

# THE GREEN HEART OF ITALY



**Lee Irvine** uncovers Umbria, a place steeped in history, blanketed in vineyards and oozing peaceful charm...

Umbria is the only region in Italy that doesn't have a coast or a border with another country. The whole area is a mixture of fertile plains and mountains interlaced with rivers... it's known as The Green Heart of Italy.

From golden, honeysuckle scented streets, to settling into a beautiful villa that can trace its origins back to Roman times, it's impossible not to slow down and just enjoy the calming beauty that is San Gemini, the

small hilltop town that became our base.

San Gemini has to be seen to be believed. The tall, narrow streets are filled with soft golden sunlight that bounces down from the blue skies above, and tucked away within them are delightful local shops and bars. Venturing deeper into the alleyways, we discovered hidden plazas and striking vistas across the surrounding valleys that felt like they hadn't been visited for years

Our villa, with its own tower, was two minutes from the square and had views

for miles in every direction. Once inside, the marble floors, ancient, thick walls and soft light falling through shuttered windows made us consider never trying to find a wifi signal or update our Facebook status ever again! And that was before yoga sessions in the shaded garden and a lounge by the pool to watch the sun go down... It was the perfect location to relax and wind down after wandering the streets of San Gemini.

As idyllic as our villa was, getting out and exploring the sights, sound, and tastes of Umbria is a must. We took up the opportunity of a guided trip bicycle tour through landscapes that have inspired artists for centuries. Rolling through the quiet fields, vineyards and ancient villages at a leisurely pace, we were stopping every few minutes to try to take photos that were worthy of the surroundings. The views, scents and fresh air extend the perfect excuse to indulge in local



foods and wines whenever the opportunity arises. Fortunately, this happens a lot. From fresh antipasti while sampling fantastic red and white wines, through to orange-infused olive oil from the smallest family business, unscheduled snack stops are highly recommended at any time of the day.

Umbrian cuisine is renowned for truffles, olive oil and wine, and with a global reputation for all three, it does not disappoint. A morning spent truffle hunting with two seasoned hunters and their enthusiastic, friendly dogs was a highlight of our trip. The dogs did a great job and hunted out enough truffles for the hunters, who revealed themselves to be restaurant owners and chefs. Our hosts transformed the morning's find into a truffle tasting lunch menu that was simple, fresh and amazing. Soft boiled egg topped with truffle is our new favourite starter!

Have we mentioned how good the food is yet?! It's even good when you make it yourself. We were given authentic Italian gnocchi and pesto lessons in the home kitchen of San Gemini's own world-renowned chef. You'll find making and then eating beautiful food in friendly surroundings very hard to beat.

If you're feeling adventurous, you can always seek out some of Umbria's other offerings, with opportunities for all flavours of outdoors sports, and options ranging from rock climbing and mountain biking through to parachuting to choose from. We opted for a morning of white water rafting

down the River Nera. It was exhilarating, refreshing and topped off with a visit to the stunning Marmore Waterfalls. A little adventure and adrenaline is the perfect contrast to the leisurely pace that permeates the laid-back beauty of Umbria. Not only is it The Green Heart of Italy, it's a heavenly honeymoon choice too...



### *Find out more*

We stayed at Villa Santi Terzi, San Gemini. Tuscany Now & More offers Santi Terzi from £2,659 for 14 people for 7 days sharing on a self-catering basis, including a maid, which makes it perfect for destination weddings or decadent hen or stag parties. The company features a range of properties across the region and Italy and can provide private chefs, excursions and other services on request. [tuscanynowandmore.com](http://tuscanynowandmore.com)

Airport lounge access available through [www.no1lounges.com](http://www.no1lounges.com).

Flights were with **Easyjet** to Rome Fiumicino. The transfer time to San Gemini is around one hour.

