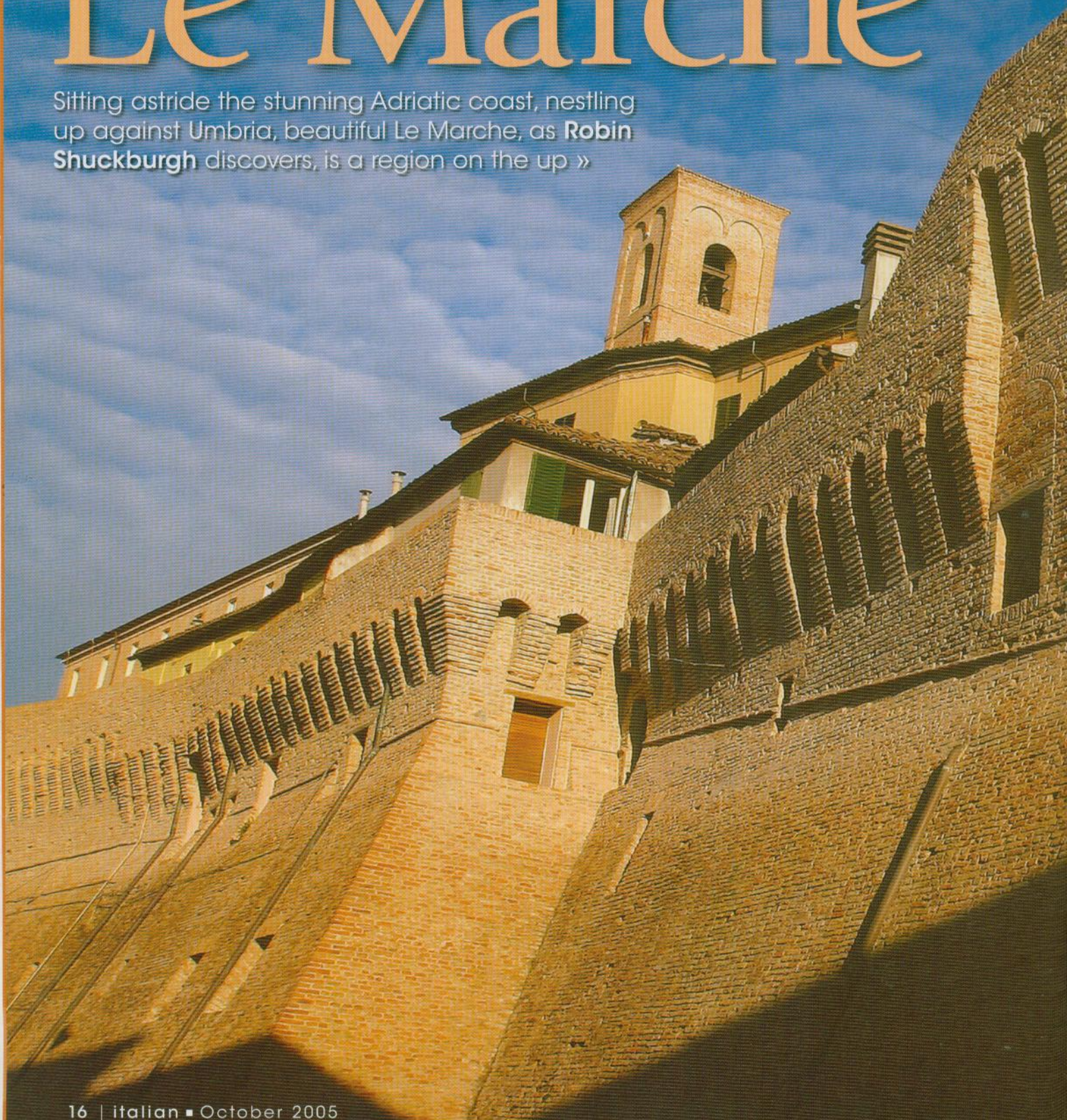


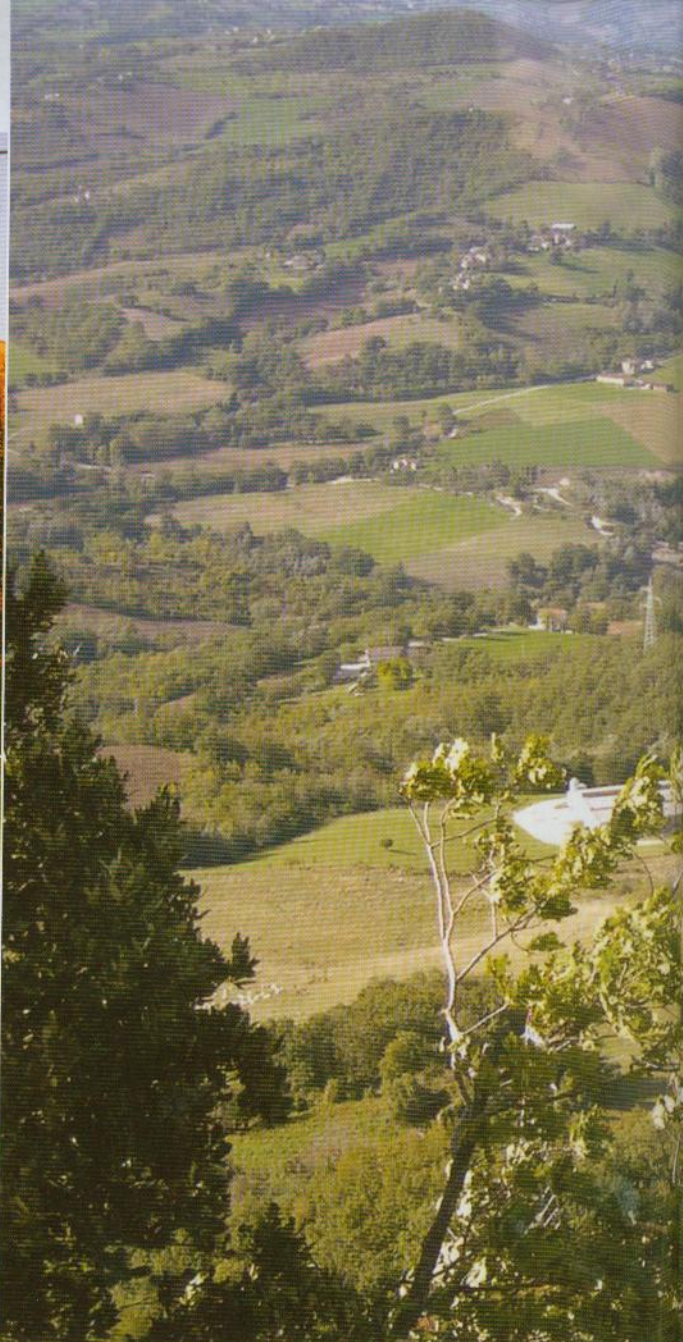
