

# *MEDIEVAL HILLTOWNS of ITALY*

## Central Italian Gems North of Rome, South of Florence

September 22-28, 2012



### INTRODUCTION

One of Venture Out's most popular tours in our early days (1998-2001) was our "Hilltowns of Tuscany" itinerary. Here's another take on that with a whole new assortment of amazing medieval towns that you've probably never been to but are well worth your while to experience! Our tour meets in Rome before heading north to explore the wonderful towns and cities of **Orvieto, Assisi, Perugia, Bevagna and Montefalco**, among others. Also on our program are unique opportunities to enjoy a fun **cooking session** at a beautiful historic winery (and enjoy the meal afterwards, of course!) and to visit fascinating **local artisans' workshops** (handpainted ceramics and handwoven fabrics) which focus on the continuation of beautiful medieval and Renaissance craftsmanship.

This in-depth exploration of Central Italy's marvelous medieval hilltowns and bucolic landscapes will take us to the "must-see" highlights as well as off the beaten track for some much less common and very interesting sights and activities. This is an area with an exceedingly rich art history, lavish natural beauty, stunning ancient towns, and of course, delicious cuisine and excellent wines!

The countryside here is rustically pretty, with steep hills and narrow valleys. The region is often called the "Green Heart of Italy" (and is officially known as Umbria). Its tidy, beautiful hilltowns are of pinkish gray stone. From some spots you can see several at a time, like an archipelago of islands crowned with villages, one behind the other, vanishing into the horizon. Each of them is crammed with artistic and architectural treasures.

## VentureOut

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Gastronomic credentials here include the highly prized truffle, found only here and one other area in the country. These strange delicacies have been coveted since Roman times for their aromatic, not to mention aphrodisiac qualities. The local pasta, meat and game, delicious olive oil, and cheese all add to the alluring mix.

## ITINERARY

### Day 1, Meet in Rome

**Saturday, September 22, 2012**

We will come together at our hotel in the incredible “Eternal City” in the early evening for a welcome *aperitivo* before walking to our carefully chosen restaurant for an excellent dinner in one of Rome’s lively and characterful neighborhoods.



Overnight in Rome.

*Meals included: Welcome Drink, Welcome Dinner*

{**Please Note:** If you’ve never been to Rome before we strongly encourage you to spend more time here since the focus of this tour is not Rome. We can arrange extra nights for you at our group hotel in Rome before and/or after our tour depending on your travel plans. We can arrange a private transfer from the Rome airport to the hotel if you wish. Taxis are also available from the airport as well as an express train to the central station in Rome (“Termini”), from where a taxi is recommended to reach the hotel.}



### Day 2 - Orvieto

Leaving Rome this morning we head north about 90 minutes to the spectacularly sited city of **Orvieto**, sitting atop a magnificent crag — a 1,000-ft sheer-cliffed mesa created by an ancient volcano, which also enriched the hillsides below with special minerals to produce Orvieto's famous white wine. The city is home to one of Italy's finest

Gothic cathedrals. Its awe-inspiring facade alone took over 300 years to complete and features amazing mosaics, while inside is Luca Signorelli's stunning "Last Judgment," certainly one of the great Italian fresco cycles of the Renaissance. We'll also see the Palazzo del Popolo, a splendid example of a 12th-century civic building made of tufa stone and perfectly harmonized with the medieval character of the city. Our lunch will be in one of Orvieto's best restaurants -- not a fancy kind of place, but excellent traditional food abounds here. The city has many pretty shops and cafes interspersed within alluring narrow and winding streets to spend some free time in this afternoon. You may wish to descend into the surprising St. Patrick's Well — a very deep well with two spiral staircases in a double-helix inside, each with 248 steps! Built in the 1500s to provide an emergency water supply in the event of a siege, this amazing structure was the work of the papal architect Sangallo the Younger.

After our visit of Orvieto we'll continue about an hour to the beautiful hilltown of **Assisi** where we will check in to our next hotel -- our 5-star base for the remainder of the trip. A gorgeous spa (built over ancient Roman remains from the 1st century AD), excellent restaurant, beautiful architecture dating from the 13th century, and a flair for modern design combined with a respect for its history are a few of this hotel's very attractive features. (See [Accommodations](#) farther down in the program.) Dinner is included this evening.

*Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

### **Day 3 – Assisi**

Today is dedicated to the wonders of **Assisi** — the city of Saint Francis — perhaps one of Italy's most famous small towns and one of its loveliest. We'll take in the Piazza del Comune (the town's main square) with its medieval buildings and the interesting ancient Roman temple of Minerva, recently beautifully restored. Below the piazza is the newly opened Museum of the Roman Forum where we explore the remains of a large Roman public area. We'll also see the lovely Basilica of Santa Chiara as well as the San Rufino Cathedral.



After lunch we arrive at one of Italy's "biggies" -- the Basilica of Saint Francis — with its upper and lower churches containing masterpieces of Italian medieval art by Giotto, Cimabue, and Martini. Afterwards, a little way outside the center of town is San Damiano, an austere stone monastery in a very peaceful, tranquil setting.

Dinner this evening is on your own. There are several places to dine scattered about Assisi, from simple *trattorie* to more refined restaurants. Assisi is a fairly compact town so you can walk to and from your dinner venue.

*Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch*



#### **Day 4 – Spello & Bevagna**

We begin today in nearby sweet **Spello** where we'll enjoy a guided tour of this medieval hilltown, admiring its pink and cream stone houses lounging under Mount Subasio and overlooking the Valle Umbra. The highlights here are the noteworthy Renaissance fresco by Pinturicchio in the Cappella Baglioni and three excellently preserved Roman-era gates.

Then we pop over to **Bevagna**, a charming ancient town -- and the only one on our itinerary that's not so hilly! The main square of Piazza S. Silvestro is flanked by two Romanesque-period jewels: the Church of San Michele and

the Church of San Silvestro, both facing the 13th-century Palazzo dei Consoli. Bevagna is famous for its *Mercato delle Gaite*, an annual 10-day event during which village life is transformed to medieval times, where every aspect of daily life is reproduced as it was during those times. The most interesting aspect of the fair is the authentic old workshops that still operate using medieval techniques. For the rest of the year these workshops are normally closed to the public, but we have arranged a special visit of four of the principal medieval workshops: the *Cartiera* (paper making), the *Cereria* (candle making); the *Setificio* (silk making), and the *Dipintore* (painting on wood).

After a delicious lunch in Bevagna we return to Assisi where you can enjoy the indulging facilities of our hotel or perhaps you'd like to hike up to the fortress above town and soak in the wonderful views of the Umbrian countryside from there. Dinner this evening is on your own.

*Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch*



### **Day 5 - Montefalco and Cooking Session / Winery**

**Montefalco**, the "balcony of Umbria," offers wonderful views over the region from the Appenines to the Martani mountains, and it's also home to some superb wines. This charming town is completely surrounded by its medieval walls with five gates. We'll stroll the town a bit and visit its main historical attraction, the Church of San Francesco with its famous Renaissance frescoes by Benozzo Gozzoli and Perugino.

Then it's just a few miles' drive out into the countryside to a very lovely historic villa, now a **winery**, where we delve into our **cooking session** and wine tasting. With a hands-on approach we visit traditional cooking techniques, such as terracotta pot cooking for dried pulses or meats roasted or pizzas baked in a wood stove. We'll learn the art of making gnocchi and taste dishes scented with wild aromatic herbs and dressed with organic extra virgin olive oil right from the immediate surroundings. We'll prepare (and enjoy!) a complete seasonal menu with an antipasto, first course, second course with vegetable side dishes, and dessert based on genuine Umbrian ingredients. Accompanying wines from the estate are served with each course. We also get to take home a set of printed recipes. (If you're not into cooking, not to worry. There's no requirement to participate in the actual preparation/cooking, yet it's still a fun experience.)

After returning to our relaxing hotel in Assisi the remainder of the day and evening are free.

*Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch*



### **Day 6 - Deruta & Perugia**

This morning we head over to **Deruta**, very well known as one of Italy's production centers of traditional handpainted ceramics (*maiolica*). We'll enter into one of the finest **maiolica workshops**, where master artisans will welcome us to demonstrate their ancient production processes. Since the early Renaissance some of the most beautiful *maiolica* in Italy has been handmade here in Deruta. We'll have the opportunity to observe the entire production cycle, from throwing to glazing to decoration, and to admire the typical forms and decorations that have made the name Deruta famous

the world over for its ceramics. You will certainly appreciate both the quality of the objects made here and those who create them with such great passion. For those who wish to acquire some of this beautiful art, there will be pieces available for sale.

After this wonderful local experience we make our way up to the Umbrian capital: **Perugia** — an intensely atmospheric place sheltering some of the most authentic medieval streets in all Europe, and also very well known for its chocolates! We begin with a visit to another traditional artisan. In a former church that dates back to the early 1200s we call in at a **weaving workshop** where the artists create beautiful items by hand based on ancient weaving traditions -- pillow covers, tablecloths, napkins, bedspreads, curtains and so forth. You will be able to purchase items if you wish.

After lunch in Perugia our visits will include the city's wonderful "main drag" of Corso Vannucci; the 13th-century Fontana Maggiore (one of Italy's nicest) with its 48 double relief-panels sculpted by Pisano father and son; and the Collegio del Cambio with extraordinary frescos by Perugino (teacher of Raphael). Then it's time on your own to explore as you wish: stroll the back streets; relax in a cafe on the Corso Vannucci; peruse the upscale shops; or take in the National Gallery of Umbria with its masterpieces of Gothic art by Pinturicchio, Perugino, Fra Angelico, and Piero della Francesca.



After returning to our hotel you may wish to indulge at the spa before we reconvene for our farewell dinner where we can review the week's sights, sounds, and smells and debate which were the "best." (There's no correct outcome on that . . . )

*Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

## **Day 7 – Departure**

### **Friday, September 28, 2012**

This morning it will be difficult to tear ourselves away from our beautiful accommodation here. After breakfast you are free to depart according to your onward travel plans. Assisi has a train station with routes going north (towards Florence, Milan, Venice, etc.) and south (towards Rome, Naples, Amalfi Coast). The station is a 10-minute taxi ride from our hotel. We can also arrange private transportation for you anywhere in the country.

*Meals included: Breakfast*

## ACCOMMODATIONS

The following are the hotels that we plan to use for the tour at the time of publishing this itinerary. We reserve the right to make changes to the accommodations.



### Rome – 1 night

We have selected a beautiful hotel in an excellent central location. Located right by the Tiber River, it is perfectly positioned to reach many of Rome's attractions by foot. It is located just off the Via Giulia, easily one of Rome's prettiest streets. Just a few minutes' walk will take you to the Campo de' Fiori – Rome's most famous and lively outdoor market place. A few more minutes and you could be

at the amazing Piazza Navona, the old Jewish quarter, the Pantheon, the Trevi Fountain, or the Spanish Steps. In the other direction from the hotel you cross a pedestrian bridge over the Tiber and find yourself in the heart of Rome's characterful Trastevere district. The hotel has one of the prettiest patio-courtyards in Rome, an enchanting spot shadowed by palm trees, set with tables, and adorned with pink and white flowers, all surrounded by the ochre walls of the hotel, which was renovated from a Renaissance palazzo built by a noble Venetian family. Inside, the sleek decor features cherry wood accents, recessed lighting, and luminous marble floors. All rooms have internet access, minibar, satellite TV, air conditioning, and a safe.



### Assisi – 5 nights

Assisi may be known for pilgrimages, but our new five-star hotel has brought luxury and just a touch of decadence to the city of Saint Francis. The historic structure has an austere stone façade, reminding us that it was once a monastery, built in 1275. But this former religious residence is anything but spartan; it's stylish and sensual. Vaulted ceilings and exposed stone give a rustic hint of

history, but they contrast with modern furnishings. Glass and chrome meld with ancient fresco fragments and old wooden beams. Each of the 18 rooms is unique, all of them occupying space that once housed the sisters of a Benedictine order. Now they're spacious and airy, outfitted with swanky contemporary furnishings and high-tech gadgetry. Sleek white contrasts with the natural sandstone. The underground spa is unique. Ensnared within the remains of a Roman archeological site, the pool is surrounded by ancient pillars. A flight of steps once led to a Roman temple, but now this site is dedicated to the human temple, and worshiping takes the form of massage, facials

and salt scrubs. The hotel's restaurant uses only local produce to serve up artfully presented seasonal fare that takes traditional Umbrian dishes far beyond their peasant origins. The monastery's main cloister is now a retreat for alfresco dining.



