



Ascoli Piceno

# Undiscovered Italy

LE MARCHE IS THE NEW TUSCANY, MINUS THE CROWDS.  
JUST DON'T GO TELLING EVERYONE, SAYS **JOANNE CHRISTIE**

**Everyone knows about** the rolling hills and quaint medieval towns of Tuscany. Everyone. And they're heading there in droves, so much so that tourism authorities in some areas have started diverting their attention away from their usual job of attracting tourists, and are now working on discouraging them instead.

But the picturesque farmhouses and traditional Italy you see in films and books does still exist, you just need to travel a teeny bit further downwards and sideways to find it. While Tuscany absorbed the impact of 4,802,120 foreign visitors in the 2004 season (2005 figures are yet to be released), the lesser-known Central Italian province of Le Marche had just 334,264, despite being

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home to just as many beautiful medieval towns, rolling hills and expansive vineyards.

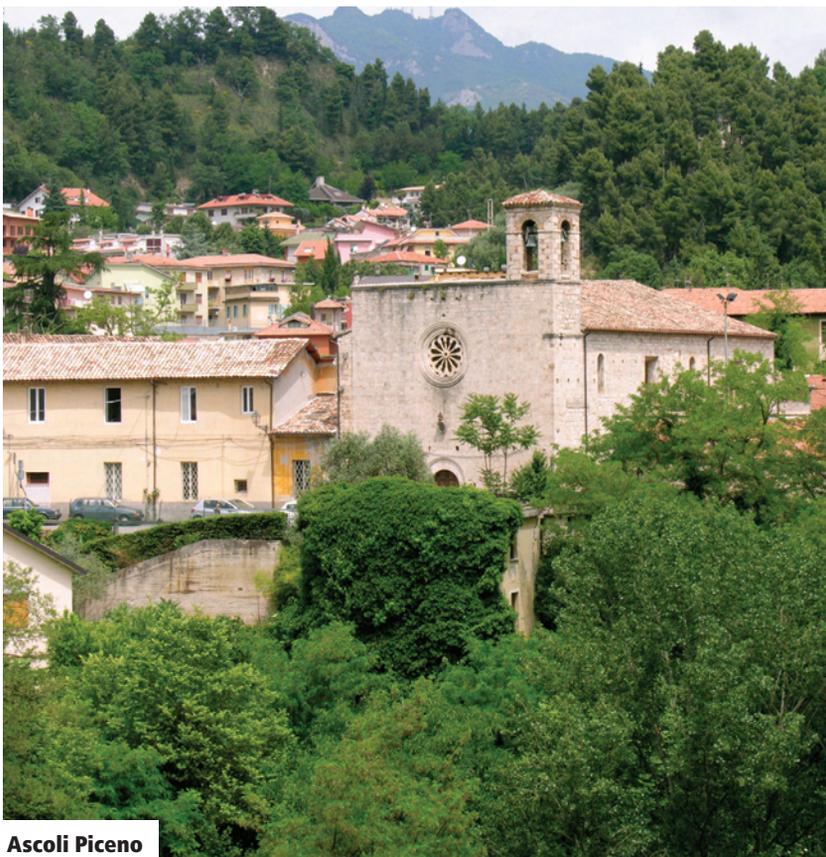
In the lovely but well-trodden medieval town of San Gimignano in Tuscany, visitor numbers are so out of control, residents and local authorities have started campaigning against the drive-by tourism that sees Japanese tour buses pull up at 8am, do a cursory tour and leave again at 8.45. But in the equally quaint Le Marche cities of Ascoli Piceno or Urbino, you could sometimes have a gallery or cathedral to yourself.

On a tour of the Sant'Emidio Cathedral in Ascoli, our host Giulia Panichi, who we later discovered was a princess (though she never mentioned it), casually let slip that Le Marche had produced three former popes,

which left me even more confused about why the region was so unknown. But after a guided tour of an exquisite art exhibition in the beautiful town of Fermo, where the host apologised for being boring, and lunch at a lovingly restored farmhouse where the owner apologised for the rustic nature of the property, I'm starting to see why the area hasn't quite taken off.

The PR skills of the locals are decidedly lacking, by accident or design I'm not sure, but either way I can't help being glad they're not great at selling themselves. In three days in the region, I didn't hear one other Australian accent, and barely came across any foreign tourists at all.

Though British second-homebuyers are



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Conero Riviera

slowly starting to see the area's attractions, you certainly don't have to jostle for space with hordes of other tourists, and if you want to experience Italy, rather than just visit it, Le Marche is a much better choice than Tuscany. Of course it's not all beautiful hilltop towns and rolling vineyards; the region has inevitably been badly developed in parts — ugly factory outlets and high rise apartment blocks have been built in many of the valleys separating the traditional medieval towns and there seems to be a never-ending number of toll booths dotted along the highways. Nevertheless, if you get away from the coast and off the main roads, you're still far more likely to see a donkey meandering along the road than a tour bus full of drunken revellers.

Most people's initiation to Le Marche begins in Ancona, a busy port town with the area's only international airport. Ancona's charms, though they exist, are limited and in a short visit it is best treated as an entry and exit point only. On the coastal front, while there are some spectacular beaches along the Adriatic Sea, home to the very first Le Marche settlers, the Piceni tribes, these areas are best avoided due to huge levels of internal tourism and ugly '60s-style developments.

JOANNE CHRISTIE/TNT IMAGES, REX FEATURES

The region's real highlights lie in the interior and the best way to explore these is by renting a car — one of the drawbacks of an underdeveloped tourist industry is that public transport between towns is fairly limited. Once you've seen the major city of Urbino, you can literally take your pick from

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hundreds of medieval hilltop towns, Ascoli Piceno, Fermo and Recanati are particularly interesting for art lovers. Though these may be the most notable, there's a rich art scene throughout the region and while the locals may be modest when it comes to self-promotion, they are fiercely proud of their artistic history and knowledge, especially when it comes to the theatre.

"No other place has this amount of historical theatres," says Giulia, informing us there are 73 in total in Le Marche. "The local families would get together and build

theatres because it was important to them that their town had one. Each family would put in some money and then they would own certain seats or areas in that theatre for their family to use."

While it may not be as prominent as other wine-growing areas in Italy, Le Marche also has some renowned and award-winning vineyards and if you're passing one, it's worth stopping in for a taste test and tour. Locals say the salty winds blowing from the Adriatic give the white wines their special flavour and these same winds are also credited with producing distinct flavours in the tomatoes and olives which form the basis of many of their delicious staple dishes.

If you're the type of person who sticks religiously by the guidebook and follows the crowd, Le Marche may not be for you, but if you like the challenge of not knowing exactly what's around each bend, and crave the feeling of actually finding something out for yourself, get there now before the secret gets out — it's only a matter of time. ■

■ Joanne Christie travelled to Le Marche with Ryanair ([www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) who have daily flights from London Stansted to Ancona from £26.02 return. For more information on the region, see [www.turismo.marche.it](http://www.turismo.marche.it).