



Umbria's Time to Shine

Eleonora Mazzucchi (April 07, 2008)

Italy's Umbria region, which has provided the lush, scenic backdrop for movies such as "My House in Umbria", gets a day in the spotlight at the Italian Government Tourist Board. Connoisseurs of the region and travel businesses were treated to a presentation, rich with travel-inducing photos, and a feast of Umbrian specialties

One might think the region of Umbria suffers overshadowing from its oft-mentioned, universally lauded neighbor, Tuscany. Or that, at very least Umbria hangs on Tuscany's tourism coattails. But as a promotional conference for Umbria last week demonstrated, the smaller Italian region is a gem in its own right, a land with a startling diversity of natural and architectonic beauties. And now its Regional Agency for Promotion of Tourism has set up packages and initiatives, and not to mention philosophical contemplations, to help woo tourists.

In a crowded room at the [Italian Government Tourist Board \(ENIT\)](#) [1] on 5th Ave, where Umbria held its event, the audience watched picture slideshows of everything the region has to offer. There was a palpable sense of collective longing while images of—among others—Assisi, Perugia, Orvieto, Gubbio, their red-roofed cityscapes flanked by verdant hills and sun-drenched cathedrals and piazzas, filed past, set to Umbrian music. While the window at the back of the room permitted shafts of wintry, Gothamite light, viewers, it seemed, held their breath when Giotto's bright paintings appeared on the screen and every subsequent picture, from expansive countysides dotted with cypress trees and narrow cobble stone streets, radiated warmth. A narrator explained that Umbria's "soul lives on the tiny villages of the hillsides" and looking at the pictures it wasn't difficult to understand why Umbria calls itself "the green heart of Italy".

When Stefano Cimicchi, the charismatic head of Umbria's Regional Agency for Promotion of Tourism was at the podium, a cell phone rang in the audience. He smiled and took the opportunity to think up a regional slogan. "Turn off your cell phone, relax, you're in Umbria" he mused. That is, in large part, the objective behind Umbria's new promotional endeavor: to underscore that a vacation in Umbria is not just a sightseeing trip, but a way of life—a cell phoneless one, preferably. Umbria is after all one of the biggest promoters of "slow life", part and parcel of the slow food movement, a philosophy that encourages harried urban masses to stop and fully experience things, to walk and observe, to respect the environment, to essentially prolong life and restore its meaning. Cimicchi himself, a former mayor of Orvieto for 13 years, is the founder of the Slow City Association and waxes nostalgically of his upbringing and of walks in the countryside, all part of a culture that he insists still exists.

Among the things that would make any tourist stop and stay in Umbria are its various festivals. This summer a Festival of Nations will host Israel, while of course the Festival di Due Mondi, a world-renowned arts event that inspired an American counterpart, "Spoleto Festival USA", will carry on with an impressive program. Filippo Tomassoni, CEO of the Festival di Due Mondi, was on hand to gleefully announce that his festival will reinstate a partnership with the Charleston-based Spoleto Festival, which had become independent some years ago. And if one wants to go the way of Daniel Day Lewis, who famously put his acting career on hold to apprentice with a cobbler in Italy, possibilities to stay in Umbrian ateliers, in fields like art restoration, are also being offered. In the adventure department, "green" isn't just a label. Umbria advertised hiking (including a pilgrimage



road dedicated to St. Francis of Assisi), rafting, and environmentally-friendly fishing.

At the end of the conference, while guests gorged on Umbrian fare, the North America Director for ENIT, Riccardo Strano, stressed the changes that are taking place in vacationing. He described a “togetherness” phenomenon, families and people taking vacations together in an effort to bond, more than in times past, and that ecologically sustainable tourism is very much in demand. Cimicchi added that they were ready to face any demands: research into “touristic tribes” was revealing the needs of student groups, business people, and even pilgrims, while a new international airport in Perugia would make Umbria highly reachable.

One of Umbria’s biggest fans, a travel photographer named Julie Maris, said seeing the evening’s presentation set off her deep urges to go back to Umbria and that she had been “moved”. Finally, she remarked, while biting into a biscotto: “What was with those tour operators asking if the hotels in Umbria are internet-ready, or if there are enough spas? That’s not why you go! If you can’t appreciate Umbria, then just stay home.”

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