

TOURING



Secrets of Le Marche

by Vera Marie Badertscher

After dodging mopeds in Rome, standing in line for hours to see Michelangelo's *David* in Florence, and squeezing into an overfilled water taxi in Venice, you may be thinking, "What ever happened to *La Dolce Vita*?"

Do not despair. Just south of Venice and Rimini, east of Tuscany and Umbria, stretching between the mountainous spine of the Apennines and the Adriatic Sea, the region of Le Marche provides a new look at a very old Italy.

Today's explorers follow in some very old footsteps. Over 2,000 years ago, the tribes of *umbri* and *piscini* built shelters on hilltops here. Later the Romans built roads and

amphitheatres and arches. Charlemagne came thundering in and later ceded the lands to papal rule. Oh yes, a lot of people have passed through, but no one stayed around long enough to build major urban areas.

The landscape surrounding the abundant Roman ruins looks very much as it did to a Roman legionnaire. And when you wind uphill and pop through the narrow gates of a fortified

All photos by Vera Marie Badertscher



Opposite: The castle at Sassorcaro, in the Marche region of Italy, was designed by Franciso di Giorgio Martini and resembles the shape of a tortoise, a symbol of alchemy and appropriate for Count Ubaldini, who commissioned the structure and dabbled in alchemy himself. Center: The castle at San Leo, an impressive example of defensive architecture designed by Martini, provides visitors with a breathtaking view of the surrounding lands. Right: The charm of Sassorcaro is evident even in its simple structures.

village, you will see villagers sweeping the cobbled streets before 500-year-old doors just as their ancestors did. Modern flats and industrial parks sometimes huddle outside the walls, but inside the walls, aside from a few cars and drooping electric wires, you could be walking in the Middle Ages.

Just as the early tribes split between mountain people (*umbri*) and sea people (*piscini*), modern day tourists' interests diverge as they choose between mountain roads edged with wild greenery or basking beside the blue sea. The long seacoast cannot compete for glamour with the

rugged western coast of Italy. Here beach chairs march in tight formation down long stretches of sand from Rimini in the north to the smaller towns in the southern Marche. Aside from the dramatic cliffs around Ancona, the land is flat and the lure of the sea is a civilized, orderly affair. Fly into Ancona, take the train to the chosen beach. Sit under an umbrella by day, eat seafood in the evening – a routine enlivened by summer music festivals.

By contrast, inland Le Marche provides challenges, starting with narrow, steep roads and limited public

transportation. Foothills rise quickly and sharply, interfering with the construction of roadways and rail beds. To discover the secrets of Le Marche, rent a car and get ready for lots of downshifting and whipping around sharp curves.

Inland from the seaside toll road that zips from north to south, the hills glow emerald green in the springtime sun. If an artist painted the mist rising from an infinity of almost vertical meadows, he would be chastened for over-romanticizing.



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Stone walls hug hilltops, their meandering path punctuated by towers and steeples. So many medieval fortress towns watch over the valleys of Le Marche that a hilltop covered with grass and trees, instead of a man-made pile of rocks, looks lonely and vulnerable.

Boxy three-story stone farmhouses used by generations of Italian farmers stand shaded by cypress and acacia trees in the midst of tidy fields. In order to stay on the land, the younger generation of Italians has added a crop of vacationers to traditionally grown wine grapes, truffles, and olives. Agritourism, encouraged by government grants, increasingly substitutes for traditional agriculture, which has become an increasingly difficult way to make a living. Eager British ex-pats and a smattering of Germans have joined the Italian families who are opening country inns with improved plumbing, Web sites for ease of registration, and meals featuring local produce.

Americans have been slower than Europeans to discover Le Marche (12,335 in 2004, versus 21,897 from the UK and 67,019 from Germany), but inevitably, somebody will publish a book entitled *Under the Le Marche Sun* and the tour buses will arrive. For now, however, the villagers seem almost surprised to see a foreign tourist.

Five years ago, Le Torricelle joined the ranks of agritourism inns that dot the countryside. Near the village of Lunano, a road winds up a hill to a quirky, isolated place to stay. At



Le Torricelle is representative of the agritourism trend that has become an increasingly popular undertaking in Le Marche. Left: The view from Le Torricelle. Above: One of the buildings on Le Torricelle's grounds.

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The clean-swept streets spotted with vibrant geraniums belie the past battles that have taken place in Le Marche's Castelfidardo.

Le Torricelle, a tile mosaic placed discreetly on the side of a small building identifies the cluster of refurbished ancient stone houses.

The two- and three-story stone buildings once housed an agricultural community, home for workers who toiled on someone else's land. Now five Bavarians live here, and during the summer they rent out two apartments and a small house. The residents grow vegetables, herbs, and olives, and gather honey from their bees. Clusters of white flowers drip from the acacia trees, and the hum of the resident bees fills the air.

