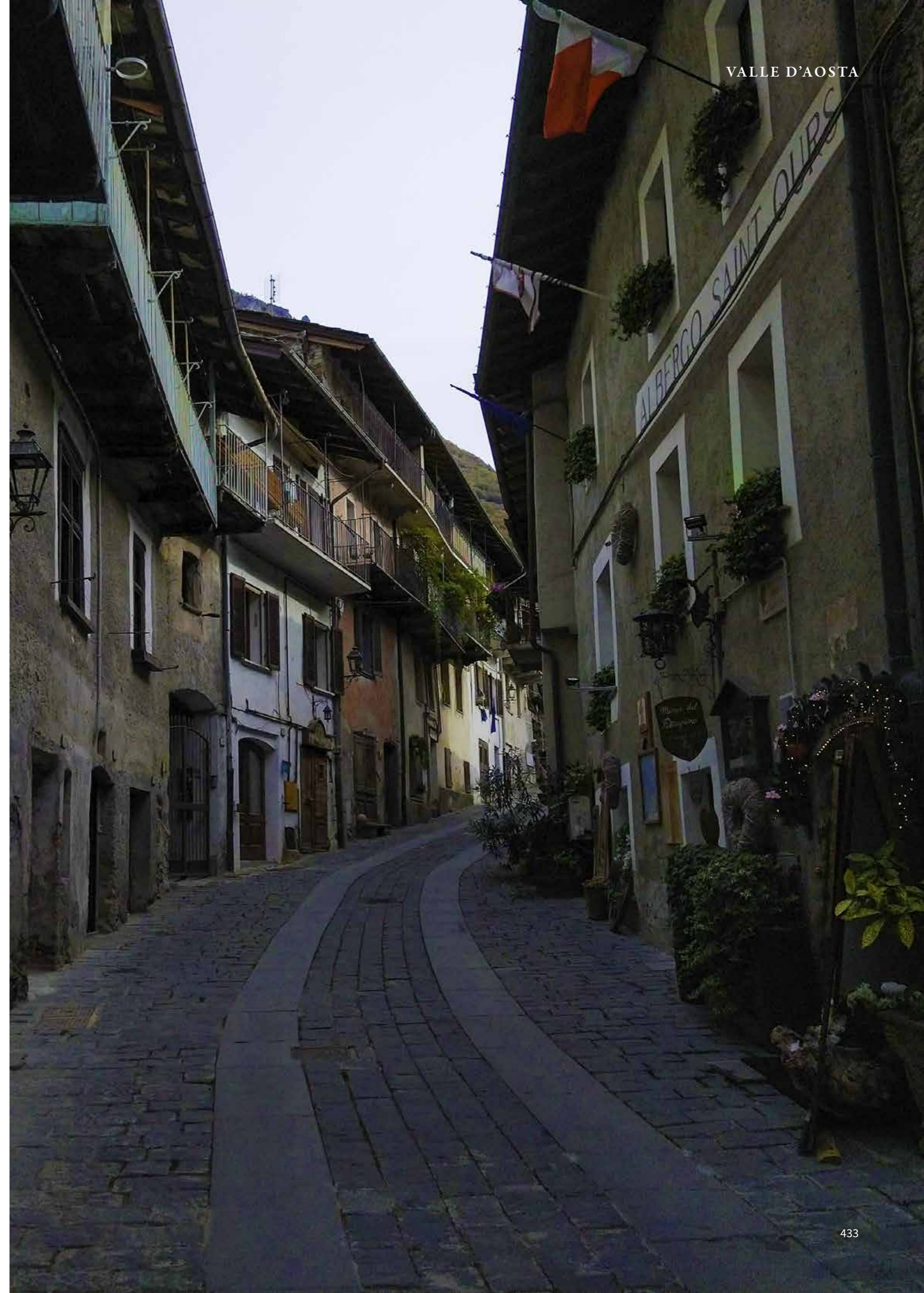
However, you can also drive. You'll get incredible views and also a glimpse at the Pramotton Tower, which dates back to the 13th century.

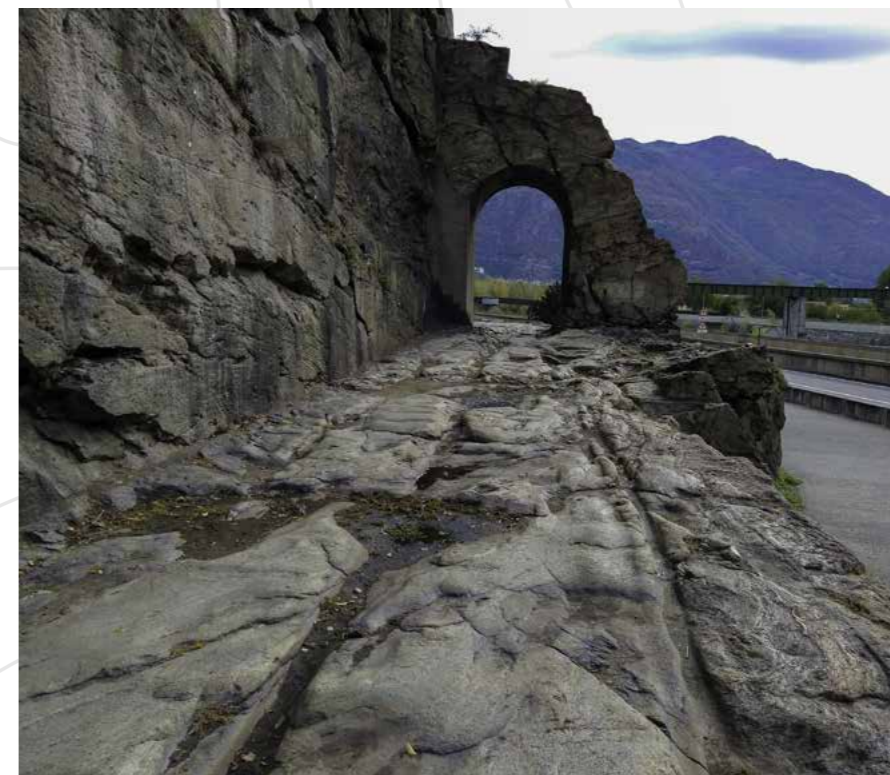
STROLL THROUGH THE MEDIEVAL VILLAGE AND ROMAN ROAD TO THE ARCH

Next up is exploring the medieval village marked by the Porta Orientale, the gate marking the entrance to the medieval village. Download the free app which gives you a self-guided tour of the village. You'll see the instructions right by the gate.

