



Centuries-old villages where the pace remains unchanged

There is a stunning area of east-central Italy, far from the crowded tourist centers, that can only be reached by car or motorcycle. Spread out over parts of the Le Marche, Umbria and Abruzzo regions, this mountainous spine of Italy is a wondrous combination of tiny roads and minimal traffic where tourists are unexpected but received with grace and civility. To explore and enjoy the area, you need a reasonable amount of flexibility, an adventuresome spirit and a willingness to embrace the unexpected.

After our two-week repositioning cruise from the U.S. on the *Eurodam*, we toured Rome, Florence and Pisa and then spent a marvelous week in Tuscany. Our adventure continued when we drove our rented Fiat east toward the little town of Mercatello located in the heart of Umbria.

Each little town we entered along the way had its own traditions and storied history. And, if you take the time to stop, engage and spend a few days, the history comes alive. It is one thing to read in a book about the Carthaginian legions commanded

Rural Italy

Story and Photos by David and Mary Gayle Sartwell



Roman-era roads and bridges still provide stable passage.



Having a glass of wine in Rosia's magical garden of roses

Artistic hand-painted entryways mark many of the homes.



by Hannibal's brother, Hasdrubal, battling the Roman legions, but it is quite another to stand on the hillside above the ancient battlefield and imagine the clash in which 60,000 soldiers, cavalry and elephants fought until Hasdrubal was killed and his head delivered to his brother. Where 30,000 men died that day, there is only a plaque to remember them and only an occasional history buff to observe.

On this hillside, we met Rosia Giuliani, who invited us to her house for

Sunday dinner. Little did we know that she had a rose garden with more than 300 different varieties spread over a mountain-side where we could see the city of Urbino in the distance. Her son, Giovanni, has a doctoral degree in ungulates with a passion for woodcock and grouse hunting and spoke perfect English, so we passed the hours swapping stories of bygone hunts, guns and pointing dogs.

The next day we visited the Castello della Pieve, a tiny set of stone

buildings that cling to a mountain promontory built to protect Mercatello just after the breakup of the Roman Empire. It is behind these ancient walls that in 1301 Corso Donati, the rector of Massa Trabaria and Charles of Valois, the brother of the King of France, plotted with others to have Dante expelled from Florence for writing in *The Inferno* that the Donati family was going to hell. The restaurant was small but the food and service were wonderful.

In the Mercatello museum we

Castelluccio proved to be a Shangri-La.



watched women creating a delicate lace by a process called *tombolo*. Thread is attached to as many as 100 bobbins that are continuously intertwined by hand, making intricate patterns. It is an art that requires patience and skill. If done well, the results are breathtakingly beautiful.

Just to the north, in the small village of Carpegna, we met Emanuel Francioni at his tiny cellar workshop called Antica Stamperia, an ancient fabric stenciling shop that has been in his family for seven generations. On shelves along the walls are hundreds of hand-engraved walnut or pear wooden blocks that have been created by Francioni's family. Using a simple dye made by combining vinegar and rust, Emanuel rolls the block with the dye and then pushes the block down onto the fabric. With a little instruction, we were soon making our own aprons with traditional Italian designs to take home as gifts.

The small town of Urbania (formerly Castledurante), just east of Mercatello, has been famous since the 16th century for beautiful ceramics. No trip to the area would be complete without watching the artists at Ceramica d'Arte Antica Castledurante paint their fabulous creations.

We then turned south in S. Angelo in Vado (home of the prestigious white truffle and an amazing archeological find of a Roman villa called The Domus) and over the next few days simply got lost following the spine of central Italy. We took in the wonders of the scenic back roads to Sasso Terrato that led us to a very narrow canyon through the mountains near Genga where the world-famous Grotte Di Frassassi is located. Discovered in 1971, this third-largest cave complex in the world has several spectacular chambers filled with incredible stalactites and stalagmites that are easily observed from a walking track.

