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Hedonistic Hiking runs all-inclusive tours across Italy (and Australia) in which you learn so much about the history, culture and food and wine of the areas you are travelling in



A brief rest



Pomegranates and plums



Local ham and cheese



Ever onwards



The remains of the Cistercian abbey of Santa Maria del Monte

OFF-GRID *in Abruzzo*

Mark Nicholls spends a week savouring the pleasures of hiking, traditional cuisine and *alberghi diffusi* in the unspoilt national parks of Abruzzo

The crumbling walls of a Cistercian monastery stand in silence as sentinels against the elements. For centuries, the Abbey of Santa Maria del Monte was an important ecclesiastical house in this bleak corner of Abruzzo, controlling the surrounding terrain from its commanding position. Monks managed the flocks for Florentine rulers who had become wealthy on the fleeces, until the importance of wool trade declined in the 17th century. Today all that remains of the 13th-century abbey are lonely walls. Isolated and in ruins, they sit against a backdrop of soaring rock escarpments and undulating pasture sweeping across steppe-like plains that lie below the jagged vertical walls that lead up to the summit of Corno Grande at 2,912m. The silence is eerie, interrupted only by the sound of bells clanging around the necks of free-roaming cattle.

Joining a group from Hedonistic Hiking on a walking, wine and food tour through the region of Abruzzo, east of Rome, I pass the ruins mid-morning. The weather is mild with clear skies and sunshine, though occasionally the October breeze carries a hint of the chill and snows that lie ahead. Undulating between 1,580m and 1,780m above sea level, we cut across grasslands and rocky hillsides as the cloud line whispers to the upper peaks. After half a dozen miles, it is lunch; a rendezvous with picnic hampers packed with local meats and cheese, fresh fruits, red and white wine from the region, salads, bread and porcini mushroom soup. Hedonistic Hiking is run by Jackie and Mick Parsons, who also lead the hikes, and the ethos is to showcase the Italian landscape, its history and culture, accompanied by tastes of traditional cuisine and local wines.

MOUNTAINS AND HILLS

Over the days ahead, these al fresco lunches become a welcome feature of a journey on foot through Abruzzo's network of national parks. It is a region characterised by the mountains and hills of the Apennine range, gorges and expanses of high plateaux, extensive forestry,

fortified medieval villages, churches and castles, with the walled city of L'Aquila as the main commercial centre. Within the parks are soaring peaks, such as Monte Petroso (2,249m) and Monte Marsicano (2,245m), and forests of beech, oak, pine, maple, mountain ash, yew and laburnum, offering a blaze of bronze, copper and decaying yellow as autumn takes hold. The parks are also home to protected wildlife: the critically-endangered Marsican brown bear, Abruzzo chamois, Apennine wolves, red deer and roe deer, as well as cattle and semi-wild horses. A third of Abruzzo is subject to environmental protection, including the Gran Sasso, Majella and Abruzzo national parks, which is where we spend much of the tour.

Encircled by the majestic peaks of the Gran Sasso National Park, we follow the rocky remnants of a glacial flow and head back to the fortified medieval village of Santo Stefano di Sessanio and the Hotel Sextantio, which champions the *albergo diffuso* (diffused hotel) concept of accommodation. Not dissimilar to the cave homes that have been converted into hotels in Cappadocia in central Turkey, or the similar dwellings of Matera

Cattle are allowed to roam freely here through the warmer months



THE CONCEPT OF THE ALBERGO DIFFUSO



Hotel Sextantio

Translating as “diffused hotel”, this style sees rooms spread across a village or farm, rather than clustered together. The accommodation is often in transformed former homes, here hewn out of rock and devastated by earthquake and age, being sympathetically reconstructed within the centuries-old village in a way that reflects rural traditions.

With a key the size of a small hammer, a heavy latch clanks and a huge wooden door creaks open. I step down into my cosy, yet cavernous, room. Not so long ago this was a ruin – one of numerous empty rooms in a community that time looked set to forget and allow, over the weathered decades, to be absorbed back into this outcrop. Now reborn, and honed into an *albergo diffuso*, these atmospheric abodes are breathing new life into Santo Stefano di Sessanio, which was devastated in the 2009 earthquake, with many buildings, including the symbolic Medici Tower (being rebuilt), destroyed.

