



Opposite: the town of Loreto Aprutino
Clockwise from right:
porchetta (slow-roasted pig) at Sulmona market;
pomegranates at Sulmona market;
Confetti Rapone, Sulmona; a street in Navelli; a fisherman brings in his catch from the Adriatic Sea near Pescara



EAT PRAY LOVE

Abruzzo is Italy's hidden gem, a virtually tourist-free idyll of hilltop havens, food worthy of worship and wonderful people, writes **Fiona Smith**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON McLEAN



The hillside village is perched precariously on rocks and presided over by a guardian castle

They say you come to Abruzzo and take your palate back 30 years. In winter, there are weekend traffic jams leading out of Rome as the capital-dwellers head east to treat themselves to lovingly prepared local specialities. Yet, apart from these culinary migrations, tourist routes mostly bypass this vastly rewarding destination.

Enter Absolutely Abruzzo Tours, run by Australian couple Luciana Masci and Michael Howard. Luciana's parents are from Abruzzo and much of her family remains in the region. She introduced Mike, an operatic tenor, to Abruzzo - having regularly performed in Rome and Milan, he couldn't believe somewhere so pristine still existed in Italy. The couple now live six months about in Australia and Abruzzo.

Travelling with Luciana and Mike opens many doors that could otherwise be a little jammed, and the tour I took with them really opened my eyes and palate to the wonders of the region.

Pescara is the region's transport hub and, while not the prettiest town in the area, makes a logical starting point. If you find yourself there for a night, head to Corso Gabriele Manthonè, Via delle Caserme and the

surrounding streets where there are lots of bars and little restaurants. Try Ristorante Acquapazza, Osteria La Lumaca or La Corte "del sale".

Joining up with Luciana and Mike, we began our "tour proper" in the charming walled town of Sulmona, whose main square is traversed by an impressive Roman aqueduct restored by monks in the 13th century. Twice a week this square is home to a bustling food market, where the stallholders include Luciana's 77-year-old aunty, Palmina Pizzica, who sells her fruit and veges there.

We're soon diverted by the aromas of porchetta - fragrant, slow-roasted whole pig - and Luciana leads us to a stall run by the winner of Italy's national porchetta competition. The meat is juicy, succulent and aromatic with garlic, rosemary and fennel.

Next stop is Confetti Rapone. Confetti began in Sulmona, made by local nuns from almonds coated in honey praline, the secret lying in the countless layers of candy, built up over time to create a crisp but not rock-hard shell. The Rapone family has been making confetti since the mid-17th century and their shop offers a unique saffron variety.

Moving on, we dive through a little archway into Hostaria dell' Arco and

are greeted with the most delicious-looking antipasti buffet: marinated anchovies, baked ricotta, fried seasonal vegetables and pieces of eggplant cooked in olive oil and garlic then tossed with egg and pecorino.

After that come the pasta dishes, including seasonal favourites such as gnocchetti e fagioli (tiny pasta dumplings and beans in soup) - a version of the pasta e fagioli which you will find on every menu in Abruzzo during borlotti bean season. We finish with two local cakes - cassata Sulmonese (a sponge soaked in chocolate liqueur and layered with almond praline and chocolate ganache) and the house speciality, confettata, which is topped with crushed confetti.

An afternoon drive takes us through the scenic Sagittaro gorge to the hillside village of Anversa degli Abruzzi, perched precariously on jutting rocks and presided over by a guardian Norman castle.

This much-fought-over region boasts many such fortified villages, all seemingly unreachable on rocky outcrops. Many are now abandoned and in ruins, making for very picturesque viewing. One that hasn't been abandoned, Scanno, is perched on the edge of a national park (one



Clockwise from above: Anversa degli Abruzzi; Luciana and her aunt Palmina Pizzica at Sulmona market; Scanno; zucchini flowers at Pescara market; confetti. Opposite, from left: Convivio Girasole's chef Adriano; barbecuing at Ristoro Mucciante; Navelli





A walk through the climbing narrow streets makes you feel you've stepped back in time

of three in the region) and is now a popular spot for holiday homes. Nevertheless, a walk through the climbing narrow streets makes you feel you've stepped back in time, with many women still wearing the town's traditional heavy woollen skirts.

Back in Sulmona, we visit La Cantina di Biffi. This enoteca and restaurant has a wonderfully warm welcoming feel that is enhanced by Piero, the amiable host. While his "mama" creates mouth-watering house specialities in the open kitchen, he charms diners, talking them through the menu and the fantastic wine list.

The food is simple with lots of regional fare, such as zucchini cooked with borlotti beans and fried bread dumplings smothered in tomato sauce and pecorino. Don't leave without trying the house ratafia. Here the liqueur, made from sour cherries steeped in Montepulciano wine, is one of the best examples you will find.

Heading north from Sulmona, we stop at the partially deserted village of Navelli. The steep walk through the crumbling houses would have you believe nothing ever went on here, but in the surrounding fields and behind

modest doorways exists a thriving saffron industry - the spice has been produced here since the 13th century.