Then explore the village and greet any pilgrims you see doing the Via Francigena or the Camino Balteo.

Continue on to one of the highlights of Donnas to the Roman Road. You'll marvel at the





4-meter high arch painstakingly carved by hand. You'll also want to look down and see the tracks from carts, worn into the stone - an indication of how busy the road was.

INSIDER TIPS FOR VISITING DONNAS

Try the award-winning Caves Cooperatives de Donnas 'Napoleon'. It's said that Napoleon appreciated the wine, hence the name.

Donnas is also known for its fontina cheese so I recommend ordering something that includes it, whether it's gnocchi, polenta or something else. Or pick up fresh fontina from a cheese factory. If you have a large group, you can also arrange wine and cheese tastings.

Hikes in Donnas

Surrounded by mountains, there is no shortage of hikes in Donnas. I recommend picking up the book "The Paths of Donnas" by Marco Blatto and Luca Zavatta which you can find in local shops.

Hike the Sentiero dei Vigneti (Vineyard Path) in Donnas. It's an easy walk that's the perfect opportunity for you to check on the grapes. [*Here are the GPS tracks.*](#)

You'll also want to check out the Climbing Park Balteo. While intended for climbers, there are also via ferratas and you can also hike there. I did an easy hike that only took about 20 minutes for an amazing view over Donnas. There's a sign at the entrance to the park with a map to all the trails.

Etroubles

Step back in time to one of the prettiest villages in Italy, according to Bourghitalia and that's also certified with the Orange Flag (the environmental tourism quality mark) from the Italian Touring Club

Located in the heart of the Gran San Bernardo Valley and an important stop on the Romans Road (Via delle Gallie in Italian), the medieval village continues its history with pilgrims passing through walking the Via Francigena to Rome.

There's a surprising amount to see in this medieval village with just 500 inhabitants.

What To Do in Etroubles

STROLL THROUGH THE MEDIEVAL VILLAGE OF AND ENJOY THE OPEN-AIR MUSEUM

You'll want to visit the medieval village starting at the Parish Church of Santa Maria Assunta (1177) and the bell tower (1480). Right across from the church, you'll see a map that shows you the location of all 22 art pieces in the Open-Air Museum. It's a permanent exhibition of contemporary art that you discover as you stroll along the cobblestone streets. I loved discovering the artwork.

You'll feel like you've stepped several hundred years as you stroll through the medieval village. The water fountain

where pilgrims and animals could stop for a drink, and the washing station, used by villagers in medieval times is of special interest. Keep your eyes out for the occasional fresco.

VISIT A CHAPEL AND THE TORRE DI VACHERY

Take the steep cobblestone road, passing one of the five small chapels found around Etroubles, and admire the remaining frescos. Visit the Torre Di Vachery, the medieval watch tower of Vachéry. It dates back to the 12th century.

Hikes in Etroubles

You'll find lots of hikes around Etroubles but for an easy and historic one I recommend walking in the steps of the Romans and pilgrims on the Via Francigena to the medieval village of Saint-Oyen.

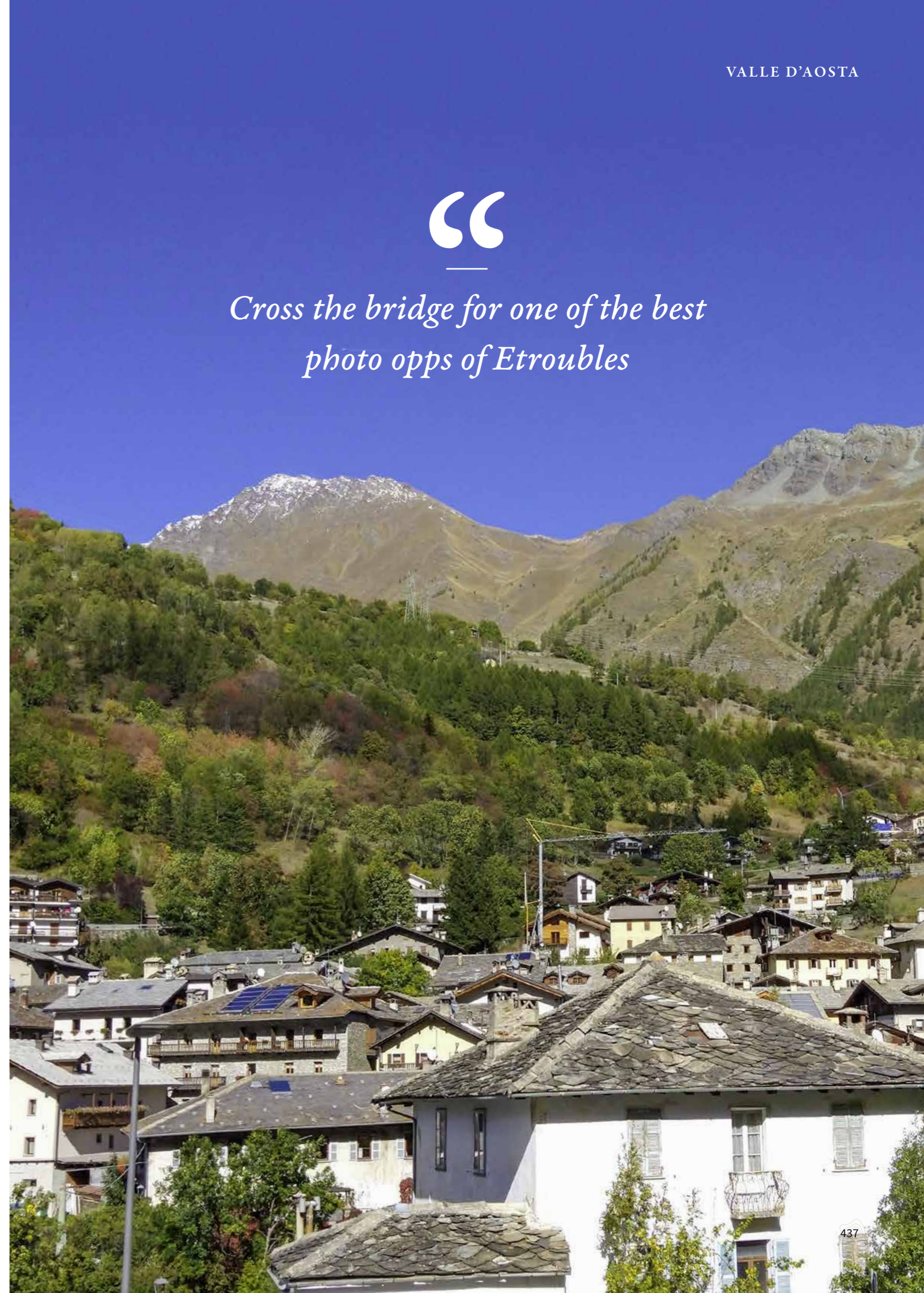
Admittedly, this is in the reverse direction, but the lovely mountain views make the 20-minute walk worthwhile and you can reward yourself with a traditional meal. Then, on your way back to Etroubles, you'll be walking in the same direction that pilgrims would take as they walked to Rome and marvel at the majestic views.

