

The “undiscovered” charms of Le Marche

Tourist agencies and holiday websites nearly always use this epithet when describing the region of Le Marche, situated on the eastern side of the country, taking up the calf of the boot-shape that is Italy. In fact, it is well known to Northern European holidaymakers, who flock to its hills and valleys in the spring and summer. And although it can't boast all the artistic and cultural tourist magnets of Florence or Assisi, it has many more discreet charms of its own. The city of Urbino, in the north of the region, and a World Heritage site, easily competes with the aesthetic hubs of Tuscany and Umbria. Home to Piero della Francesca, it includes the impressive ducal palace of Federico de Montefeltro, diplomat and warrior and subject of Piero's famous painting of his profile with hooked nose. At the other end of the scale, the small hilltop village of Montefalcone Appennino houses a triptych by Pietro Allemano which would not be out of place in the Uffizi.

Prior to the unification of Italy, Le Marche was one of the papal states, with its people acting as tax collectors for the Pope, thereby giving rise to the saying: “*Meglio un morto in casa che un marchigiano alla porta.*” (“Better a death in the house than a Marchigiano at your door.”). As a result, the local communities had strong connections with Rome, something which benefited Servigliano in the 18th century. Unlike most other communities in Le Marche, such as the Trust's eponymous Monte San Martino, which are medieval hilltop villages with narrow streets and vertiginous drops, Servigliano today is built on a grid in the valley of the River Tenna. This is a result of several earthquakes starting in 1758 that destroyed the old town, whose luminaries then made supplications to Pope Clement XIV who, in one of the earlier examples of town planning, responded by instructing its rebuilding as the elegant town seen today.

As well as “undiscovered”, Le Marche is known as “all of Italy in one region”. The coast is the venue for the typical Italian beach holiday, with bars and umbrellas and extended families in evidence beside the peaceful Adriatic Sea. Inland, hilltops give way to the Apennine mountains, running down the spine of Italy and known as the *Sibillini* in Le Marche. Imbued with legends, including a wizard and prophet, after whom the Monte Sibilla is named, the most spectacular site is the Lago di Pilato, a lake high up in the mountains said to hold the remains of Pontius Pilate, and which turns red due to the presence of a particular shrimp, to be found only at this location. Walks up to the lake start at the delightful hamlet of Foce, with sustenance provided by the Rifugio Taverna Della Montagna.

Miracles and legends accompany most of the mountain walks in this region. There are two walks that are easily reachable from Servigliano, the first being the “*Gola dell'infernaccio*”, The “Gorge of Hell”, from which one can climb up to the church of St Leonard, originally an ancient hermitage completely rebuilt by one Padre Pietro, who carried out all the reconstruction entirely by himself (including carrying all the necessary material up from the gorge) from the 1970s until his death in 2015. Secondly, the neighbouring gorge of the River Ambro contains the church and sanctuary of the Madonna dell'Ambro, marking the miraculous vision of the Madonna by a mute shepherdess, still the destination of pilgrims to this day.

These gorges and much else besides are covered by the Sibillini National Park, making the area ideal for nature-lovers (recent re-introductions include the chamois), walkers and climbers.

Still on the subject of legends, the town of Loreto, south of Ancona, is one of the most important Catholic pilgrimage sites, containing in its Basilica the “Holy House”, namely the home of Jesus, brought from Bethlehem by angels. Further north lie the Frasassi Caverns (*Grotte di Frasassi*) only discovered in 1971 and one of the largest cave systems in Europe (they say the cathedral in Milan could easily fit in the largest of its rooms). Dramatically lit and with gantries and stairs to make walking easy, it is a spectacular place to visit.

Just south of Servigliano is the town of Ascoli Piceno, with beautiful piazzas constructed of travertine marble, in which one can people-watch from the Liberty Style (Italian version of Art Nouveau) Bar Meletti, while sampling a Marche speciality, *olive ascolane* – olives covered in breadcrumbs and stuffed with meat, or *Vincisgrassi*, a regional lasagne much lighter than the usual offering and reputedly named after an Austrian general, Alfred von Windisch-Grätz, with whom the locals wished to ingratiate themselves. And on the subject of food, Marche is home to several major wine producers, perhaps the most famous being Ciu Ciu (the nickname of the founder), whose cantina is open for tastings in the town of Offida, itself famous for its lace production and where it is still possible to watch women sitting outside their houses making extraordinarily intricate items.

To explore further, click here: <https://www.turismo.marche.it/en-us/>

Brief history of PG59 Servigliano

Built as a prison camp for Austrian PoWs in the First World War, the camp was re-opened in January 1941 and by January 1942 the first Allied prisoners began to filter through from North Africa. A camp for Other Ranks, as were the two others in the region (PG53 Sforzacosta and PG70 MonteUrano – both requisitioned factories), at its peak it held 2,000 men, with increasing numbers of Americans after their country's entry into the war. It has its fair share of escape stories pre-Armistice, including three tunnels, one of which was partially successful in that some men did escape, but not as many as should have as a result of one Chief Petty Officer being too large and getting stuck. It is the only other example (along with Fontanellato) of the escapes in September 1943 being negotiated between the Camp Leader (SBO equivalent in OR camps) and the Commandant, with Dr Millar the Camp Leader having to sign a form saying he took full responsibility for the break-out (now preserved in the Imperial War Museum). The outline of the hole excavated by Keith Killby and his SAS companions can still be seen in the wall at the back of the camp.

After the Armistice, PG59 was re-purposed as a transit camp for Jews on their way to the death camps at Dachau and the like. It has the singular honour of being the only place where the Allies actively helped in the liberation of Jews. Liaising with local partisans, the RAF bombed the camp, allowing the Resistance to enter and remove any of those inside willing to leave.

Post-war, it remained in use as a refugee camp for Italians driven out of the Yugoslav territories of Istria and Dalmatia, and was only finally closed in 1955, becoming a public park in the 1980s and now in part used to house a museum and library for the study of its history.

Recommended reading: Gilbert Broadbent "Behind Enemy Lines" – an almost day by day account of life in PG59 Servigliano. Also <https://camp59survivors.com/> – curator Dennis Hill's father was in PG59 and he has been collecting memories and accounts on the subject for the past 10 years.

Servigliano local information

Restaurants:

Pane e Vino, Servigliano: <https://www.facebook.com/Pane-e-Vino-392803340899676/> Superior dining in a relaxed setting

Re Leone, Servigliano: Good basic Italian restaurant in leafy surroundings

Hotels:

Villa Funari <https://www.villafunari.it/en/> – country house accommodation just outside Servigliano, with their own produce sold in a shop in Servigliano

Hotel San Marco <http://www.hotelristorantesanmarco.it/hotel/> – standard hotel accommodation with good restaurant serving fantastic meats cooked "alla brace" (over a log fire)

Angela Garden: B&B with enthusiastic host Luigi <https://angela-garden-bed-breakfast.allmarchehotels.com/en/>

Airports: *(all currently serviced by Ryanair)*

Pescara (1hr40 south)

Ancona (1hr40 north)

Rome Ciampino (3hrs but a lovely drive through the Abruzzi National Park. Or if you prefer to avoid the autostrada, then the old Salt Road – *Via Salaria*)