The views here redefine spectacular. The hilltop, rising as perpendicular as a watchtower, somehow escaped becoming the site of a castle. Standing in the dew-covered grass,

surveying a vast landscape of fields and pastures, one might be forgiven for getting the urge to ride out and conquer the peaceful valley that spreads below.

URBINO

Le Torricelle is on the southern edge of a territory known as Montefeltro. In the capital, Urbino, perpendicular neon letters spell out CINEMA on the corner of a weathered stone building that houses classrooms of a university founded in 1506. Twenty-two thousand students still make up more than half the population of Urbino, where signs on ancient stone structures advertise student apartments for rent inside the walled city.

Only residents or those with business permits can drive down the steep and narrow streets. Day-trippers count their blessings when they find a parking space near one of the city gates. Modern cars squeeze through the narrow gates just wide enough to admit two horses or a cart.

Urbino still bears the stamp of the mercenary-turned-art-patron who ruled the province of Montefeltro for 30 years starting in 1444. Although other dukes bore the Montefeltro name, Federico remains enshrined in history as the ideal courtier holding court in the perfect Renaissance palace. So much has been written about the idyllic small city a few hours south of Venice that historians refer to the "legend of Urbino."

Federico built the castle with its soaring towers, assembled an enormous library, and collected works of art. When he lost his right eye in battle, Federico reportedly hacked away at the bridge of his nose so that it would not impede his one-eyed view of the enemy. His beaked nose and jutting chin dominate a dozen paintings in the palace and in a famous portrait at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, but viewers never see his full face. Paintings always show the left side of his face in ferocious profile.

Perhaps his own ugliness led him to surround himself with beauty. The Ducal Palace in Urbino served as a model for other Renaissance seats of power. The castle's façade of golden stones framed by thin six-story-high towers gazing across the town walls creates the perfect portrait of a fairy-tale castle. Urbino undulates over two hills, and the architects adapted the castle to the topography. Compared to the Rapunzel towers on the opposite side, the visitor approaches a rather modest three-story building. The entrance leads from a city plaza beside the cathedral, rebuilt since Federico's day, but impressive nevertheless.

The symmetrical courtyard speaks of power, and inside, the enormous halls with story-and-a-half-high doors dwarf the visitor. The *trompe l'oeil* wood inlays that mimic open cabinets spilling books, the elaborately carved mantelpieces, and the painted ceilings all create a sense of awe.

Today's visitors to the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino are following the footsteps of visiting popes, a king of England, and noted philosophers. During the reigns of Federico and the son who succeeded him, most of the great minds of the Renaissance visited Urbino. Mathematicians and scientists joined artists like Piero della Francesca and architects like Francesco Martini. The intelligentsia moved from Rome to Florence to Milan to Urbino. The blending of science and art characterized by Leonardo da Vinci grew in the fertile ground of these courts. In fact, experts say da Vinci owned a tract on architecture by Martini – the only known surviving book of da Vinci's personal library.

CASTLES ON THE ROCKS

The multi-talented Francisco di Giorgio Martini first came to Federico's attention when he worked on some of the details of the Urbino palace. Soon the duke entrusted Martini with the design of castles built to protect the land and reward compatriots throughout Montefeltro.

Day trips from Urbino introduce the variety of designs dreamed up by this genius of defensive architecture. For sheer, jaw-dropping audacity of site, nothing can outdo San Leo. Pictures merely hint at the effect of this formidable fortress rising organically from a sheer cliff. The Romans called the cliff Mons Feretrius; the Montefeltro clan's first toehold was here, and they borrowed the name.

Earlier occupiers had built fortresses on the bluff, but Martini designed the version that stands today. The stern walls with guardian towers present a battle-ready face on the town side and a scale-me-if-you-can challenge from the cliffside. Even today, the approach to the fortress elicits an eerie sense of eyes watching from above. Besides being spectacularly picturesque, the San Leo castle promoters boast that Dante slept here and St. Francis visited.

Visitors climb stone steps and edge through dark, clammy passageways to ogle the usual medieval memorabilia, including instruments of torture and war. The ornately painted barrel that fitted over a person's body, the wheel upon which prisoners were stretched like barbecue meat, the creepy stretching machines that cracked bones – all belonged to later papal rulers rather than Federico. In a tower room, suits of armor stand just out of reach of lethal weapons stored in glass cases.

When Napoleon visited San Leo, he reportedly searched for the grave of a legendary n'er-do-well. The prison cell where the medieval con man and would-be sorcerer died evokes the magic of bygone days. His "marks" included Catherine the Great of Russia and Marie Antoinette of France. The church finally had enough of him and locked him in a pit cell where his evil eye could not damage his guards. Even today, fans leave flowers in tribute to the scoundrel known as Cagliostro. His grave, somewhere on this hill, remains undiscovered.