INSIDER TIP FOR VISITING ETRoubles

Cross the bridge for one of the best photo opps of Etroubles

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Cross the bridge for one of the best photo opps of Etroubles



Saint-Rhémy-en-Bosses

Saint-Rhémy-en-Bosses is a gorgeous medieval village that was an important trading post in Roman Times. Today, the population numbers only six, but don't let the small size put you off. It only makes it more charming.

What To Do in Saint-Rhémy-en-Bosses

Explore the medieval village of Saint Rhémy on foot admiring the medieval buildings and greet any pilgrims you see walking the Via Francigena. You'll also want to sample the local ham, Vallée d'Aoste Jambon de Bosses (PDO product) at the Prosciuttificio. There's a store so you can take some with you. In the nearby village of San Leonardo, take in the stained glass artwork near the church. You can also marvel at the Castello di Bosses in San Leonardo, which houses a museum during the high season. Soak in the valley and mountain views.

VISIT THE GREAT SAINT-BERNARD PASS

You'll also want to do the stunning drive (or rent an ebike) to go up to the Great Saint-Bernard Pass, connecting Switzerland with Italy. Here you'll find the majestic Grand

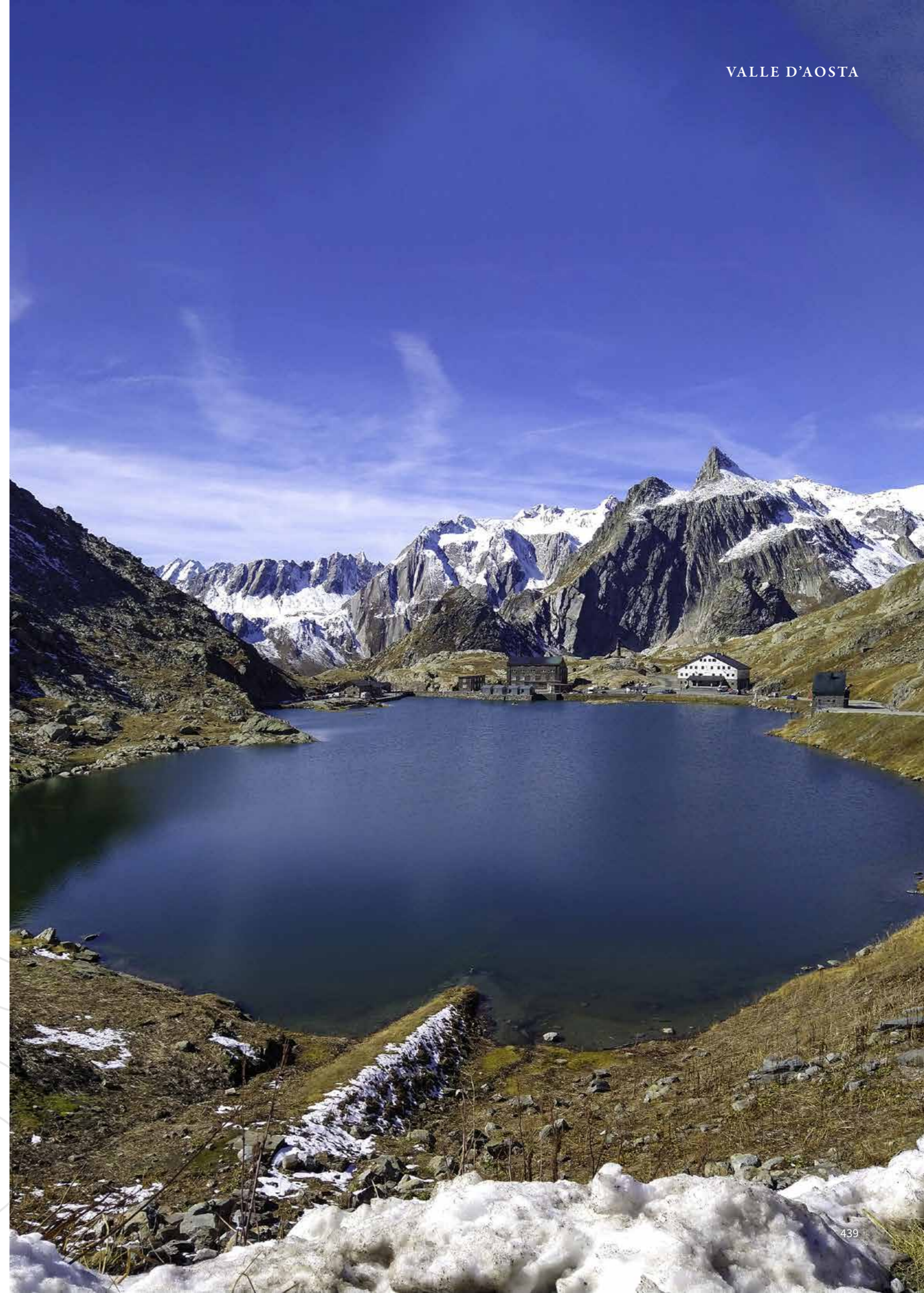
Saint-Bernard Lake. The pass is also the first stage of the Via Francigena in Italy. There are a couple of places you can have lunch here.

Hikes in Saint Rhémy

There are lots of hiking opportunities near Saint Rhémy, but for an easy one I recommend walking in the footsteps of ancient Romans by walking the Via Francigena from Saint Rhémy to San Leonardo. It's an easy walk down although if you plan to go back by foot, it will be uphill on the way back.

A hike that I loved (which would be even better by e-bike) is the one to Plan Puitz. You not only get stunning views over the valley and of San Leonardo, but there's also a historical landmark of the WW1 fortified artillery post. It's a cave dug in the mountain which was used as a lookout point. Fortunately, there wasn't much action there. You'll also find an ebike charging station at the top of Plan Puitz and a picnic table - a great place to enjoy some of the prosciutto you bought.