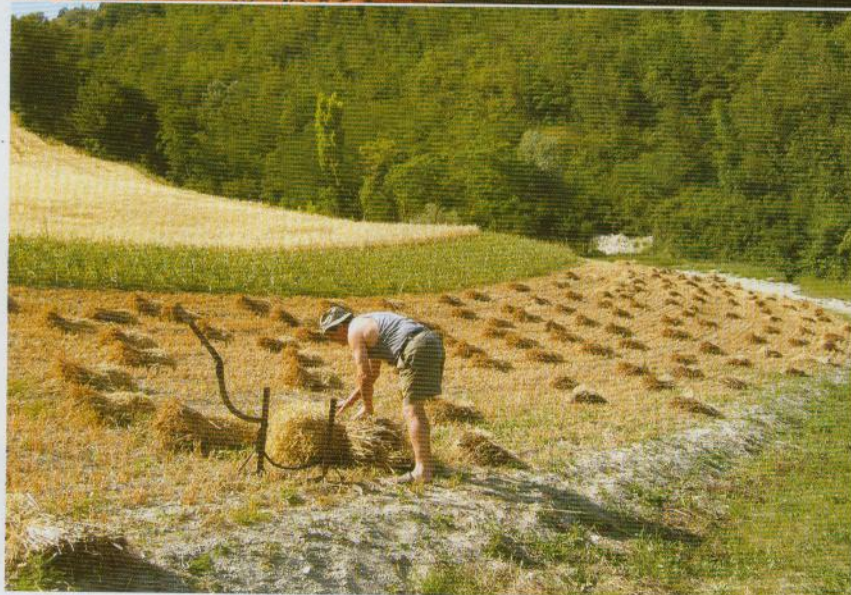
Lost in Le Marche

