



48 HOURS IN...

Ascoli Piceno

Home to more than 200 towers in the Middle Ages, Ascoli Piceno is accessible, manageable and rich in history and culture. **Jane Keightley** takes the tour...

Travelling through southern Le Marche I could not help wondering why the area is not as popular with tourists as neighbouring Tuscany and Umbria. The area is blessed with beautiful hill towns as far as the eye can see; it has the amazing Sibillini Mountains on one side and the beautiful beaches of the Palm Riviera on the other. The peaceful atmosphere is part of its charm. It is easy to imagine coming here and living like a local. It is not like the tourist hotspots where everybody speaks English. Here you have to use whatever Italian you have, rusty or otherwise, which makes it all so much more fun.

THE BALCONY OF PICENO

I was in Southern Le Marche to visit Ascoli Piceno, the capital of the province, but before I got there I wanted to explore some of the many beguiling hill towns of the region. I began my brief tour of the area by visiting Ripatransone. It has been given the title of 'Balcony of Piceno' – and rightly so as you can gaze out towards the Adriatic, and inland towards the mountains, with so many hill towns dotted in between it is impossible to count them all. Its



Clockwise from top left: A shop window; view of Ascoli; Piazza del Popolo, Offida; peaceful house in the Marche countryside; church door; street life; the narrowest street in Italy; Le Marche panorama

Photography © Jane Keightley

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

PINOTECA CIVICA 1

Piazza Arringo

The Pinoteca Civica, Ascoli Piceno's principal art gallery, is housed in the grand Palazzo Arringo and has more than 800 works of art. If you would like to see more of the city's art you can buy yourself a combined ticket, for the Contemporary Art Museum and the Ceramic Museum as well, for €8.

THE PAPAL PAPER MILL 2

Via della Cartiera 1

☎ +39 073 625 2594

www.musecartierapapale.it

The Papal Paper Mill in Ascoli Piceno dates back to the Middle Ages, while official documents bear proof of the use of these mills as far back as the 8th century. Giulio della Rovere, who would become Pope Julius II – the 'Warrior Pope' – commissioned refurbishments in 1512 and it was at that time that the Papal Paper Mill acquired the layout that can still be seen today.

TEMPIETTO DI SANT'EMIDIO

ALLE GROTTE 3

Via Carso 5

A magnificent example of baroque architecture, this small temple marks the place where it is said that Saint Emidio brought his own decapitated head in order to find a Christian burial. It was built in 1721 as a thanksgiving to the city's patron saint for having saved Ascoli from the earthquake of 1703. It is situated at the base of the grottoes of the early Christian catacombs.

THE DUOMO OF SAINT EMIDIO 4

Piazza Arringo

The interior of the Duomo is beautiful with a vast cycle of frescoes and a magnificent polyptych by Carlo Crivelli. Down in the crypt there is an altar surrounded by mosaics. The tradition that gives Saint Emidio special powers against earthquakes is relatively recent. The 1703 earthquake destroyed many central Italian cities, yet Ascoli, miraculously, remained untouched. From this moment Saint Emidio is often represented in the act of supporting the buildings of the city with his arms extended.

FORTE MALATESTA 5

Built near the banks of the River Castellano and the Cecco bridge, this fort on the edge of the city is well worth a trip out of town for a visit. Built in 1349 and reconstructed in 1540 it has a varied and interesting history. In 1828 it was restored and used as a prison until 1978. It was restored between 2000 and 2010 and is now a museum.



Quieter than Tuscany, but no less beautiful

DON'T MISS

THE QUINTANA

On the first Sunday of August, Ascoli hosts the Joust of the Quintana, which features around 1,500 people in medieval costume and jousts between the cavaliers of the town's historical sestieri. This is considered to be the best medieval pageant in Le Marche.

► historical centre boasts buildings dating back to the Middle Ages, Renaissance and baroque times, but it is best known for having 'the narrowest street in Italy'. At just 43 centimetres wide it is just an alley really, but it attracts the visitors who enjoy posing for a photograph squeezed tightly between its walls. When you have done posing, make time for a visit to the Museum of Rural Life and Handicrafts, and the Potters museum.