There are also lots of hikes ranging from easy to challenging starting from the Great Saint-Bernard Pass and Alpine lake area. You'll see lots of signs.



Valpelline

Valpelline is the ultimate getaway if you're seeking a tranquil nature-filled getaway. Situated in a valley and surrounded by high peaks, you'll feel your knots start to loosen as you start to relax.

What To Do in Valpelline

VISIT THE FONTINA CHEESE FACTORY

While you could drive there, I recommend doing an easy walk that leads to the coolest Fontina factory (and largest in the Aosta Valley), The Cooperativa Produttori Latte e Fontina,. It's located in the caves of an old copper mine. You can do a tour and a tasting (trust me, you'll want to). Just call in advance. Also ask for the free recipe book, which features regional specialities created with fontina.

VISIT THE LAKE PLACE-MOULIN

Hop in the car and drive to the end of the valley to the stunning Lake Place-Moulin. While called a lake, it's actually a dam. It's

one of the largest reservoirs in Europe and plays an important role in providing hydroelectric power to the region.

It's an engineering marvel and if you're travelling with a large group you can arrange a tour for the inner workings of the dam.

Hikes in Valpelline

Valpelline is a hiker's paradise. While it's known for its more challenging hikes, there are also easy ones you can do. The Il Ru di-z-Aagne which starts in Valpelline and leads to the fontina cheese factory is a good - not to mention rewarding choice. Look for a sign, just above the church.

There are also numerous hikes you can do along the reservoir. While many of these are challenging, the one to Rifugio Prarayer is mainly flat.

There's no tourist office in Valpelline but the owners of the Le Lievre Amoureux Hotel Ristorante are friendly and happy to recommend hikes. Just be sure to either stay there or have lunch or dinner there.





Arvier

Arvier is a unique place in Italy's Aosta Valley in that there are two medieval villages - Arvier and Leverogne, almost side by side.

Arvier was located in a strategic spot on the Roman Road, but prehistoric remains show that it was inhabited long before.

What To Do in Arvier

EXPLORE ARVIER AND LEVEROGNE

In Leverogne, stop at the pilgrims' hospice which dates back to 1368. On the fresco, you'll see the "7 Acts of Mercy" on the top row and the "7 Deadly Sins" on the bottom row. The devils' mouth is missing from the ancient fresco, but that's where everyone depicted in the bottom row is headed.

The old Roman Road goes through the medieval village. The original road is lower and is under the current road. Fortunately, you can still see the old Roman Bridge.

In Arvier, you'll want to check out the old bell tower of the church and the castle ruins of La Mothe. As part of an exciting project called "Agile Arvier," the castle will be turned into a "Museum of the Future" - such a cool idea. As you stroll through the medieval village of Arvier, check out the Photo Alp Arvier, a photo exhibition of the best photos of the Tour du Rutor - one of the largest international ski

mountaineering competitions in the world!

SAMPLE WINE FROM THE ARVIER COLLECTIVE

At the Arvier Collective, they do things a bit differently. They play music at 432 Hz for the organic wine. You can taste the difference the innovative technique has on the wine for yourself. I highly recommend "Enfer," which means "hell" in French, but is referring to the hot microclimate where the wine grows.

Hiking in Arvier

Besides the village, Arvier is also an excellent area for hiking. Right by the church, you'll see a sign showing all the hikes starting from Arvier.

Leverogne is on the Camino Balteo. I hiked part of it up to the Big Bench, where you get fantastic views of *Mont Blanc*.

Then, I hiked down a different trail, the Ru Eausourde, a canal system that brings water down the mountain to the farmers.

Along the way, you can see artwork from local students of local flora and fauna. It's so much fun spotting them.

The next day I did a hike to the ruins of Montmayeur Castle. For a longer hike, you can start in Arvier. Or for a much shorter and easier hike, start in the nearby hamlet of Grand Haury.

Introd

You might not have heard of the small medieval village of Introd in the Aosta Valley, Italy, but there's a lot to do in such a small place. In fact, Pope John Paul II loved it so much he often spent his summers here.

What To Do in Introd

Not to be missed is a visit to the *Maison Bruil d'Introd*, an ethnographic museum showcasing the traditional food of the Aosta Valley. It's housed in one of two rural houses found in Introd.

You'll also want to visit the nearby animal park *Parc Animalier Introd* which features local animals. Next year, look for the newest additions - wolves!

Castello di Introd is only open for special events. However you can enjoy a picnic with a view fitting for royalty - convenient since there are no restaurants in Introd.

As you stroll around town, you'll notice the "Old Bridge" as it's called with the the "New Bridge" visible in the background, bread ovens and a washing station where

villagers used to wash their clothes and some still do!

VISIT THE NEARBY HAMLET OF LES COMBES

Pope John Paul II was a fan of Introd, often spending summers here to enjoy his walks.

