

# Secret ITALY

Le Marche – regarded as Tuscany's little sister – is a beautiful, unspoiled corner of Italy, as Tricia Martin discovers

I've always adored Italy. So why had I never heard of Le Marche? The area is described by Italians as 'all of Italy in one region', and it's true. It has rolling countryside, historic hilltop towns and vineyards to rival neighbouring Tuscany, plus a 180km coastline that makes the Italian Riviera look miniscule, with no less than 20 Blue Flag beaches.

And if I needed any more of an incentive to check out Italy's best-kept secret, it was the news that it's where 90 per cent of Italy's shoes are made. Call me shallow, but discount designer shoes and handbags make my heart soar nearly as much as a beautiful sea view! There are shopping outlets scattered across Le Marche, where you can get up to 60 per cent off top brands like Prada, Armani and Tod's.

We started our trip at Villa Olivo, in Civitanova Alta, a holiday rental that has been renovated by its owners (who live close by). It's incredibly stylish, decorated in muted beige tones, and sleeps 12, with a spa – featuring a six-person jacuzzi, steam room and sauna – and a fully equipped gym. If you want to work off all those

pasta dishes, the owners can organise a personal trainer. Outdoors there's a pool, lush gardens and a barbecue, along with a fire pit for al fresco evenings.

Our stay began with a truly special touch, as owners David and Luisa arranged for their housekeeper Antonella to come and cook us a delicious dinner, including exquisite local seafood and homemade ice cream.

We would have happily spent all our time relaxing at the villa, but when we peeled ourselves off our sun loungers we found that we were a pleasant drive from a string of pretty resorts, with unspoiled coves and beaches.

Portonovo was our first stop, for lunch with a sea view at Ristorante da Giacchetti, a popular restaurant that was packed with Italian families enjoying the weekend. Not surprisingly, fish is the speciality, and after a selection of mussels, razor clams, sardines and scallops, we dined on skewers of squid and prawns.

When the time came for us to leave Villa Olivo, we drove to the medieval village of

Petritoli, on a hill 350m above sea level, with captivating views of the Adriatic Sea and Sibillini Mountains. We stayed in another rental property here, Palazzo Scarsini, a 14th-century vaulted apartment with details like original tiles and touches of gold leaf. It's owned by Brits Michael and Dawn Hobbs, for whom Petritoli is home and the base for their luxury property business, Appassionata. If the thought of a holiday home without the hassle of maintenance appeals, then Appassionata's fractional ownership is an idea well worth considering, as buyers own a 10th share in exchange for five weeks a year. I went to bed dreaming of their Villa Veneto, which will be

The stunning coastline at the area's Mezzavalle beach

Villa Olivo in Civitanova Alta



Picturesque Civitanova

We drove to the medieval village of Petritoli... with captivating views of the Adriatic

ready this summer, and which will boast a rooftop Jacuzzi.

For our final slice of Le Marche life, we drove just a few miles down the road to Montelparo, checking in at the boutique Hotel Leone. Nothing is too much trouble for owners Tim and Madeline Jones, who opened the place in 2011 after a five-year search for the perfect spot. Tim's the chef working wonders in the kitchen, while Madeline is happy to talk guests through the wine list she has lovingly created.

While staying at Hotel Leone, we headed out with Danilo from Turismarche.com. Formed by young locals, the company offers tourists all manner of authentic experiences. We enjoyed a morning searching for truffles with a local hunter and his adorable dogs, then returned with our haul to a nearby farmhouse where the owner's aunt showed us how to make truffle pasta. The finished dish was served up for lunch with cured meat and cheese, and some lovely local wines.

Le Marche is becoming a well-known name in wine circles – it's already home to Verdicchio and the Montepulciano grape – and via Turismarche.com you can book a vineyard tour (or even a grape-stomping

session!) to familiarise yourself with some of the region's best varieties.

After all that food and drink, we took in the breathtaking scenery on a hike in the Sibillini Mountains. There are 10 peaks that soar to over 2,000m, but the national park has trails for walkers of every level.

When you fancy a bit of culture, Le Marche doesn't disappoint either. The region has the greatest density of museums and art galleries in Italy. Scenic and still blissfully quiet, Le Marche really is Italy's best-kept secret.

## WAY TO GO

Ryanair (ryanair.com) offers flights from London Stansted to Ancona from £33.37 return, and from London Stansted to Pescara from £45.82 return (prices based on a trip length of 12-14 days). EasyJet (easyjet.com) flies to Ancona from London Gatwick with prices starting from £49.47pp (one way, including taxes and based on two people on the same booking). A low-season stay at Villa Olivo for four nights (minimum length of stay) costs €4,000. Visit villaolivomarche.com. Stays at Palazzo Scarsini cost €125 per night (subject to a minimum of two nights). A 10 per cent discount is offered for seven or more nights, and 20 per cent for a month or more. Visit appassionata.com. Rooms at Hotel Leone start from €125 per night for a twin room on a bed and breakfast basis. Visit hotelleonemarche.com. Also visit turismarche.com.

Enjoy the lap of luxury at Palazzo Scarsini



## BARGAIN BREAKS

Explore the best of Italy with these three getaways

### WHERE: Rome

**WHY:** Walk in the footsteps of the Romans in the Italian capital. See beautiful art and architecture at the Vatican, and fill up on pizza and pasta.

**HOW:** Travel Republic (020 8974 7200, travelrepublic.co.uk) has three nights at the four-star Vatican Rooms on a room-only basis from **£179 per person**, based on two adults sharing and flying from Luton on June 6.

### WHERE: Bologna & Tuscany

**WHY:** From bolognese in Bologna to wine in a Tuscan vineyard, this self-drive journey explores the markets and medieval monuments that make up these foodie hot spots.

**HOW:** Citalia (01293 831970, citalia.com) has eight nights in Italy on a B&B basis from **£949 per person**, including four-star accommodation, car hire and return flights from London Gatwick with easyJet on July 11. Call to book.

### WHERE: Venice

**WHY:** This floating city attracts romance, with pretty palaces, sunset gondola rides and breathtaking bell-tower views. Steal a kiss in a tunnel of love or under the Bridge of Sighs.

**HOW:** Teletext Holidays (020 3001 1273, teletextholidays.co.uk) is offering three nights at the four-star Hotel All'Angelo on B&B basis from **£216 per person**, flying from Southend on June 2.