Sitting astride the stunning Adriatic coast, nestling up against Umbria, beautiful Le Marche, as **Robin Shuckburgh** discovers, is a region on the up »



The monumental
medieval fortress
walls of Jesi





"TOTALLY ITALIAN, UNSPOILED, SLEEPY, CHEAP AND

My first introduction to the Marche region of Italy was way back in 1967. Living in Rome with my parents was definitely cramping my style and I needed somewhere romantic to escape to. Le Marche was the perfect place. It was within easy reach, totally Italian, unspoiled, sleepy, cheap, stunningly beautiful at all times of the year, and full of bits of Renaissance art on which I could mug up and show off.

Nearly 40 years later, I am still in love with this part of Italy; now because it is within easy reach, totally Italian, unspoiled, sleepy, cheap... well, you get the idea.

Wedged between the eastern Adriatic coast of central Italy and the Apennine mountain range, Le Marche is on the same latitude as southern Tuscany and Umbria. You would expect therefore that the climate would be similar, and indeed in some ways it is. However, the narrow gap between

the mountains and the sea means cooling breezes in the summer and a good deal more snow in the winter.

Flying into Ancona airport, you get the first indication of how confident this region is about its future. A big shiny new terminal has been built to welcome the new rush of tourists from the rest of Europe. Up until now, tourism has been largely restricted to native holidaymakers. The Adriatic is clean, beautiful and there is no doubt that if you are looking for this kind of thing, they do it very well here. However, it is inland where Le Marche's real beauty lies.

Wherever you may be in Le Marche, you are not far from the limestone crags and gorges of the Apennines. They form the backdrop to the lovely rounded hills, speckled with mediaeval villages, which make up the body of the region. Highly protected and often designated National Park, they are topped by an unusual high plateau which, in the spring, is covered with flowers as far as the eye can see.



Clockwise from above: the gorges of the Apennines; harvest in Le Marche; a typical hilltown; verdant Le Marche country; life at a leisurely pace



STUNNINGLY BEAUTIFUL AT ALL TIMES OF THE YEAR"

Possibly the easiest to get to of these extraordinary flower fields is just inland from the small town of Cagliari. A seven mile drive up into the mountains will take you to the summit of Monte Petrano, where the wild daffodil display will take your breath away.

CALL OF THE WILD

I am keen to underline the wild and woolly nature of these hills. There are hundreds of miles of trekking to be had, and you may well see wildlife rarely spotted in Europe – golden eagles, porcupines and even the occasional wolf. This is real frontier territory, a fact that has contributed so much to the remarkable difficulty the Italians have had in unifying their country. Take care, but if you are a walker you really must have a crack at these hills. Oh, and of course skiing with a young family here is just great. Safe off-piste snowboarding and informal village resorts are relaxing and laid- >>



Making it in **Le Marche**

Robin Shuckburgh talks to two British entrepreneurs who have moved to Le Marche to set up a holiday apartments business and asks how they have got on



In true pioneer spirit, Bob Garner and Ian Richards, two experienced and successful businessmen from London, have bought a stunning farmhouse just south of Macerata, and are converting it into holiday apartments.