OFFIDA

Still moving onwards towards Ascoli Piceno I decided to spend a few hours in Offida, a town famous for its lace-

making. As I approached the entrance to the old part of the town I stopped to admire the bronze monument which shows three generations of lace-makers. I then followed the main street, passing real live lace-makers in their doorways busy working on their small wooden bobbins. When I reached the town's main square, Piazza del Popolo (which is actually triangular in shape) I was impressed by the Palazzo Communale, one of the most beautiful town halls in Le Marche. Passing under its porticos I ventured inside to discover its hidden treasure, the Serpente Aureo Theatre. Built in the 18th century, it is a truly amazing example of the many beautiful little theatres that are scattered all over Le Marche. On the west side of the square is the church of the Collegiata. Venturing in I discovered a vast interior decorated with stuccoes and, under the high altar, the body of Saint Leonard, the

An amazing example of the many beautiful little theatres scattered over Le Marche

patron saint of Offida. Following the via Roma to just outside the town, the church of Santa Maria della Rocca stands high on a wedge-shaped rocky spur. Its interior is quite minimalist in comparison to the Collegiata. Coming back down into town I

decided I could not leave Offida without visiting the Lace Museum. Some of the exhibits belong to the museum and some belong to the lace-making inhabitants of Offida, who take it in turns to lend the museum some of their best works so

At the east end of the square stands the Duomo di Sant'Emidio, the patron saint

the display is always changing. One of the exhibits is a lace dress made for Naomi Campbell to wear at a fashion show in London. Hungry now after all my exploring I went in search of sustenance. I thought I would try the local speciality, *chichi ripieno*, which is a flat-bread stuffed with tuna, anchovies, artichokes in oil and pickled peppers – and very tasty it was too. I was then offered one of the local cakes, which are called *funghetti* because of their mushroom shape. They are made of flour, sugar, water and aniseed – and are also delicious.

SIGHTS AND ADVENTURES

The next day I headed off to Ascoli,

looking forward to a day filled with new sights and adventures. I had heard that the centre of Ascoli was particularly beautiful with its two main squares, Piazza Arringo and Piazza del Popolo, so I decided to visit them before I did anything

else. I started off in Piazza Arringo, so named because in the Middle Ages it was the place for public meetings – *arringo* is the Italian word for harangue. It is now the main cultural centre of the city and there you will find the main museums, the Town Hall, the Bishop's Palace and the Cathedral. At the east end of the square stands the Duomo di Sant'Emidio, who was the first Bishop of Ascoli, the Patron Saint of the city and its protector against earthquakes. It was first built in the 4th century with extra bits added on throughout the years. On the left of the Cathedral stands the Baptistery, an octagonal construction dating ►



Piazza del Popolo



Back street



High street

WHERE TO STAY

PALAZZO GUIDEROCCHI 6

Via Cesare Battisti 3

☎ +39 073 634 3441

www.palazzoguiderochi.com

This hotel situated in a grand old *palazzo* is centrally situated near the Piazza del Popolo. Despite its location, however, there is private parking available. The staff are friendly and the surroundings luxurious. The hotel's restaurant, La Rua de Notari, serves traditional regional dishes along with sophisticated international cuisine. Double rooms from €89.

HOTEL RESIDENZA 100 TORRE 7

Via C. Mazzoni 6

☎ +39 073 625 5123

www.centotorri.com

This central hotel has been developed from the stables of an old *palazzo*. Fine furniture and curtains, lights and decorative objects, in a pleasant atmosphere of exclusivity. As well as the 'recreation of inner harmony', there is also free private parking. Double rooms from €98.

HOTEL PALAZZO DEI MERCANTI 8

Corso Trento & Trieste 35

☎ +39 073 625 6044

www.palazzodeimercanti.com

This luxurious but great value hotel is centrally placed near both Piazza Arringo and Piazza del Popolo. It has helpful, English speaking staff and contains a restaurant and a wellness centre. It was converted from a medieval convent. Double rooms from €99.

ALBERGO PICENO 9

Via Minucia 10

☎ +39 073 625 3017

www.albergopiceno.it

This hotel centrally placed between the Piazza del Popolo and the Piazza Arringo is situated in an elegant 18th century building which was carefully restored in 2007 to bring back its earlier beauty. It has very friendly and helpful staff. Double rooms from £59.

NASCONDIGLIO DI BACCO 10

Contrada Ciafone 97, Offida

☎ +39 073 688 9537

www.nascondigliodibacco.it

If you fancy somewhere that is situated more in the countryside, but still with luxurious surroundings, this place cannot be beaten. A 50-year-old farmhouse set in seven acres of grounds, it has an infinity pool and beautiful views of the Marche countryside. It offers bed and breakfast, and eight rooms all named after a grape variety from the Marche region. Some of the rooms have private terraces and all have air conditioning. Double rooms from £85.