Still dried in the traditional way, over embers of almond and oak wood, the Zafferano dell'Aquila DOP variety grown in the region is highly prized. The Papaoli family's small shop sells the vibrant prized stamens and we also taste a wonderfully earthy saffron-infused sheep's ricotta here. If you visit in October, Alfonso will take you down to his fields to see the beautiful purple blooms.

Now we climb up into the Apennines, which are very much reminiscent of the Central Otago landscape, save for the vein-like covering of shepherds' tracks and the occasional maremma - the powerful sheepdogs that protect the herds from wolves. About 2000 metres up in the Gran Sasso national park, the mountains level off into a vast alpine plain, the Campo Imperatore.

In the middle of this barren landscape is Ristoro Mucciante, a kind of DIY barbecue spot. Inside a simple wooden building you can buy skewered mutton and pork, along with bread, cheese and wine, while outside are rows and rows of long, narrow, charcoal barbecues. The

place teems with families and groups of friends. Here Luciana puts on a lavish picnic supplemented with her own giardiniera (pickled vegetables), aunty Palmina's tomatoes and, the highlight, cousin Piero's wild-boar sausage and prosciutto.

After lunch we amble through yet another high-perching village, though this one has a key difference - Santo Stefano di Sessanio is a model for sustainable renovation and eco tourism. Once owned by the Medicis, the village had fallen into ruins until Swedish-Italian entrepreneur and investor Daniele Kihlgren bought up much of the town. Using modern, non-invasive practices, he restored the crumbling cottages and the city now thrives on tourists in search of authentic-yet-comfortable mountain-village holidays.

Descending from the Apennines, rocks and dust give way to green hills covered with olive trees. We call into the town of Loreto Aprutino for another delicious meal - this time at Convivio Girasole - then move on to Le Magnolie, a working olive farm that is also an agriturismo. Owners Gabriella Di Minco and Mario



Clockwise from above: harvesting olives near Il Casolare restaurant; Absolutely Abruzzo Tours' Michael and Luciana; local olives; Santa Maria della Pietà; Navelli saffron. Opposite, from left: gathering apples in the Loreto Aprutino area; Sulmona Santa Lucia B&B; truffle hunters Serafini Ugo and Diana



You are likely to find the mellow, dry red Montepulciano on every table in the region

Tortella offer accommodation in their beautifully restored 17th-century farmhouse, where guests are made to feel part of the farm life - and family.

If you arrive during olive-pressing you'll be treated to a dinner celebrating the harvest: ultra-fresh, grassy, extra virgin olive oil from the farm is poured liberally over everything from bread to borlotti beans and slices of rabbit; used to fry zucchini flowers; and even features in the dessert of ricotta torte.

One afternoon is devoted to hands-on cooking, with Gabriella's mother Olga at the helm. An afternoon spent with Olga is the best way to gain insight into this simple but richly rewarding cuisine. We make the local pasta, chitarra Abruzzese, by pressing fresh pasta sheets through something resembling a many-stringed rectangular guitar.

There are plenty of interesting producers in the Loreto Aprutino area. We visit a cheesemaker who hand-moulds pecorino using traditional woven willow baskets - the aroma in the ageing room is unbelievable. To wash down our cheese, we stop at the Contesa

winery in Collecervino to sample Montepulciano d'Abruzzo. You are likely to find the mellow, dry red Montepulciano on every lunch and dinner table in the region. Trebbiano is the most popular white wine, but tasting the Contesa Pecorino (an aromatic, fruity white) will soon have you favouring the latter.

If there's room for lunch, stop in at Il Casolare - its pasta e fagoli is sensational, fresh with tomatoes, and if you're lucky the restaurant's owner will invite you to his house just down the road, to see the fruit being harvested from his olive trees.

Abruzzo is also a large producer of truffles and near the coast we stop in at the shop of truffle dealer SZ Tartufi to try some of the many truffle products. But the real highlight of a visit is if truffle hunter Serafini Ugo takes you out with his dogs on the trail of the knobbly gems.

One of the charms of this region is the dramatic way you can go from mountain to coast in a matter of hours and the food specialties change just as strikingly. At Ristorante Caldora in Rocca San Giovanni on the coast outside

Pescara, the menu is strictly from the sea. Marinated anchovies, carpaccio of swordfish, tuna prosciutto and pressed octopus all feature, and outside you can watch fishermen bring in the catch of the day from the Adriatic Sea.

Throughout our time in Abruzzo we met wonderful locals, from exuberant restaurateurs to stern market stallholders who treated us with scepticism until we (with Luciana's help) got chatting and they started inundating us with samples. And walking along the road one day we came across a robust elderly woman picking apples up a rickety old ladder, who came down and cheerily offered us some of the most delicious apples I have ever eaten. There's a saying about the people of Abruzzo: "*forte e gentile*", meaning strong but kind, and I found examples of this everywhere we went. ☘

GETTING THERE

Absolutely Abruzzo Tours run from May through October. For flights and bookings, call House of Travel toll-free on ph: 0800-838 747, absolutelyabruzzo.com

The view from Pennapiedimonte
Opposite, from left:
fishing nets in the
Adriatic Sea near
Pescara; fresh seafood
at Ristorante Caldora;
Contesa winery's
Rocco Pasetti and his
daughter Paola