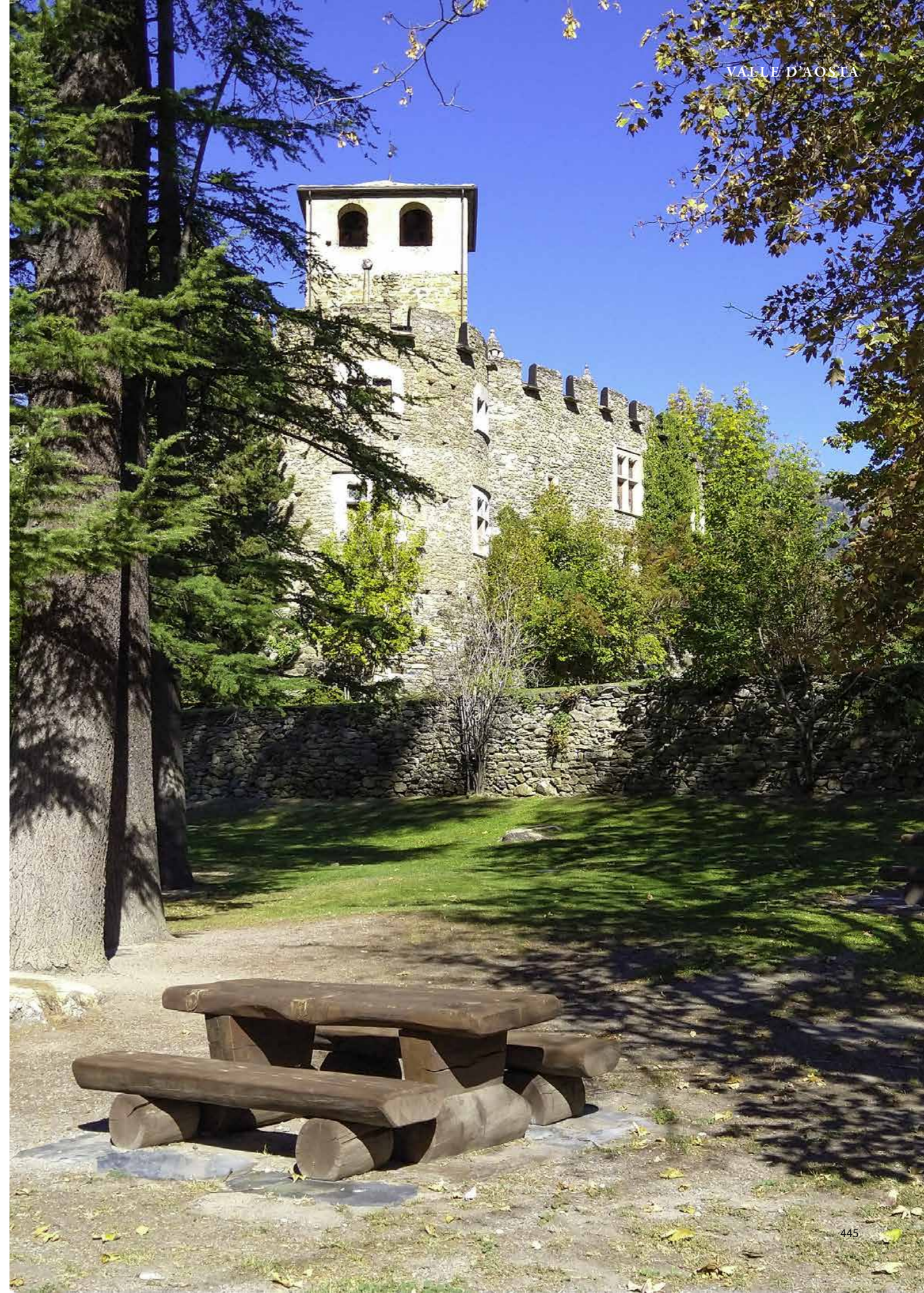
There's a museum dedicated to him in the nearby hamlet of Les Combes that's open in summer. From Les Combes, there's also a walking trail, suitable for everyone, Plan du Saint-Père where you can follow in his literal footsteps.

Hikes in Introd

The above-mentioned Plan du Saint-Père, in which you follow in Pope John Paul II's footsteps, is an easy walk that everyone can do.

From the nearby hamlet of Grand Haury, you can go on an easy hike to the castle ruins of Montmayeur, mentioned above. You can also hike part of the Cammino Balteo, but the section to and from Introd is steep.

Or if you're seeking a more challenging hike, you'll find plenty of those around Introd as well.





Morgex

Morgex is best known for the outdoor activities you can do in the area and for the stunning views of Mont Blanc (Monte Bianco). It's also famous for its wine, the DOC Blanc de Morgex et de La Salle. It's known as the 'highest wine of Europe' and is produced at an altitude of 1200m in its highest point. But in addition, Morgex has an ancient history and was an important stop on the Roman Road, even though none of the road is visible today.

What To Do in Morgex

Start in the center of the town with a visit to the De l'Archet Tower. It dates back to the 10th century and is one of the oldest in the Aosta Valley. You'll also find the tourist office here which

is open in the high season.

Nearby is the medieval church, the Chiesa Parrocchiale of Our Lady of the Assumption which dates back to 1176. Of special interest are the painting of the Last Supper on the left hand side of the central nave, which dates back 1559 and the frescoes of the fifteenth century chapel at the bottom of the left hand nave.

EXPLORE READING PARK

The community park references its former history of being a railway. You'll find interactive play stations for kids and stunning views of Mont Blanc for the adults. Cross the bridge and look down to see the former railway tracks, a creative reminder of the past.





WORK OUT AT THE RECREATION AREA

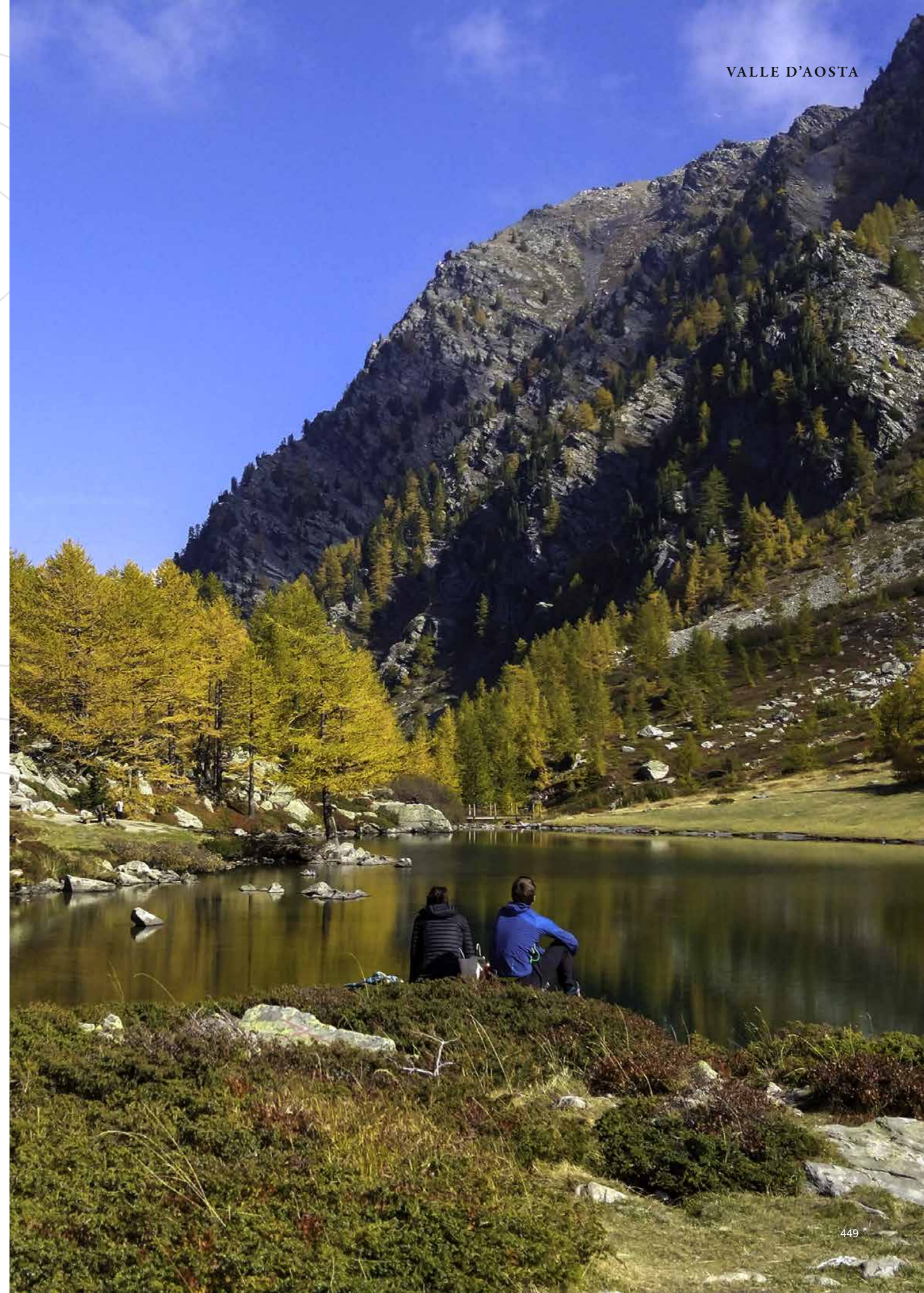
If you need motivation, look no further than the recreation area which has outdoor exercise equipment with a view of Mont Blanc. You'll also find a barefoot park, which kids will love and is a great way to connect with nature.

