



Uncrowded **Abruzzo** **Perfect taste of the simple life**

Some places are even better over time, simply because they don't change, writes **Sarah Nicholson**

WHEN I think of Abruzzo I remember a single, perfect scoop of strawberry gelato.

The icy treat was a deep shade of cerise, and with every spoonful that vibrant pink exploded in my mouth and I was reminded of eating fresh strawberries from the bush in my grandparent's back yard when I was little.

I was sitting on the church steps in the centre of Sulmona, gazing at the barren peaks of the Apennines looming over the town's low stone buildings, and it was one of those perfect Italian moments you expect to happen in the middle of an idyllic summer's day.

Sulmona had shut down for the afternoon siesta – a tradition that's still observed in a part of Italy that hasn't been corrupted by the tourist dollar – and the main street was almost deserted, with shutters pulled across the windows of shops that would open again that evening.

Most of the locals had gone home to a long meal with family and the only people I saw as I enjoyed my all-fresco gelato lunch were a few elderly residents deep in conversation as they strolled to an afternoon rendezvous.

When I planned to visit Italy in August I braced myself for the crowds of tourists I expected to encounter at every turn – I visited Venice during the same month a few years back and found the Piazza San Marco so crowded during the day it was hard to cross – but the expected mob was blissfully absent.

That's because Abruzzo, which sits in the heart of the Italian peninsula a couple of easy hours east of Rome, is off the tourist trail, with most international visitors concentrating on Umbria and Tuscany just a stone's throw to the north.

While the district is a sideshow now enclosed by the towering peaks of the Apennines on one side and the sparkling water of the Adriatic on the other, Abruzzo was right in the centre of the action a few centuries back when it sat on the important medieval trading route between Florence and Naples.

The region also has a rich history in sheep farming, with shepherds traditionally grazing their flocks on the high plains of the Campo Imperatore during the summer before moving them to protected paddocks around Puglia for winter, and stone huts dot the wild landscape as a reminder of the hardy men who once lived on the land.

Some of the traditions of that era endure, and in the charming hilltop hamlet of Scanno – where old women still wear the traditional garb of a long pleated black skirt covered by a patterned apron, a black cardigan and a dark scarf covering silver locks – jewellers continue to make the medallions that shepherds gave their sweethearts.

When a young farmer was about to hit the road for Puglia he would give his girl a delicate gold filigree medallion with two hearts in the centre, a sign to the other boys that she was taken, and when they married he would replace it with a disc showing a moon above the hearts.

George Clooney made *The American* in Abruzzo last year – he stayed at the same Sulmona B&B as me – and he told locals he hoped the movie would encourage people to visit the region.

But I hope he is wrong.

It's so hard to find a quiet corner of Italy where you can slow down and appreciate the simple pace in a country that values tradition and the

good things in life, and I would hate for Abruzzo to get swept up in the destructive wave of mass tourism.

I explored Abruzzo with Luciana Masci and Michael Howard from Absolutely Abruzzo Tours and, with five other Australians and a New Zealand couple, we roamed the region's quiet back roads and serene settlements following the Medieval Magic itinerary.

Luciana and Michael live in Brisbane half the year and base themselves in the Abruzzo village of Palombaro for six months during the northern summer.

They have been running the Medieval Magic tour since 2006 but also offer a collection of other itineraries that let visitors get under the skin of Italy's best-kept secret.

Luciana has a strong connection to Abruzzo.

It's her ancestral home, which her parents leaving in the 1950s to migrate to Australia, and she uses her local connections and linguistic skills to get her small bands of travellers into places other visitors would never see.

"Abruzzo is the home of my heritage, my family, and friends," she explains.

"We have lived in Abruzzo now since 2004, spending six months here from May to October, and I'm rediscovering old recipes from my family, realising the importance of slow food, working with the seasons and celebrating life and the good things it gives us.

"With my network I'm able to get below the surface and really provide guests with an experience of their dreams – taste wine made by local people, visit a cheesemaker whose family has been doing so for generations, make pasta by hand with local ladies."



For eight lazy days we spent our time exploring tranquil villages that were bathed in sunshine, with the itinerary planned so we were in one town on market day and another during the annual festival's colourful parade, and feast at different restaurants, with the menus planned so we sampled a full range of local cuisine.

We were taken into the kitchen of Castel del Monte cheesemaker Maddalena Aromatario, and watched as she turned the milk produced by her brother's sheep into a delicious pecorino, and joined saffron producer Alphonse Papaoli on the small plot of land outside Navelli where he grows the crop that's worth \$20,000 a kilogram.

We chatted with Luigi Rapone, whose family has been making confetti - traditional sugared almonds - since the 1700s.

We were shown around the vineyards of Valle Reale, a winery that sits in the shadows of the Gran Sasso National Park, before sampling the latest vintage of montepulciano d'Abruzzo and trebbiano d'Abruzzo.

We were invited into the kitchen of a Santo Stefano matriarch, who taught us to make pasta from scratch and shared other heirloom recipes, and then joined her family and neighbours for a multi-course feast that went late into the night and included lots of music, singing and laughter.

We had a private tour of a chapel with walls covered by ancient frescoes, wandered a museum with rare religious artefacts that isn't open to the public, and visited San Benedetto's underground grottos where we joined the locals for a lunch that included more music and singing, some dancing, lots of local wine and even a

game of cards.

"Abruzzo is like Tuscany was 50 or 60 years ago, before the tourists came to the area, and it offers a most authentic Italian village experience that many travellers yearn for but often do not experience," Luciana says.

"(In other parts of Italy) visitors are often inundated by crowds of tourists visiting popular sites, food menus that are written in English, and there is virtually no contact with the local people - Abruzzo isn't like that."

But we should keep that between us, we don't want everyone knowing the tourist-free delights of Abruzzo.

Sarah Nicholson travelled courtesy of Absolutely Abruzzo Tours and Thai Airways.