DON'T MISS

TASTES OF ASCOLI

Ascoli Piceno has many culinary specialities but it is most well known for olive oil all'ascolana. Local olives are stuffed with a paste made from pork, chicken and beef, then coated in breadcrumbs and fried. In the spring Ascoli puts on a dedicated festival.

WHERE TO EAT

IL DESCO 11

Via Vidacilio 10
 ☎ +39 073 625 0757
 www.ildescoristorante.it
 This restaurant located in the heart of the historical centre of Ascoli Piceno has an elegant décor and friendly, helpful staff. The food is wonderful and the restaurant also has a lovely rear garden offering you the opportunity to eat outside on warm summer evenings.

Price range € €

CAFFE MELETTI 12

Piazza del Popolo
 ☎ +39 073 625 5559
 www.caffemeletti.it
 Opened in 1907, this place is famous for its Art Deco architecture and the sweet aniseed digestive, Anisetta Meletti, which they use here to flavour ice cream. It is the ideal place to enjoy some good food and indulge in a bit of people watching in the Piazza del Popolo, one of the loveliest squares in Italy.

Price range € €

LA PAESANA 13

Vi Giacomo Leopardi 31
 Acquaviva Picena
 ☎ +39 073 576 5251
 www.lapaesana.net

La Paesana is an understated family run restaurant which serves the typical food of the Le Marche region, including the famous olive all'ascolana. It was founded in 1970 and is still run by the same people. A local favourite, it offers very good food for a modest price.

Price range € €

PICCOLO TEATRO 14

Via Goldoni 2
 ☎ +39 073 626 1574
 www.alpiccoloteatro.it

This restaurant is mainly used by the locals – which is always a good sign – and offers traditional dishes of the region. The service is good and the place has a cosy atmosphere but the other side of that is that it is small, so if you want to eat here do be sure that you book ahead.

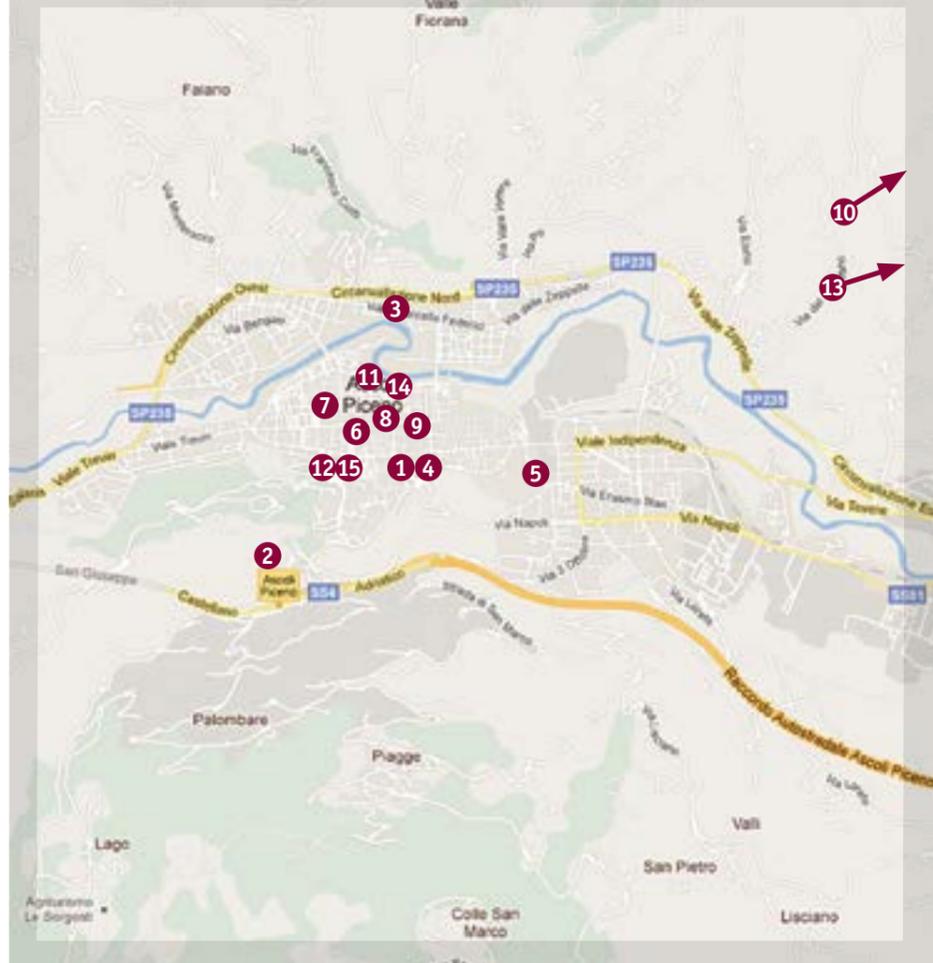
Price range € €

CAFFE LORENZ 15

Piazza del Popolo 5
 ☎ +39 073 625 9959
 www.lorenzcafe.it

Situated on Piazza del Popolo, the Caffè Lorenz offers great gelato, tasty snacks and a great location for watching the world go by. As well as being a place to enjoy a drink, however, it also does a fixed menu of four courses for €28.