Ian is a project manager by profession and Bob was the chief executive of an animal welfare charity. It could be said

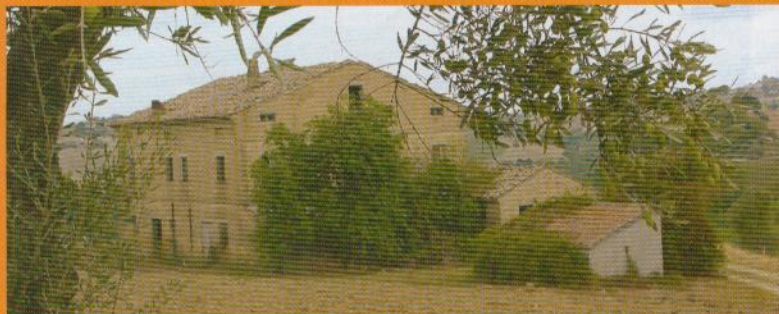
they have an in-built advantage over the rest of us but their example might easily be a lesson to anyone planning a house purchase in Le Marche.

Firstly, they chose the house with great care. They bought in an area which combines all the best of the region. Stunning views, easy access to the mountains and the sea, and, perhaps above all, a friendly and welcoming local population.

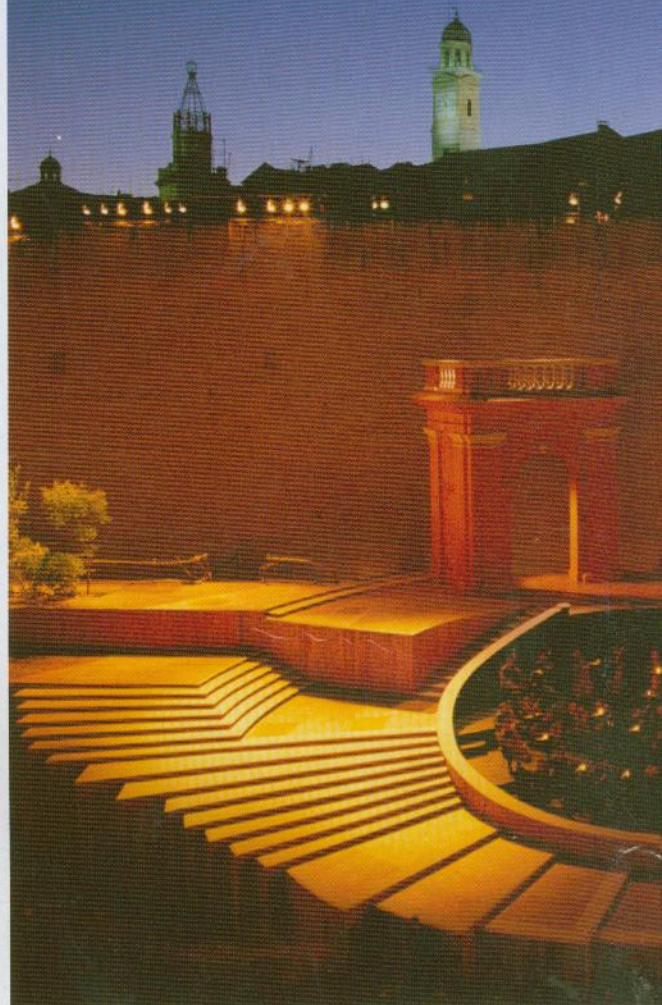
They put huge contingency into their plans, so that even the loss of four months building work, as a result of the appalling winter this year, hasn't phased them. Bob told me the secret. "Planning really is critical. Maintain the enthusiasm but temper it with as comprehensive a practical view as you can. Most of all, use local expertise."