VISIT THE VINEYARDS

Just above Morgex, you can visit the vineyards. Winemaking has existed in the area since before the Middle Ages. Wine was traditionally consumed in the family, it was only in the 20th century that people started selling it. Of special note are the terraces. They're purposely built low to the ground so that the earth warms the plants in this high alpine environment.

Hikes in Morgex

Morgex is a hiking paradise with all its snow-capped mountains and has something for all levels of hikers. The easy and popular hike that was recommended to me by multiple people was to the alpine lake, Lake D'Arpy, famous for its water reflecting the impressive wall of the Grandes Jorasses. It's stunning at any time, but particularly in fall when the larch trees are in full color! It's 10km from Morgex and starts from the Colle San Carlo. Or more specifically, at the Hotel Genzianella where there's a car park. You could easily spend several weeks hiking around Morgex and still not do all the hikes. Check with the Tourist Information for further details.



5 Tips for Visiting the Aosta Valley in the Off-Season

1 Many cable cars/lifts close around mid-September and don't open until June or July. This is fine for hikes lower in the valley, but if you have a specific hike in mind, check to see if it requires a lift to reach it and if so, if the lift is open.

2 Similarly, many mountain huts close off-season so bring a picnic lunch or check before you start your hike.

3 Many museums close in the off-season so check in advance.

4 Depending on when you go off-season, there may be more rain than normal so have some indoor activities in mind for rainy days.

5 Visit at least some of the numerous castles found in the Aosta Valley. There are eight open to the public. In particular, I recommend Fort Bard (which has exhibitions and museums where you could easily spend the day) and Savoy Castle in Gressoney-Saint-Jean.



Laurel is an avid adventurer, traveller and hiker. Originally from Canada, she's lived in Europe for over 12 years, currently in Bulgaria. She's on a mission to get more people outdoors more often. Her work has appeared in BBC Travel, National Geographic and Forbes.

Best Time to Visit

There are so many amazing things to do in the Aosta Valley, no matter what time of year you go. In fact, you'll want to go multiple times and at different times of the year since what you can do varies so much.

If you are looking at doing some of the harder hikes in the higher mountain ranges like the Tour du Mont Blanc, Alta Via 1 or 2, you'll need to go in summer.

If you want to ski, either piste, off piste or cross-country skiing, then

you should go in winter obviously. Although some off-piste skiing on glaciers is available even during summer months.

However, If you're looking to explore the softer side of the Aosta Valley, I'd highly recommend going off-season in fall or spring.

The summer and skiing crowds have disappeared and you'll find it's much quieter. You'll also find that accommodations are much cheaper since it's off-season.

*The most beautiful
places to visit in*
Veneto





BY BECKI ENRIGHT | [BLOG BORDERSOFADVENTURE.COM](https://www.blogbordersofadventure.com)

When it comes to the Veneto region of Italy, the monumental capital of Venice and the Shakespearean-inspired Verona steal the attention. And while these focal Veneto cities are meritorious, they cradle (and somewhat overshadow) a region worthy of broader exploration. There are UNESCO landmarks on Lake Garda, Venetian splendour valley villages with mountainous backdrops, some of the best-preserved medieval fortresses in Italy, to hilltop hamlets immortalised by the works of poets, writers, and artists over the centuries. A collection of time capsules and ancient historical trails

scattered across northern Italy. Such beauty and the preservation of it is officially listed. The Borghi Più Belli d'Italia (Most Beautiful Villages in Italy) distinction is a compiled list of villages and historic centres of small towns to preserve and promote some of Italy's historical landmarks and the foundations of its urban fabric.

So, if you are looking for day trips from Venice or Verona or want to visit the lesser-known destinations snuggled between them, here's a top pick of the places to visit in Veneto, Italy. A journey through 10 of the region's most beautiful small towns and villages



Places to Visit in Veneto From Verona

These historic hamlets are within easy reach via public transport and less than one hour from Verona.



Peschiera del Garda

Lake Garda's turquoise basin is steeped in history, and the amber-toned fortified town of Peschiera del Garda on the southern shores is one of the most alluring. Three manmade fortified islands form a trestle between the lake and the Mincio River that funnels from it. Inside the pentagonal fortress walls of the largest is Peschiera's

colourful and buzzing old town. Cobblestoned streets, buildings coated in ochre and earthy shades, Venetian villas, and Hapsburg-era military stations – old abodes whose ground floors turned into traditional restaurants, cocktail and craft beer bars, and fashion stores.

Walk the history trail, starting from Peschiera's beginning as the Roman town of Arilica. Take the Via Roma to Piazza Ferdinando di Savoia, and you'll reach the tiny Abitato Romano di Arilica site – the excavations of Roman homes and courtyards uncovered in 1974. Peschiera grew during the 13th century under the rule of the medieval Della Scala family. Still, the grand architectural enclosure you see today is the preserved defence systems of the Venetian Republic from the 15th century, declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2017.

