



*Sketch of stone villa in Cerquetto village, Umbria by Duncan Gregory*

## Traversing Rome ... and landing in Umbria

What makes a place exciting as a travel destination? Those sensors deposited deep in our brain cells must tell us, by responding in a positive or negative manner to the sights and sounds and even smells of a new location. Later in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century there may be digital algorithms to predict the destination most suited for our personality, but for now it is trial and error ... which I think I prefer.

In my case, the trial and error procedure offers up two diverse locations: India and Italy. But because I have written a number of other articles which focus on South Asia, this piece converges on that magnificent Mediterranean enclave named Italy (or Italia, as the Italians themselves know it).

I guess there could be a hundred other places I haven't seen, which I might prefer, but when I'm too long away from Italy, I start thinking I should be making plans to re-visit. It gets to me when I see tablecloths spread under a street-side veranda, or people quaffing wine during their lunchtime break. In whatever nondescript place I happen to be, my mind floats back to a piazza setting in Rome, or Umbria, or an untold number of glorious Italian localities.

I first went there when I was a teenager. My floating hotel docked in Naples en route to Australia, where I abandoned ship for a day to tramp the byways of the town and consume the obligatory bus-trip to the Roman ruins of Pompei. My main recollections are of swarthy young men in dark shades pushing me to buy postcards, plus wall-art of a Roman soldier with a huge appendage between his legs (I guess I was at an age then, to be in awe of such things). It was just a stopover, but those first impressions stayed with me: vibrant alleyways, but such an easy-going mood; quite different to the Britain I knew and had left in my wake.

A few years after, when my twenties glass was still half-empty - or half-full, other less optimistic folk might say - I found myself and young bride in a cheap rental, over the bridge from the train station in Venice. We had extended our two-week package holiday in Austria to bus through the snows of Switzerland, then train South alongside the icy waters of Lake Como, to the Italian plains. Another long hop and we were in Venice. After road (or rail) for several days, I have vivid memories of hastily washed clothes turning brown on an oven-hot water boiler in the bowels of our dank, underground homestay. Strangely, it was at that juncture that I began to fall in love with the place.

More than two decades after that I visited Rome for the first time, with a young family in tow. Italians of course love kids, so that was no problem. We stopped for a day or two in Termini (the central station area) where many other tourists in transit also stay. A few years later I returned to the same precinct, for a longer-than-normal stopover; then, there were just two of us in a small penthouse, with a roof-top terrace and a squeezey little lift. It was memorable in part for late night exploits, when Antonio, a staff member, helped us raid the hotel's basement wine store. When we bumped into him a few days later and sat for an impromptu cappuccino-chat outside a typical family-run coffee bar, it felt like we had known each other for years. Italians, I came to realise, have the happy knack of becoming your best friend in the blink of an eye.

But back to that that first trip through Rome, with two kids incorporated. We were in fact heading for a hilltop villa, three or four hours away, in Umbria. The place was owned by a British friend, and both the house and its resident two-door (and tiny) Fiat Uno, were still either under repair, or in serious need of attention. It was one of the hottest summers on record and water was in short supply, especially for the fitted (but non-functioning) flush toilet, so the ritual was to grab a spade and head for the hills, or in this case, the adjoining grounds (something my older daughter unrelentingly refused to do).

The little black Fiat looked fine from a distance but on closer inspection had no registration or insurance, and perhaps more importantly, no brakes. I soon found that steering this pocket-sized, left-hand drive motor – that offered no assured way of stopping - down the steep, winding, unsealed road, to the main highway at the bottom, was quite a challenge. But even greater peril lay in meeting the Italian Polizi, on the main *strada*, which ran along the valley into Spoleto, the local town. We saw them on several occasions, but on that heart-stopping moment when we were pulled over, they were

more focused on ensuring that I (as a foreign driver) knew the road rules, rather than any checks of the car; which was at the time, one enormous, breath-exhaling relief!

I made a sketch of my friend's two-story stone villa where we lived for two weeks – It was one of a handful of ancient dwellings, perched on top of a small mountain, which together formed the tiny village of Cerquetto. I still have that sketch some twenty years later (and is reproduced at the start of this article). Viewing the drawing after all this time brings back some great memories ... including the toilet without water!

One of those memories was getting to know two young ladies who travelled down from Northern Europe to use the villa's garage as their summer residence, kipping down on sleeping bags, alongside the Uno. "You'll be sure to meet the two *Belgian ladies*," the owner of the house had forewarned me just before leaving Britain. And sure enough we did ... on the very first night we were there, when they came knocking at the front door, looking for sugar. Then later, as we came to know each other more, squeezing them into our little black box on wheels, on the way down to the valley floor; meeting afterwards, in the main Piazza of old Spoleto town, to share a porchetta roll: one of those things in life you can never forget: an Italian delicacy in its traditional setting.