Bob and Ian are doing most of the non-structural work themselves. However, from day one, they have used local builders for structural work, as it is they who have the understanding of earthquake regulations, suppliers and so on.

They bought the house in March 2004, and expect to open for business in April 2006. Not usually a betting man, I would put a tenner on them making it in time. If you would like to track their progress visit their website, www.casaldeifichi.com. It is a fascinating diary of their work on the project, from the emotional horror of the death of their cat, to more practical matters like the enormous local cost of window frames. Theirs have been manufactured and shipped from Manchester!



Above: Bob Garner and Ian Richards get stuck into their new life in Le Marche



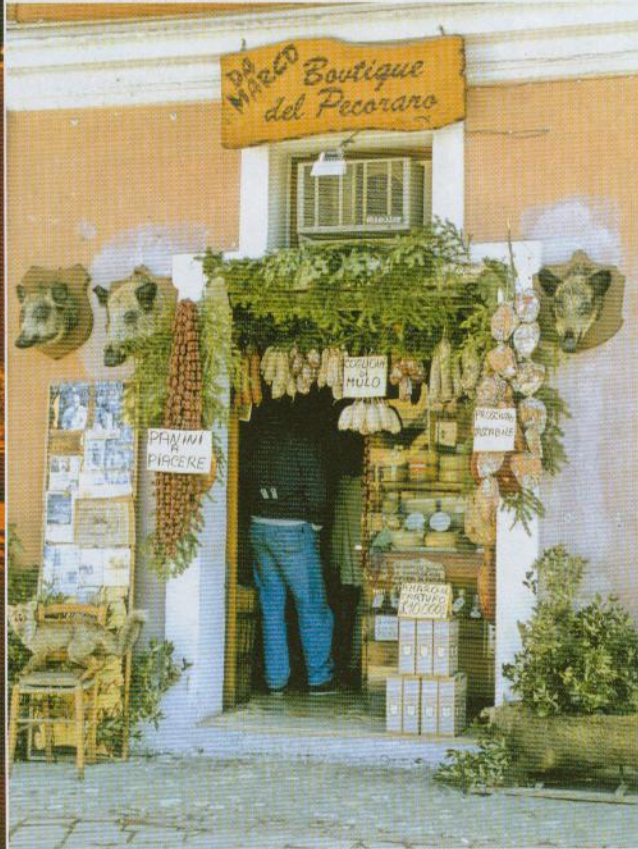
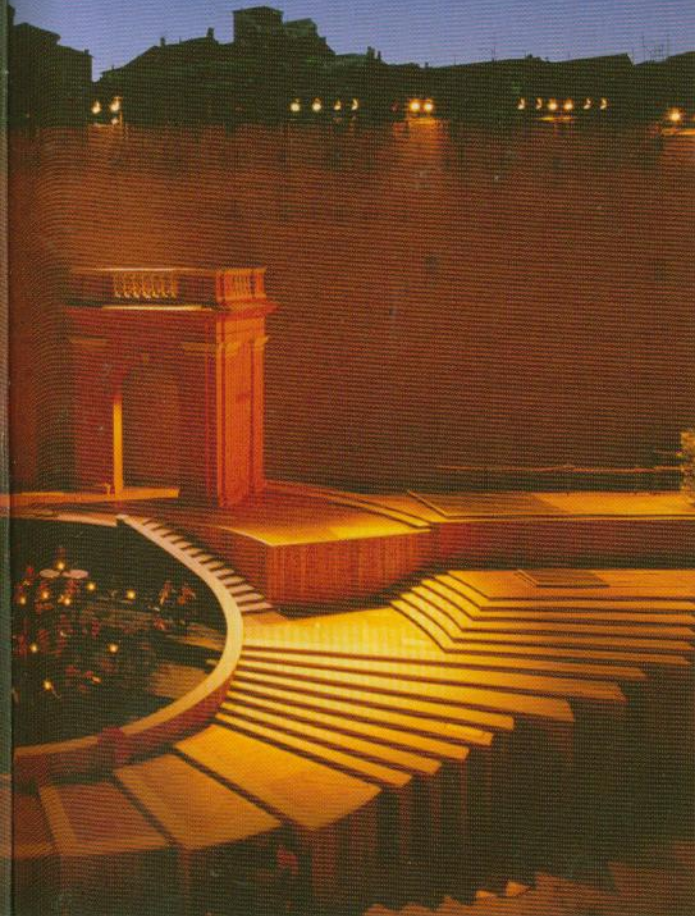
back. It doesn't compare with the Alps and it's not a long season, but if you are anything like me, they offer a relief from the first-on-the-lift mentality.