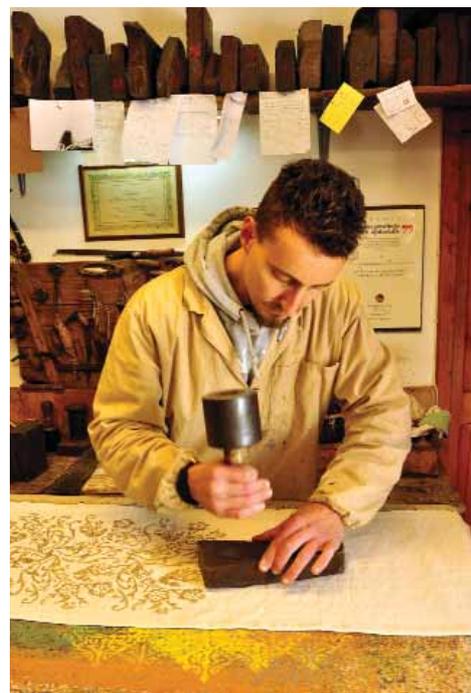
Just a few miles west of the caves, we stopped in Fabriano to watch the ancient artisanal art of paper production. The Arabs

spread their process of making paper throughout the Mediterranean, but paper at that time did not last very long. In Fabriano, they found that the use of animal gelatin for surface sizing allowed for a more stable product. The hammer mill was also used for the first time to create homogeneous fibers. Those two creations allowed Fabriano to once be the paper-production capital of the world.

Continuing south, we passed through Metalica, S. Severino, and Caldarola and on to the entrance of Monti Sibillini National Park in Pieca. For days we passed through deep valleys and topped mountain peaks, all the while fascinated by the many tiny hamlets that appeared along the way. It was in there that we crested a ridge, pulled to a stop and stared in wonder at perhaps the most beautiful valley in all of Italy. Called the Piano Grande (Great Plain), it is nestled against the high mountains of the Monti Sibillini National Park. The valley is about a six-square-mile karstic basin which is settled on porous limestone that holds the water that drains from the surrounding mountains.

The soil here is renowned for producing small, delicate lentils that possess a nutty, earthy quality and they are so tender you can cook them without soaking them ahead of time. In June and early July, the area is a photographer's and painter's dream because of the lavish colors of the astonishing array of wild red poppies and yellow rapeseed that are allowed to grow with the lentils.

We watched the streams of sunlight play through the heavy clouds and wander over the patchwork fields, some of them a rich, dark-brown color from being freshly plowed. To our right, two women were digging dandelion greens from a barren sidehill. In the distance we could see a heavy rainstorm sweeping toward us. Hurriedly we drove across the valley toward the distant tiny village of Castelluccio that clung stubbornly to a rocky outcropping. We arrived just as the



Emanuel is the seventh generation of the Fabriano family to use a block to hand-stencil fabrics.

***Tombolo* is the ancient art of creating delicate lace by hand-twisting thread-filled bobbins.**





The snowcapped Sibillini Mountains surround the fertile Piano Grande valley.

deluge started. Once again we were the beneficiaries of the wonderful hospitality of rural Italians.

An older woman welcomed us to Taverna Castelluccio, a tiny restaurant and hotel. Although she could not speak English, she seated us at a table, brought out some really good red wine and bruschetta and indicated her son would be along in a few minutes. I followed her out to her kitchen and found her soaking the dandelions she had been picking. She was one of the two women we had seen earlier on the slopes!

We helped her scrape the greens until her son showed up. He gave us a cozy room on the third floor with a tiny horizontal window that opened out toward the valley below. It was a wonderful retreat from the raging storm. That night we enjoyed pasta with a ragu sauce that was out of this world, fresh dandelions and another great local red wine. We woke in the morning, threw open the window and were treated to a spectacular sight. The May rain had turned to snow on the upper elevations. The valley was a

Watch or signal towers dating from Roman times are in every ancient village.

