



# absolutely abruzzo

Tricia Welsh heads along  
shepherd's tracks and  
through medieval villages to  
explore the food and wine of  
Italy's Abruzzo region.



**The distinctive, near-addictive** aroma of truffles gently permeates the air as we descend into the sixteenth-century cellar restaurant of Ai Vecchi Sapori, Lanciano, for our first night's dinner in Italy's Abruzzo region. In the glassed-in open kitchen, chef and restaurateur Davide Rapino is in quiet control, shaving prized winter truffle onto platters of hearty, house-made spaghetti destined for other diners' tables. Sipping chilled *prosecco*, we savour our truffle and ricotta appetisers, agreeing this is a fine way to begin our week-long tour through this region of Italy.

We drink to our genial Absolutely Abruzzo hosts, Luciana Masci and her husband, Michael Howard, who have brought our group together for a pastoral tour of the region dubbed "Along the Shepherds' Tracks".

Over the next week, we will learn just how important those ancient shepherds were to the history, culture and lifestyle of this region – a place in which slow food is not a new-found culinary movement but the way Abruzzese housewives have always prepared their delicious *cucina povera*, or "peasant food".

The region of Abruzzo lies due east of Rome: on landing at the capital's Leonardo da Vinci airport earlier that morning, we had virtually traversed the country to get here, taking around three hours to drive the 250 kilometres from coast to coast.

Masci and Howard do the pick-ups personally, introducing each participant as he or she clammers into the mid-sized van that will transport us around the region's southern and eastern parts for the

Main: The medieval castle of Roccascalegna

Above: The poppy fields of Abruzzo in springtime

# ITALIAN EXCELLENCE

Fashion, Art & Cars

Commence from Milan, then after a glimpse of Verona, visit an interesting 20C collection of what is the Italian passion for discovery at the Nicolis Museum. Discover Venice like a local and enjoy a boat trip along the Brenta Riviera. Visit the fascinating museum of Italian designer fashion including the Rossimoda Shoe Collection. Afternoon tour of the Lamborghini Collection and Production where you can hear the first ignition of a Lamborghini engine, more of the cars at the Galleria Ferrari. Change of pace in appreciation of another 'Italian' fascination, food: learn and taste Aceto Balsamico di Modena, Prosciutto and Parmigiano in Parma and a little wine! On the fifth day return to Milan late evening. You will do it all without losing the 'cultural' aspect of your visit.

Cost from: \$2044pp in twin share

Inclusions: 5 days in twin share at 4\* hotels, breakfast daily, 3 dinners with beverages, tasting: Aceto Balsamico, Parmigiano, Prosciutto & Lambrusco, five guided tours, entrance to mentioned Museums, tour escort, small group tour, taxes and service charges.



Bookings and information  
contact your preferred travel  
agent or ATI Tours

**ati** TOURS

TOLL FREE 1300 888 997  
www.atitours.com.au

LICENCE 2TA5627 ABN 20109 484 326



“... the most picturesque... vineyards and olive groves dot the countryside...”

next eight days. In that time, we'll drive across the Apennines, through vineyards and countless medieval hilltop towns, along coastal beaches punctuated by charming fishing villages, into deep gorges and river valleys and along those famous shepherds' tracks.

We are a small group: a couple from Sydney, two young women from New Zealand, Masci and Howard, who double as tour leaders, and myself. Our agreeable, Brisbane-based guides have been showing tour groups around Masci's home province since 2006, introducing them to the Abruzzi way of life via her extended family's activities and environs. A physiotherapist by profession, Masci had pined for her Abruzzi roots and wanted to do something to celebrate her forebears' lifestyle. Clearly, she's settled in well, and is greeted warmly wherever we go. Howard, an internationally acclaimed tenor, gives private concerts along the way. On our tour, the recital highlight is a tribute to locally-born composer F. P. Tosti that takes place in an exquisite Victorian parlour in the seaside town of Ortona.

Dean Martin, Mario Lanza, Jimmy Durante and Madonna all have family roots in Abruzzo, our musically-

minded tour leaders inform us. They've even compiled a tape of Abruzzo natives' hits to use as background music while we travel.