The town of Cagli is well worth a visit. The main square is pretty, well served by friendly bars, and features the work of Francesco di Giorgio Martini, a Quattrocento military architect who built fortified buildings in many of the northern Marche towns. His style is unusual to say the least. His buildings always seem to me to look upside-down. The most famous is in Sassocorvaro and it played protective host during the World War II to many of the greatest works of art from Venice, Milan and Florence, as well as Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation* from Urbino's Palazzo Ducale.

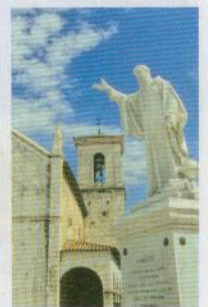
Urbino is the capital of this northern area of Le Marche and it's here that one starts to realize the confidence and strength the Renaissance leaders had. The Ducale palace is up there amongst the best Italian stately homes. Built by Duke Federico da Montefeltro, with the help Martini, it is a great rambling place, filled with remarkable works of art. Of all the great *palazzi* I have been lucky enough to visit in Italy, this one feels most like a home.

Driving south from Urbino into the Verdicchio vineyards of central Le Marche, you come to the perfect small town of Pergola. Founded in the 13th century, this town houses,

“THERE IS A REAL TREASURE-TROVE OF ART AND NATURAL BEAUTY TO DISCOVER”



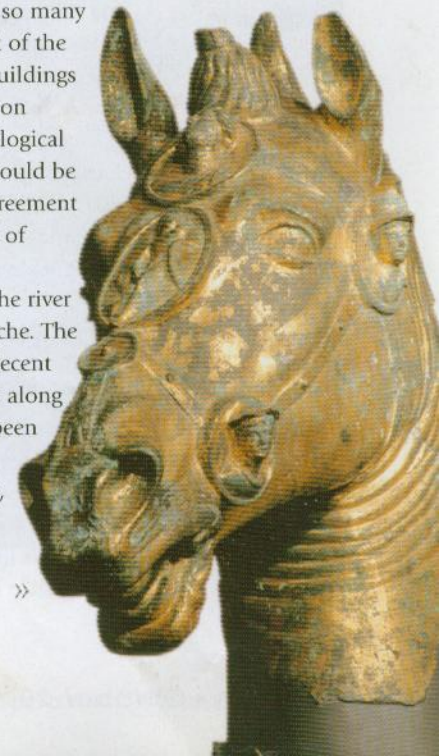
Clockwise from below: Norcia's central piazza; Urbino's spectacular palazzi; Macerata's magnificent amphitheatre; a typical store selling local produce



for at least part of the year, some gilded bronze statues which date from no later than the first century AD. They were found in 1946, in pieces, in a nearby field. Their importance, whilst obvious for their antiquity, is enhanced by the fact that they are symbolic of one of the more extraordinary things about Le Marche. Unlike so many parts of Italy, or indeed the world, a huge part of the artistic legacy of the region is housed in the buildings for which it was created. There is a row going on between the people of Pergola and the archeological museum in Ancona as to where the statues should be housed. It is currently at stalemate with an agreement that they should be shared. I hope the people of Pergola hold out.