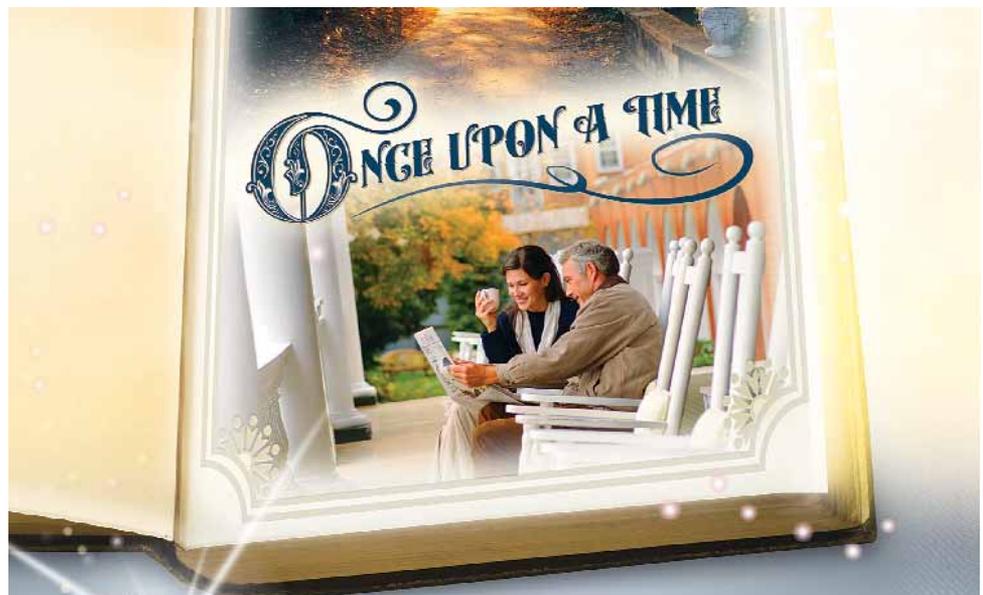


vibrant green while the mountains were capped with a brilliant white.

After breakfast, we loaded the car and dropped down to the valley floor. Passing a shepherd with his dog and about 100 sheep being moved to distant pasture, we climbed slowly up to a pass where early hikers were beginning their weekend trek. We tilted over the other side, curling back and forth down the mountainside on a twisting two-lane road, dropping into the valley deep below. Reaching the bottom, we were guided by two police officers to a detour around a tiny town that was pressed between a river and the steep hillside behind. It looked like there was a fair going on, so we parked along the roadside with everyone else and walked back into town.

We were met with a scene reminiscent of the Middle Ages. The towns in the area are so small that they do not have many stores. There is a caravan of peddlers that goes from hamlet to hamlet and sets up shop on a posted two-week schedule. There were a more than a dozen box trucks with the lifted right sides of the box resting on high posts. Using the side as an awning, they set up folding tables to show their wares. What was displayed would do a small shopping center proud. Clothes, housewares, vegetables, fruit, fish and the ever-present prosciutto. Folks were walking about in a fair-like atmosphere, neighbor talking to neighbor with kids running everywhere. We had a sandwich with the ham carved fresh from the haunch and then headed south again, looking for the next adventure.

Dr. David and Mary Gayle Sartwell are an award-winning writing and photography team who have published thousands of articles in both newspapers and magazines. They are outdoor people specializing in adventure travel. Both love travel, bridge, good food and wine, fly fishing and outdoor adventure of any kind.



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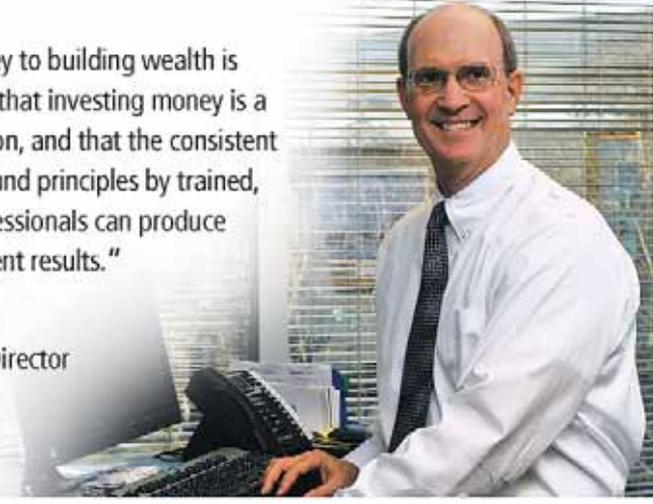
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