

1 – ASSISI

It is all too easy to associate Assisi with its “poor saint” and with centuries of Franciscanism that have inevitably shaped the city, with the Basilica of St Francis and the marvellous cycle of frescoes by Simone Martini and Cimabue in the lower basilica, and those by Giotto in the upper one. Not to mention other significant examples of medieval art, such as the Basilica of Santa Chiara and the church of San Damiano, as well as Santa Maria Maggiore and San Rufino – whose crypts date back to before the year 1000. Originally established as an Umbrian acropolis, all that remains of the Roman municipality of *Asisium* are the terraces on the hillside, the Forum square and the Temple of Minerva; in the early Middle Ages, the inhabited centres within the walled city were built upon these Roman ruins.

The religious devotion of the place is evident during Holy Week with two rites of particular intensity and evocative power: on Holy Thursday, the deposition of the dead Christ (*scavigliazione*); thanks to a hinge at the level of the shoulder blades, it is possible to detach the body from the cross by folding the arms along the sides. On Good Friday, the Procession takes place, with the statues of the dead Christ and Our Lady of Sorrows carried by costumed participants between the Basilica of St Francis and the Cathedral of St Rufino, by the light of torches alone.

Assisi is built from the pink stone quarried from the looming Mount Subasio, with its unmistakable rounded “tortoise-back” profile, easily identifiable on the Umbrian skyline, isolated as it is from the rest of the Apennine range. Since the 10th century BC, Mount Subasio has held a sacred and mystical significance for the Umbrian people; on its slopes lies the Hermitage of the Carceri, the place where Francis and his companions would retreat for meditation. The limestone terrain gives rise to sinkholes, karst depressions locally known as “*mortari*” (due to their resemblance to a kitchen mortar), which were once used to store snow for ice production. Since 1995, the Monte Subasio Regional Park has protected an area of over seven thousand hectares, situated in the municipalities of Assisi, Spello, Valtopina and Nocera Umbra; the protected area boasts remarkable animal biodiversity, with endemic species found only in this part of the Apennines.

But there is also plant biodiversity: in an initial zone where olive cultivation predominates, the natural tree vegetation gradually alternates and replaces it according to the phytoclimatic succession of holm oak, downy oak and Turkey oak, as well as hop hornbeam, manna ash, maple and then beech. The third zone is characterised by stands of conifers, planted for reforestation, and the summit grasslands that cover the peaks of Mount Subasio.

The traditional craft industry works with iron and copper, from which various objects and reproductions of medieval weapons are made, as well as wood, particularly olive wood. Also noteworthy is the art of embroidery using the Assisi stitch: numerous

workshops produce items using this technique, which is highly recognisable as one of the few to employ a “negative” pattern.

With the boom they have experienced in recent years, Assisi is deeply connected to the Pilgrimage Routes: hence the Way of St Francis – from Florence or Rimini or from the Sanctuary of La Verna towards Assisi and then on to Rome; the Via Lauretana – from Assisi to Loreto; and the Franciscan Way of the Marca – from Assisi to Ascoli, covering 167 km.

Turning the Gospel concept on its head (with all due respect): since “*man does not live by spirit alone*” but also by local cuisine, here is the *torta al testo*, a large round focaccia, about a centimetre thick, served as an accompaniment to a meal, or cut in half and stuffed to taste with cold cuts, cheeses and vegetables. Among the first courses, a typical Umbrian dish is *strangozzi* – a string-shaped pasta, hence the name, made by kneading soft wheat flour and water, enriched with truffle. Finally, there are many desserts: mostaccioli – made with bread dough, honey, almonds and grape must; tradition has it that they were created by Jacopa Settesoli, a Roman noblewoman and dear friend of Francis, who loved them so much that she asked for them even on her deathbed; the *rocciata* – a typical, delicious and fragrant filled pastry, a puff pastry filled with apples and dried fruit, “*arrocciata*”, that is, rolled up on itself; St Francis’ bread – a honey-leavened sweet bread, enriched with raisins, candied fruit and sometimes almonds.

2 – GUBBIO

Set in a landscape nestled between the hills of the Umbrian-Marche Apennines and the valley basin it overlooks, Gubbio has a distinctly medieval character, evident in its urban layout and the use of local stone, with the spectacular Piazza Grande, where the Palazzo del Podestà stands. The imposing 14th-century Palazzo dei Consoli, home to the Civic Museum and the Municipal Art Gallery, houses the famous Eugubine Tables, seven bronze tablets engraved with the most important text in the Umbrian language, containing an extensive description of religious rituals and details regarding the organisation of the city-state of Gubbio. The 14th-century Palazzo del Bargello stands next to the fountain of the same name, also known as the “Fountain of the Madmen” due to a tradition inspired by the “*birate*”, the circles the Ceri make in Piazza Grande during the festival. The “madman’s licence” is easily acquired: simply walk round the fountain three times and find a local willing to splash a little water on the candidate; from that moment on, one is christened for life. All this to reflect the eccentric spirit of the people of Gubbio: “If they aren’t mad, we don’t want them”, is sung in Gubbio during the *Festa dei Ceri*.