The vineyards from here on, southward to the river Esino, are probably the best known in Le Marche. The local Verdicchio grape has been making half decent white wine here for a very long time. Recently, along with so many parts of Italy, the standard has been rising steadily. I could wax lyrical about the individual growers performing miracles where, in the past, no decent wine could be made, but this article isn't about wine. So I will just mention Antonio Terni, an ex-nuclear

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"IT'S INLAND WHERE LE MARCHE'S REAL BEAUTY LIES"



Above: Locals attend one of many typical Marche markets

Top: Local children celebrate a festival in traditional dress

physicist and diehard Bob Dylan fan. Just south of Ancona, Antonio has been making magical wines, which he names after Dylan albums or songs. If you are feeling very rich indeed, try Planet Waves, Rosso Conero 2003.

The town of Jesi is also a must. The 14th-century city walls enclose a maze of medieval streets. If you come here this autumn, go to the opera in the Teatro Pergolesi. Built in the 18th century, it is named after Jesi's most famous son, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, composer, born here in 1710. Sitting in this beautiful theatre listening to Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*, written, incidentally, just before his early death at the age of 26, is pretty close to heaven.

Heading south again, the next stop is Cingoli. This town, widely known as the 'balcony of Le Marche' has one of the rare English ex-pat communities in the region. It's hardly surprising, as its beauty is exceptional. Almost hanging from the side of the mountains, the views eastward are truly breathtaking. It is famous locally for catching the last rays of the evening sun and has, as a result, a wonderfully peaceful atmosphere.

There are several good local restaurants here where you can get a selection of the local cuisine. Food in Le Marche is still very much based on the peasant tradition. There are few concessions to international taste. Whilst local dishes vary, there is a general emphasis on foods gleaned from the wild. Game, nuts, herbs and, of course, their world renowned *funghi* and truffles. The aim of most local cooks is to reproduce the dishes *Mama* used to make.

There is little English spoken in the region, so unless your Italian is good, you may find yourself working by

instinct. Be brave, as you will be rewarded. In the early days, I found that watching what other people were eating and pointing a lot was useful. Not surprisingly, on the coast, there is a plethora of good fish restaurants. Look out for the *brodetto*, a stew with 13 different varieties of fish.


Like all Italians, they take their food seriously. There are food and wine events throughout the year, which are always worth visiting. In September, there is a mushroom fair in Piandimilato, near Urbino, and a grape festival in Cupramotana, and in late October, the truffle fair at Acqualagna, near Cagli, all of which should not be missed. For a full list of events, visit the website www.le-marche.com, which is an excellent source of general information.


MAGNIFICENT MACERATA

Now, as you travel further south, visit Macerata, which has an enormous neoclassical arena, built in the 1820s, where a world class opera festival takes place every July. It is here that I started my property search. Just south of Macerata I found some of the most exciting rural property. The economy of the region has moved away from agriculture and farmhouses have been deserted for the luxuries of new homes with double glazing. There are many great houses to be found but bear in mind this is an earthquake zone, so renovation is almost always necessary and can be expensive.

As I hope you will have gathered, the region offers an insight into rural Italian life not nearly so easily found in northern territories. There are very few English residents, hardly any English spoken, and there is a real treasure-trove of art and natural beauty to discover. **TIM**


GETTING THERE

 **Air** – Fly to Ancona with Ryanair (08712 460000; www.ryanair.com) from London Stansted.

 **Road** – P&O Ferries sail from Dover to Calais (08705 202020; www.poferries.com). Take the E15 from Calais to Lyon, then follow the A32/43 to Turin. From there, take the A4 to Milan, join the A1 to Bologna and then follow the A14 into Le Marche.

 **Rail** – TGV trains run from Paris to Milan. From there take ES Rail to Ancona. Contact Rail Europe for timetables and ticket prices (08705 848848; www.raileurope.co.uk).

