



This page and opposite: Pretty hilltop towns such as Rochette with their quaint cobble streets litter the Italian region of Sabina, which is famous for producing olive oil, often served drizzled over bruschetta



WORDS: SUE WATT

A WELL-KEPT SECRET

The medieval hilltop towns of Sabina, just an hour from Rome, offer some of Italy's most beautiful landscapes, yet this bucolic haven remains relatively unknown

The Romans have done a good job of keeping Sabina to themselves, and who can blame them? With its ancient pilgrim trails and shepherds' paths, it offers an idyllic and tranquil escape from city life.

A conspiracy of silence surrounds Sabina. You'll find very little written about it in guidebooks on Italy, despite the fact that the canny Romans have been coming here for years – since around 750BC in fact, when they took a fancy to the local ladies and carried them away for breeding, an event now immortalised in Rubens' 17th-century Baroque painting *The Rape of The Sabine Women*. But it's not out of any sense of shame for past misdeeds that the Romans have been keeping quiet about Sabina – it's because they want to keep this beautiful region all to themselves.

Less than an hour from the centre of Rome, yet worlds away from

the chaos of the city, this northeastern corner of Lazio has a rustic simplicity. With the Tiber River to its eastern side and the Monti Sabini (Sabine Hills) to its west, you could be forgiven for thinking that the last few centuries had bypassed Sabina's towns and villages, many of which have been perched precariously on hilltops since the Middle Ages.

A good base to explore the area is the bustling market town of Poggio Mirteto, fairly central to the region and a good starting point for day trips to the north or south. Driving can be interesting, with roads curving around hillsides or squeezing between narrow streets, although many of the hilltop villages like Bocchignano, Rochette and Contigliano have cobbled lanes and alleyways that simply can't contend with vehicles, and remain delightfully car-free. Accommodation ranges from simple *agriturismi* (farmhouses) to a luxury hotel in nearby Poggio Catino, to stylish ►

We stopped to take in the view of patchwork groves and green oak forests that cloak the hills all around

villas with private pools, which are often essential in the summer heat. You can easily spend a week here, discovering ancient sights and taking time to soak up the gentle, relaxing atmosphere.

The tranquillity of today's Sabina belies its somewhat turbulent past and historical significance. In the south of the region, the Benedictine Farfa Abbey, dating back to the sixth century, controlled many of the villages here and was once one of the most powerful monasteries in Europe. Later it exerted tremendous political influence in struggles between the Papacy and the Roman Empire. Exquisite frescoes and friezes of biblical scenes still adorn almost every inch of the abbey's interior, but today it exerts a gentler influence over its congregation. As we arrived on a Tuesday morning to the sound of the abbey bells, people were praying quietly, piously crossing themselves. Outside, small artisan shops sell lace, candles, local delicacies and extra-virgin olive oil, regarded by many as the best in Italy.

Emphasising the significance of olive oil to the area, the pretty village of Castelnuovo di Farfa, about 4km from the abbey, is home to a rather eccentric olive museum, the Museo dell'Olio della Sabina. Located within a 15th-century *palazzetto* (town house), it contains a strange mix of eclectic modern art vaguely connected by an olive theme, together with pieces of ancient farming machinery and a photographic archive of the local olive industry. It's worth a visit simply for its audacious quirkiness.

To get a living sense of olive history, however, a visit to Le Mole sul Farfa is needed. Just outside the nearby village of Mompeo, this lovely vegetarian *agriturismo* is full of surprises, including an ancient villa Romana which the owners, Stefano and Elizabeth, excavated beneath their house. Stefano gives guided walks around the villa and his farm, which lead to the romantic Farfa River and Gorge. He took us into a refreshingly cool underground archway, with a calcified ceiling covered with pointed stalactites. In one of the rooms leading off the archway, Stefano discovered three stone troughs each about a metre square, which were used in an ancient oil-filtering process; proof that olive oil was being produced here over 2000 years ago.

As he showed us around his land – now designated a Natural Monument – we stopped to take in the breathtaking view of an intricate patchwork of groves and green oak forests that cloak the rolling hills all around. 'At sunset, I take walkers inside the villa,' Stefano explained. 'The reflection of the sun lights up the archway, turning it bright red, and then they come out here by the olive trees to see the sun go down. It's so beautiful, some people start to cry.'

Food is a crucial part of life here, as it is throughout Italy, with restaurants ranging from rustic to sophisticated. A highlight for many visitors is enjoying the atmosphere of local food festivals, which

almost every village holds at some point in the year to showcase its local produce. Casperia celebrates its famed *stringozzi* pasta in July, Selci, its spicy *porchetta* (rolled pork), in August, and Roccantica honours the humble cauliflower every March. Usually located in the historic village centres in the shadows of ancient fortresses, each festival welcomes locals and visitors from miles around.

