Exploring Le Marche

From the hustle and bustle of Rome, **Paul Pettengale** and family travel to Le Marche for a week's stay in a magnificent villa for a spot of R&R and to explore one of Italy's lesser-known regions…

The Pettengale family enjoyed their stay

Image by Paul Pettengale

The outdoor pool at L'Antica Sapienza

Images © Le Marche Explorer unless otherwise stated

Although no doubt familiar to many *Italia!* readers, the region of Le Marche is little-known to the vast majority of people who aren't natives of Italy. And even then there are those who question where on the peninsula it actually is. Le Marche could be considered a rural backwater, playing second fiddle to the likes of Tuscany, Umbria and Lazio in central Italy. Which is a shame, because – to my mind at least – Le Marche is one of the most stunning regions in the country. It has a dramatic topography that provides vast vistas encompassing mountains, rolling plains, cliff-side beaches and big, big skies. It is uniquely tranquil, and yet possesses a united population that is friendly, welcoming of tourists, and fiercely proud of the cities, towns and villages they inhabit. Le Marche is a delightful pocket of Italy that absolutely deserves to be explored and enjoyed.

The sound of one's children hitting the water when diving into a pool at the end of a long journey is most satisfying. It says, "We've arrived", and one that offers the glowing start-of-holiday feeling, one that instantly relaxes you into a state of slow-motion contentment. We'd arranged to stay at L'Antica Sapienza through Le Marche Explorer, a company owned and run by Dutch couple Monique de Veer and Robert Hofsteede. They specialise in rental properties in the region, but also provide services for those who wish to purchase property in Le Marche, and will even oversee restoration projects, taking tumbledown wrecks to a complete house with a pool (if you wish) that you'd be proud to call home (through www.marchepropertynet.com).

RURAL LOCATION

Once a school house, the villa has been sympathetically restored, the gardens landscaped and a large pool installed. Its extremely rural location makes it a perfect place to relax with your family or friends – it can sleep up to eight – though it's a relatively short drive from the towns of San Ginesio and Tolentino for restaurants and provisions. If you would prefer to self-cater then you'll be delighted by the fully kitted-out kitchen, the large barbecue next to the pool and the pizza oven in the villa's portico.

One of the most important aspects of an Italian holiday, as we all know, is the food. Le Marche is one of the least appreciated regions of the country for its cuisine, which is a crying shame. Take, for instance, *Olive all'ascolana*. Sublime… Harking from the town of Ascoli Piceno, these are large, local olives stuffed with cheese or spiced minced meat, coated in breadcrumbs and ➤

Tucked away in the hills of Le Marche

The lavender-lined path leads down to the pool

Once a ruin, this is now a charming hideaway

Restored with local stone

Cook for yourselves or hire a private chef

The interior retains so much original character

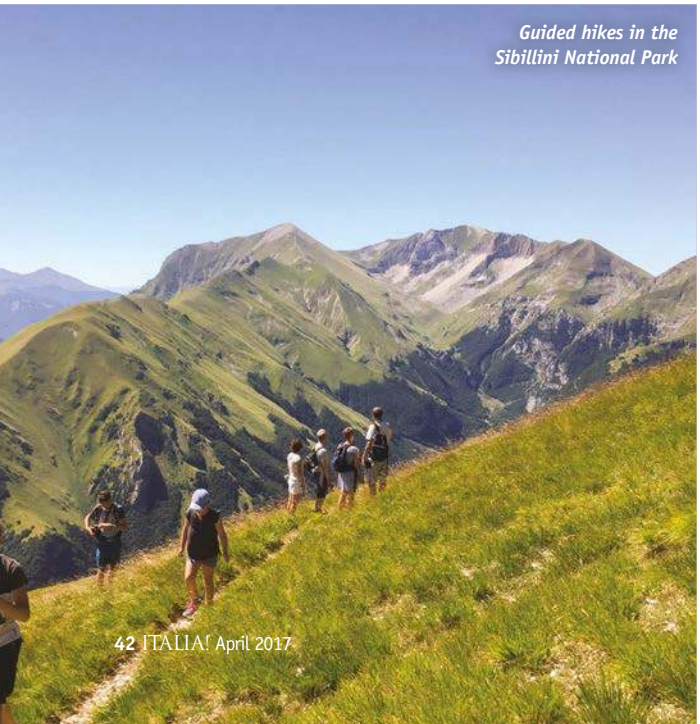
Image by Paul Pettengale

Plenty of space to relax on the shores of Il Lago di Fiastra

Soak up the view while you soak in the bath

The bespoke kitchen at L'Antica Sapienza

Le Marche Explorer's welcome open-air feast in San Ginesio



Guided hikes in the Sibillini National Park

Watersports abound at Il Lago di Fiastra

fried. Once you start eating them it's hard to stop.

