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Villa Santi Terzi, San Gemini

TRAVEL



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Waking *dreams*

Tuscany draws the crowds, but its neighbour has wonders of its own. Sarah Tucker heads for Umbria

The countryside may have been shaken, but in this enigmatic, landlocked region, it's the emotions that are invariably stirred. Overshadowed by Tuscany – its fashionable cousin to the north and west – and with the World Heritage Site of Assisi among its pearls, Umbria is *il cuore verde d'Italia*: the green heart of Italy.

Forget the earthquakes, horrifying as they are. Like the ones that rose in fury against the region in October 2016, sending shudders through the Eternal City itself, more than 80 miles away to the south. Meditate instead upon conifers and medieval towers and truffles as big as tennis balls, or on fields of endless gold.

When teaching yoga, I create a visualisation which goes something like this. Imagine yourself standing by a river glistening with light. The day is warm and you look up to the sun and breathe in the air, sweet with honeysuckle. You dip in a toe. And then you jump in, now swimming with the current, now against it, allowing yourself to breathe deeper than ever before...

I did all that for real on my first day in Umbria, in the medieval town of San Gemini,

famed for its spring waters and sitting astride the Via Flaminia, ancient route from Rome across the Apennines to the Adriatic coast.

Here, in the most sublime sense, is a lost world, unsullied by the presence of the odd Anglo-American expat. In San Gemini, as throughout the villages of Umbria, the community remains resolutely Italian, with many locals still living

in the house in which they were born. Even the swifts seemed like long-term tenants, possessively skimming the towers of our villa like gliders on the whispering breeze.

Every lunch here is a Monet, full of texture and light: mozzarella, tomato and basil all refresh the parts that even Waitrose cannot

reach. Impressionist meals at cheap imitation prices – a bottle of the finest Umbrian wine (£35 on Amazon) costs just £4. I learned to make gnocchi pasta with Lorena Autuori, who runs a cookery school in her home. So sensual is the process that it practically constitutes pasta porn.

Umbria is more industrialised than Tuscany, which may or may not have any bearing on the fact that

the Umbrians eat more meat. Boar sausages and prosciutto are both five-starred – even your non-carnivorous correspondent was lured into giving the prosciutto a try.

Meaty matters aside, however, you can go truffle hunting (from 75 euros for the day) and then sample the results on pasta with soft boiled eggs. And at Ristorante Piermarini in Ferentillo the owner – originally from Hammersmith, later of the US and now firmly rooted in Italy – gave me my second cooking lesson of the trip, flawlessly executed in an Estuary accent laced with a rather fetching Umbrian twang.

Cycling is big here, as the region includes the flat, fertile valley of the Tiber, stretched out in pleasing contrast to the elevated grandeur of the Apennines. We pedalled along the Nera (tributary of the Tiber) to Marmore's Falls, a creation of the Romans and the tallest man-made waterfall in the world, where the flow is literally turned on and off like a tap.

This is Byron country; a waking dream of a place, studded with chapels and fascinating towns like Bevagna, that inspired His Lordship two centuries ago and is still as poetic today. The light dazzles and enchants. In photos, it was as though Walt Disney himself were cusing in the butterflies, bees and birds, while the linden trees bathed the air in perfume like an anointing from Chanel.

Back in San Gemini they were having a concert. Califone, an experimental rock band from Chicago (but you knew that), was doing its thing in one of the medieval squares, startling the swifts with timeless classics such as *Rattlesnakes Smell Like Split Cucumber* and *Porno Starlet Vs Rodeo Clown*. It was good, actually. Trust me.

Soon though it was time to beat a blissful retreat to the Villa Santi Terzi, an exquisitely decorated, centrally located refuge where the artwork has the edge on the plumbing. It's self-catering, though you can hire a chef – the excellent Daniela Pitari – and it can host up to 16 people. All the bars and restaurants of San Gemini are within easy reach, while in-house delights include a swimming pool, a well-stocked library and a superb yoga teacher called Francesco who – for those with more zing than zen – can also fill you in on the arts of Japanese self-defence. Saturday night's alright for fighting in the corridors of the Villa Santi Terzi.

So enjoy it. Since my visit I've tried endlessly to recreate the Umbrian experience, picnicking beneath the flight path and foraging for truffles in Richmond Park with the aid of my neighbour's labradoodle...

But to no avail: Umbria is a joy entire unto itself. Byron, for one, would have agreed.

■ Sarah travelled to Umbria with Tuscany Now and More (tuscanynowandmore.com)

“Every lunch is a Monet, full of texture and light”