The central area of Spoleto – the old medieval bit – as for many other towns across the length and breadth of Italy, is an architectural masterpiece, its narrow, cobbled streets and ochre walls representing a bygone era that's reflected still by the close, community life of today's generation. The food market, set up before dawn and gone by noon - a hive of activity and gossip that has existed since the beginning of time – is transformed, after the mid-afternoon siesta, into an enclosure circumnavigated by cafes and restaurants, which carry the day on, into night.

During that first hot summer vacation in Cerquetto, we visited Todi, a small town, thirty or forty kilometres out on the plains, to the West, which boasts a similar medieval centre. There, I wrote a poem to reflect my thoughts: the thoughts of an itinerant in Italy.

### ***Hot Todi***

*The heat rises and hangs  
Above the simmering street paving,  
Etched and carefully laid on the angle.*

*The buildings: three, four, five floors,  
Crowd in on the road,  
Their colours ranging through greys and browns,  
To pinky beige and mustard yellows.*

*People scramble up the slope,  
Caught in the heat-haze of the street.  
Siesta time lingers on hot metal shutters  
And unadorned tables outside the pizzerias.*

*Medieval town,  
An intricate castle,  
A labyrinth of steep streets,  
A majestic form above the Umbrian plain.*

*Hilltop piazza, spread out in the sun  
To the steps of a towering duomo.  
Cafes and bars at the opposite end  
Hold most of the people, entrapped by the shade.*

*Then slowly, but surely,  
Those shutters unfolded, the tables redressed,  
This small country town crawls back into life.  
The elegant people begin to emerge  
To reclaim the streets once again.*

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Umbria, June 2000

But back to Spoleto. The town is unique in that it boasts one of the foremost art festivals in Italy, and as such, I have particularly vivid recollections, of inspiring musical events. One when we and a thousand other locals and nomads packed into this small, rectangular-shaped piazza, to hear an early summer's concert, with the principal instrument being a cello. As the orchestra played through the late afternoon sun into the evening dark, the sounds that bounced from those ancient walls - wooden-shuttered and adorned with flowers - still linger with me today.

On another occasion, I joined the Italian throng for an evening concert *at The Rocca Albomoziana* – the grand castle, way up on the hill above Spoleto, its ochre ramparts lit with yellow beams in the night. I waited with the Italian throng at the entrance down below. Fashionistas, rich and famous, local dignitaries: all were there. There was a buzz in the air: everyone excited to be part of this special night, this annual, must-do event. Clambering aboard a commuter bus I joined the party with the people inside, as we wound our way up the long driveway to the castle above.

On arrival, the atmosphere inside the Rocca was building: orchestra tuning, seats filling: excited faces, Italian voices. The internal quadrangle was open to the night and one thousand stars looked down on the scene from a dark and cloudless sky. Then all were seated and hushed by the raised baton: a night of Mozart and Vivaldi about to begin. Immediately the orchestra started, the wonder of the venue was evident, as the sounds of strings and wind echoed off the castle walls and floated up to the stars above.

But the real magic of the evening lay in what was to come. After the introduction from the gathered ensemble, the musicians divided into cohesive groups, to play in smaller rooms around the central square and within the castle walls. I was free to wander between the adjoining chambers and listen in one, to violin and cello, in another perhaps

clarinet and oboe. It was an educational, as well as inspirational soiree, loved by people of all ages. Towards the end, the onlookers re-grouped and the orchestra joined its many parts to make a whole, offering a rousing grand finale to a full moon, which was now high in the sky above.

Some years later I returned to Spoleto and walked across the viaduct, above the moat - now sown with grass – which ran around the old medieval centre. There, I wrote a few lines which captured my feelings of re-visiting a place that held so many memories. This is an extract from that poem:

### ***Looking Back***

*Spoleto now a scaffolded town.  
Constant rain  
On our track.  
Across the viaduct to a younger past,  
Expose those deep thoughts of mortality,  
That question when,  
And maybe how.  
Perhaps it's better not to qualify;  
Just continue to watch, as years go by.*

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Italy, 2004

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#### **FOOTNOTE:**

A number of poems, written by the author, relating to travels in Italy, can be found in the Poetry section of the *Whittling our Niche* website. These include:

***Am I beautiful? Yes, I'm!***  
***Eine Kliene, Roccamusik***  
***Hot Todi***  
***Looking Back***  
***Suddenly it was Spring!***  
***Train to Perugia***  
***Venice, my friend***