



La Chiesa di Santo Stefano



Living in Le Marche

Le Marche is a glorious and unspoilt region of Italy, full of beautiful countryside, lovely beaches and a plethora of places of interest – from historical sites such as Loreto, to the stunning caves of Frasassi.

The fact that it is still relatively unknown in comparison to Tuscany and Umbria is a significant part of its charm, with few souvenir shops, no crowds and yet so much to see and do – and all in a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere.



The region has a rich and varied history, and is crammed with buildings of interest. Not least, many of the small walled hill towns are well worth a trip, and if you love visiting old churches you will not be disappointed! With several dating back to the 11th century, and some of the more recent churches resplendent with stunning frescoes, there are many delights in store for you.

If art is your main interest, there are some excellent local galleries displaying work from regional artists, with other galleries displaying work by Titian, Tintoretto and Raphael.

And of course, Italians love their food and wine. Le Marche is said to have some of the best food in Italy, and fast food barely exists – apart from pizza, of course. But venture into any little taverna or trattoria and you will almost certainly find some excellent home made pasta and a jug of local wine to enjoy at a very reasonable cost.

If you have young children, there are plenty of places to visit. Whilst most are content to play in the pool at Santo Stefano during the summer months, others like to explore further afield. The water park at Verde Azzurro is packed with exciting water slides and pools, and the beaches along the Adriatic coast are very safe for swimming, with lovely surrounding countryside.





Festivals

One thing the Italians do very well is enjoy themselves! Throughout the year, there is a festival almost every week in some part of Le Marche. From music festivals, to flower festivals, to festivals for everything from the broad bean to the pizza, there will be a party atmosphere and the streets will be full of families have a good time.

In the heart of the Sibillini mountains there is a festival to celebrate the wild flowers and the lentil harvest. People come from all over the world to see field upon field of red and yellow lentil flowers, but the wild flowers that grow along the sides of the road and in the open fields are stunning.

Another famous festival is the Macerata Opera Festival held at the end of July / beginning of August. The operas take place at the magnificent neoclassical Sferisterio – an open air elliptical sweep of colonnaded balconies, built in the 1820s as a ball court - right in the heart of Macerata, and only 25 minutes from La Chiesa di Santo Stefano.



As you might expect, our favourite festival is the one held each year in our local town of Treia. The town piazza is transformed into an outdoor concert arena, with the local townspeople enjoying everything from a Beatles tribute band to the winner of the Italian X factor!

Several locandas are set up specially for the event, with local ladies providing excellent home made food, and each day a heat of the Bracciale – a ball game played against the walls of the town – takes place. The festival culminates in a parade, and the final of the ball game attracts a big crowd.



Historical sites of Le Marche



No historical tour of Le Marche would be complete without a visit to the striking hill town of Loreto, which lies just inland from the Adriatic Sea and is one of the world's most important shrines to the cult of the Virgin Mary, visited each year by thousands of pilgrims who travel here from around the world. The wonderful Basilica, which in itself is full of interest, houses the rustic cottage or "holy house" said to have come from Nazareth and to be the site of the Annunciation and the childhood of Jesus.



Although not a town of great beauty itself, Ancona is home to the Trajan's Arch - the finest Roman monument in Le Marche, which was erected at the beginning of the 2nd Century AD in honour of Emperor Trajan. Also of historical interest are The Gilded Bronzes of Pergola - a magnificent group of equestrian sculptures, dating back to the Roman period, which were unearthed in a field near Pergola in 1946

Amongst the many and varied historical sites of Le Marche, it's worth remembering that the magnificent Assisi is less than two hours drive from Santo Stefano.



Art and architecture in Le Marche

The Le Marche region is rich in art history, and some of the historical sites outlined above are also of interest to art lovers, but in addition there are endless beautiful old hill towns just waiting to be explored. Some of the more important sites to visit might include:

Urbino - The spectacular Palazzo Ducale houses some world class Italian renaissance art, including a gorgeous portrait by Raphael. The palace also houses a fascinating archaeological collection of Roman tablets.

Tolentino - the wonderful Basilica is the home to Giottoesque frescoes in the Gothic Cappellone di San Nicola - these vivid masterpieces date from the 14th century

Fabriano - Museo della Carta - museum of paper. Fabriano is world famous for its paper and this modern museum offers demonstrations of hand-made papermaking, explains the art of the watermark, and for children it is even possible to arrange for them to make their own paper.

Ascoli Piceno - A rich collection of art mainly by painters who lived and worked in this part of the Marche but also works of Titian, Tintoretto, Guido Reni and Guercino

Visit the gallery in San Severino, housed in the 15th century Palazzo Manuzzini where works of art by local artists are arranged in chronological order from the first quarter of the 13th century depicting the history of the town and the course of local events





Gourmet food and wine

The Le Marche region of Italy offers some of the best restaurants and the most exquisite gourmet food in Italy. If you dine at the Michelin starred Uliassi restaurant in Senigallia, the only option is to have the menù sorpresa. Mauro Uliassi himself each day chooses the best produce and develops his own special menù degustazione which is shared by the whole table. This might amount to 12 separate dishes, but each in turn is a tiny portion packed with interesting flavours, and contrasting textures.

Or you might chose to experience the Le Busche restaurant (again with a Michelin star) where their Yin and Yang salmon is absolutely delicious. Part marinated, part lightly seared, the flavour imparted by the zenzero (ginger) used in the marinade is both unusual and memorable.

If you are looking for simpler food, nearby San Severino is the location of a small trattoria where the owner's mother makes all the pasta and gnocchi daily by hand – and when we say by hand, we mean she rolls it all out with a rolling pin. And for real enthusiasts, she will even offer a personal lesson!



And what could be better than to have the wonderful Casolare dei Segreti restaurant right on your doorstep. Less than 2 kilometres away, this restaurant serves excellent local dishes, with their antipasti being particularly tasty and unusual.

The Le Marche region is also packed with vineyards – from the biggest who export around the world, to the small home producers who only bottle a few thousand litres per year. The Italians are reputed to keep their best wines to themselves, and we have certainly been amazed by the quality and diversity of the wines of the region. From full rich reds to light dry whites, this area will delight any wine enthusiast.

The vineyard owners welcome people from overseas, and their enthusiasm and willingness to allow you to taste every single type of wine is contagious! We rarely leave without more than we intended to buy.





Nature and scenery

The natural beauty of the region remains unspoiled by mass development and mass tourism. The local shopkeepers are still delighted by people who struggle to make themselves understood, and will do all that they can to help.

The region is bounded on one side by the Adriatic sea, where the rugged coastline of Monte Conero rises majestically out of the sea to a height of just over 500 metres. The views over the sea are stunning, and there are some lovely beaches, such as those found in the Sirolo area. The national park boasts over a thousand species of wild plants as well as some wonderful birdlife.



On the other side rises the great Monti Sibillini mountain range, which includes one of the highest peaks on the Italian mainland. In spring, the fields are covered with wild flowers, and the landscape is spectacular, and during the winter months the ski slopes are open and are just an hour's drive away.



The Frasassi caves offer another amazing treat, with a dramatic central cave which is said to be large enough to hold Milan cathedral. But outside the caves, the glorious hills around the gorge present opportunities for some lovely walks, and there are currently golden eagles nesting there.



Even at Santo Stefano, wildlife abounds. A family of hoopoes makes regular visits to the garden at certain times of year, and just outside the grounds at night you can often hear (and see, if you are lucky) a herd of wild boar foraging for food.