Travel and Adventure: The quiet magic of Abruzzo

by Susan Van Allen

ABRUZZO, Italy - Teenagers in skintight jeans and T-shirts were coupled on stone benches, sitting face to face with their legs entwined, gazing into each other's eyes and leaning in for gentle kisses. I was on the outer rim of the flat, rectangular park in Sulmona, a small town in Abruzzo, Italy, trying not to stare. Back where I live in Los Angeles, I never see these live, sigh-inspiring reminders of my long-ago high school days. According to Tiziana, my guide, I was where I belonged.

ITALIAN ARCHITECTURE - Chiesa dell'Annunziata, on Corso Ovidio in Sulmona, Italy, was rebuilt after an earthquake in 1706, and is an example of the region's Renaissance architecture. CNS Photo courtesy of Italian American Tourist Board. SNOW-CAPPED SCENERY - The Maiella Mountains provide a dramatic backdrop to the landscape of Abruzzo. CNS Photo courtesy of Italian American Tourist Board. SNAKE CHARMER - A native of Sulmona holds a snake he captured from the nearby forest, in preparation for the May Procession of the San Domenico Snake Handlers. Photo courtesy of Italian American Tourist Board. "The inside of the park is only always for the young lovers," she told me.

The amore show, softly shaded by tall pine and linden trees, seemed to be no big deal to the natives in my path: kids wearing Hello Kitty jackets holding their mamma's hand and weathered seniors in dark wool suits greeting each other with "buona seras." It's quintessential Italy, where romance seamlessly blends with daily life, and as I continued to explore Sulmona, it came at me from all directions.

The Latin poet Ovid, author of "The Art of Love," a courtship and sex manual, was born here in 43 B.C. Strolling along Corso Ovidio, the cobblestone main drag named in his honor, I was surrounded by displays of candies I automatically associate with love - confetti, or sugar-coated almonds, the town's most famous export. At every Italian-American wedding I got to go to as a kid, I remember white confetti wrapped up in small, netted bags that were given as favors.

"It symbolizes a wish for the couple to have a fruitful marriage," Tiziana said.

The Corso ends at an impressive 13th century aqueduct that opens to Piazza Garibaldi, where knight-in-shining-armor fantasies are played out every summer with reenactments of Renaissance jousts. It

wasn't only in Sulmona where romantic sentiments were stirred up last April when I visited Abruzzo. This undertouristed region that lies east of Rome, on the calf of the boot, possesses a quiet magic - conjured up through a mix of small towns rich with tradition, Medieval and Renaissance architecture, vibrant food and wine, and welcoming natives.

Adding to its appeal are its meal and accommodation prices, which, across the board, are about a third below what's charged in other Italian destinations. A dramatic backdrop of natural beauty completes the picture, featuring a mesmerizing Adriatic horizon, grassy fields of grazing sheep and shimmering green hills framed by the snowcapped Appenine Mountains.

"There's a legend about these mountains," Tiziana told me. "The story goes that Maya, the Greco-Roman Goddess of the Earth, came here searching for a flower to heal her sick son, but failed to reach the top before he died. She died in sorrow for her loss and reappeared in the form of the rounded mountains that make up the Maiella chain, or Sleeping Beauty. Her son reappeared as the jagged range opposite her, the Gran Sasso, or Sleeping Giant."

More than 1,000 castles crown this terrain, accenting its enchantment. One afternoon I traipsed around (with a scrumptious gelato in hand) the Capestrano Castle, named for its native warrior, San Giovanni di Capestrano. A mission in Southern California (San Juan Capistrano) is named after this same Abruzzese saint. In fact, the connection between America and Abruzzo is strong. More than 1 million people migrated from this region in the early 20th century, and many settled in the States, including ancestors of celebrities such as Madonna, Dean Martin, Rocky Marciano, Henry Mancini and Alan Alda.

My most elegant castle experience was in Loreto Aprutino, where a majestic building from 864 has been converted to become the Castello Chiola Hotel. Dining in what was once the courtyard (now skylighted and featuring a glass elevator to reach the posh accommodations upstairs) was a chance to immerse myself in an atmosphere fit for royalty and taste Abruzzo's delicious mountain cuisine: a warm pecorino cheese pie surrounded by slices of salami, baked spaghetti chitarra (named because it's cut with a tool resembling guitar strings) and lamb stuffed with artichoke.

The food was outstanding everywhere, showcasing the products of Abruzzo's forests and farms: sausages spiced with hot pepper, goat ricotta cheese, guinea fowl, roasted kid, fresh pasta and rough-crusted airy bread. Exotic flavors accented our meals - red garlic from Sulmona, a knock-me-out custard flavored with saffron

that grows abundantly in the Abruzzo hills, and ratafia, a bitter cherry liqueur.

All were accompanied by deep and gusty Montepulciano D'Abruzzo red wines, along with Cerasuolo, a delicate rose, and Trebbiano d'Abruzzo, a crisp white.

Snakes were nowhere to be found on the menus, but they figure large in tradition here, as I discovered in Cocullo, where locals had gathered them from the nearby forests in preparation for the Procession of the San Domenico Snake Handlers. When a yellow-toothed signor handed me a five-foot-long, gold and black mottled snake from the bundle he held in his arms (assuring me it was defanged), I let the slithery creature wind around my arm. My only experience feeling snakeskin before this was running my hands over wallets and shoes in fancy department stores. But this creature was warm and smooth, and as it slowly moved over me, I got a strange, calm sense of connection to the mysterious nature of this animal that's been the center of ritual here since pagan times.

Over the years, Cocullo's ceremony that protects against snakebites has been transformed to a Catholic rite, with thousands flocking here in May to see a statue of San Domenico covered with live snakes paraded through the town.

"The people here have a good balance - the warmth of the south and the reserve of the north," my traveling pal Giovanni said as we poked around stores in Castelli, where the craft of ceramic making that's been around since the 17th century is still going strong. Shopkeepers displaying impressive wares of painted plates, vases and plaques gave us simple "buon giornos" and were helpful, but let us browse without pouncing to make sales.

In Castelli's piazza, surrounded by the snowcapped Gran Sasso, a kiln burning beech wood scented the mountain air with a warm, spicy aroma. I looked over the shoulder of a signora seated near the fire, painting a plate. With delicate brush strokes, she transformed a white dish into a landscape of sage grass, pale blue sky and a golden farmhouse.

Gracefully following tradition, she was, in her own way, expressing the quiet magic of Abruzzo.

IF YOU GO

Four-star accommodations:

Castello Chiola Hotel: Via Degli Aquino, 12 Loreto Aprutino, www.castellochiolahotel.com.Rates: $185 single, $395 suite.

Hotel Ovidius: Via Circ. Occidentale 177, Sulmona, www.hotelovidius.it. Rates: $96 single, $275 suite.

Eurofly Airlines, www.euroflyusa.com, provides direct service from JFK to Pescara.

Italian Travel Promotion Council, www.italiantravelpromotioncouncil.org, provides expert tour operators who specialize in Italian vacations, including package tours to Abruzzo.

Italian Tourist Board: www.italiantourism.com.

Susan Van Allen is a freelance travel writer.

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