With its thick stone walls, my accommodation is warm and comfortable, and comes complete with bath, toilet, bed and furnishings. With courtyards and cobbled passages leading to dispersed rooms managed from a central reception, the village also has restaurants, bars, cafés and shops, all of them immersed within this ancient infrastructure.



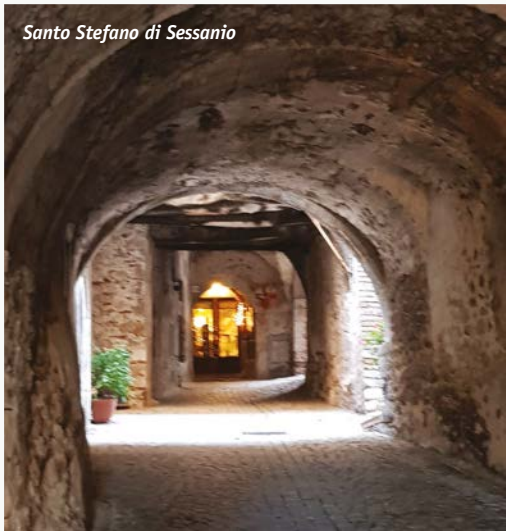
My room at the hotel



Finding your way around



Dinner in the hotel restaurant



Santo Stefano di Sessanio



Hotel sign



Into the sunshine



Reaching the ruins of the fortress of Rocca Calascio

in Basilicata, here in Italy, Hotel Sextantio provides an atmospheric base for the first three nights of our ‘Wilds of Abruzzo’ tour of central Italy.

The following morning, with the light crisp and sharp, we walk out of the village and climb gradually. Our destination on a rocky ledge above grassy slopes is the ruins of Rocca Calascio. Evidence suggests that there was a fortress here for a thousand years, commanding trade and the transit routes where sheep were herded across the barren emptiness of Abruzzo. At 1,460m, the view over the hills is breathtaking. Descending past the 17th-century chapel of Santa Maria della Pietà just below, we pause for lunch of lentil soup, *caprese* (buffalo mozzarella, basil and tomatoes), rocket salad with walnuts and fennel, pecorino cheese and mortadella ham, prepared by Iole Esposito. On other days we feast on sheep’s and goat’s cheese, salami, *ventricina* – a pork sausage with chilli, wild fennel and orange zest – *schiciata* and *focaccia* bread, grilled pepper and courgettes, and sweet clementine, apples, plums, persimmons, pears and pomegranates.

REMOTE BEAUTY

Abruzzo remains one of Italy’s poorer regions, and the remoteness – and the risk of earthquake – has seen villages abandoned, with citizens leaving and never returning. Hollywood, however, has not neglected this region, and films such as *The Name of the Rose* (starring Sean Connery and based on Umberto Eco’s debut novel) and *The American* were filmed in the area, the latter starring George Clooney, who is regarded as something of a friend to the region for his support after the earthquake of April 2009 devastated L’Aquila. The Wilds of Abruzzo tour also gives us the opportunity to visit Sulmona, famous for its sugared almonds (known as *confetti*), and the medieval village of Barrea overlooking the lake that takes its name.

By mid-week we are well into our stride, starting a walk beside stone watering troughs, along farm tracks and past roaming cattle into the shade of beech trees and following the trail across the hillside above a fertile glacial basin into Pescocostanzo. The livestock is protected from wolves, vultures and eagles by Abruzzese Mastiff dogs with warm white coats, which police the pasturelands. These companionable canines seemingly appear from nowhere, joining us for a few miles, and then disappear. Indeed, as we walk, these amiable creatures become regular escorts through the open terrain and tree lines, and onto high ridges.

Next we tackle a trek of 12 miles. Starting below Pescocostanzo, we wander beneath copper beeches filtering sunlight, cross open meadows and onto a high ledge. Our route back is a long descent over a rock-strewn path and into open fields. Another walk, through the Abruzzo National Park, takes us towards Opi, a village on a rocky spine dominated by the church at the top and the bold white face of its clock. From a cobbled main street, narrow alleys tumble away to courtyards and entrances to houses where window boxes cling to the remnants of summer flowers, the last vestiges of red



Looking down over Lake Barrea



On the final approach to Pescasseroli

and pink geraniums set against the pale grey stonework. We take lunch and then set off towards Pescasseroli via a steep climb before descending across pasture and undulating meadow, which in the winter forms a popular ski area.

