



# Heavenly Hills

Northeast of Rome are the magnificent hilltop towns of Umbria that offer sweeping views across red roofs to rich fertile valleys, accommodations as grand as a Renaissance palace, and superb cuisine, regional breads, cheeses and wine. For lovers of history and art, these towns are particularly irresistible and seem as textured and richly colored as a medieval tapestry.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER WEATHERBURN-BAKER

The delightful hilltop town of Todi is a convenient center for touring Umbria.



**C**renellated castles, cobblestone streets, twisting stone-cut passageways, monasteries, feudal fortresses and palaces perched on hillsides provide texture. Color comes from a palette of red, white and pink flowers in terra-cotta pots; pale shrouds of morning mists; slender green cypress trees; butter-yellow sunflowers and groves of lavender-gray olive trees.

Woven into this backdrop is a rich pageant of figures and events that have shaped some of the most influential movements in art, history and religion of

the Western world. Saints and sinners, popes and philosophers, artists and artisans all walked these towns and left a mark tangible centuries later.

A step into an ancient alley in Umbria is like stepping into a living history book, lavishly illustrated with scenes from a bygone age. Spacious courtyards are entered through iron-studded doors that once opened to lords on horseback returning from a hunt. Elaborately gilded halls are where rich and powerful burghers pondered treaties and alliances. Frescoed churches, monasteries and convents are where followers of saints, born more than seven





centuries ago, still kneel in silent prayer. Carved public fountains and monumental sculptures are of heroes. Flag-decked market squares are where the townsfolk still gather to buy and sell, relax and gossip.

There is evidence of the modern world too: tangled traffic, hissing buses, speeding scooters, crowded car parks and cafes, and fashion-conscious, female cops in mini-skirts and stiletto heels. What distinguishes these towns from many others is that today's realities seem little more than an intrusion on a way of life that has remained largely unchanged. Umbrians live in the same houses, walk the same alleyways and even go about the same business that many of their ancestors did. They live with the glory of their past. It's not in the halls of a museum but all around them.

While Umbrian towns cannot match the wealth of treasures found in Florence or Rome, most are easy to explore in their entirety in a morning or afternoon, they are relatively short distances apart and there are no interminable lines.

There is one drawback. These are hilltop towns and their centers are often literally at the top. Getting there by car can be tough — not for Italians, but for visitors. The locals barrel around steep and narrow curves with high-speed gusto. When they reach the top, they breeze confidently through the tangled cobweb of one-way streets, then appear to think nothing of abandoning their cars in a doorway, on a blind bend or on some impossibly small patch of sidewalk. The less experienced need

Left: Flights of stone-cut stairs can be as taxing as a Stairmaster for those unaccustomed to medieval thoroughfares. Right: The magnificent early Renaissance entrance to the Collegio del Cambio, where Perugia's elite merchants once met. It contains a room of frescos by Perugino that's considered a masterpiece of pictorial style, emulated by artists and artisans for centuries.

a crash course in hairpin bend navigation and opportune parking. Fortunately, parking is usually available on the lower slopes of the hills, but visitors have to walk up from there.

Some of the hilltop splendors can be reached only by steep climbs up cobbled inclines that seem never-ending. These can leave all but the fit in a state of quivering collapse. There are other towns that have thoughtfully installed tourist-friendly escalators or cable-car funicular. However the ascent is made, the climb is always worth it. The views are magnificent and the sights are many.

The star attractions of Umbria are found in Orvieto, Deruta, Perugia, Gubbio, Assisi and Spoleto, which form a rough circle around Todi, a convenient center for touring the region. They each have compelling reasons to visit, but a brief look at a few sets the tone because much commerce, art, architecture and culture of this area is interwoven.

## Place of Pilgrimage

Throughout history most of these towns were feuding with



Above: The entrance gate to the convent adjacent to the Basilica di San Francesco. Top right: Hats and umbrellas, two Italian essentials. Bottom right: Antique street market in Perugia.

someone, a fact partially responsible for their inclination to protect themselves by perching atop largely inaccessible mountaintops. During the Middle Ages, feuding often erupted into full-scale battles.

