

YOUR ESSENTIAL SATURDAY TV GUIDE

# SATURDAY

THE SUNDAY EXPRESS

FEBRUARY 17, 2018

**TROY: FALL OF A CITY**  
BBC1'S BIG BUDGET  
RETELLING OF  
HOMER'S EPIC

**WIN**  
**£1,000**  
**IN CASH**

**CHRISTINE LAMPARD**  
SECRETS TO A  
CLEAR COMPLEXION

**EMMERDALE**  
TRACY'S IN TURMOIL

**SARAH BEENY**  
ON THINKING  
OUTSIDE THE BOX

**FASHION**  
EIGHT GREAT  
COATS FOR  
SPRING

**ANNA FRIEL** ON PLAYING MARCELLA,  
TV'S MOST TROUBLED DETECTIVE





# ESCAPE TO THE COUNTRY

With its lush landscape and sleepy medieval hilltop towns, landlocked Umbria offers a more peaceful alternative to touristy Tuscany, as Kirsten Jones discovers...

**A**s a self-confessed fitness addict, I never thought I'd find myself poolside with a chunk of fresh bread and a glass of red wine, basking in the sun in the middle of the Italian countryside. But after spending much of my adult life on adventure holidays, I thought it was about time I tried something different. Searching the web for a relaxing retreat, I found a rather beautiful and undiscovered part of Italy.

Apparently, the landlocked region of Umbria is fast becoming the new Tuscany. Known as the green heart of Italy since the 70s, it has equally quaint hilltop towns and mouthwatering cuisine, with each town boasting its own pasta and dessert recipe, and the region well known for producing legumes, wild mushrooms and truffles. But a busy day in Umbria is defined by a scattering of folk sipping coffee outside a café, or perhaps a small group of travellers checking out the ancient architecture. If you're keen to escape the tourist traps, this is the place for you.

My boyfriend and I found a quaint little villa in the middle of

nowhere, on the outskirts of a medieval town called San Gemini. We were offered a warm welcome to Villa Il Cerro – a beautiful two-bedroom, two-bathroom property on the books of luxury villa specialist Tuscany Now & More – by caretaker Elena and her charming husband Piero, who was bursting with pride about his historic hometown.

The former Roman settlement (on a hillside, of course) is built up around a maze of winding cobbled

Umbria's vineyards produce some of Italy's most underrated wines



streets, stairways, arches and gates. Visitors enter via the Roman Gate, a grand archway dating back to the Middle Ages. Don't be surprised to see bikes, cars and even the odd 4x4 squeezing through it; it's a source of great entertainment over a scoop of gelato in the town square.

On our first visit to the town at sunset, we were greeted by an army of men clad in medieval clothing, waving colourful flags to the sound of beating drums. We'd happily stumbled upon the annual Giostra dell'Arme festival – a historical re-enactment during which residents stroll

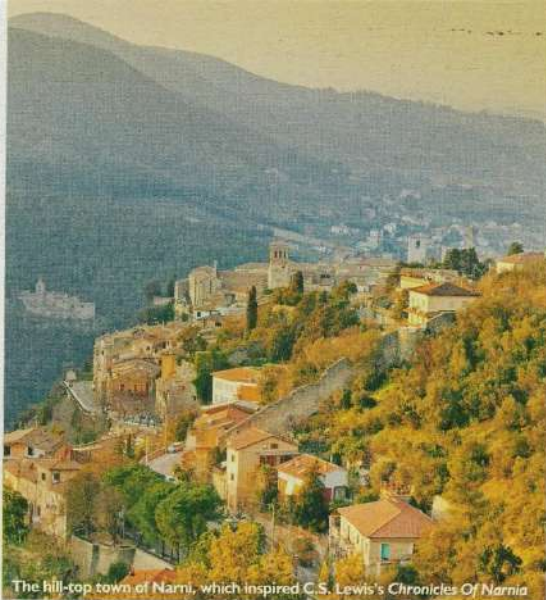
**“KNOWN AS THE GREEN HEART OF ITALY, UMBRIA HAS QUAIN HILLTOP TOWNS AND MOUTHWATERING CUISINE, WITH EACH TOWN BOASTING ITS OWN PASTA AND DESSERT RECIPE”**

the streets in medieval costume and enjoy flag waving and knights duelling.