CULTURE AND LEGEND

Our journey, however, is not just about food, wine and walking; Jackie tells us about the local history, culture and legend, and the produce of the region, as well as entertaining us with an après-lunch story as we sit in the sun with a glass of wine. Reading extracts from books set in the area, we hear about daring wartime tales and

of Allied prisoners aided in their escape by courageous Abruzzese from *Escaping Hitler* by Monty Halls. On another day, *Finding Valentino* by Australian author Angela Di Sciascio details her travels through southern Italy, capturing the history of her father and his culture through their relatives still living in Abruzzo.

Ahead of the final day of walking, we recharge in Pescasseroli, setting off promptly in the cool air of the following morning on a challenging route that climbs some 700m through beech and maple woods to a spectacular ridge at 1,800m and an abandoned 1920s *rifugio*. Following the ridgeline along the regional border of Abruzzo and Molise, the landscape below is managed by park authorities and home to the last remaining 50 Marsican bears, which feed on endemic bushes, berries, vegetation and small mammals. Descending a rocky hillside into mountain pastures, we picnic near the church of Santa Maria di Monte Tranquillo, at 1,600m, on sausages and *arrosticini* (skewers of lamb) cooked over coals, and then follow shepherd’s tracks back to Pescasseroli to complete a walk of some 17km.

A STEP BACK IN TIME

Hedonistic Hiking runs tours across Italy throughout the summer (and in Australia from November onwards). But what is apparent is the passion and enthusiasm for regions such as Abruzzo, and the local cuisine, which is always such a critical element of the hikes.

“Walking through Abruzzo feels like a step back in time, an area that has been untouched and unspoilt by tourism,” Jackie tells me. “We are often the only tourists going there and that spills over into the welcome we get from the people who live there. We can often walk all day and never see anyone else; that is my idea of a top walk. In autumn you get the amazing colours of the trees, in springtime you see the wild flowers, and there is the appeal of the wildlife as well.” The walks are designed to be enjoyable and manageable and in Abruzzo range from six to twelve miles, with altitude differences of 1,200 to 1,900m.

A beautifully isolated landscape, Abruzzo is sparsely populated and unspoilt. It offers deliciously wholesome food and wine across a spectacularly bleak yet mesmerising terrain of medieval villages, castles, fortresses and remote hiking trails. Go there to experience an adventure right off the beaten track, you’ll be glad you did. ■

PASTA MAKING IN ABRUZZO



Spaghetti cutters or chitarre

High-quality, locally-grown durum wheat means Abruzzo has a thriving pasta industry, as well as abundant vegetables and pulses. While the more mountainous areas are not suitable for cultivating vines, the land towards the coast is famous for its red Montepulciano d’Abruzzo and its white Trebbiano d’Abruzzo wines from an array of producers, which we sample as we go. Dinner is often in a village restaurant with gnocchi, spinach, roast lamb, green beans and potatoes, risotto of mushrooms and pumpkin, and river trout on the menu. We also taste bruschetta, ravioli filled with gorgonzola cheese and pear, roast rabbit and tiramisù. But there comes a time where we too don chef’s aprons and prepare a meal from scratch at the *albergo diffuso*. Guided by a local chef, we make the Abruzzese speciality of *spaghetti alla chitarra*, starting with egg and flour, then kneading the mixture, and pressing it through a *chitarra* implement to form long thin noodles similar to spaghetti. We then make meatballs, later served to us in the restaurant with the spaghetti and a tomato-based sauce.



The process in action



Hand-made spaghetti!



That’s Jackie on the right



The church clock at Opi



An Abruzzese Mastiff



High above the clouds on the Abruzzo-Molise border

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Mark Nicholls joined Hedonistic Hiking’s Wilds of Abruzzo tour. Classified as Level 4 walking, the accommodation includes the Hotel Sextantio *albergo diffuso*, the Hotel Archi San Rocco at Pescocostanzo and Hotel Villino Quintilliani at Pescasseroli. The next Abruzzo walk runs from May 29 to June 6, 2020, at €3,025 per person.
- Other destinations include the Dolomites, Tuscany, Piedmont, the Italian Lakes and Alps, Emilia-Romagna, Umbria and Basilicata. Tours are all-inclusive, including guided walking, gourmet picnic lunches, dinners with wine, museum visits and wine tastings and cookery classes and airport transfers.
- For more information, visit www.hedonistichiking.com