

Umbria by rail: Discovering Italy's 'green heart'

Three hill towns hold cultural and culinary gems in a medieval setting

BY PERRI KLASS

Calling itself the green heart of Italy, the landlocked region of Umbria is known for its truffles and olive oil, roast pork and sausage, wine and cheese.

It also has great cultural riches — many of them in hill towns like Orvieto, Perugia and Assisi. You can admire the brilliant reliefs and mosaics on the facade of the medieval Cathedral of Orvieto, see Giotto's amazing frescoes in the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi (the first inklings of Renaissance art) and explore the National Gallery of Umbria in Perugia, with art going back to the 13th century.

The cultural and culinary treasures of the region can easily be reached by train from Rome, which lies to the south, or from Florence, to the north. From Rome, a logical starting point is Orvieto, only a little over an hour away, with trains available about once an hour. Some leave from the main Termini station; others from the multilevel Tiburtina station, easy to get to on the Rome subway. Expect to pay between 9 euros (about \$10) and 17 euros (about \$18.50) for a ticket. From Florence, do the trip in reverse, starting in the more northern towns of Assisi and Perugia, and continuing on to Orvieto — from which you can easily continue on to Rome.

ORVIETO

Umbria is hill country, and at each town, you'll need to get up the hill from the train station. Each town solves this in a slightly different way. In Orvieto, a funicular (€1.30) will take you up to the town, which sits on a rock cliff, overlooking the surrounding green valley and distant hills.

Rising above the town's highest point are the towers of the massive cathedral, dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, and constructed over several centuries, starting in 1290, to commemorate a local miracle: the bleeding communion host in the nearby town of Bolsena in 1263. The stained altar cloth is preserved in the cathedral today.

The upper facade of the Orvieto cathedral is resplendent with mosaics on a golden background, originally dating from the 14th century, but reworked and altered over the intervening centuries. At eye level are four giant marble bas-reliefs, with scenes from the Old and New Testaments, fabulous masterpieces of sculpture and biblical storytelling.

An excellent map, available at the cathedral, will help you find the art treasures inside. The chapel of the Madonna of San Brizio has ceiling frescoes by Fra Angelico and Benozzo Gozzoli. Another Tuscan genius, Luca Signorelli, completed the ceiling and then painted the walls with scenes from Revelations, including of the damned suffering in hell

and the elect enjoying paradise.

You'll see signs all over Orvieto offering porchetta, the boneless pork roast that is eaten — if not fetishized — in much of central Italy. In this region, the pork tends to be stuffed with wild fennel, before being rolled up, tied and roasted for hours. At L'Oste del Re, not far from the cathedral, you can choose from a full menu, including local cold cuts and pastas; a full lunch might cost €25. You can also pick up well-stuffed sandwiches to take away (under €10). And at L'Angolo Divino, the special of the day may well be hot slices of porchetta, served with roast potatoes (€25 to €30).

Keep an eye out for thick, local umbrichelli pasta, and different varieties of pecorino cheese, and for anything with truffles. Local wines include Orvieto Classico, one of Italy's most famous whites, and red Montefalcos.

After you've wandered down the picturesque hill-town streets, make your way back to the overlook near where you got off the funicular. Look out over the spectacular landscape of hills and valleys, and then descend into the Pozzo di San Patrizio, or St. Patrick's Well.

In 1527, after the violent sack of Rome, when the armies of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V pillaged the city, Pope Clement VII took refuge in Orvieto, which was part of his papal state. He wanted the city to be ready to withstand a siege; thus a 53-meter-deep well was designed by the Florentine architect, Antonio da Sangallo the Younger (who also worked on St. Peter's in Rome), with two separate staircases, each with 248 steps, and twisted together into a double helix. Donkeys could descend one stairway, be loaded up with water, and return up the other stairway. A ticket (€5) allows you to walk down to the bottom and experience the architecture and the eerie light, which dwindles as you descend one circular stairway, and then slowly returns as you come back up the other.

At the Hotel Duomo, some rooms have views of the cathedral square. Doubles start around €140.

PERUGIA

The train from Orvieto to Perugia takes about two hours, including a change at Terontola-Cortona (tickets, €10.10). From the Perugia train station, cross a piazza and take a little monorail (€1.50). The Pincetto stop puts you in the historic center of Perugia, overlooking the surrounding hills and valleys.

You're very close to the Piazza IV Novembre, the cathedral and the Fontana Maggiore, a medieval fountain with two magnificent pink-and-white marble basins, one inside the other, surrounded by carved marble tiles representing the months of the year and the signs of the zodiac.