And so, on the evening after we'd arrived at L'Antica Sapienza, we drove to the nearby medieval village of San Ginesio – voted one of the most attractive in all of Italy – where we were served these delicious olive treats, served on cocktail sticks, along with a glass of prosecco. The occasion? Le Marche Explorer was welcoming its guests with an open-air feast, taking place in the town square. Following the nibbles we were served 'white' pizza (no tomato sauce), then a huge slab of perfectly-cooked lasagne, roasted pork with potatoes, and then – for those that could manage it – tiramisù and coffee. The company was superb. Well over 30 guests (plus children) sat on one long table, and conversation flowed. The majority of the diners were either Dutch or German, though English prevailed as the main spoken language. The couple sat next to us had been on a mammoth journey from the Netherlands – the last leg alone had taken them 11 hours, including having to deal with plenty of snarled-up traffic around Milan. We felt grateful that we'd taken a leisurely couple of days to make our way from Rome, across Umbria and into Le Marche.

CHILLING OUT

For the next couple of days we were determined to relax, taking time out to dip in and out of the pool, cook locally-sourced produce on the pool-side barbecue and visit the many small towns and villages in the Macerata province (the small, walled town of Urbisaglia was one of our favourites, and a must-visit especially for foodies – the Le Logge restaurant is definitely worth a visit). There are various markets in Le Marche where you can pick up fresh meat, fish and vegetables, and I'd encourage you to track them down – market-bought produce simply can't be beaten (though if you need the convenience of a supermarket there's a good, well-stocked Punto Simply in Tolentino, just 5km or so from the villa).

Though after a mid-week wine tour (see more on page 46), it was time for some exercise! Le Marche Explorer organises regular walking tours through the Sibillini National Park, but plenty of time and a head for heights are needed. So we decided to save the boot leather and head for some nearby water.

My wife is a committed swimmer. Long swims – three or four times a week – and when I say 'long' I'm talking at least 3km at a time. Most of her swimming is in a flooded quarry, or in the sea. Of course, the pool at L'Antica Sapienza is superb, and essential during the heat of summer, but Fiona needed something a tad more challenging during our stay. And so, remembering a solo trip I'd taken many years before, we all piled into the car and headed in the direction of the mountains.

SWITCHBACK ROADS

Il Lago di Fiastra is a reservoir nestled in the heart of the Sibillini Mountain National Park. About an hour's drive from L'Antica Sapienza, following fairly tortuous switchback roads, it feels somewhat incongruous to encounter such a large lake so far above sea level. But what a lake it is! When I photographed it in 2005, the water was a dark grey, and there wasn't a soul to be seen. A decade on and what a difference!

At first I thought the colour of the water had been altered by some divine iteration of Photoshop, but no, it really was that turquoise. Iridescent, even. Fiona was in the water in a jot – 3km later she emerged to where I was resting under the shade of a tree with the children only to announce she was going back for more. And after another 3km in the drink we were all ready for lunch.

And lunch at Il Lago di Fiastra means pizza, as right next to the car park (and adjacent to the beach area where you can hire loungers or engage in water sports) is Osteria del Lago, a fantastic, family-run pizzeria with both indoor and (covered) outdoor spaces. It features great food at very reasonable prices (€9 will get you a large pizza, easily enough for one, arguably for two), and views across the lake. It's certainly a great place to refuel

WHERE TO EAT

IN YOUR VILLA WITH CLAUDIA'S KITCHEN
Organised through Le Marche Explorer. When you arrive in your holiday villa in Le Marche you're no doubt shattered, and the last thing you want to do is get back in the car to drive to a restaurant or – heaven forbid – cook for yourselves. So why not employ the services of Claudia Dürrbeck, a local chef who will travel to your rental property and cook dinner for you. Dishes will vary depending on season (our son loved her nettle gnocchi, I loved her slow-cooked lamb). A meal for four will cost €110, plus ingredients (does not include wine). She even does the washing up (though there's no harm in giving a helping hand).
€€€