WHERE TO EAT

 In Ascoli Piceno, try the local specialities at the friendly **Le Locandiera** (Via Goldoni 2; +39 0736 262509). Expect to pay around €20 per head.


In Ancona, head for **Passetto** (Piazza IV Novembre 1; +39 071 33214) for great food and



wonderful views across the Adriatic. Meals cost around €45.

Rosa (Via Armaroli 17; +39 0733 260124) is one of the better restaurants in Macerata, serving excellent wine and reliable local dishes. Meals start from around €30.

WHERE TO STAY


 **Locanda San Rocco** (Fraz. Collaiello 2; +39 0737 642324) just outside Castel Raimondo, is a converted farmhouse with plenty of atmosphere. It is part of a huge estate that provides the area with

all its fruit, vegetables and meat, so expect to eat well. Double rooms start at €85.

Il Sambuco (Sant' Ippolito; +39 3471554804) is a cosy B&B on the edge of the beautiful Monte Sibillini National Park. Prices start from €30 per person.

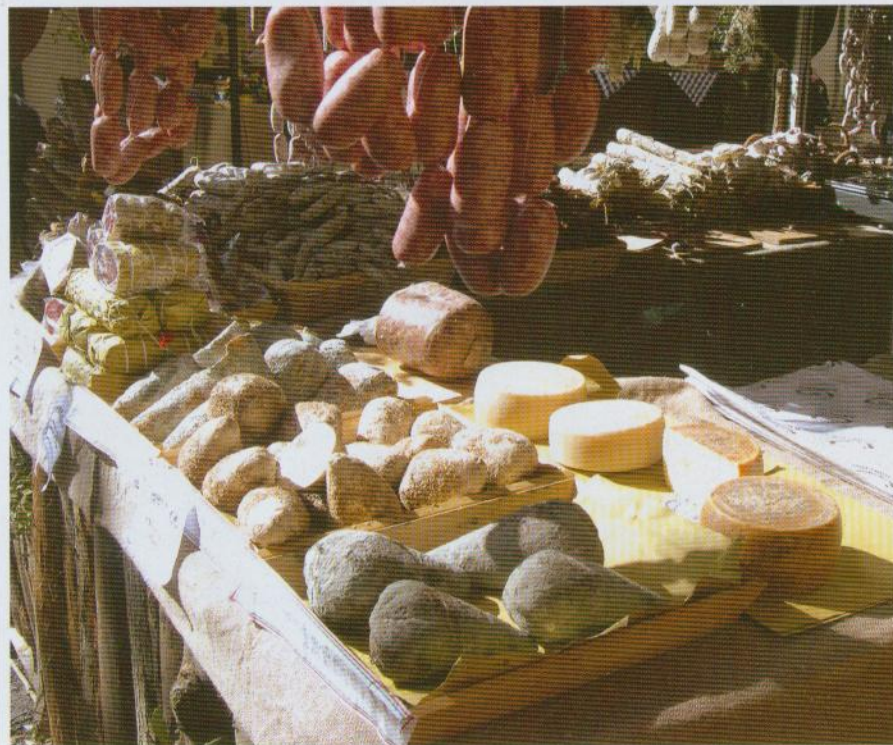
In Ancona, try **Hotel della Rosa** (Piazza Roselli 3; +39 071 41388), a reasonably priced place close to the centre of town. Doubles start from around €88.

CLIMATE

 Le Marche by and large has long, hot summers and mild winters. However, the high altitudes of the Monte Sibillini park can throw up unpredictable conditions.

TOURIST INFORMATION

 **Ancona tourist office:** Via Thon de Revel 4; +39 071 358991
Urbino tourist office: Via Puccinotti 3; +39 0722 2613
Ascoli Piceno tourist office: Piazza del Popolo; +39 0736 253045



Above left to right: Mouth-watering local cheese and sausages on sale at a typical market; the lush rolling hills of Le Marche countryside