

Travel

Edited by Jane Memmler

Trekking down
Italy's secret
pathways

STARTING POINT: The 18th-century church of San Michele Arcangelo, in Contigliano, is the beginning of the tour

SUE WATT enjoys the beauty and solitude of pilgrims' trails and ancient ruins on a walk through the little-known Sabina region

THE ITALIAN region of Lazio is better known for its football team and bustling Roman streets than for quiet walks in beautiful rolling countryside.

In its north-eastern corner, 37 miles from Italy's capital, Sabina has remained a well-kept secret demanding local knowledge to navigate the tangled maze of shepherds' tracks and old pilgrims' trails that lead to medieval villages perched on hilltops and ancient groves that produce some of the country's finest olive oil.

These secrets are gradually unravelling, however, with a 40-mile self-guided hiking trail recently created by olive farmer Stefano Fassone, which allows visitors to explore the surrounding Sabine Hills in almost total solitude.

In five days of walking through meadows and woods, my partner and I met only a handful of farmers, a man foraging for mushrooms and an adorable black-and-brown mongrel who followed us for a whole afternoon.

Each day we walked for around four to six hours, following clearly marked routes to our next accommodation. We bedded down in a range of properties that included an elegant 15th-century palazzetto (townhouse) called La Torretta in the medieval village of Casperia and remote agriturismo (farmhouses) up in the hills. Our hosts prepared packed

lunches and transferred our luggage to the next destinations so all we had to worry about was navigating the routes.

Our trek started from the 18th-century church of San Michele Arcangelo, a massive sand-coloured building which dominates the cobbled village of Contigliano, after we'd spent the night at Locanda Bellarmino, a pretty guest house near the piazza.

We walked through cool forests where wild pink cyclamen were unfurling,



WALKIES: Sue and her travelling friend

and watched delicate lilac butterflies fluttering on to thistles of identical colour as we ate our picnic.

After a couple of hours wandering through green woods we reached our next accommodation Casa d'Artista (The Artist's Home), near the

village of Cottanello. The artist is Francesca Pastore whose colourful, contemporary paintings cover almost every wall of the house. Bright and modern, the rooms are not luxurious but Francesca's company is priceless.

We chatted endlessly over a tasty dinner of ravioli and melanzane parmigiana (aubergines in tomato sauce and parmesan cheese) served in Francesca's living room which is full of charm; a guitar waits by the fireside and there are books everywhere.

Over the next couple of days we discovered more hidden secrets such as La Grotta di San Michele near the hillside village of Roccantica, an extraordinary 4th-century chapel-cave with fading frescoes on its walls found deep in the forest.

We also found Osteria Faducci, a meadow with expansive views over undulating hills, and a deserted stone hostelry that was once the Sabina equivalent of a coaching inn.

Each day was a contrast, from wooded landscapes to open vistas, through pretty, rural villages; think the Cotswolds with more hills and no American tourists. Indeed without any tourists at all. The only sounds were goats' bells jingling, a hum of

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Travel



ULTIMATE DESTINATION: The 6th-century Farfa Abbey became one of the most powerful monasteries in central Europe

Abbeys, art and olives

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bees and birdsong, and the occasional whirring of a tractor.

For our penultimate day we chose the hard option to walk to a viewpoint between the twin villages of Mompeo and Salisano. In the distance we could see other villages such as Fara Sabina and San Martino, clinging on to hilltops looking like they might topple at any moment.

Calling in at Salisano, we sipped a well-deserved ice-cold prosecco in the piazza. Then following a zigzag route of old tracks, we reached Le Mole sul Farfa, the vegetarian agriturismo of route designer Stefano. Le Mole has its own secrets, including a fascinating 2,000-year-old Roman villa discovered underneath the house, nearby ruined olive mills and the Farfa River and gorge.

An hour's walk the following morning took us to the village of Castelnuovo di Farfa, where modern and medieval blend seamlessly. Sounds of TVs float from windows, along with tempting aromas of family lunches, reminding you that these ancient higgledy-piggledy streets are still very much alive.

Even the local museum which is dedicated to Sabina's rich



olive history, is a quirky mix of modern art, symbolising the significance of olive oil through the centuries, and more traditional agricultural machinery.

Leaving the village we saw our ultimate destination, Farfa Abbey, in the distance. Dating back to the 6th century, it became one of the most powerful monasteries in Europe. Inside, almost every inch is covered with exquisite frescoes and friezes of biblical scenes.

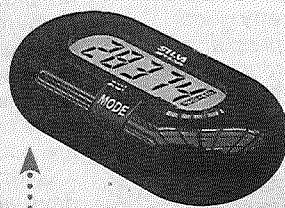
The abbey bells were ringing as we arrived and people were walking in quietly to pray.

I'm sure Sabina still has secrets tucked away in its hills but at the end of our walk, it felt like we've got to know at least some of them.

THE KNOWLEDGE

On Foot Holidays (01722 322652/www.onfootholidays.co.uk) offers seven-night self-guided treks in the Sabine Hills, ending in Rome, for £680pp (two sharing), B&B. Price includes some meals, luggage transfers, walking pack with maps and route information. For departures until end October, easyJet (0905 821 0905/www.easyjet.com) offers return flights to Rome from £118. Italian State Tourist Board: 0207 408 1254/www.italiantouristboard.co.uk

in the bag: walking essentials

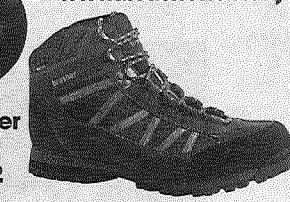


Lithium GTX Walking Boot, £125, Brasher (0191 516 5780/www.brasher.co.uk)



Horizon Coolmax Trekker Socks, £13.99, Horizon Socks (01202 874874/www.horizonsocks.co.uk)

Silva EX1 Pedometer Plus, £22.99, Ellis Brigham (0844 372 1010/www.ellis-brigham.com)



Nosilife sun hat with 40+ sun protection, £14, Craghoppers (0844 811 1022/www.craghoppers.com)



Eurohike Pathfinder 25 rucksack, £24.99, Millets (0800 389 5861/www.millets.co.uk)



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