LE LOGGE
Corso Giannelli 34, Urbisaglia
☎ +39 0733 506788
www.locandalelogge.it
Situated in the heart of the medieval Palazzo Brunelli in the charming town of Urbisaglia, Le Logge became our favourite restaurant in the area – we visited both for lunch and for dinner. We'd recommend going for a mixed antipasti as a lunch option – the restaurant produces its own Charcuterie from its own pigs – though the pasta dishes are also excellent. When it comes to an evening meal you're spoilt for choice (the menu changes daily, depending on season and availability of produce). My son described his fillet steak as: "One of the best steaks I've had in my life."
€€€

TERRA NOSTRA
Piazza A.Gentili 3, San Ginesio
☎ +39 0733 656957
www.terranostrasanginesio.it
Terra Nostra provided the food in the San Ginesio piazza for the Le Marche Explorer welcome feast. Noted for its huge variety of pizzas, it also offers a wide range of Marche specialities. There is seating both inside and out, with a warm welcome! Settle down in the town square for a glass of prosecco, some antipasti, a pizza and a totally relaxed atmosphere. And, given its location, it's very reasonably priced.
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A view of Il Torre di Portonovo from the sea

Al fresco dining at Il Torre di Portonovo

Image by Paul Pettengale

WHERE TO EAT (*continued*)

OSTERIA FIASTRA
Il Lago di Fiastra
☎ +39 0737 52669
After a swim in the lake or to get some respite from lounging on the lake's beach? Then head for Osteria Fiastra. A variety of dishes is served at the friendly, family-run establishment, though we'd definitely recommend the pizza. For sure, it's not of the like that you'll encounter in the centre of Naples, but the restaurant's pizzas are tasty, filling and there are a large number of toppings to choose from (the mushroom option proved a hit on our visit). And it's cheap! Pizzas from €6, with a large bottle of Birra Morreti for just €2.50.
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RISTORANTE DA GIACCHETTI
Portonovo Beach
☎ +39 071 801384
www.ristorantedagiacchetti.it
Situated right on the Portonovo beach is a massively popular establishment. Seafood is the way to go here, as you'd expect, with a huge array of options that will differ depending on what's caught on the day. Open from 1 April until the end of October, booking is essential. There is also a (surprisingly reasonable) bar that is open all day, should you just fancy a drink and some shade from the sun.
€€€

➤ **KEY TO RESTAURANT PRICES**
(full meal per person, not including wine)
€ **Up to €25**
€€ **€26-€50**
€€€ **More than €50**

WHERE TO STAY

LE MARCHE EXPLORER
☎ +39 333 979 1785
www.le-marche-explorer.com
info@le-marche-explorer.com
Le Marche Explorer offers hand-picked accommodation for your holiday or long-term rental with a wide range of villas, apartments, B&Bs to choose from – there's even a tower by the sea!

GETTING THERE

➤ **BY AIR**
You can fly into Ancona airport from Stansted, or fly-drive from Rome. A car is advisable for getting around in Le Marche.

before taking a leisurely lakeside stroll for the afternoon.

It's always the same when you're on holiday: relaxing by the pool, later in the day, I realise that five sun-drenched days had flown by. Just where did they go? The slow-paced way of life in Le Marche has somehow accelerated the longer we've been here. As the kids enjoy diving competitions (carefully, of course – the pool isn't that deep) Fiona and I discuss the next stage in our east Italian experience. Monique and Robert have arranged for us to discover a very different aspect of Le Marche, away from the mountains and the rolling hills, for tomorrow we're due to travel to the coast. Something really rather special has been lined up.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

After packing our bags into our hire car we head east, towards Ancona, Le Marche's capital city. Though we take a right off of the A14 Autostrada towards Camerano and from there on to the tiny, though famed, seaside resort of Portonovo. The beach maybe fine shingle rather than sand, but that doesn't put off the hundreds of locals and tourists who flock here. And it's easy to see why: the view out across the Adriatic Sea is breathtaking. Cobalt blue seas stretch to a seemingly infinite horizon, whilst mahogany-tanned Italians lounge, chat, swim, or maybe enjoy a hired sail boat.

If you intend to go, then go early. Car parking is limited, and the locals are wise to the fact, arriving as early as 7am during the height of summer. And ask about '*meduse*', for at times, small jellyfish bob about ready to sting the unwary (this didn't put Fiona off; she described each sting as no worse than that of a stinging nettle).

But where to stay in this placid resort? We were extremely fortunate to spend a night in Il Torre di Portonovo; once a watchtower commissioned by Pope Clement XI in the 18th century to guard against pirates, it was home to the De Bosis family from the late 19th century. Now the family-run the property as a very low-key B&B (there are just three rooms available), though its location, just yards from the sea edge, the tremendous sense of history and the utterly spectacular views (especially from the 'open deck' top floor) make this a very special place to spend a night, or longer, should you have the chance.