#### **TOUR COST and IMPORTANT TRIP DETAILS**

\$3,595 per person (with 14-15 participants)

\$3,795 per person (with 11-13 participants)

\$3,995 per person (with 8-10 participants)

Tour pricing is based on double occupancy.

Single supplement: \$495

A note about tier pricing: There are certain fixed costs involved with operating a trip of this nature regardless of the number of participants who have signed up. As you can imagine, with a smaller number of group members, the fixed costs per person are higher. In order to cover those fixed costs for a smaller-sized group, rather than cancel a trip due to a low number of sign-

ups, we prefer to charge a bit extra in order to ensure that the trip can run.

Costs are based on double occupancy of a room. If you are traveling alone and wish to share a room, we will match you with a roommate if one is available. Should there be no one to pair you with, the single supplement fee will apply.

#### **Tour Cost Includes:**

- o Accommodations for 6 nights in carefully selected 5-star and 4-star properties (see descriptions above)
- o Buffet breakfast each morning in the hotels
- o Lunch every day (except the arrival and departure days), including wine and mineral water
- o Dinner on Days 1, 2, and 6
- o Welcome drink
- o Entrance fees for all sights mentioned in itinerary
- o Licensed private tour guide for all towns mentioned in itinerary
- o Visits to ceramic and weaving artisan workshops
- o Hands-on cooking session with wine tasting
- o Tour escort accompanying the group throughout
- o Ground transportation in a private comfortable bus and driver's services, room, and board

#### **Tour Cost Does Not Include:**

Airfare; any meals not specified above; beverages with the included dinners; additional accommodations pre- or post-tour that may be desired or necessitated by flight schedules or other factors; transportation from the airport to the hotel in Rome; tipping; travel insurance; passports; and other expenses of a personal nature such as minibar charges, laundry, telephone calls, etc.

**Currency Exchange Rates:** Our costs to operate this tour are tied directly and entirely to the exchange rate between the Euro and the Dollar. Over the past few years the value of the U.S. dollar has fluctuated in quite a volatile manner against the Euro — and generally in an unfavorable direction for the dollar. *We reserve the right to alter the trip pricing indicated here should there be a significant fluctuation of the dollar.* Please read the Terms & Conditions that accompany the Trip Enrollment Form.

**Tipping:** In an effort to make it as simple and seamless for our guests as possible, on some trips, such as this one, we think it's better to collect some tip funds from you at the beginning of the tour on Day 1 so that you don't have to fuss with that every day as you go along. These tip funds will be distributed by the tour escort as the trip unfolds to the wait staff in restaurants, drivers, and hotel porters. We prefer that you tip the local tour guide directly at the end of the tour.

**TRIP PACING & OTHER THINGS TO KNOW:** We have structured the days in this program in the most logically flowing way in order to keep driving times to a minimum and to avoid repetition of roads. However, some days will see more driving than others. None of the driving is done at long, uninterrupted intervals. We stop often throughout the day for our visits, thus breaking up the day's activities. Our transportation will be in a comfortable small tour bus, and at no time will it feel like an endless road trip. Day 2 will involve the most driving: about two and a half hours in total but broken up by our several hours in Orvieto. Total driving time on the other days should be between 1 and 2 hours.



As you might expect from the title of this tour, the towns we visit throughout the itinerary are hilly. We cannot drive through them on our bus (even on a small bus) as the roads inside the towns are from medieval days. We have to explore the towns on foot, and the hilliness might pose a challenge to those who have any walking issues. Please check with us if you have concerns in this area.

Each day's activities are, of course, optional. You are free to stay back at "home base" and while away the time as you wish at our beautiful and relaxing hotel/spa or just to take in more of Assisi on your own.



