

Family fun in Italy's green heart

Charlotte Smith-Jarvis explores the beauty of Italy's agricultural heartland...

It's not a common question to be asked on holiday... "Did the earth move for you?"

But with not one, not two, not three, but five earthquakes trembling central Italy during our recent visit, the enquiry (mostly from worried friends and family) was to be expected.

Fortunately we were unaffected – although we did feel them strongly. Mr Jarvis was in the bath when the first one struck and thought the tremors were the result of a few too many glasses of vino!

Would it put me off travelling to the region again? Don't be silly. The quakes were felt in Rome, Florence and elsewhere – and the tourism industry is highly unlikely to be felled in either of these places.

During our five days in Italia, we were based in the country's green heart (cuore verdi) of Umbria.

Forget about earthquakes. Our memories are of ancient golden hillside villages framed by a tapestry of verdant vineyards, silver-green olive trees, and freshly ploughed farmland. Of the warmth of the people, who had a real passion to share their love of their culture, history, food and wine.

Umbria is, as we discovered, ideal for families. From door to door the travel time was just three hours from our south Suffolk home (it's only a two hour flight from Stansted) and there is loads to see and do. Waterfalls, trekking, the new cycle track connecting Assisi to Spoleto, food workshops, and chocolate, art and music festivals.

You will need to hire a car. But that's just part of the fun!

Where to stay

We were based at the rather swanky resort of Valle di Assisi.

The complex has been designed to take in the jaw-dropping views of Assisi and mount Subasio.

Our suite had nifty touch operated lighting and blinds, which the kids loved. Both beds were more than comfortable. And we had two terraces overlooking the mountain. We loved the spa jet bath in the bathroom – much-needed after a day trekking around the local sights.

Around the hotel are a football area, tennis court, golf course and pool and there were bikes to get around the grounds, which include a vineyard, farm and olive groves. The fruits of all these plantations can be enjoyed in the hotel restaurant where we loved the modern take on Italian cuisine, and the fabulous wines – Canto in particular.

On our last day, we indulged in the underground spa. It is just fabulous.

Where to go

Assisi

Known locally as the Rose of the Umbrian Valley because of the pink stone from the mountains used to construct the buildings, Assisi



■ Basilica of St Francis in Assisi

glows blush under the setting sun.

Ethan (8) and I had our first view of the town from the mountainside national park of Assisi. This ethereally quiet place is where locals and visitors head to escape the hot summer sun, bringing picnics, cycling the pathways, hiking, watching the stars.

We were fascinated by the hermitage where St Francis used to isolate himself, believing that this particular spot (almost in the clouds) would bring him closer to nature, closer to God.

You can still see the tiny hidey hole St Francis used. Ethan was fascinated by the miniscule proportions of the place and couldn't quite believe the doll-sized 'bed' of St Francis.

Back in the heart of the town we stopped for gelato and rambled around the historic centre, where artisanal shops and restaurants are tucked into the tiny alleyways.

Look out for the majestic columns of the Temple of Minerva. And you simply cannot ignore the Basilica of St Francis. This enormous Papal building is in fact three churches, one on top of the other.

Underground, an austere but beautiful crypt reveals a shrine to St Francis. The lower church is feted for its 'golden corner' of art, with one of the most important collections of frescoes by Italian artists in the county from greats such as Giotto. The upper, gothic part of the basilica would not, many say, have been appreciated by the frugal saint, due to its ostentatious décor, but it was my favourite part.

Perugia

Did we want to visit a chocolate factory? Silly question. We hopped at the chance to visit the Perugia factory in San Sisto on the outskirts of Umbria's capital city.

The unmistakable scent of cocoa permeates every part of the building. It is here that over two million much-loved Baci (a chocolate gianduja mixed with crushed hazelnuts and topped with a single nut) are created. Each one is topped with a 'love note' (or carti) before being enveloped in foil.

In the chocolate museum, we learnt more about the history of Baci and the Perugia factory. We saw a recreation of the world's biggest ever Baci. And we had the opportunity to try many of the

■ A view to the valley from the highest point of Perugia.

Photos: CHARLOTTE SMITH-JARVIS



factory's amazing choccies.

Afterwards there was a skyline tour of the building. The children were captivated by the process of making and packing, and we really did have a bird's eye view.

Perugia has its own school of chocolate with a variety of workshops. We had a great (and very messy) time with the brilliantly funny master of chocolate, making truffles in a hands-on session.

A trip up into Perugia itself is a must. Our guide Michele took us to the city's highest point, which he called the Door to the Sun, as you can see the celestial globe rising from the mountains every morning.

Visit the north entrance of the city, built 2,300 years ago, the exceptional round-framed Temple of San Michelangelo, and the fountain in the main square with its intricate carvings.

Traverse the long narrow aqueduct that links the university to the city centre. And look up at St



■ Charlotte and Ella making (eating) truffles at the Perugia chocolate factory. Right, Ethan making truffles at the chocolate factory.

Laurence Cathedral to see the crucifix – stolen and placed there by the people of Perugia in defiance of the War of Salt. History is all around you.

But that's not to say life stands still. Perugia hosts many music

festivals, including an important jazz festival.

One of our favourite things delving down into the catacombs – because the Romans actually built on top of the original city! Magical.



■ Top, a unique church in Perugia. Above, Ella, Ethan and Jarv at Carsulae. And below, Carsulae

Where to eat

Testano, nr Assisi

A short drive from Assisi, at first glance the location might not look appealing, being as it is by the road in an industrial area, but it is renowned for serving some of the best torta al testo around and was thronged with locals. Torta al testo is a typical Umbrian snack that involves a type of flatbread being filled with whatever you like and toasted over a super hot fire. At only 5 Euros for a huge slice and a drink, what's not to like? Try the barbozza (meaning beard) which is deliciously cured pig's cheek.