The Abbey of St Nicolo, built in 1036, still stands outside the walls of San Gemini. It's one of five important buildings in the town, including churches and the former government building, now home to the “*campana delle adunanze*” bell made in 1318. If you have the pleasure of staying at Il Cerro, Elena is happy to give you a guided tour of the abbey.

The villa, in a sweeping valley below the town, had everything we needed. The large kitchen made it a home away from home and the outdoor swimming pool was the icing on the cake. A wonderful welcome package of fresh bread, tomatoes, pasta and wine encouraged a homemade dinner under the stars, but first we were keen to sample the food of San Gemini. We loved popular restaurant Taverna Del Torchio, where we dined at a table ▶





The hill-top town of Narni, which inspired C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles Of Narnia*

for two on the cobblestones and watched the sun set.

We had just five days to soak up extraordinary Umbria, so after a quick dip in the pool, we hit the road with our sat nav to find the historic ruins of Carsulae. A short stroll from a main road, the archaeological park is a fascinating snapshot of life in a Roman settlement. Next up was a jaunt around Narni, the hill-town that inspired the famous *Chronicles Of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis. There are no witches or fantasy creatures, but you will find scrumptious Turkish delight and an 11th-century cathedral with a shrine devoted to the Blessed St Lucy of Narni.

That night we were treated to an outstanding 10-course dinner at our villa – just one of the services that can be arranged through the Tuscany Now & More concierge team – cooked by local chef Daniela.

Among the typical Umbrian dishes were turkey with porcini mushrooms and pork loin with salsa.

We followed this feast, the next day, with a full day of wine-themed fun (another experience that can be arranged through the concierge) with Alessandro, our tour guide. Our first stop was the Wine Museum of Torgiano, a series of underground rooms filled with delightful artifacts from paintings to pitchers and everything in between. Then we hopped aboard a horse and cart to taste the grapes at Di Filippo winery. Our final stop saw us step behind the scenes at Cantina Roccafiore winery.

Bellies full and thirst quenched, we enjoyed a final stroll around San Gemini before driving back to the bustling city of Rome. What a treat to see the laidback life of Umbria.

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES, ALAMY



The Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi

## Ten things you must do in Umbria

**1** Get your gelato fix in San Gemini's town square.

**2** Dine at an authentic Italian restaurant. Expect a multi-course feast at a trattoria, and less formal, family style food at an osteria.

**3** Journey to Terni to see the majestic Cascata delle Marmore (marmorefalls.it), a man-made waterfall created by the Romans.

**4** For the best panini in Spoleto, seek out Prosciutteria del Corso – the place to go for amazing cold cuts and cheese.

**5** Take a day trip to Florence (an hour away) to explore the art

galleries and awe-inspiring architecture.

**6** Enjoy a history lesson in Rome



(less than two hours away) – peek inside the Vatican and imagine gladiators in battle at the amazing Colosseum.

**7** Take a hike in one of Umbria's many hilltop towns. Don't forget your camera – the views from each peak are worth the climb.

**8** Explore Umbria's ancient buildings, such as Orvieto Cathedral, Basilica Assisi and Spoleto's Casa Romana.

**9** Explore the ruins at Carsulae, an ancient town where the Romans once lived.

**10** Tour the region's top wineries, including Di Filippo (vinidifilippo.com) and Cantina Roccafiore (roccaforewines.com), and invest in a bottle or two.



### WAY TO GO

Tuscany Now & More (020 7684 8884, [tuscanynowandmore.com](http://tuscanynowandmore.com)) offers Il Cerro from £868 for two people for seven days, sharing on a self-catering basis (maximum occupancy of five people). Tuscany Now & More features a range of properties across the region and Italy and can provide private chefs, excursions and other services upon request.



Villa Il Cerro on the outskirts of San Gemini