

Travel

Le Marche on your stomach

TOP SLICE:
Pizza night at
La Tavola
Marche
cookery
school near
Urbino,
above

Yvonne Gordon learns the art of cooking (and a bit of cow herding) at a farmhouse in the unspoilt Marche region of Italy

There's a piece of paper on the table reading '4.45am, Transumanza'. It looks like our plans for a lie-in followed by a leisurely pool-side breakfast will have to be abandoned. Ashley, our vibrant host at La Tavola Marche, explains that before dawn tomorrow, the villagers will move the cows from the village of Piobbico to the top of Mount Nerone for better grazing.

This centuries-old tradition takes place once a year, starting before sunrise while roads are empty and it's not too hot. It's a community effort, the pace set by 82-year-old herd master Franco. It's optional for us farmhouse guests to go along and help – but as tourists rarely get to witness this event, we jump at the chance to experience it. So at 4am the

Turn to Page 78 >>

>> From Page 77

next morning, we gather in the farmhouse kitchen, fortifying ourselves with espresso before setting off. When we get to the village in the dark, it's empty except for a man at the well filling containers.

The scent of jasmine is in the air; we are full of anticipation. Suddenly, three well dressed horsemen – with starched shirts and leather waistcoats and boots – enter the village on horseback, followed by the cows, followed by walkers with sticks. We bring up the rear, following the cows as they moo and poo their way through town and up the hill.

This is life in Le Marche, an unspoilt region between the Adriatic Sea and the Apennines in central Italy. Less famous than neighbours Tuscany and Umbria, its rolling hills and walled medieval towns are just as beautiful – and much less touristy.

We're staying at La Tavola Marche, an organic farm, inn and cooking school in a 300-year-old stone farmhouse. Immersing themselves in the local culture and introducing it to guests is what Ashley and her husband Jason, a classically trained New York chef, have done since they moved here from the US, providing an insight into the culture of a region where farming is the main industry and tourism has yet to be developed.

Many people visit Le Marche to see Urbino, the walled city which was home to the extravagant Duke Federico da Montefeltro in the 1400s – he built a huge palace and filled it with Renaissance art, much of which is still there. The city is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

It's just 25km from Urbino to Poggio and La Tavola Marche, with its peaceful setting on 500 acres of rolling, organic farmland. Tavola means 'table' in Italian and guests come here for Jason's hands-on, farm-to-fork cooking classes, connecting with the culture and people of the region through its food.

On our first night, we enjoy a five-course feast: antipasti with meats, salads and cheeses, pasta with courgette, sausages on a rosemary skewer with polenta.

Jason loves slow food, eating with the seasons and cooking with traditional recipes.

'All I want to do is carry on the tradition of the cooking of the area,' he says. 'These recipes aren't mine, I learnt how to make them. We take

"I don't transform ingredients, I show their perfection"



HOSTS: Ashley and Jason Bartner run La Tavola Marche

three or four simple ingredients and do as little with them as possible. Nature makes a thing perfectly. My job, instead of transforming it into something else, is to highlight its perfection.' The next night, we have a cooking class with Jason.

First, we gather the ingredients – down at the vegetable patch.

Here we pick broad beans, celery, courgettes, cucumber, potatoes, parsley, rocket, aubergines and strawberries. In the kitchen, we learn proper knife skills, how to

Learn to cook like an Italian, from the basics to seasonal specialties

A three-day 'farm-to-fork' holiday at La Tavola Marche, including accommodation, a five-course dinner, a wild edibles walk, a mushroom hunt and a half-day cooking class costs €300.

The school can also organise language breaks, seasonal truffle hunts, sausage making and wine tours.

There are a host of specialised classes, such as the 'Cooking with spring's wild edibles' course, which takes place from March 29 to April 2 and costs from €490. This four-night package includes a

guided wild edible walk, two half-day cooking classes with meal and wine, a five-course welcome dinner and breakfast daily.

Other options include the five-night 'Three basics of the Italian kitchen' course, which costs €750, and the three-night 'Flavours of fall' course, which is priced at €330, and will take place in the autumn.

For more information, log on to latavolamarche.com or call (0039) 331 525 2753.

GROW YOUR OWN: Jason, left, takes students into the school's garden



TASTE OF ITALY: Guests enjoy the sumptuous local ingredients; the school is based in a stone farmhouse, above

local olive oil. Honey and meat are from a local farm, flour for the bread and pasta is milled from the fields along the road. Truffles and mushrooms can be foraged for in the woods. Wines are made from the

region's lacrima grape. Jason makes his own pasta and cures meats during winter, Ashley makes liqueurs from the fruit of the trees. They swap what they don't need with neighbours for other produce, or

save what they don't use, for example preserving extra tomatoes from the summer in jars for the winter. With solar panels, wood stoves and the water for drinking, washing and the pool all coming from

the nearby sulphur spring, the farm is self-sufficient.

At weekly pizza night, Jason cooks pizzas in a wood-burning oven – forno a legna – where the temperature is controlled by the thickness of the wood; acacia for quick burning, oak for power. The lifestyle inspires many guests to start gardening when they go home.

On the last night, we turn out the lights and watch the fireflies flashing around in the dark, under a sky lit only by stars. There are no passing buses, no street lights. Birds, crickets and frogs provide the ambient noise. There are no clocks, there's no internet and very little mobile phone reception. Some guests get nervous when they first arrive and find out there's no internet, saying that they'll have to go into town. But Ashley tells us that most of them never get around to it in the end...