**FOOD FOR THOUGHT ---  
SOME TYPICAL DISHES  
FROM THIS PART OF ITALY...**

**ANTIPASTI (appetizers)**

*Bruschetta*: toasted bread rubbed with olive oil and garlic or sometimes truffles

*Crostini*: thin slices of toast with a piquant paté spread of chicken liver, anchovies, capers and lemons, or other variations

**PRIMI (first courses)**

*Minestra di Farro*: a soup made with a popular local grain (spelt) and cooked with a ham bone

*Spaghetti alla Norcina*: made with a sauce of black truffles, oil, and anchovies or with sausage and cream

*Strangozzi (Stringozzi) or Ciriolo*: long pasta strands made with hand-milled flour

*Umbricelli*: Thick, chewy strand pasta, very suitable to robust pasta sauces or oil with garlic and herbs

**SECONDI (second courses)**

*Fagiano all'Uva*: pheasant cooked with grapes

*Porchetta*: roast suckling pig with garlic, rosemary, and other herbs

*Salsiccia all'Uva*: Fresh pork sausage cooked with grapes

*Piccione alla Perugina*: Squab cooked with olives

*Anguilla*: eel from Lake Trasimeno, served either grilled or braised in wine, tomatoes, onions, and garlic

**OTHER UMBRIAN FLAVORS**

*Torta sul Testo*: a flatbread cooked on hot stones

*Extra Virgin Olive Oil*: often jade green, fragrant, fruity, and sometimes very lusty. It is among the finest oils in Italy.

*Tartufi Neri e Bianchi* (black and white truffles): the most prized gourmet delicacy in Umbria. Earthy, aromatic, and aphrodisiac tubers that are very picky about where they grow. Umbria is one of their favorite spots. Except for saffron, truffles are the most expensive comestibles in the world. White truffles can command a staggering \$200 an ounce; black are much less, but still expensive.

## **DOLCI (desserts)**

*Fichi*: excellent figs come from Amelia, near Orvieto

*Pan Nociato*: a rich dessert made of bread, pecorino cheese, raisins, walnuts, cloves, red wine, all wrapped and baked in grape leaves

*Pinoccata*: a cookie made with pine nuts, lemon peel, orange peel, sugar, and sometimes chocolate

*Torcolo*: a sweet roll that contains pine nuts, raisins, anise seed, and sometimes candied fruit

## **VINO (wine)**

*Orvieto* and *Orvieto Classico*: the most famous wine in the region. A pleasant white that can range from bone dry to buttery creaminess.

*Sagrantino di Montefalco*: a wine that is well known to connoisseurs and almost unknown to everyone else. Made with at least 95% Sagrantino grapes and perhaps a few Trebbiano Toscano grapes to lighten this intense and powerful wine.

*Torgiano*: from a town of the same name.

Wine has been made here since Etruscan times. Includes magnificent dry, full-bodied reds that can take years of ageing, and a light and lively bianco.

*Rosso di Montefalco*: made of approximately 65% Sangiovese, plus Trebbiano Toscano and Sagrantino grapes, which give this wine its particular richness.

*Vin Santo* (holy wine): The most famous dessert wine here is a rich, deep unctuous golden wine made from semi-dried grapes. It's sweet and strong, and "holy" only perhaps because priests are so fond of it.



## **CAVEAT**

While as accurate as possible at the time of printing, this itinerary should be considered an approximate indication of the schedule and scope of activities, trip routing, and meals, rather than an inflexible schedule of events; it is subject to change due to circumstances beyond our control. We reserve the right to maintain flexibility in order to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities. This trip is subject to the Limitation of Liability and all the Terms and Conditions as detailed in the Trip Enrollment Form.

To realize the maximum enjoyment from your Venture Out trip, we encourage participants to have flexibility, a sense of humor, curiosity and enthusiasm about new people and places, and an openness to the unexpected. With a spirit of adventure and positive attitude, we're sure you will have a very special travel experience. If you are uncertain about the level of comfort, difficulty, or any of the activities described in this itinerary, please email us or call Venture Out at 1-888-431-6789 to discuss your concerns.

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