Down the road at Sassocorvaro, a contrasting Martini creation seems downright domestic in comparison to San Leo. But a story of magic lurks here, too. Fat, motherly bastions surround a curved structure shaped like a tortoise. The tortoise, it seems, is an alchemist symbol, and the 15th century Count Ubaldini who commissioned the castle dabbled in alchemy.

Surprises inside this castle include a Baroque theater added in the late 18th century. Delicate paintings of flower

baskets adorn the pink and lavender walls. The ceiling swarms with cherubs carrying musical instruments. The little jewel box of a theater, which seats only 80 on the floor and about 100 in box seats, joins over 100 scattered throughout the region. Restorers work at bringing back every last cherub and curlicue to these theaters, and traveling troupes of performers visit once again.

In a country packed with original masterpieces, the Sassocorvaro castle features a display of reproductions instead of the real thing. The people of Sassocorvaro take pride in the role their castle played in preserving Italy's great works of art during World War II. Rescuers hid paintings from around the country in remote locations where they might be safe from bombs. Thanks to the thick walls of this castle, the stunning *Ideal City*, sometimes attributed to Piero della Francesca, now hangs in its home castle of

Urbino. A life-size copy hangs in Sassocorvaro, along with copies of *The Tempest* by Giorgione, now returned to the Accademia in Venice, and *Annunciation* by Carpaccio, now back home in Venice at the Ca D'Oro. Paintings by Raphael, Titian, and Tintoretto and lesser known artists returned after the war to museums around Le Marche and to Venice. In all, 6,509 paintings, sculptures, and precious manuscripts survived 20th century warfare, protected by the defensive walls of Martini's 15th century fortress.

IN THE SOUTH

The Montefeltro clan, fascinating as it is, comprises just one small part of Le Marche. Other surprises await in the southern provinces of the region.



Guests at Le Case, near Macerata in the southern provinces of Le Marche, can enjoy a relaxing stay in the 14th-century former convent while enjoying fine dining, spa facilities, and the view from the indoor pool.

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The hills of Le Marche. Visitors can experience the splendors of Mother Nature in various national and regional parks found in the area.

Macerata, home of an outdoor theater and summer festival, provides a good base for exploring the area north of the Sibillini Mountain Park and west of the Adriatic. Macerata's theater, Arena Sferisterio, once housed a game called *pallone a bracciale*, a kind of team handball played with a wooden cylinder over the arm. The ancient game held the fans' attention from the 15th century to the early 19th, but soccer eclipsed the ancient game just after the town built the new stadium in the early 1800s. Resilient Macerata turned the arena into an outdoor theater for opera, and thousands of music fans swarm to a festival here each summer.

Just down the hill from the walled town of Macerata, the mini-resort of Le Case presides over a lush farming valley. As sophisticated as Le Torricelle is casual, Le Case demonstrates the wide variety of agritourism stays available in Le Marche. The Giosue family put a 14th century convent to work as a restaurant, serving traditional dishes made with produce grown on the surrounding farm. Soon they opened hotel rooms, elegant with lace curtains and antique furniture, in the typically spare stone houses. Next came a spa and indoor swimming pool with a floor-to-ceiling view of the surrounding velvety green fields.

The latest addition, Enoteca, serves updated versions of classical Le Marche cuisine using fresh, homegrown produce and seafood from the nearby Adriatic. The creativity of

the chefs at Enoteca may well make this a destination restaurant. Drawn by the cuisine, people may come to spend a week dining well, sampling wines from the thick book of choices, and working off calories at the spa. Other choices include relaxing with a chocolate massage or a facial of grape must, the dregs of the grapes after wine-making.

For those with ambitions to do more than eat and drink, the seashore is less than an hour's drive away and hilltop walled villages watch over the surrounding valleys a short drive from Le Case.

The shrine at Loreto has attracted pilgrims since the Middle Ages. Here, the legend says, angels set down the house of the Virgin Mary, transported from the Holy Land. Spoilsport scientists who have tested the rock and pored over ancient parchment say that although the house came from the village of Nazareth, medieval documents prove a crusader carted it off and gave it to an Italian princess. The prosaic explanation and lack of proof Mary ever lived there does not slow the procession of worshippers who line up to see the humble abode, which has been encased in marble and surrounded by an ornate basilica.

A few miles away, Castelfidardo, the world's accordion capital, owes its town industry to the pilgrimage to Loreto. As a young man, Paolo Soprani met a music maker who entertained the pilgrims on the way to Loreto with an Austrian squeeze box. The curious young man took the

instrument apart, reassembled and improved it, and started selling the new fisarmonica. By 1900, Castelfidardo was the center of accordion production, and today they make more than 80 percent of the world's accordions.