Borghetto Sul Mincio

The quaint hamlet of Borghetto is a beauty in isolation, nestled on the opposite bank of the river from the larger town of Valeggio sul Mincio, and the 600,000 square metres Sigurtà Garden Park. It brims with visitors, just as it always has, Borghetto being once the path of merchants and a sanctuary on the pilgrimage points through Santiago de Compostela, Rome, and Jerusalem.

Remnants of medieval gates and bridges and the traces of cobblestoned lanes past ancient working water mills are what remains of this once-powerful fortification that formed part of a complex of villages connected by walls. The vestiges of the Visconteo Bridge, a once 650-metre-long, 25-metre-wide pass built in 1393 to defend the late medieval city from Venetian influence, lead to the hilltop fortress of Scaligero Castle and the 14th-century towers that still protectively look out over the villages, as you can too.

Borghetto is the setting for the *Leggenda del Nodo d'Amore* ("Legend of the Love Knot") – the tied golden handkerchief left by the River Mincio by a nymph as a token of her love for a soldier. Fable to feast, it is the perfect excuse to eat the traditional *Tortellini di Valeggio* – a smaller version of the famous pasta that resembles the love knot.



Soave

It's no wonder Soave won Italy's most beautiful village distinction for 2022 – it's known for being one of the best-preserved medieval villages in the country. The ground walls, towers and gates, and the old fortress complex rising from the hill are almost entirely intact, encasing a beautiful historic centre.

Soave's Roman groundwork was fortified in the 13th century by ruling families of the Middle Ages before the Venetian Republic nobility moved in, leaving behind a road lined with a noble stature. Pass Palazzo Scaligero Del Capitano, Palazzo Moscardo, Palazzo Di Giustizia, and Palazzo Cavalli on the walk

between the grand gates of Porta Aquila and Porta Verona. Soave, hugged by vineyards, is noted for its wine culture. If you are not joining those on the street sipping on the Soave Classico made from the regional white Garganega grape in one of the bars, then a cellar tour and tasting are a must. Find Cantina Coffele and Cantina Del Castello within the village, and the famed Rocca Sveva next to the ancient castle walls.

Combine history and wine on the Monte Tenda nature trail – a two-hour circular trek that curves through a panorama of vineyards before winding up to the medieval and Venetian meld of courts, towers, and turrets of the ancient citadel on the Tenda hill.



Places to Go in Veneto between Verona and Venice

Head into the centre of Veneto and find two of the region's revered medieval fortified towns.



Montagnana

As soon as you arrive in Montagnana, you can see why it is defined by its preserved medieval citadel - a village surrounded by 2 kilometres of majestic old walls, 24 towers and four gates up to 8 metres high. Porta Legnago has a prime view of the long stretch of wall, with the oldest gate of Porta Padova sheltering the San Zeno Castle. Now the archaeological exhibit-filled Museo Civico (Civic Museum), it's also where you can access the tower for elevated views over the vast fortress.

Being in Montagnana is to move from the history of medieval defence as you pass through the walls to the splendour that filled the village during the Venetian era. The bronze-hued walls enclose a historical centre full of houses in colourful rows and streets that lead to the Piazza Comunale square lined with palatial elegant, arcaded Venetian villas. The Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, from 1502, stands out with its combined Gothic and Renaissance features and looks directly at the landmark Palazzo Valderi.

Montagnana also prides itself on its Prosciutto, with the Veneto Berico-Euganeo DOP (Protected Designation of Origin) stamp of quality. It's found on almost every menu, served on aperitivo plates, and showcased in Prosciuttificios like Attilio Fontana outside the city walls.

Marostica

You can't tell that Marostica was once a Roman military outpost. The village's location right in the centre of Veneto saw its fortifications enlarged by the Della Scala family, who ruled Verona and the Veneto region during most of the 14th century. It's known today for these preserved fortress ruins constructed in 1312, with curving hilltop walls.

On a one-hour walled village hike, start at Porta Bassano, and follow the route of the walls that snake their way on the hill. Take the forested, rocky trail path to the Castello Superiore (Upper Castle) for a view directly to the strategically placed Castello Inferiore (Lower Castle) bastion. Reliving the traditions of the Venetian Republic, the La Partita a Scacchi di Marostica live human chess game in Marostica's masterpiece, played on the giant chessboard in front of the Lower Castle. It follows the story of noblemen Rinaldo d'Angarano and Vieri da Vallonara, who fight for the hand of the Lord of Marostica's beautiful daughter, Lionora. Outside of the event, which takes place every second weekend of September on even-numbered years, the Lower Castle (Castello Inferiore) is a museum primarily dedicated to the game, showcasing props and costumes.

Places to Visit in Veneto

From Venice

Venice is enticing, but go find the pockets of Venetian elegance and medieval magnificence in towns nearby and take the chance to get closer to the mountains.



Arquà Petrarca

This hilltop village set to a backdrop of unfurling green slopes and mountain trails was immortalised by the 14th-century Italian poet Francesco Petrarca who described it as "rich of green vegetation and full of peace". Once you arrive, you will no doubt agree.

Arquà Petrarca is a model village of beauty. Old medieval dwellings like the 12th-century Loggia del Vicari where the medieval ruling families would meet, silver stone houses, picture-perfect whitewashed cottages, and grand Venetian villas jostle for space on the layering of winding roads and stone staircases. No wonder Petrarca spent the last years of his life here from 1370 to 1374. You can visit his tomb in the heart of the charming cobblestoned medieval hamlet at Palazzo Contarini, next to the fresco-filled Parish Church of Santa Maria Assunta.

The streets are filled with al fresco diners on Piazza San Marco and people enjoying a glass of wine on Strada Provinciale avenue of vino bars and stores. It brings locals together with the hikers and bikers who pass through as they journey through the villa-set hills and mountainous trails.

The Atestino trail is the closest hike path to the village, a 20-km five-hour circular route through

the peak plains and passes of Mount Rusta and the Marlunghè ridge that ends at Petrarch's home close to the entrance of the village. Whatever path you take here, his legend and poetic words live on.

Asolo

Asolo, the "Town of a Hundred Horizons", so called for its romantic setting on the rolling hills between the Venetian plains and the eastern Alps. Inhabited since prehistoric times, it became an important Roman Municipium and was ruled by the four families of Ezzelini, Scaligeri, Carraresi, and Trevigiani during the Middle Ages. Under the Venetian Republic, it became illustrious, attracting poets, painters, writers, and thinkers.

