



An Italian adventure

BACK TO NATURE: Stunning scenery, leisurely lunches and getting up close to the people and animals of the mountain villages is all in a day's ride in Umbria

As we urged our horses up the final incline our guide Agostino turned around in his saddle, made a dramatic sweep with his arm to indicate the view and, smiling, declared 'bella vista'. We halted alongside him and, temporarily silenced by the magnificent scenery, let our eyes drink in the striking mountains and valleys.

It was indeed a bella vista, one of many we'd experienced riding in the mountains of southern Umbria, Italy.

As beautiful as Tuscany, but with fewer visitors, Umbria was proving to be a real hit with all our party – and exploring the mountain tracks and

LESLEY BAYLEY EXPLORES THE MOUNTAINS ON HORSEBACK ON A RIDING HOLIDAY IN ITALY'S UMBRIA REGION

medieval villages on horseback was a superb way to see the country.

However, we were immersing ourselves in much more than the scenery. Our hosts, the Bevilacqua family, follow the tradition of the extended family living together. Meal times were therefore very social affairs with as many as 18 to 20 people sitting down

together – and on our trip just five of these were guests!

While the younger members of the family spoke English the older ones knew only a few words, so it was an opportunity to learn some Italian. Our hosts were also keen to try out their English and it wasn't long before everyone had added to their vocabulary of either Italian or English.

Taste of Umbria

One of the advantages of going on a riding holiday is that you get closer to the real people and the real country – this is perhaps why equine tourism is growing, with many horse owners and riders choosing to ride abroad.

The beauty of an 'Umbrian Adventure' trip is that the Bevilacqua family can cater for any level of rider. For almost 30 years they have run a riding school, and although they keep the trail and school horses separately, it is possible to have a combination of lessons and trail riding.

One of our party, Jenny, had ridden for just two-and-a-half hours before



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deciding to try a riding holiday. Luckily, she'd selected the right venue for her first holiday, as she was able to enjoy tuition and then put her skills to the test on the trail. Through careful planning of the routes, Jenny was able to take a slower, shorter route than the rest of us but was able to meet everyone for lunch and at other points throughout the day. The other good news was that she certainly didn't miss out on any of the wonderful views we enjoyed.

'I liked the idea of a riding holiday and after just five lessons took the plunge and booked my holiday, but as the departure date drew nearer I started to wonder what I'd done,' said Jenny. 'I've had a lovely time though. The lessons earlier in the week helped my confidence and then I was able to put everything into practice on the day rides. The horses and the tuition have been excellent. Surprisingly, my muscles haven't ached as much as I thought they would either.'

Clare Pedrick, an Englishwoman who is married to an Italian and has lived in the area for some years, guides the rides along

with one of the family. Clare checks out the details supplied by guests and allocates the horses. The horses she selected for me were great fun to ride – Ercolino, a little bay Argentinian horse who was very manoeuvrable, light and responsive to ride with comfy paces, and Ares, a grey Anglo-Arab who is normally ridden by one of the guides. As a result he likes to be in front and once again he was a very responsive ride and light in the mouth.

IN THE SADDLE: Half and full day rides across rolling hills and mountaintops are punctuated by rest stops to give the riders chance to enjoy the views

Stunning scenery

We had half and full day rides, with the scenery ranging from open country on the rolling hills and mountaintops to serene woodland tracks. Along the various routes we'd pass small medieval hill villages where it seemed time had stopped.

Our travels took us past tiny chapels in the middle of nowhere, abandoned villages, small farms and a superb private estate known as the Butterfly Park. On one ride we rode back over the hills via a village poised on a rock outcrop, which was home to just two people, an old man and a woman.





AL FRESCO: Meal times are very social affairs (above); trail guides Agostino and Clare (above right)

Each ride was different and on each occasion it seemed we learned more about the way of life in this corner of Umbria. For instance, we rode through the chestnut woods and learned that each smallholder in the area has about 100 trees and they each know which trees belong to them! The chestnuts are harvested around October time and are sold for various uses, for example marron glacé.

On many of our rides we glimpsed views of a disappearing way of life and saw contrasting lifestyles. We saw one man mowing his acre or so of hay meadow by walking behind a machine powered by a small diesel engine, and just further on, in the chestnut woods, another farmer driving a huge new John Deere

tractor. The following day we rode past the hay meadow again – there was still half of it to cut.

Most of the locals are self-sufficient to some degree, raising a few sheep or cows on their land, growing a few vines, harvesting chestnuts from their trees in the woodland, perhaps having a few olive trees on their smallholdings. 'Quality of life is important to people here,' explained Clare.

'Often they do not have a lot of material possessions, but they eat well and enjoy their lives. The idea of the extended family is dying out in a lot of Italy, but here in Umbria people still live as large family units. Perhaps one or two of the family members will have salaried jobs while the others will work the family's land.'

Off-road riding

As the Bevilacqua family have been in the area for many years they have access to many more trails and tracks than the public would normally be able to ride on. Most of the riding is off-road with small amounts of roadwork on quiet rural roads.

One thing that does seem alien to English riders is the idea of cantering along stony tracks – but it was commonplace on this holiday and the horses were all used to it. They were all fit and well-conditioned for their jobs. Their legs were hard and clean and as our guide Clare pointed out, her Thoroughbred 'coped with much more than most people could imagine a Thoroughbred dealing with'.

Just before we set off at speed along one track Clare advised: 'Keep your mouths shut as there are lots of tiny stones along this path, they fly up and can easily

break your teeth'. This is probably the most unusual instruction I've ever received while riding. However, her advice was indeed apt.

Good riding in fantastic countryside helps to make a holiday, but this trip scored highly in another respect as well – food! Wonderful three-course meals are provided at lunch and in the evening – sumptuous pasta, delightful pizza and tasty meat dishes accompanied by wine.

It didn't matter whether we were dining at home or in the middle of an alpine meadow during a day ride, the food was excellent. The helpings were always generous and there was more if you could possibly squeeze any extra in – so don't expect to lose weight on this holiday.

The setting for the riding centre is glorious so you could be tempted to stay put. However, you are just a short drive away from one of the major towns of the region, Spoleto. It's a well-preserved hill town where history oozes from every corner so it's a must for visitors. As you amble around you almost expect to meet characters from Romeo and Juliet. The annual wine festival was on during our stay and for 10 Euros you are armed with a glass in its own holder and a map so that you can disappear into the cellars of beautiful old buildings and sample wines and food from all over Italy.

If you've never been on a riding holiday before, an Umbrian Adventure would be a great introduction. And if you've never been to Italy, then this area would be an ideal place to start. If you're an old hand at riding holidays and visiting Italy then go anyway – you don't want to miss out on a good time!

Further information

- **Getting there:** Lesley travelled to Umbria with Unicorn Trails.
- **Trip length:** Eight days and seven nights.
- **2008 dates:** 8-15 Mar; 12-19 April; 10-17 May; 7-14 Jun*; 12-19 Jul*; 2-9 Aug*; 13-20 Sept; 11-18 Oct. Dates on request for groups of four or more. *Umbrian Summer Adventures are special trails running in June, July and August.
- **Prices:** Umbrian Adventure from £625, discount for children under 12, from £189, excluding flights; Umbrian Summer Adventure from £675, discount for children under 12, from £189, excluding flights.
- **Meeting points:** Rome airport, Spoleto or Perugia train stations.
- **Flight guide:** London to Rome return, from £50 with Ryanair. London to Perugia from £50 with Ryanair.
- Please contact Unicorn Trails for more information on 01767 600606, email info@unicorntrails.com or visit www.unicorntrails.com