

# Meditate in the land of the saints

Bridget Galton found staying on an exclusive private estate in this Italian region a tranquil and gastronomic



■ Estate in the morning mist

**U**mbria holds an almost spiritual place in the hearts of Italians.

Known as “la terra dei santi” – or land of the saints, it’s the birthplace of venerated holy men such as St Valentine, St Benedict and of course Italy’s patron saint St Francis.

For years tourists neglected this coastless central region in favour of its showier neighbour Tuscany. But this beautiful spot has now been thoroughly discovered and is a firm favourite with British visitors.

The easy flights into regional capital Perugia and unhurried way you can discover Medieval and Renaissance gems in a cluster of small hilltop towns – Norcia, Orvieto, and Assisi – have long been a draw, as has a cuisine famed for its truffles, olive oil, wine and cured meat.

One of the loveliest ways to experience its charms is to stay on a private estate like Tenuta di Murlo. Thousands of hectares of woods, olive groves, valleys and lakes have been in the same family since the 12th century, which means all you see from your villa window are undeveloped wooded hills dotted with ancient buildings.

Of course such large estates are costly to maintain so the family has converted old buildings into luxury cottages and villas, each with its own private garden, pool and unique charm.

Torre is a restored medieval defensive tower with an infinity pool and roof terrace with a view to die for.

Santa Croce at the top of the estate has stunning 360 degree views and a restful, cool grey interior. And 16th Century farmhouse Subtilla has three apartments and a luxury honeymoon suite by the pool.

Turn off the main road and you bump along twisting gravelled paths with gorgeous views to reach the gates of your villa. Of course you can self cater but there are in villa services with private chefs and butlers, wine tastings

and cooking classes for those who want a little more.

If it’s tranquillity you are after this has it in spades. But should you need more bustle, Il Caldaro restaurant next to the 18 hole golf course has bags of rustic charm and a warm welcome.

Try one of the inexpensive wood fired pizzas, or a flatbread with olive oil and rosemary. A tender hunk of lamb with rosemary potatoes and ratatouille was a highlight. As was a mixed starter of regional cured meats and cheeses.

From the estate it’s a short journey to one of Italy’s cultural and spiritual gems, the hilltop town of Assisi.

If you thought monks and nuns were a dwindling breed then a visit here will take you back to the days of medieval pilgrimages. Born into a wealthy family in 1181, St Francis is now buried in the Basilica. In his lifetime he was renowned for a life of poverty and he founded the Franciscan order who still wear hooded brown robes, knotted rope belts and sandals – their plain attire contrasting wildly with the Basilica’s lavish decoration. Its foundation stone was laid by Pope Gregory IX the day after St Francis’ canonisation in 1228. Not a square inch of the lower church is left uncovered with glorious 13th Century frescoes

## FACTFILE

- Tenuta di Murlo is located 20km from Perugia which has Ryanair flights to the UK
- Villas start from 2900 Euros per week. Cottages from 1,000 Euros per week. Murlo.com
- Further details on what to see in Umbria from [taliantourism.com/umbria](http://taliantourism.com/umbria)

of the passion and life of the saint, attributed to Lorenzetti, Cimabue, and Giotto.

It’s a place of both spiritualism and beauty with Mass being heard as we arrived, and respectful pilgrims filing past the saint’s stone sarcophagus. We emerged into the bright sunshine and strolled towards the central square where the Roman columns of a former temple of Minerva guard the entrance to yet another church. Santa Chiara holds saints’ relics and indeed the preserved body of St Clare herself along with a venerated 12th century crucifix that spoke to St Francis while he was praying.

You could wander these atmospheric streets all day dipping into shops and the numerous churches, or if you



■ The Murlo Castle and (below) Villa Santa Croce Pictures: Simon McBride

have stamina, climb to the Rocca Maggiore for stupendous views.

We had a date at the Lungarotti vineyard in Torgiano, but first an excellent meal in the wine estate’s five star restaurant and hotel Le Tre Vaselle where dishes such as deep fried truffled egg with pecorino, and veal cheek braised in Rubesco with celeriac puree showed off the wines to their best.

One of the oldest estates in Umbria, Lungarotti is a fine example of Italy’s growing wine tourism. Take a tour of the cellars, sample the wines, visit their wine museum, stay at the hotel and spa, and buy a bottle to take home.

Back at villa Caminata we donned white hats and aprons for a cooking class with a private chef. Pitched somewhere between a demonstration and a hands-on class, we each got to work with the pasta dough to make our own butternut squash stuffed ravioli. After watching its preparation our simple supper of bean soup, pasta and chocolate fondant was served to us with generous lashings of

wine.

Before we left though, a chance to visit one of the many local food festivals. In the walled hilltop village of Montone the Fiesta del Bosco (festival of the woods) annually celebrates local produce with stalls, traditional music and children’s activities.

Wandering its steep streets, thronged with families it was a fascinating culinary treat to find every front room and shed turned into a stall selling meats, cheeses, and artisan goods. Technically there should have been piles of mushrooms but a disastrously dry autumn had been terrible for the national past-time of foraging. Still there were plenty of truffles and porcini in jars of pastes. We picked up pancetta, a hard goats cheese and an aged pecorino, salsicce, and samples of the first olive oil pressing to take home for a taste of rural Italy.

It had been a fascinating glimpse of a lifestyle connected to the land and almost unchanged since St Francis preached and prayed here.