You'll probably see lots of students — Perugia has been a university town since 1308. The famous Cesare Borgia (illegitimate son of Pope Alexander VI) was a student at the university in Peru-

gia in the late 15th century and would play a major role in extending the power of the papal government during the Renaissance, as the forces of the Papal State battled the individual city-states.

That's why Clement VII was able to take refuge in Orvieto (and build the well) — by then, the popes ruled Umbria, as they continued to do right up until the unification of Italy in the 19th century. The cathedral, dedicated to San Lorenzo, was supposed to be decorated in white and pink marble, but construction stopped in 1490. The facade was never finished, so the stone is still rough.

Across the piazza is the National Gallery of Umbria, in the Palazzo dei Priori. Take your time exploring this giant museum, admiring the paintings of the town's namesake Perugino (his real name was Pietro Vannucci), but also the works of Pinturicchio (another native son), Beato Angelico and Piero della Francesca.

You will also see chocolate shops in the piazza, and indeed, all over town. The Perugina chocolate factory, a few kilometers away can be visited. Perugia is known for its chocolates, particularly the hazelnut-chocolate Baci.

For a quick — and excellent — lunch, there are panini and platters of local cold cuts and cheeses available at Mr. Norey (€10 or less). On a recent visit, the longest line in town was at the Antica Porchetta Granieri 1916 sandwich stand in Piazza Giacomo Matteotti, where the server was carving a porchetta that looked to be some six feet (1.8 meters) long.

The luxury hotel Sina Brufani is near the Giardini Carducci (doubles start around €200).

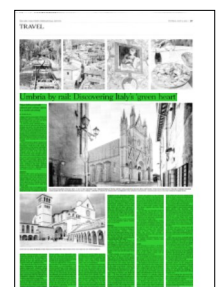
ASSISI

From Perugia, it's about a 20-minute train ride to Assisi (tickets, €3 to €5.25). To get up the hill to the center of Assisi, take a connecting bus which stops in front of the station (tickets can be bought onboard for €1.50).

One advantage of sleeping in Assisi is that you can beat the crowds and be at the Basilica of San Francesco of Assisi early in the morning (it opens at 6 a.m.).

The basilica is one of the great artistic sights of Italy, but it's also a major destination for religious tours and pilgrimages. A pilgrimage path, the Via di Francesco, starts in Tuscany, centers on Assisi, and then goes on to Rome, about 300 miles (480 kilometers) in all. Given the saint's fondness for animals, pilgrims are encouraged to walk with their dogs, who will find hospitality in Assisi as well, in a special area near the basilica.

St. Francis, who lived from 1181 to



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1226, was canonized two years after his death, which is also when construction began on the basilica; his tomb is in the crypt. Born the son of a wealthy merchant in Assisi, Francis devoted himself after a religious vision to a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. He is one of the two patron saints of Italy, and he remains a profoundly beloved figure.

The basilica, spectacularly built into a hillside, includes a lower church and an upper church, both decorated with beautiful frescoes. The works of some of the most important late medieval painters can be seen here as they invent Renaissance art — most particularly in the work of the young Giotto, who, along with his assistants, decorated the upper church with scenes of the life of St. Francis, including, next to the entrance, the famous image of the saint preaching to the birds.

In these frescoes, Giotto used his trademark blue pigment and gave his figures three-dimensional sculptural presence, while representing human expression and emotion in new and realistic ways.

Make sure you have a detailed guide to help you decipher the four frescoes up in the crossing vault, by Giotto or one of his close followers, which offer an image of the saint in his glory and also allegories of the three Franciscan virtues.

Assisi is a charming town for eating. Try the garden terrace of the excellent Buca di San Francesco, in a beautiful old building, offering dishes like spaghetti alla buca, homemade pasta with mushrooms, meat and herbs, or carlaccia, a baked crepe with cheese, prosciutto and veal (dinner about €35 to €40).

The more informal Osteria da Santu Mangione draws on the proprietor's farm (he'll tell you the name of the pig who went into the sausages), and has some amazing outside tables from which you can admire the buildings of the old town and the valley below (lunch is about €20).

If you're starting this trip from Florence, trains to Perugia leave every couple of hours and take between two and two-and-a-half hours (€14.65).

The Giotto Hotel and Spa, dating back to 1899, offers a glorious panoramic terrace for eating and drinking. Prices for a double start at €100.