There is no shortage of evidence from the Roman period, with the Theatre at the foot of the town – dating from the Augustan era – and from the Renaissance, with the Ducal Palace, built for Duke Federico da Montefeltro, featuring a beautiful courtyard with

columns on three sides, enhanced by the two-tone combination of red brick and pietra serena.

Sweeping views of the surrounding mountain range can be enjoyed from the summit of Monte Ingino, at an altitude of 908 metres, reachable for the fitter visitors via the CAI 257 trail with a climb of just under 400 metres, passing by the Basilica of Sant'Ubaldo and the Rocche. Alternatively, via the cable car which takes six minutes to reach a point just below the Basilica, dedicated to the patron saint, which houses his remains alongside the Ceri, octagonal wooden torches weighing over 300 kg. During the festival, held on 15 May on the eve of the feast day of Sant'Ubaldo, the Ceri (which had previously been brought down into the town) are carried in a procession from the town centre back to the Basilica; the top of the world's largest Christmas tree, which has entered the Guinness Book of Records, is also brought here.

The Palio della Balestra, on the last Sunday in May, involves the crossbowmen of Gubbio and Sansepolcro, dressed in traditional period costumes, reviving a tradition documented as far back as 1594. In the race, participants must hit the tasso, a target placed 36 metres away, using an ancient crossbow from a fixed position. Accompanied by processions of flag-wavers through the town, it takes place in the picturesque Piazza Grande; a square which, together with the Church of San Giovanni, was used as a location in the early series of the TV drama Don Matteo, starring Terence Hill, thereby bringing greater visibility to the town thanks to the boost from film tourism.

The local crafts include pottery, revived in the 1920s from a medieval tradition, wrought iron, woodwork and violin-making, alongside the restoration of antique furniture.

The surrounding area naturally influences the local cuisine: tagliatelle enriched with a sprinkling of white and black truffles. *Crescia*, a flatbread made from a dough of water, flour and yeast, is baked under the ashes of a wood fire on the *panaro*, a circular wrought-iron griddle; it is best enjoyed with local cold cuts or, in the Easter version, with cheese. There is also *brustengo*, another yeast-free flatbread, excellent with cold cuts and cheeses. The meat comes from mountain pastures, yielding generous roasts; a speciality is *friccò*, prepared with various types of meat, such as chicken, duck, rabbit and lamb, stewed with tomato, wine, vinegar and herbs. There is no shortage of game, cured meats and extra virgin olive oil.

3 – GOLA DEL FURLO

The Furlo Gorge derives from *Forulum*, Latin for "Small Forum", which was later vulgarised to Forlo and finally to Furlo. The gorge lies on the Via Flaminia, the historic road linking Rome and Rimini built by the Etruscans, which subsequently took its name from the consul Gaius Flaminius, who had it paved from 220 BC. The ancient Via Flaminia crossed the Apennines through the rugged Furlo Gorge, situated between Mount Pietralata (889 m above sea level, on the left bank) and Mount Paganuccio (976 m above

sea level, on the right bank); It is carved by the River Candigliano, which has carved out its course over time, aided by the tectonic discontinuities of the Apennine ridge, characterised here by sedimentary limestones of the Umbrian-Marche Series. The ancient Mesozoic Sea is evidenced by the numerous fossil remains found here, including ammonites, pelagic cephalopod molluscs and ancestors of the modern nautilus, which were exceptionally widespread between 225 and 65 million years ago.

To facilitate the passage of the consular road at the narrowest point of the valley, ancient Roman remains can still be seen; the small tunnel, approximately eight metres long and with an average width of 3.30 metres, is the older of the two, whilst the large tunnel was opened by Vespasian in 76 AD. Since the 1980s, two new tunnels, each approximately 3 km long, have facilitated traffic on the modern Flaminia road, restoring at least part of the gorge's original natural state. Downstream of the Gorge, the waters of the Candigliano are dammed by a gravity arch dam, completed in 1922, standing 59 metres high with a crest length of 50 metres, one of the most spectacular in central Italy.

Environmentally, the area is protected by the Gole del Furlo Nature Reserve, whose emblematic species include the Golden Eagle, present here in the form of a nesting pair on the cliffs of Mount Paganuccio, an attraction for keen birdwatchers. The flora is highly diverse, featuring Mediterranean and thermophilic species, typically found in the region's warmer or coastal areas, alongside vegetation typical of higher altitudes, characteristic of the Umbrian-Marche Apennines. During a visit of more than just a fleeting stop, do not miss the opportunity to follow the Reserve's network of trails up to Monte Pietralata and Monte Paganuccio to appreciate the diverse environments: woods, rocky cliffs and summit meadows.