Masci and Howard so love their newfound role that they now spend six months a year in a small village in Abruzzo. They travel and research the region and, by now, know it better than most. We link up with Masci's family at various points *en route*. Her cousin, Loredana, helps put on an *al fresco* lunch at the mouth of the Gorge of Santo Spirito, in the snow-capped Maiella National Park – where shepherds used to shelter. Another cousin, Maurizio, joins us for a winery lunch, but not before we've raided his greengrocery in the lovely village of Villamagna for fresh cherries and strawberries, and joined locals in the bar for a pre-lunch *digestivo* made from local herbs.

The Abruzzo region must be one of the most picturesque in Italy: vineyards and olive groves dot the countryside and snowy peaks form a picture-postcard backdrop. It's serviced by a splendid clutch of *agriturismos*: honest, country accommodation with in-house restaurants, so-called because they make most of their own ingredients – olive oil, cheese, wine, *salsicce*,



Above from left: Mouthwatering cakes for sale in Casoli; following ancient shepherds' tracks to a medieval monastery; NZ student Elle learns to make pasta at Magnolie

pasta, rustic breads. What they can't make, they source locally.

Our group stays at two vastly different *agriturismos*. One is part of an acclaimed winery that produces some of the region's most popular wines – crisply refreshing Trebbiano, an enormously palatable, rosé-style Cerasuolo and the area's flagship Montepulciano d'Abruzzo – and has an aroma of just-baked, buttery, light-as-air croissants in the mornings that is the stuff of memories. Being close to the coast, it is also ideally situated for accessing the curious-looking fishing huts on stilts known as *trabocchi* that are unique to the area, and for indulging in excellent seafood: fresh local squid, stuffed mussels, grilled flounder, *scampetti* and *fritto misto*.

Our second home lies northwest of the provincial capital of Chieti, on the outskirts of the medieval hilltop village of Loreto Aprutino. Le Magnolie, a generously proportioned seventeenth-century farmhouse, once housed some 50 residents. Today, it oozes country warmth. Here, owner Gabriella De Minco and her mother Olga prepare some of the most delicious, rustic fare you'll eat on the tour.

## A WORD ON TRAVEL TO EUROPE: 'CHOICE'



With Finnair, the choices are all yours! First, fly from your nearest Australian capital to your choice of eleven Finnair Asian gateways. Then there's your choice of over 50 European destinations. Choose **Business**, **Economy** or **Combination Class**. Combination is a choice which gives you *all* the benefits of Business, Asia/Europe, but the economy of Economy between Australia and Asia.

If Business or Combination is your choice, the bar on our new A340 flights allows you to choose when to snack or take a refreshment. And even if you are two metres tall you can choose to sleep flat in our seat. (Take a test fly at: [www.finnair.com/lieflat](http://www.finnair.com/lieflat)) Find out about your choice of Finnair Australia/Europe fares, contact your preferred AFTA travel agent or email: [finnair.sydney@worldaviation.com.au](mailto:finnair.sydney@worldaviation.com.au)

Finally, choose which of our **oneworld** partners best suits you for frequent flyer points. Finnair to Europe: 'choice'!

From BANGKOK, HONG KONG, GUANGZHOU, SHANGHAI, BEIJING, SEOUL, TOKYO, NAGOYA, OSAKA, DELHI, MUMBAI and NEW YORK to Finnair's extensive European network.



One night, Olga and her kitchen team give our group a cooking class. Under her practiced eye, we mix, roll and press fresh pasta through a *chitarra* (literally, “guitar”) to produce the iconic, flat-edged spaghetti of the region, then bone a plump duck to stuff for dinner and prepare olive-oil pastry for a fruit-tart dessert.

By day, we visit churches, browse ceramic, olive-oil and folklore museums, climb crumbling castles and explore medieval villages on foot. We watch cheese-makers squash fresh ricotta into twig baskets, sample local wines and taste days-old, lime-green olive oils.

If we’d timed our tour for autumn, during truffle harvest time, we might have also had the privilege of joining a truffle hunt. But it’s spring, so we rise before dawn to visit colourful fields of crocus and help pick the delicate flowers with their precious saffron stamens. Abruzzo cultivates just eight hectares of the highest quality saffron, introduced to the region in the Middle Ages by a Spanish Dominican monk.