A bust of Soprani stands near the entrance of the Fisarmonica Museum, which is located in the town hall. Inside, ancient Chinese instruments stand near movie posters featuring accordion players. Recorded music and occasional live performances on old instruments fill the small museum with the bouncy, optimistic music of the accordion. In October each year, hundreds of musicians pour into Castelfidardo for a world competition. Categories accommodate soloists, jazz ensembles, and classical music orchestras, all featuring the accordion.

Castelfidardo's urban pride shines in a park commemorating the Italian war of independence and a key battle fought here in 1860 when the Piedmontese defeated the pope. Visitors more attuned to 20th century history can learn about a four-day siege when Patton's troops marched down the valley from nearby Recanati. Where industrial parks now stand, the British, Polish, and U.S. troops rolled through farmland and planes dropped bombs on the German outpost in Castelfidardo. Today modern apartments shoot up above ancient walls where bombs destroyed medieval buildings. Like the other fortress towns in Le Marche, Castelfidardo appears freshly swept and decked throughout with pots of red geraniums and purple petunias.

A few minutes' drive leads to the long, narrow hill town of Recanati. Three rulers united here in the 15th century to form one of the largest bastions in the area. The usual flower shops and bakeries spill inviting aromas onto cobblestone streets. However, this town also features fashion shops like "Bad Girl," and women walk by carrying Benetton shopping bags. An 18th century palazzo with ornate ceilings and some period furniture displays prehistoric artifacts in one room and Renaissance art in others. Lorenzo Lotto, a local boy, dominates here with his religious paintings of startled figures in bright colors, including the famous *Annunciation* that features a cat fleeing God's messenger.

Giacomo Leopardi, a poet who grew up here, was as anxious to bolt as Lotto's cat. A tower with swallowtailed crenellations dominates the central Piazza Leopardi, named for the poet. Leopardi's wan image surveys the town from the center of the square. His poems indicate his dissatisfaction with his hometown, and the statue looks like it is still plotting escape. Leopardi's father was a local VIP who donated both the town's extensive library and the charming restored theater. Providing they arrive outside of



A beehkeeper at Le Torricelle. It is not uncommon for inns and hotels in Le Marche to produce some of their own food.

the afternoon siesta hours, tourists may visit these buildings and the palazzo where Leopardi spent his childhood.

The Theater of Milan has adopted Recanati's Teatro G. Persiani, guaranteeing a stellar lineup of plays and musical performances. A tour of the ornate Baroque space may persuade you to seek out some of the seventy-odd other 18th and early 19th century restored theaters in the region. Nearby towns with these lovely little confections include Macerata, Potenza Piscina, Montelupone, and Ossimo.

NATURE

Besides 200 or so fortified towns, the sparsely populated Le Marche region contains several national and regional parks and preservation areas. The Sibillini, one of the largest Italian national parks, sprawls across the southern portion of Le Marche. The highest peak of the 70,000 hectare (172,974 acres) Sibillini National Park soars to 2,476 meters (8,123 feet).

In the north, the town of Carpegna borders the Regional Parco del Conero near San Leo. Hotels shaded by big pine trees line the streets of Carpegna, providing a cool summer resort for harried Romans and a base for mountain drives and hikes.

A Roman road leads to the best kept secret of spectacular scenery in the region. In the Pesaro-Urbino province, follow in the footsteps of Etruscans and Romans along the Via Flaminia leading inland from seaside Fano. Take time off from the November truffle fair in Acqualagna to drive through the tunnel carved in 76 A.D. under the orders of the Emperor Vespasiano into the Furlo Pass (Gola del Furlo). There, limestone cliffs tower hundreds of feet high above the small Candigliano River.

The tiny town of Furlo, its one major street a Roman road reached through a 2,000-year-old tunnel, offers a 6th century convent as well as entry to scenic hikes off a panoramic road. On a bright spring day, café tables spilled off the sidewalk into the street and a handful of villagers whiled away the afternoon gossiping while tourists bit into the local flat bread called *cresci*. The aroma of fresh-brewed coffee mingled with the scent of wild roses. Across the

IF YOU GO:

The isolation that protected the medieval dukedoms has also protected the area from modern day invading hordes of tourists. It takes some digging to find travel information. An out-of-print guidebook by the Touring Club of Italy may be difficult to locate. The Cadogan guide to Tuscany, Umbria, and Le Marche contains some useful information, but the most comprehensive guide in English can be found on the Internet at www.le-marche.com. Le Marche's tourist office, through this Web site, provides a Touring Club of Italy map, free by request.

- Le Torricelle, www.letorricelle.com
- Le Case, www.ristorantelecase.it

road, a wildly romantic wall of rock rose hundreds of meters above a lushly shaded river. The moment typified the easygoing, traveler-friendly Le Marche.

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