Umbro, Perugia

I know what you're thinking – "Umbro's a brand of trainers" – but in this case it's a lively eatery/shop. Underneath is a market selling regional specialities as well as daily essentials. Above is a bar, grill and deli counter like I've never seen before. The never-ending counter brims with cured meats, cheeses, hot dishes, and more. Take a ticket, join the queue and try to make a selection. The pasta is great and the sharing platter of salamis and hams is to die for.

La Rosetta, Perugia

From the outside, this hotel and restaurant looks a little tired. But the restaurant here is incredible



■ Ella tucking into pizza in Assisi. Below, Umbrian delicacies at Valle di Assisi hotel.

and with an old-fashioned charm and hospitality uncommon today. The head chef is dedicated to using fresh, local Umbrian produce and demonstrated exceptional skill and flair in the seven course feast he presented to us. There was a tiny beef tartare sitting on top of black rice with the sweet tang of pomegranate seeds. Home-cured duck prosciutto drizzled with local honey. A risotto of Umbrian saffron, grayfish from lake Trasimeno and melting lardo

draped over the top. Crisp pumpkin tartlets crowned with burnished onion and truffle, and served with a blue cheese cream sauce. Al dente pasta with wild boar and rosemary ragu. Pork loin in a sticky wine reduction with dried fig and tiny sweet plums. And...phew...baked chocolate mousse with vanilla cream. A gastronomic experience for sure.

Ristorante il Convent, Corciano

Found in the depths of a former convent, this elegant restaurant, with arched ceilings and historic brickwork, is a great place for typical Umbrian food. I tried Umbricetti (the local eggless pasta) served with hot chilli, truffle and layers of lardo. The porchetta, filled with spicy garlic and herbs was gorgeous. And the lentil soup is excellent. Staff are more than happy to make recommendations. Service is friendly. And there was enough choice to satisfy even the fussiest of kids – I should know, we had two with us!



from one of the highest falls in Europe. Seven dams control the cascata, and the sound of the water crashing and swelling in the pools below changes throughout the day and depending on where you are standing. We were told that the falls have their own microclimate, and this is so evident as you walk close to the water. The air around you becomes cooler, fresher, invigorating, making this a full sensory day out.



Di Filippo Vineyard

Having grown up in rural Suffolk, next to a farm, I've always had an affinity with agriculture so it was refreshing to spend time with a visionary, passionate farmer at this vineyard not far from our hotel.

Roberto and wife Emma grow their grapes organically and biodynamically, with the second generation vines producing varieties such as Trebiano Spontano, Grechetto and Sangiovese.

Our tour began with a cornucopia of cured meats and cheeses, many produced by friends of Roberto's, followed by the farm's own goose rolled with pistachio, and a sticky fig crostata. We tried lots of the wines we'd never have considered before. Montefalco is typical of the locality and I think that was my favourite.

Roberto loves what he does which was more than apparent as we toured the vineyard on his horse-drawn cart. This was the kind of romantic vision we probably have in our minds of rural Italy. Roberto combines modern farming knowledge with time-honoured traditions that have improved his production by a whopping 40%. Instead of pesticides and fertilisers, a flock of 150 geese snuffle about the grounds, picking off bugs, leaving behind their manure and clearing the land in a perfect symbiosis.

Lake Trasimeno

It would take an hour to circumnavigate Italy's fourth largest lake. Its banks conceal tiny villages and towns, pontoons surrounded by sailing boats. This is where Perugians come to walk with their lovers, escape the sun, dress up and enjoy lunch. At the centre are three islands, one a national park, and another, Maggiore, lived on by population of just 17.

If you take a boat trip, departing regularly from Passagnano Sul

Contacts

www.vallediassisi.com
www.larosetta.eu
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www.lagotrasimeno.co.uk
www.marmorefalls.it
vinidifilippo.com
www.umbriatourism.it

Trasimeno, you'll get much closer to the islands, may see birds on their way home to Africa, or even stop off for lunch on Maggiore.

A short drive away is the olive oil mill of the Palombaro brothers, just outside Monte de Lago. The action was frenetic. If the olives don't make it to pressing within 24 hours they're no good, so everywhere you looked there were farmers dashing with boxes of the fruit.

It was interesting to see the oil in production, in a process that takes just two and a half hours. The olives are crushed and churned into a paste then spread on nylon rounds before being compressed to extract the goodies. I confess, I've been drizzling it on toast every day since we got back. I'm not getting on those scales until after Christmas!



■ Olive oil being stored in an Umbrian olive oil mill.

And don't miss Corciano

After our plans were changed due to the earthquakes, we found ourselves spending an evening in Corciano.. Dreamy streets, two magnificent towers, petite squares, arches, alleyways - I fell head over heels. As we walked around we noticed pieces of wood perched on the sides of buildings. Apparently for around a week at Christmas time the village becomes a living, breathing nativity scene with people in traditional dress, set pieces, animals and more – how wonderful is that?

Carsulae

If ruins are your thing, then plan for a few hours at Carsulae near San Gemini. Flanked by hills and mountains, and surrounded by greenery, it's difficult to comprehend just quite how big this ancient Roman town was. Even more difficult to grasp that what has been uncovered is only approximately 23% of its entirety.

We walked on the bumpy Roman road. Saw the still-standing north entry gate. Peered into a sink hole where pottery and more has been found. Stood in the remains of the forum. It's incredible to think that decades ago this was a plant-festooned ramble of a place, where families would come to relax and picnic – having no idea on earth what they were surrounded by.

Cascata Delle Marmore

Byron described these waterfalls as "horribly beautiful". An apt observation of the urgency and power of the water as it tumbles