The most famous festival of the region, however, celebrates its medieval past. In mid-August, the sleepy hilltop village of Roccantica bursts into life as crowds of people come to join in a four-day festival celebrating the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. Starting in the early evenings, we joined in, taking a bus to the top of the zig-zag road that leads to the village. From here, we walked into the main piazza, full of crests-of-arms and colourful flags flying from the ramparts of the fortress, and flame torches illuminating the huge fortifications. It was the perfect stage for the procession of local Roccanticans dressed in elaborate medieval costumes, as they walked down the cobbled streets to the sound of soulful singing. Casks of local wine and a meal of wild boar and pasta provided sustenance for the ensuing entertainment. This included a falconry display, fencing, flag-throwers, flamethrowers and fire eaters, drummers and trumpeters, and culminated in the re-enactment of a medieval play depicting the triumph of good over evil. About 500 people live in the village, and it seemed they were all involved in the celebrations. The piazza finally started to empty at about 1am, after a brilliant firework display that looked like a waterfall of stars cascading down the fortress walls lighting up the whole valley below.

However, Roccantica is worth a visit at any time of the year, with its pretty, higgledy-piggledy streets, and ancient churches. It's also the starting point for a walk along the Valle de Galantina. In the summer heat, we were rewarded with beautiful views stretching far across the red-tiled roofs of Roccantica and Montasola villages to lush farmlands and silvery olive groves. An hour later, we reached the Grotta de San Michele, an extraordinary fourth-century chapel-cave with frescoes and an altar just visible through iron gates, to which Roccanticans make a pilgrimage every year.

The countryside contains a maze of old pilgrim trails and shepherds' paths that make for some beautiful walks, such as through the wide expanse of meadows around Osteria Fadducchi or to the pretty village of Casperia. Wherever we walked, we seemed to have the hills to ourselves, accompanied only by the buzz of bees and birdsong.

Our favourite treat after a day's walk was a well-deserved cold beer or two at Da Giorgio's, a lovely small trattoria on Poggio Mirteto's main piazza. There we would sit for hours, watching Sabina life go by, wishing, like the Romans, we could keep it all to ourselves, too. ►

Opposite page: The town of Casperia (top) celebrates its local produce throughout the summer; Castelnuovo di Farfa is home to a quirky museum with an olive theme (middle right); Poggio Mirteto with its ancient church (bottom left), is fairly central to the region and makes a good base for day trips to the north or south



THE FACTS

Sabina

From when to go, where to eat and what to see, follow our guide to making the most of your visit



VITAL STATISTICS

01 WHEN TO GO
November to December for olive oil aficionados; March to June, and September to November for walkers; mid-August for the Roccaantica Medioevo in Festa festival; anytime for exploring.



02 CLIMATE
Because of the hilly terrain, Sabina's weather can be unpredictable, but generally, summer months

from July to September can be hot and humid and winter months cold and crisp, with snow on the higher summits. Spring and autumn are much like the UK seasons.

**WHAT'S ON THE MENU**

Olive oil takes centre stage in this region. Come November, every restaurant will offer their extra-virgin olive oil with crusty bread, or drizzled over bruschetta. Wild boar is a regional speciality along with porchetta, hot rolled herb-infused pork wedged inside bread rolls. Often served with tomato-based sauces, stringozzi is the local pasta.

Try La Vecchia Quercia in Selci (lavecchiaquercia.net; +39 0765 519207) for vegetarian antipasti followed by simple wild nettle ravioli in butter and sage. Locals frequent L'Antica Rocca restaurant (+39 0765 63498) for its pizzas and excellent steaks. For fine dining, try La Casina nel Parco (lacasinanelparco.com; +39 0765 26291) where fish is a speciality.



FIVE THINGS NOT TO MISS

1 MOUNTAIN HIGH
Trek to Monte Pizzuto, the region's highest peak, with views from its summit down to the Tiber River and the Tyrrhenian Sea beyond Rome.

2 RIVER LOW
Take a picnic and paddle along the cool Farfa River among brightly coloured dragonflies near Montopoli in Sabina.

3 VILLAGE PRESS
Visit an olive press with its intense grassy aroma amid the excitement of the new season's oil – anyone can call in and it's free.

4 COOK WITH A VIEW
Learn to cook Sabina-style while staying at La Torretta in Casperia, pictured. (latorrettabandb.com).



5 TIME FOR CHURCH
Wander around the church of Santa Maria in Vescovia, a former cathedral whose beauty lies in its simplicity, much like Sabina itself.

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