Today it melds together these historical elements. Medieval relics and romantic streets, whose arcades house the workshops of painters, sculptures, and fashion designers. Winding lanes with old stone houses and pretty palazzos like the 15th-century Palazzo della Ragione turned village museum and art treasury. The residents of artists who called Asolo home, the most well-known being Villa Freya, the abode of English writer and traveller Freya Stark, who retired in Asolo in

the 1970s. It's also a popular attraction for the remains of the foundations of a Roman theatre in the house's garden. A symbol of the village, climb the Rocca monument perched atop Monte Ricco at 310m, dating from the late 12th to the early 13th century. Take it all in from great heights with views to the Dolomites, then look up to it from the lower Castello della Regina Cornaro, where the 15th-century Venetian Queen Cornaro, the last monarch of the Kingdom of Cyprus, lived in exile.

A solo's award-winning prosecco, which has a DOCG (designation of origin and guaranteed) distinction in the Veneto wine region, adds an extra layer of elegance. End the day sampling the sweetness and carbonation varieties of these prized bubbles with a tasting in the Asolo Wine Shop.

Mel (Borgo Valbelluna)

The dramatic backdrop heightens Mel's pocket of Venetian grandeur - this small village in the centre of the Valbelluna (Belluno Valley) sits in front of the towering Dolomites. An architectural cocktail of the ages, Mel's history spans from the ancient Paleo-Venetian times in the first millennium BC to the arrival of the Romans, the feudal Middle Ages, and

the nobility of the Venetian Republic, and the Zorzi family who ruled for three centuries.

See it in the stone circles of the Necropolis site close to the centre, the hilltop Castle of Zumelle and the historical centre that preserves the old noble Venetian town. Piazza Papa Luciani keeps its timeless villas and elegant palazzos like the landmark 16th century Palazzo Cappello and Palazzo Zorzo Palace turned city hall. Artefacts from all ages are gathered in the Civic Archaeological Museum in the Palazzo delle Contesse.

Trip through the valley on the 'Anello del Borgo' trail. Follow the blue signs and walk a 6.7 km loop through the verdant plain on the Piave river, walking in parallel to the mountainous walls before circling back to the village, where the soft hills of the Venetian Prealps hug it from the other side.

Cison di Valmarino

What might appear to be a tucked-away tranquil hamlet was once a place of great importance. Cison di Valmarino was a centre point in the Middle Ages where the noble families of the 12 villages would meet. Today, this village is a window into that time, mainly of the Brandolini family, who ruled the area of the Valmarino Feud of the Venetian Republic



for three centuries. As for the Romans, it's said the remnants of the village are 1 kilometre away on a hilltop. The Venetian elements dominate. Piazza Roma oozes importance. Admire a quad of landmark buildings like the 15th-century Palazzo Zambaldi town hall and 17th-century Teatro la Loggia where those meetings took place (now a performing arts venue and vintage radio museum), and Villa CasaBrando, the former family residence a short walk from the Cantine Brandolini winery. Follow the numbered information boards and learn about the set-up of the village, including the agricultural industry in the ancient stables in Case Marian. Castle Brando is a reminder of defence – the hilltop fortification was the military garrison and residence of the Brandolini, dominating and protecting the village. Today this compact complex is a luxury hotel with a restaurant and spa, but you can take the funicular up and admire that view that was once so exclusive and off-limits.

Borgo di Follina

A 30-minute walk from Cision di Valmarino, Follina makes for a beautiful village combo. This tiny village is a cluster of little farmhouse-lined lanes, streets of caramel-toned houses and

faded mansions built upon the trickling streams. Its central heart is a row of villas painted in earthy pinks and yellows, with decorated facades – the colourful neighbours to Follina's most revered architectural treasure, the Abbey of Santa Maria. This village was built upon the foundations of wool production, renowned in the Venetian Republic for its exceptional silk and wool products. The foundations of these industries date back to 1268, when Cistercian monks moved into the Abbey. While the industry declined by the 18th century, the village kept some old wool mills and cloth factories as heirlooms. The 17th-century Palazzo Barberis Rusca, with its faded mocha façade and elegant dark wooden shutters, is the most well-known. Follina and Cision di Valmarino are nestled between two UNESCO World Heritage Site wine-growing areas that cradle the valley – Valdobbiadene and Conegliano. Bikers, hikers, and wine enthusiasts pass through the area on a 45km pathway known as Prosecco and Conegliano Valdobbiadene Hills Wine Route. Whichever way you visit, try the renowned extra dry sparkling white wine with the DOCG quality seal, even if you join the locals sitting outside the wine bar or cafe.



Becki is a British travel press award-winning writer focusing on changing perceptions about misunderstood aspects of destinations. Her writing combines storytelling with social, cultural and historical reporting, encouraging people to travel differently, adventurously, responsibly and with purpose. Becki has also written for high-profile media, including National Geographic, Guardian, Independent, Sunday Times, Wanderlust and Wizz magazine.





About this project

This joint promotion by the Italian Regions is part of the National Promotion Plan 2020 by the Ministry of Tourism, and was made possible thanks to an agreement between the Ministry of Tourism and the Commission for Tourism Policies (led by the Abruzzo Region), the Conference of the Regions and Autonomous Provinces, and ENIT (Italian National Tourist Board). The Regions of Emilia Romagna, Umbria and Marche were given the task of coordinating specific areas of actions, whilst the Abruzzo Region is responsible for interoperability with www.italia.it.

The three main focus areas of the campaign are: “Borghi and Italian landscapes, identity, style and quality of life” (led by Emilia Romagna); “Slow tourism: paths, wine and food, art and culture” (led by Umbria) and “Active tourism in summer and winter” (led by Marche).

The campaign, coordinated by the lead Regions together with their in-house agencies

(respectively APT Servizi Emilia-Romagna, Sviluppumbria S.p.A. and Fondazione Marche Cultura), was created by Dilemma whilst the media strategy was developed by The Gate Communication. Both online and offline media were engaged to ensure a broad-based promotion in both domestic and international markets.

Special attention was given to highlighting the Borghi. A website + digital interactive map with information about the 1,000 Borghi and the diverse landscapes of Italy was developed. Furthermore, in partnership with iambassador, the world’s leading network of travel content creators, the Borghi creators project was launched. 21 content creators each explored a region and shared their experiences via their blogs and social media channels. In addition, they helped to showcase the touristic offerings of each borgo. Their content will be featured on the website and digital interactive map.