•Yvonne Gordon is a Travel Extra Travel Writer award winner

GETTING THERE

Ryanair flies from London Stansted to either Ancona or Pescara (from approximately €66 return), or from Liverpool to Rimini (from €50 return). Flights from Dublin to Stansted or to Liverpool are from €33 return. **Aer Lingus** flies from Dublin to Rome (from approximately €150 return) and, from March to November, from Dublin to Bologna (from €100 return).



DELICIOUS: Pizza with tasty toppings

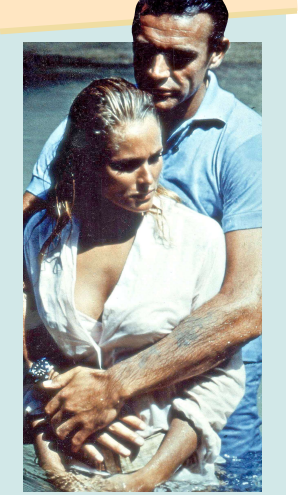


HOME COMFORT: Wooden-beamed ceilings adorn guest bedrooms

IN THE Q FOR JAMES BOND:

James Bond, the movie version, is 50 this year. Dr. No made stars of Sean Connery and the bikini (thanks to Ursula Andress), while two years later, Goldfinger gained immortality for the Aston Martin DB5. To celebrate, Britain's National Motor Museum is running a Bond In Motion exhibition until December, which features 007-related vehicles including cars, bikes, trikes, boats and more. Among the star turns are Wet Nellie, the submarine Lotus from The Spy Who Loved Me. If bought online, adult tickets are £16, (£20) and a child pass is £8 – beaulieu.co.uk. Handily, flybe flies to Southampton from Dublin, Knock and Donegal – flybe.com.

Great ESCAPES



BONDING: Connery greets Ursula Andress

THE WAY OF SAINT JAMES:

I cried my way through Martin Sheen's The Way this week. It has given me a renewed zeal to – some day – walk the Camino de Santiago.

There are so many routes that deciding which one to follow takes almost as long as the walk itself. Sheen

walks the 769km French Way, which departs from St Jean Pied de Port in the French Basque Country, takes 35 days and costs from £2,555. It has all the best accommodation. For those with less time and/or stamina, the last 111km from Sarria takes a week and costs from €720 – (01) 443 3972, followthecamino.com.

GLASGOW'S BIG PICTURE:

A Gene Kelly ceilidh is one of the star turns at Glasgow's Film Festival from February 16-26. See glasgowfilm.org. VisitScotland.com has a list of hotels. Flybe, Ryanair, Aer Arann and Aer Lingus all fly there.

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Advice for a trip?



MIXED REVIEWS: Roslyn Dee travels to Morocco but will trust her own judgement

When I wrote here back in September that I had never been a great fan of Tripadvisor, going on to highlight that there had been a raft of complaints about the site in recent times and that Britain's Advertising Standards Authority had become involved, I received (the day after publication) an email from the Tripadvisor people complaining about my column.

They pointed out that I had said that their 'Reviews You Can Trust' slogan was removed as a result of the authority's intervention when, in fact, according to their spokesman, they had already begun a process of changing the wording on their site on a gradual basis, prior to the authority's involvement. 'This evolution,' reads the email from Tripadvisor, 'was carried out across all domains gradually from June to August this year, first appearing in the UK on 27th June 2011.' Fair enough.

But I still think that Tripadvisor is



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something to be avoided like the plague. Largely, my reasons are a bit hi-falutin', I suppose, in that I think that Tripadvisor and its ilk detract from the essence of what 'travel' is supposed to be about: discovery.

Even if all the information is absolutely genuine and correct, why would you want to know everything about the place before you get there?

For many people, however, I do acknowledge that travel websites like these are useful tools – they have spent a lot of money on a family holiday, for example, and they don't want to make a bad choice.

Avoid Tripadvisor

Site's claims that reviews are trustworthy should be taken with a pinch of salt

But that's where I get confused because entries about various hotels on Tripadvisor are often at polar opposites of the spectrum. If one review is negative and all the others are positive, you can generally take it that that's just one disgruntled customer – for whatever reason – but when the positives and negatives are fairly equally balanced, then what's that about?

Now, as it happens, I will be in a hotel in Morocco next week and so, in the interests of this column I had a look at the Tripadvisor reviews. They are very mixed but tend to be either effusive in their

praise or damning altogether. The issue of 'staff' is interesting with a number of reviewers (between November 2011 and mid-January 2012) thinking they were great but with three entries (so not just the disgruntled token one) highly critical: 'rude, sulky, sometimes aggressive staff' says one, with another one headed: 'Lovely hotel, let down by staff.' The review that runs directly under that one, by the way, is headed: 'Lovely staff and hotel.'

So it's all about personal taste, really, which, if you are influenced by other people's tastes is, once again, fair enough. But, in my book, what isn't fair enough is

anonymity. It gives rise to all sorts of things, such as the allegation this past week that the staff of the Carlton Hotel Group here in Ireland had been directed to write favourable reviews about their own establishments.

Carlton has denied this but I don't think we have heard the last of it.

And this comes in the same week that the Advertising Standards Authority in Britain has published an adjudication, ruling that the Tripadvisor website could not 'claim or imply that all the reviews that appeared were from real travellers, or were honest, real or trusted'.

Why? Because the reviews could not be verified.

Tripadvisor meanwhile cites its 'advanced and highly effective fraud detection systems' and says it is confident that 'the 50 million users who come to our site every month trust the reviews'.

Well, speaking as someone who won't be upping that to 50,000,001, all I can say is that I would take the whole thing with a very large pinch of salt.

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