The gorge's rich natural heritage is complemented by the cultural heritage of the surrounding area, including the oratory church of S. Maria delle Grazie, nestled against the gorge's rocky walls. The Abbey of S. Vincenzo al Furlo – situated just upstream of the gorge and of uncertain origin, though dating from the early Middle Ages – preserves the remains of frescoes from the Marche school. In the middle Metauro valley, we find Fossombrone, an ancient town of Roman origin and the summer residence of the Dukes of Montefeltro; it boasts beautiful monumental palaces along Corso Garibaldi and a fine civic art gallery, housed in the Corte Alta or Palazzo Ducale; finally, the Citadel preserves the remains of the Malatesta-Montefeltro fortress. And then there is Cagli, which boasts both evidence of its medieval past, such as the Romanesque-Gothic church of S. Francesco, and fine Renaissance palaces, including the Palazzo Pubblico, founded in the Middle Ages but transformed in the 15th century, perhaps by Francesco di Giorgio Martini.

The gastronomic offering is robust and closely linked to the local area, where the truffle reigns supreme, well represented in the dedicated museum in Acqualagna, in whose district the four main varieties of this epigeal fungus are found: white, bianchetto, black truffle and scorzone.



4 – RIMINI

Rimini, a city of art whose historic centre encompasses over 2,000 years of history. The remains of the Roman *Ariminum* are represented by the Arch of Augustus, built in 27 BC and situated at the terminus of the Via Flaminia, and by the Tiberius Bridge, erected over the Marecchia River, begun by Augustus and completed by Tiberius. The bridge, built of Istrian stone, with five arches and in the Doric style, features breakwater spurs to mitigate the flow of the current; the Via Emilia, founded by the Consul Marcus Aemilius Lepidus in 187 BC, begins here. From Roman *Ariminum*, we move on to the medieval period, with examples of the 14th-century Rimini school of painting, right through to Renaissance Rimini, with the Malatesta Temple, one of the most significant architectural works of the Italian 15th century; its upper section remains unfinished, featuring a marvellous fresco by Pietro della Francesca depicting Sigismondo Malatesta at the feet of St Sigismund.

And then there is the 19th-century architecture of the Amintore Galli Theatre, and the legacy of Federico Fellini and the Fulgor, the legendary cinema immortalised in *Amarcord* and now part of the new Fellini Museum, a network of museums dedicated to the genius of the director, who had his suite at the Grand Hotel, adjoining that of Giulietta Masina ...

But Rimini is also a historic seaside town: in July 1843, the Stabilimento Privilegiato dei Bagni was inaugurated, marking the start of seaside tourism. During the economic boom of the 1960s, it embodied the dream of the middle-class family: dozens of small guesthouses, hearty meals and an afternoon siesta after a morning at the beach – traditions that can still be experienced today in family-run establishments. As a counterpoint to the peaceful seaside routine, there is the evening nightlife for the young (or the young at heart...) in Marina Centro, at the Vecchia Pescheria or in the quieter area of Borgo S. Giuliano; not to mention the traditional alternative of the dance halls, where people dance ballroom... And then there is the world's longest New Year's celebrations, from late November to 6 January, with numerous events that transform the city into a stage of lights, music and culture. But Rimini is also a "matchmaker", thanks to the many relationships that begin in bars or discos; a forerunner, Gabriele D'Annunzio, who joined Eleonora Duse in room 302 of the Hotel Villa Adriatica: a scandal in the newspapers of the time!

The local cuisine blends the rural traditions of the hinterland with the bounty of the sea. Thus, fresh egg pasta rolled out with a rolling pin, cured meats and Parmigiano Reggiano are the undisputed stars of the table, alongside *passatelli* – the festive soup – made using a special mould. Not to be missed is the *Piadina* or *Piada*, the bread of the Romagnoli, a *focaccia* baked on a *testo* – a slab of refractory clay – which has earned Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status; thinner than in the Forlì and Ravenna areas, it is served with prosciutto and *squacquerone*, or with wild herbs and vegetables



au gratin. The sea also offers blue fish, sole and red mullet, as well as clams, mussels, *cannelli* and *lumachini*. Typical of the area is *brodetto*, a dish featuring various types of fish, stewed with tomatoes and spices. Among the cheeses, *squacquerone* and the renowned *formaggio di fossa*, produced in the valleys of the Rubicone and Marecchia rivers, are obtained through fermentation in ageing pits. Finally, there is the *ciambella*, the typical Romagna dry cake to be dipped in sweet Albana wine; in terms of wine production, the Colli di Rimini Sangiovese, Trebbiano, Pagadebit and even the Rebola from Rimini are worth mentioning. To experience an authentically local atmosphere, it is well worth popping into the Mercato Coperto, a stone's throw from the Tempio Malatestiano, with over 100 stalls selling fish, fruit and vegetables, bread and meat, and a high concentration of traditional shops, making it ideal for a quality food and wine tour.

Finally, Rimini carries on the tradition of lace and embroidery, a legacy of the exceptionally high quality of the items produced in the late 19th century in Anita Sangiorgi's workshop; a craft still practised today by groups specialising in various techniques, such as macramé, bobbin lace and tatting.



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