Captured during one such battle was a wealthy young man born in Assisi. Following his release from prison, he gave all he had to the poor, looked after the sick, led a humble, exemplary life and founded a movement that became a global phenomenon. He is known today as St. Francis of Assisi, and his final resting place is one of the most important pilgrimage sites in the Western world.

Two years after the death of the saint in 1226, construction began in Assisi on the *Basilica di San Francesco*, which ranks behind only the Roman Colosseum, the ruins of Pompeii and the canals of Venice as Italy's top attractions.

Approached through the Spoletine Valley, the pink and pale-gray stone village of Assisi fills the skyline and is perched on a flat shelf in the side of a mountain. Easily dominating one end of the village, the basilica and huge convent below rise grandly out of the rock, inspiring awe, even from a distance.

Through the Roman arch that still marks the entrance to the village, most streets seem to lead to the two-story basilica, a decep-

tively simple structure on the outside but gorgeously embellished on the inside by some of the most celebrated artists of the age.

In the spacious Upper Church, the visitor is immediately dazzled by the festival of frescos that adorn the walls of the nave and showcase the skills of one of the greatest geniuses of the early Renaissance, Giotto di Bondone. Giotto's huge and imposing 28 fresco cycle known as *The Life of St. Francis* ranks among the world's great masterpieces. Recently restored, the fresco scenes record the most important moments in the saint's life in simple yet hauntingly powerful images.

Appropriately humbled and prepared for what is to follow, visitors descend down narrow stone steps into the magnificently decorated but dimly lit interior of the Lower Church to be immediately enveloped by an aura of reverence and the heady scent of hundreds of smoking candles. The narrow entrance to the stone-arched crypt below contains the majestically simple tomb of the man who became patron saint of Italy and one of Christianity's most revered figures. Mysteriously, the visitor feels alone in this serene place; yet, all around are robed friars and solemn nuns kneeling in wooden pews, while hushed worshippers shuffle past in an unending line.

## A Stone's Throw

While saints, popes and the faithful have walked the streets of Assisi, evil has stalked nearby Perugia. Written into the history of Umbria's capital is the story of one of the greatest family of





Opposite page clockwise from top left: A nun and her sister take an ice cream break on the steps of a Roman temple in Assisi. A winding, narrow street in Gubbio. A typical narrow passage in Gubbio that has been in continuous use since the 14th century. Medieval and early Renaissance buildings of the Corso Vannucci in Perugia, capital of Umbria. Above: The 13th century Basilica di San Francesco, deceptively simple on the outside, has a richly embellished interior, which includes frescos by Giotto that rank among the world's greatest masterpieces.

sinners of all time: the Baglioni family, whose errant escapades in the 14th century make the twisted plots of today's TV soap operas seem as innocent as a walk in the park. A favorite game of the men in town was War of Stones, *Battaglia dei Sassi*, which involved throwing rocks until more than 30 people were dead.

The Baglioni family rose to the top of the heap among several barbaric families until their own family massacre in 1500. The remaining Baglioni, Rudolfo, tried to assassinate the papal legate in revenge and so irritated Pope Paul III that forces were sent to bury the entire Baglioni neighborhood. The result is one of the many reasons to visit Perugia today: the excavated subterranean complex of eerily dark houses and alleyways is likened to Pompeii. Today, visitors can safely stroll around the old Baglioni neighborhood by stepping off the escalators that pass through it and connect the parking lots below to the streets above, including Corso Vannucci, one of the most famous

boulevards in Italy.

When the ruling elite were not preoccupied by killing each other or their neighbors, they turned to glorifying their names and their surroundings by sponsoring the most talented artists and artisans they could find. One of the best examples of this penchant for patronage is found on the Corso Vannucci. Along its stately and broad length and are magnificent squares, fountains, churches and palaces that comprise an almost complete medieval city.