As do all good hosts, Masci and Howard save the best till last. With the sun shining, we drive through spectacular alpine scenery, past fields of red poppies, to the charming village of Roccamorice. From here, we head off on foot along ancient shepherds’ tracks, flanked by spring wildflowers and littered with the evidence that once, stone shepherds’ huts or *tholos* peppered this countryside.

Descending a narrow path, we run across the thirteenth-century monastery of Saint Bartolomeo, built into the side of a rocky cliff-face with stunning frescoes overhead. We venture into the gorge below and, out of nowhere, hear Howard’s superlative voice singing Mozart’s *Ave Verum* mass from the monastery above. It’s nothing short of magical.

And if this taste of Abruzzo has whetted your appetite, you don’t have to stop at the “Shepherds’ Tracks”: Masci and Howard have introduced a new, week-long tour to the central and northern parts of the region. Dubbed “Medieval Magic of Abruzzo”, it includes a stay in a beautifully restored Medici-era village



Above from top: Goats’ and sheep’s milk for sale in a local market; fresh strawberries; assorted mushrooms in Pescara market; fresh apricots

and all the colour and pageantry of a recreated medieval joust. •

Photography by Tricia Welsh

## travelfacts

### gettingthere

British Airways, phone 1300 767 177 or visit [www.britishairways.com.au](http://www.britishairways.com.au)  
 Austrian Airlines, phone 1800 642 438 or visit [www.aua.com/au](http://www.aua.com/au)  
 Lufthansa, phone 1300 655 727 or visit [www.lufthansa.com](http://www.lufthansa.com)  
 Swiss International Airlines, phone 1300 724 666 or visit [www.swiss.com](http://www.swiss.com)  
 Qantas, phone 13 1313 or visit [www.qantas.com.au](http://www.qantas.com.au)  
 Thai Airways, phone 1300 651 960 or visit [www.thaiairways.com.au](http://www.thaiairways.com.au)  
 Finnair, phone 1300 798 188 or visit [www.finnair.com](http://www.finnair.com)  
 Scandinavian Airlines, phone 1300 727 707 or visit [www.flysas.com.au](http://www.flysas.com.au)

### gettingaround

Absolutely Abruzzo’s 8-day / 7-night tours start from AU\$4350 per person for “Along the Shepherds’ Tracks” and AU\$4500 per person for “Medieval Magic of Abruzzo”. Phone 1800 641 136 or visit [www.absolutelyabruzzo.com](http://www.absolutelyabruzzo.com)  
 ATI Tours, phone 1300 888 997 or visit [www.atitours.com.au](http://www.atitours.com.au)  
 Avis, phone 13 63 33 or visit [www.avis.com.au](http://www.avis.com.au)  
 DriveAway Holidays, phone 1300 723 972 or visit [www.driveaway.com.au](http://www.driveaway.com.au)  
 Hertz, phone 13 3039 or visit [www.hertz.co.nz](http://www.hertz.co.nz)  
 Intrepid Travel, phone 1300 364 512 or visit [www.intrepidtravel.com](http://www.intrepidtravel.com)  
 Rail Europe, phone 03 9642 8644 or visit [www.raileurope.com.au](http://www.raileurope.com.au)  
 Rail Plus, phone 1300 555 003 or visit [www.railplus.com.au](http://www.railplus.com.au)  
 Renault Euro Drive, phone 1300 551 160 or visit [www.renaulteurodrive.com.au](http://www.renaulteurodrive.com.au)  
 Scenic Tours, phone 1300 136 001 or visit [www.scenictours.com](http://www.scenictours.com)  
 Tempo Holidays, phone 03 9646 0277 or visit [www.tempoholidays.com](http://www.tempoholidays.com)  
 Trafalgar Tours, visit [www.trafalgartours.com.au](http://www.trafalgartours.com.au)  
 Uniworld Cruises, visit [www.uniworldcruises.com.au](http://www.uniworldcruises.com.au)  
 Utracks, phone 1300 303 368 or visit [www.utracks.com](http://www.utracks.com)

### furtherinformation

Italian Government Tourist Board, phone 02 9262 1666 or visit [www.italiantourism.com.au](http://www.italiantourism.com.au)