There's a Michelin-starred restaurant on the beach, but we wouldn't be dining there on the night of our stay. No, Adriana, who manages the tower as a business, had prepared a superb open-air meal to be shared with her family – and Monique and Robert with their own daughters. Wine flowed, as did the conversation, but we weren't late to bed, for we were determined to climb to the top of the tower the following morning to watch the sunrise over the Adriatic at 5.30am.

It was a fitting conclusion to our time in Le Marche. Absolute tranquility and a sense of peace. Within hours, after a hearty breakfast, we'd be back in the car for a long drive back to Rome. The peace would be shattered, but the memories would remain. As we left Le Marche my wife simply said: "I could live here."

To read more about the story of the restoration of L'Antica Sapienza, please turn to page 46. ➤

WINE MATTERS

If you love wine, then you'll love Le Marche. Skilled craftsmen vinify fine wines, principally from the red Sangiovese and Montepulciano grapes and the white Verdicchio. The areas of Matelica, Jesi and Mount Conero are all with an easy drive from L'Antica Sapienza, and have some of the best producers – and the best wines – of Le Marche. You can organise tastings, though you'll need to call ahead. They're informal and friendly, and English is spoken for the most part. In addition, the wines are reasonably priced, should you decide to take away a case or two.

During our visit, we spent the afternoon with Monique from Le Marche Explorer and Claudia, our local private chef, visiting two prominent producers. Established in 1971 in the Matelica zone, **Belisario** is responsible for producing 24 wines in total, the vast majority of them based on Verdicchio (**www.belisario.it**). All though all of the wines we tasted were quite superb, I particularly enjoyed the sparkling Cuvée Nadir and the Carpe

Wine tasting at Belisario

Image by Paul Pettengale

Diem dessert wine. Contact the winery at belisario@belisario.it to organize your visit. Buy the wines, and local produce, from the in-house store.

We also went to **Alberto Quacquarini** in Serrapetrona. This cooperative makes three sparkling wines, a Verdicchio and three reds (plus a couple of grappas, for the brave). The sparklers are good, the Brut my favourite, and the reds are superb. The top-of-the-range Colli della Serra, which blends Vernacchia with Merlot, Sangiovese and Cabernet is to die for. Visit **www.quacquarini.it** or email info@quacquarini.it to arrange your tasting. You can purchase all the company's wines (and others!) in the in-house shop along with their other speciality: confectionery.

Our home in Le Marche

Australian **Adrian Gardner and his wife, Margaret,** have an absolute passion for Italy, and for Le Marche in particular. *Italia!* asked Adrian how they came to L'Antica Sapienza

Images here courtesy of Adrian and Margaret Gardner

You live in Melbourne, Australia, which is a long way from Le Marche! What prompted you to buy a property in the area?

I was travelling regularly to Europe on business and thought how nice it would be to have a bolt-hole somewhere in Europe, preferably in a warm clime. Through friends, I made contact with an English couple who had a house in Le Marche. Many Australians visit Italy but usually stick to the west side of the Apennines or go north to the Lakes and Venice. Following our initial contact with the English couple, we did some research and decided that property in Le Marche was good value compared with Tuscany and Umbria. When we were in the region, we took the opportunity have a look at the English couple's house and met with the group who had managed their restoration.

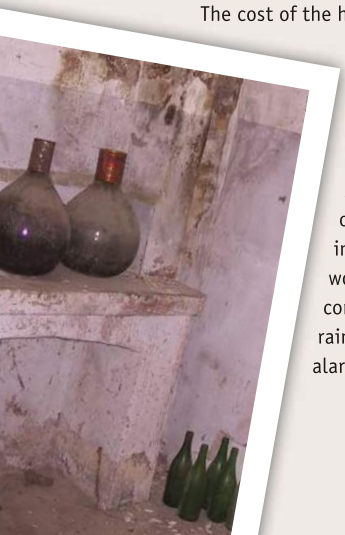
Interestingly, the principal was a German (ex-Luftwaffe), his *geometra* was a local Italian and he had an English secretary so it seemed the ideal combination – German efficiency, Italian flair and local knowledge and an English-speaking communicator! We spent a day looking at completed projects as well as 'ruins' that were ready for restoration. We fell in love with our 'ruin' and virtually decided then and there to go ahead.

L'Antica Sapienza is fairly remotely located. Did this concern you at all? And did its location prompt issues with local artisans involved in the renovation?