On this street is one of Italy's top museums, the *Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria*, which houses the largest and finest collection of Umbrian art in the world. It contains many masterpieces, including those by Pietro Vannucci, better known as Perugino, who studied alongside Leonardo da Vinci and counted among his star students Pinturicchio and Raphael.

Perhaps the most splendid example of the groundbreaking pictorial style that Perugino pioneered was his decoration of one of the rooms of the *Collegio del Cambio*, also found on the Corso Vannucci. The frescos he created for the powerful elite that once met in these rooms are considered a masterpiece of studied naturalism and precise portraiture, and an invaluable reference for 15th-century fashion. The fresco cycle and the lavish ornamentation around it provided a ready-made pattern book for engravers, inlayers and fabric designers for generations. Nowhere is this more evident than among the manufacturers of the glazed Italian ceramicware known as majolica.

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### Majolica Mecca

Deruta, the ancient hill town high above the Tiber north of Orvieto, has been a famous center of ceramic craftsmanship for more than 600 years. Pilgrims visiting the birthplace of St. Francis a few miles away were in constant need for bowls and cups for eating and drinking as well as souvenirs bearing the saint's image.

The same style plates, bowls, jars and pitchers produced in Deruta during the Renaissance are still being formed and painted today, and many of the classical motifs still used are based on the works of Perugino, Raphael, Pinturicchio and other Renaissance masters. A wonderful museum in town has especially fine examples on display.

The 300-plus ceramic firms operating in Deruta today are a mecca for lovers of the colorful and distinctive pottery that



Top right: Glazed ceramic ware on display in Deruta, a town that has been a famous center of majolica production for centuries. The pottery often features characters inspired by early Renaissance paintings. Bottom right: Michael Cavallini displays pottery he has created and painted in Deruta, as several generations of his ancestors have done.

0 Serenity



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enjoys a world-class reputation. Despite the tiny town's reputation and huge output, basic production remains largely the same, and the craft remains hands-on. One pleasure in a visit to Deruta is the possibility of meeting the people who create each piece individually, some of whom are descendents of families who produced these objects hundreds of years ago.

## Feasts and Festivals

There are many other reasons to visit Umbria, including glorious food, wine and historic festivals. The region is famous for its mouth-watering cuisine, much of which is garnished with truffles, a rare, exotic and expensive delicacy found here. It is often followed with a local fiery spirit known as *grappa* that can put out one's lights faster than a bolt of lightning. Torgiano, about nine miles south of Perugia, is celebrated for its wines. They're considered the best in Umbria, with the top label being Rubesco Riserva.

One of the best times to visit Umbria is during one of their many festivals. Conveniently, there seems to be one almost every month. Many are spectacular celebrations of history and culture. Some involve costumed marksmen in medieval cross-bow competition. Others have local citizens dressed like extras from the set of *Romeo and Juliet*.