Price range € €



DON'T MISS

CERAMIC WORKSHOPS
 Ascoli has been well known for its majolica, a type of glazed Italian ceramic, since the Middle Ages. At the end of the 1700s an enterprising monk installed a factory of majolica in the Monastery of Saint Angelo Magno. It is still made today in workshops dotted around the city.

from the early Middle Ages and reconstructed in the 12th century. Close to the Cathedral stands the Bishop's Palace, which houses the Museo Diocesano, which has a varied collection of sacred art collected from churches and monasteries in the area. Next to the Bishop's Palace is the Arengo Palace, which is the home of the Town Hall and Municipal Art Gallery. The Gallery contains one of

Half the fun is squeezing round the corners and negotiating trucks being loaded up

the most important art collections in the region and has works by Crivelli, Van Dyck and Rembrandt and a stunning 13th century Papal Cope worn by the Ascoli-born Pope Nicholas.

After my culture fix, I felt the need for a bit of retail therapy and some food to quieten my rumbling tummy so I went to find the other famous square of Ascoli, Piazza del Popolo. Known as 'the Drawing Room' of Ascoli, it takes your breath away as you enter it. The travertine

tiles that the Piazza is paved with positively gleam and it is full of stylish shops, cafés and restaurants. It is the ideal spot for people watching, and what better place to do it than the famous Art Deco Caffè Meletti, founded in 1907 and famous for its Anisetta liqueur. Refreshed and raring to go again I explored the rest of the Piazza. There are three important buildings to look out for,

which represent the three powers of the time: political with the Captain's Palace, religious with the Church of San Francesco, and commercial with the Merchant's Lodge.

I wanted to explore the rest of Ascoli but with my aching feet in mind I returned to the Piazza Arringo, where, near the Cathedral was a motorised tourist train called the Ascoli Explorer touting for business. The narrow streets of Ascoli are not big enough for the usual tourist buses and this is the ideal



Piazza del Popolo



Lacemakers statue



A room with a view



Traditional knife sharpener

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE
 There are three main airports you can fly into when visiting Ascoli Piceno. The closest are Ancona in Le Marche and Pescara in Abruzzo, both routes being served by Ryanair from London Stansted. Rome is also an option as it is only two hours drive away.

BY TRAIN
 Ascoli Piceno is easily accessible by train, especially from Ancona airport, and also from major cities all over Italy. Do bear in mind though that although tickets are a good price the journeys can be slow and have quite a few changes.

BY CAR
 Hiring a car is the best way of seeing the region. To get from either Ancona or Pescara airport to Ascoli Piceno take the A14 Ancona road, then take the exit for Ascoli Piceno/San Benedetto del Tronto.

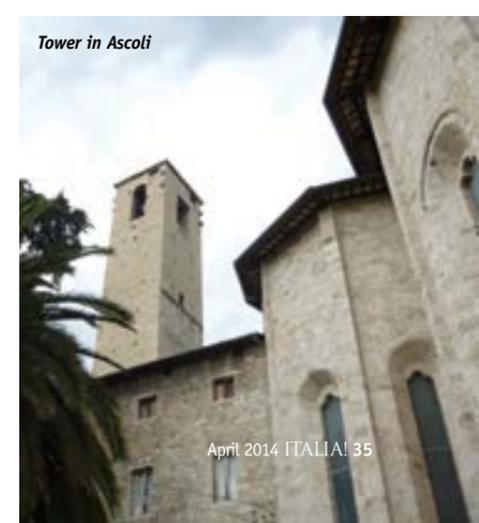
KEY TO RESTAURANT PRICES
 (full meal per person, not including wine)
 € Up to €25
 € € €26-€50
 € € € More than €50

DON'T MISS

SETTEMBRE IN MUSICA
 Music lovers might consider organising their visit for September, when the town hosts the *Settembre in Musica* festival. A fixture since 1996, the festival serves to offer a window on the musical world of the region, and open the region to the music of the world.



Café on the Piazza



Tower in Ascoli