L'Antica Sapienza has the feeling of seclusion but it is only 1km from the sealed road and 15 minutes from the motorway. So it had the best of both worlds. We were referred to a good local company which had carried out 14 renovations (ours was number 15) so they had a lot of experience. When work started early in 2005, there were some difficulties sourcing builders as a long winter had delayed many local building projects. We had a delay of a couple of months and the work was eventually carried out by a Tuscan builder using a team of local artisans. I guess the usual principles of supply and demand apply but craftsmen seem fairly mobile and are not fazed by having to travel fair distances to work.

How long did the renovation process take? And what hiccups did you have along the way?

The restoration took the best part of two years. We finally moved in early in February 2007. There were a few changes along the way – some good, others not so good – but nothing money wouldn't fix! Some changes were made to the interior layout. In those years, the footprint of the house had to match the original dwelling but the interior could be altered at will. The *geometra* redesigned the main entrance to form a beautiful atrium around the stairs. We made some changes to the



bathrooms and there was a hiccup in the kitchen where not much thought had been given to the location of the fridge relative to the cabinetry. The only workable solution was to cut a hole in the wall to accommodate the fridge.

The cost of the hole worked out to about three times the cost of the fridge! The main added cost was the landscaping. As the house was on the side of a hill in the middle of a working farm we were concerned about heavy rainfall. We had heard alarming stories of pools being filled with mud and one that was actually washed into a valley during a storm. So we engaged the services of a local who was a qualified hydrologist as well as a landscaper. He absolutely transformed the property. Terraces were constructed and an irrigation system run on rainwater collected from the roof was installed. Over 1,500 plants were used to create a wonderful garden and orchard at the property. Over the years the garden has been added to and the original olive trees have been complemented by the planting of a further 40 trees.

How much time do you spend at the villa per year?

Since we moved in nearly 10 years ago, Margaret and I have spent time in both spring and autumn in the house. The property is rented during the summer months and we have had a wonderful array of visitors from all corners of the globe, a number of whom have made return visits. We have also had numerous friends and family come and stay with us. A great benefit of spending so much time in Italy is that we have created a large circle of friends – both Italian and ex-pat – and we always look forward to catching up during our visits.

Le Marche is widely known in Italy for its great food and wine. Other than Verdicchio, the wine is not well known in Australia and I have started importing a small hand-picked selection of fine wines and introducing them to collectors and restaurants in Melbourne. A spin-off from this is that we have got to know wonderful people in the local wine industry. A longer term plan is to get the whole family to the house for a 'white' Christmas.

What advice would you have for others looking to purchase property in the Le Marche region? Renovate or restored?

We didn't really entertain the idea of buying a restored property. A huge part of the attraction was taking an old ruin that had lain dormant for 50 years or so and bringing it back to life. I have done this with a classic motor car and found it a profoundly satisfying experience. For us it was the right choice to restore the house. We got so much pleasure from seeing a beautiful villa emerge from the ruins of an old farmhouse yet retain many of its original features. The history of the house is still embedded in the new construction – the time-scarred wooden beams, the gentle curves to the walls, the pizza oven – all remind us of its origins, while having all the mod-cons of a 21st-century dwelling. However, it is understandable if people opt for a completed house, especially if the property is being bought primarily for the rental market. There are a number of local companies which have or can find properties to suit most tastes. Monique's and Robert's company (www.marchepropertynet.com) is an example.

If Italia! readers stayed at L'Antica Sapienza, where in the area should they visit?

L'Antica Sapienza is for families or groups who want privacy with their own facilities: pool, garden, pizza oven, barbecue… But the house is only a short distance from some of the most beautiful towns in Le Marche, if not Italy, such as San Ginesio, Loro Piceno and Sarnarno. Also, the historic city of Tolentino is a 15-minute drive away, with a re-enactment of the famous Napoleonic Battle of Tolentino each May. From the house, you can be on the Adriatic coast or high up in the Sybilline Mountains in less than 40 minutes. Nearby is the province's capital, Macerata, which hosts wonderful opera at the Sferisterio during the warmer months. Further afield there are the spectacular cities of Urbino in the north and Ascoli Piceno in the south, both of which chronicle the history of Le Marche back to the Romans and beyond.

Festivals are an integral part of Le Marche life and celebrate everything from flowers to chestnuts. Many are food-based and coincide with the seasons. Markets travel around the towns during the week, including the well-known antique markets in Recanati and Ascoli Piceno. As for good restaurants, there are so many it is hard to choose. We usually let our mood decide as we know we will never be disappointed. ■