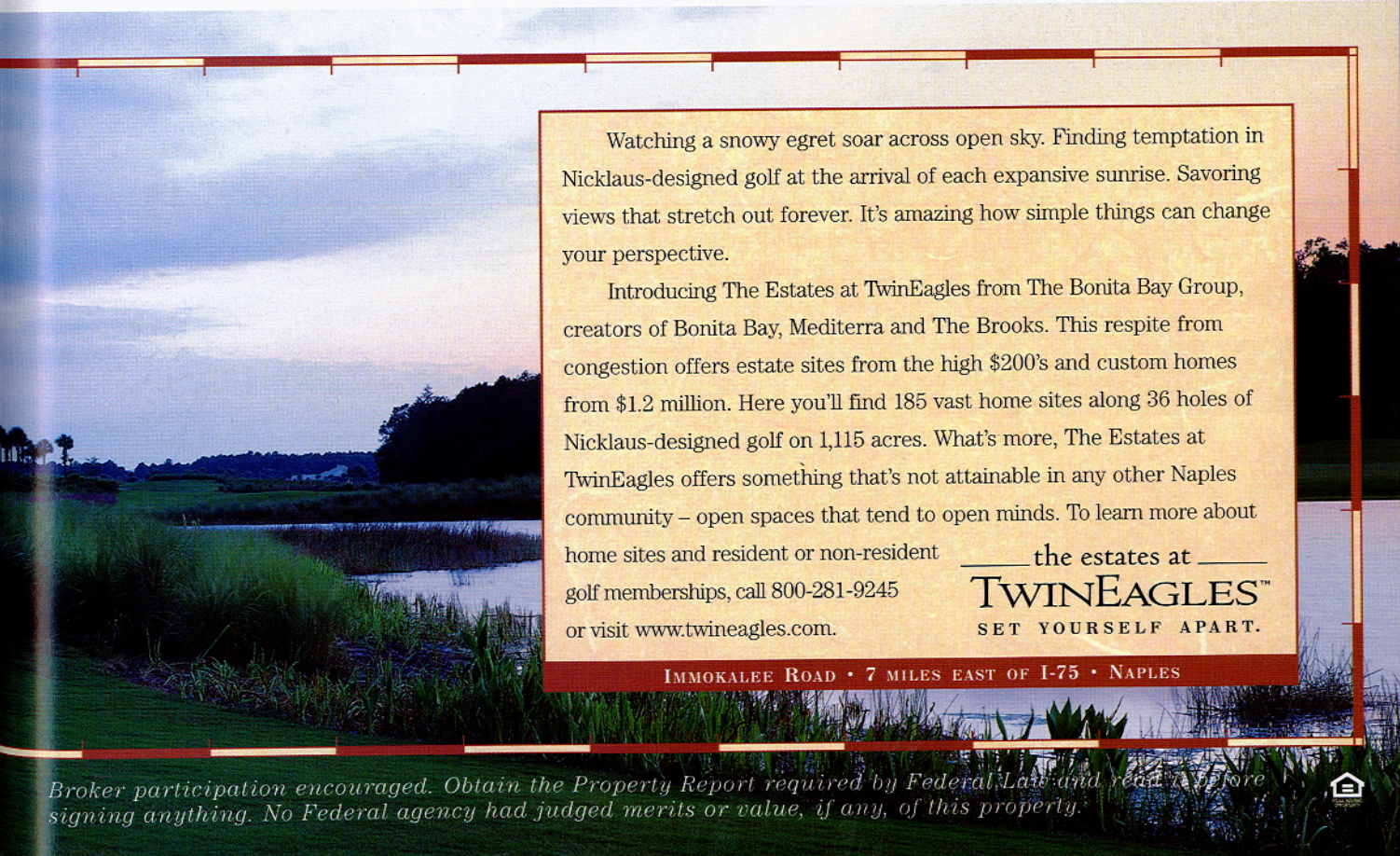
Gubbio, a town of huge fortress-like buildings stacked atop

each other up the slopes of a steep mountainside, is known as the Town of Festivals; its biggest annual bash is the pagan *Corsa dei Ceri*, held May 15. It's one of Italy's top five funfests staged in the dramatic setting of the 14th century Piazza Grande and a Palazzo dei Consoli, which boasts a 300-foot bell tower that can be seen from miles around.

In June, Orvieto is stage to the *Corpus Christi Procession*, a parade of locals in 13th-century costume performing medieval song and dance. In August, Città della Pieve hosts the *Palio dei Terzieri* that involves a procession of several hundred participants impersonating 16th-century acrobats, fire-eaters and jugglers; soldiers dragging siege canons and catapults; and locals dressed as characters from paintings by Perugino.

Spoletto, an otherwise quiet town of Roman ruins and medieval buildings, bursts at the seams each summer when it hosts the big daddy of them all, the three-week Spoleto Festival. It's a world-class dose of heavy-duty culture that amounts to one of the most important festivals of music, dance, art and theater on Europe's calendar.

All of Europe revels in its history and glorifies its past. But the ancient hilltop towns of Umbria offer something more. Landscapes, monuments, events and characters are as compelling to visitors today as they were to those who trod the same cobbled passages centuries ago. **NI**



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