



TRAVEL

Abruzzo, Italy

HIKING FOR HEDONISTS

Mark Nicholls goes off the beaten track and heads to the Abruzzo region of Italy to savour traditional cuisine and mountain hiking —



ABRUZZO IS AN EMPTY, OFTEN DESOLATE, region of Italy between Rome and Naples. With soaring peaks, open plains, forests, national parks and fortified medieval villages, it can be as spectacular as it is bleak.

While it is sparsely populated and remains one of the poorer regions of the country, Abruzzo also offers delicious cuisine and wines.

I joined a group from Hedonistic Hiking, walking through the region's three environmentally protected areas of the Gran Sasso, Majella, and Abruzzo national parks, sampling local food and wine as we wandered.

Run by Jackie and Mick Parsons, who also lead the hikes, the ethos of Hedonistic Hiking is to showcase the local wine and traditional cuisine in parallel with the Italian landscape, its history and culture.

Setting out on the first day, we hiked past the ruins of the 13th century Cistercian monastery, Abbey of Santa Maria de Monte, against a backdrop of rock escarpments and undulating pasture at between 1580m and 1780m above sea level.

After half a dozen miles, with the summit of Corno Grande at 2912m in the distance, it was time for lunch: a rendezvous with picnic hampers of local meats and cheese, fresh fruits, red and white wine from the region, salads, bread and porcini mushroom soup.

Over the days ahead, these al fresco lunches became a welcome feature of our walking, wine and food tour of Abruzzo.



Later, we headed back to the fortified medieval village of Santo Stefano di Sessanio and the Hotel Sextantio, which champions the albergo diffuso concept of accommodation.

Translating as 'scattered hotel', this sees rooms spread across the village rather than clustered together and fashioned out of abandoned homes that have been hewn out of rock.

The village has been ravaged by earthquakes, most recently in 2009, and is being sympathetically reconstructed in a way that reflects Abruzzo's rural traditions.

The atmospheric abodes of the albergo diffuso are an integral element of that and are breathing new life into Santo Stefano di Sessanio.

With thick stone walls, my accommodation was warm and comfortable, complete with a large bath tub and characterful furnishings. With courtyards and cobbled passages leading to dispersed rooms managed from a central reception, the village also has rustic restaurants, hidden bars, and cafés and shops, all immersed within the ancient infrastructure.

The following morning, we climbed to the 1000-year-old fortress of Rocca Calascio, at 1460m, before descending past the 17th century chapel of Santa Maria della Pietà, where we paused for lunch of lentil soup, cabrese (buffalo mozzarella, basil and tomatoes), rocket salad with walnuts and fennel, pecorino cheese, and mortadella ham, all prepared by Iole Esposito.

On other days we feasted on sheep and goat cheese, salami, Ventricina – a pork sausage with chilli, wild fennel and orange zest – schiacciata and focaccia bread, grilled pepper and zucchini, sausages and arrosticini (skewers of lamb) cooked over coals, and sweet clementine, apples, plums, pear and pomegranate.

While the more mountainous areas of the region 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 sampled along the way.

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 tasted bruschetta, ravioli filled with gorgonzola cheese and pear, roast rabbit and tiramisu.

But our stay at the albergo diffuso also offered the chance – under the guidance of the chef – to prepare



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FACTBOX

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–June 6, 2020, at 3025 euros 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



SPAGHETTI ALLA CHITARRA

the Abruzzesi speciality of spaghetti alla chitarra, starting with egg and flour, kneading the mixture, and pressing through the chitarra implement to form long thin noodles similar to spaghetti. We then made meatballs, later served to us in the restaurant with the spaghetti and a tomato-based sauce.

By mid-week we were well into our stride, trekking 12 miles from Pescocostanzo through copper beech woods, across open meadows and onto a high ledge, completing the route back to our hotel over a rock-strewn path and into open fields.

Another walk, through the Abruzzo National Park, took us towards Opi, a village on a rocky spine dominated by the church at the top and the bold white face of its clock.

Within the three parks are peaks such as Monte Petrosio (2249m) and Monte Marsicano (2245m), and forests of beech, pine, maple and mountain ash. They are also home to wildlife: the critically-endangered Marsican brown bear, Abruzzo chamois, Apennine wolves, red deer and roe deer as well as cattle, and semi-wild horses.

On the final day of walking, we set off from Pescasseroli and up through beech and maple woods to a spectacular ridge at 1800m and an abandoned 1920s rifugio.

Following the ridgeline along the regional border of Abruzzo and Molise, the landscape below is carefully-managed by park authorities and home to the last remaining 50 Marsican bears, which feed on endemic bushes, berries, vegetation and small mammals.



The next Abruzzo tour from Hedonistic Hiking, which runs walking holidays across Italy throughout the summer (and in Australia from November onwards), is in May.

Jackie, who originally comes from Norwich, explains: 'Walking through Abruzzo feels like a step back in time; an area that has been untouched and unspoiled by tourism.'

'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 wildflowers, and there is the appeal of the wildlife as well.'

A beautifully lonely landscape, Abruzzo offers deliciously wholesome food and wine on a journey brought to life with exhilarating hikes across the marvellous terrain. ▲