

August 13, 2006

Next Stop

In Abruzzi, Italy Shows a Rougher Edge



AS soon as we arrived in Abruzzi, a wild, mountainous region in [Italy](#) east of [Rome](#), my husband and I were lost. It was October of last year, and we were driving — or so we thought — to a medieval village called Santo Stefano. Instead, we found ourselves on a tiny mountain road just wider than a hiking trail, the car doors scraping against wild berry bushes. We were so high up over a gorge that birds were flying parallel to the car windows. When we finally reached our destination, we realized that there were two Santo Stefano villages in Abruzzi and we were at the wrong one.

Apparently, we weren't the first.

Centuries ago, whenever Christian missionaries would wander this way, they would become lost in the area's great forests and mountains, too, and either hightail it back home or hide themselves in a cave and start a cult.

We finally did find the right Santo Stefano — Santo Stefano di Sessanio, to be exact — and it was worth the long detour. In fact, we were so drawn by Abruzzi's enchanted landscapes that we returned in the spring. This time, we went with a good map and three objectives: To hike to one of the many hermitages scattered throughout Abruzzi's remote mountains; to eat at several of the restaurants that the chef Mario Batali highly recommends on his Web site (www.babbonyc.com/travel.html); and to witness one of the remaining pagan-inspired festivals that still take place in the region.

The most sensational example is the Festa dei Serpari, or the Festival of the Serpent Handlers, on the first Thursday in May in the small hilltop town of Cocullo. When we arrived on the morning of the festival, there were so many cars along the road that we had to park almost a mile away and walk. In the town's small main piazza, crowds were gathering around local residents who were showing off their snakes.

A half-hour before noon, the sloped narrow cobbled street leading to the Church of San Domenico and the small square in front were a river of pilgrims and tourists. A palpable and restless anticipation made it almost difficult to breathe.

Finally, after Mass, several men holding a towering painted wood statue of San Domenico filed out of the church. They bent down and, momentarily, the snake handlers hid the effigy from view. When the statue was raised again, there was a collective gasp and a brief awed silence. The saint was suddenly alive with slithering snakes.

Many townspeople say that the rite honors San Domenico, but many historians contend that the ritual is actually a repackaged pagan tradition that is more than 3,000 years old and was originally inspired by the healing snake goddess Angitia, who was worshipped by the local Marsi tribes.

Eventually, a buzzing current of people swept us outside the town walls. We found our car and managed to make it to Santo Stefano di Sessanio in 90 minutes, this time without a mishap. The last part of the drive took us up into Gran Sasso National Park, a huge open space of green valleys, smooth round hills and bare mountains tattooed by the tracks of generations of sheep.

Turning a corner, we caught site of the village from a distance. In the Middle Ages, the town reported to the Barony of Carapelle, and for some time, the Medici family. Now, however, roughly a third of Santo Stefano di Sessanio belongs to Daniele Kihlgren.

When Mr. Kihlgren, a 39-year-old Swedish-Italian preservationist who looks more like a friendly village bartender, isn't watching over the slow process of making Santo Stefano a historical tourist destination, he's acquiring other abandoned hamlets in Italy (he now owns five) or spontaneously heading to [Africa](#) for solo trips on his motorcycle.

It was on a motorcycle ride through Abruzzi in the mid-1990's that he discovered Santo Stefano di Sessanio and his passion: to bring this almost abandoned fortified village back to life. Last fall, he and a local architect, Lelio Di Zio, completed six hotel rooms in the Palazzo delle Logge in town; in June, they opened 40 more suites scattered in four other buildings.

With its worn stone floor and low ceiling, our room resembled a designer cave. Here and there were modern touches — two lights that looked like glowing giant grapes cast dramatic shadows, and the ancient stone-walled bathroom was outfitted with a sleek glass-enclosed rain shower and a Philippe Starck toilet.

After a comfortable sleep and a hearty breakfast of homemade jam, bread and cakes, we continued on our quest of ancient sites. Our goal was to find a hermitage or two, Christian monks' caves that were eventually turned into pilgrimage sites and small churches. In Abruzzi, especially in the Majella Mountains, the hermitic tradition began to flourish around 1000. The most famous of the monks was Pietro del Morrone, who at age 79 in 1294 became Pope Celestine V. He inspired the establishment of the Celestine order and reconstructed many of the Majella hermitage sites.

WE started with Santo Spiritio, the best known of these sites. From the mountain town of Roccamorice, we continued farther up into the Majella Mountains along a small track, which ended in a parking lot.

From there a short path led to a long grass-covered shelf that jutted out beneath the two-story hermitage.

From our angle beneath it, the ancient stone hermitage looked as if it were about to be swallowed by the side of the mountain. The only sound was of the river far below, the dripping of an old fountain and an occasional birdcall. It wasn't hard to understand why St. Celestine wanted to get back here so quickly — he was the only pope to resign.

Even more serene was our second stop, San Bartolomeo. We parked not far from the Macchie di Coco restaurant and walked from there through a field of wildflowers. After about 20 minutes, we came to some crude steps that led down a steep slope and suddenly dipped through a small natural tunnel. Seconds later, as we readjusted our eyes to the bright light, we found ourselves on a stone shelf about 10 feet wide. Straight ahead was what looked like a tiny house tucked under a roof of stone.

Tentatively, we walked to and then pushed open the wooden door, imagining we would awake the wrath of a sleeping bear or monk. Instead, we found a cool, empty, three-roomed shrine of stone, with just enough room to stand. Signs of recent pilgrims — dried flowers, coins and photos — cluttered the altar. After an hour of exploring, we reluctantly walked back to our car.

We were hungry. In Abruzzi, where the cuisine is hearty and rich, and quality local products like saffron and farro are abundant, that's a good thing. Mr. Batali's Web site recommended several restaurants near L'Aquila, a picturesque regional hub on a hill about 20 minutes from Santo Stefano. On our earlier trip, we were impressed with Elodia, a sophisticated and intimate spot that serves high-level interpretations of traditional Abruzzese fare, like pasta with fresh mountain ricotta and crisp pig-cheek bacon. This time, we headed for Le Salette Aquilane, on the outskirts of the city, for a late lunch.

From the moment we entered and saw its bright red walls and gypsy décor, I knew we were in the hands of a quirky but good-humored chef. We barely glanced at the menu and instead went with our waitress's pasta suggestions: cannarozzetti alle Salette and maccheroni alla chitarra (made with an instrument that looks like a guitar), specialties of the house and the region.

Afterward, in a hazy state of contented digestion, we briefly found ourselves lost again trying to get back on the road to Santo Stefano. But this time, we weren't concerned.

VISITOR INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

It's about a 90-minute bus or car ride from central [Rome](#) to L'Aquila, Abruzzi's main town. Alternatively, it's possible to fly into Pescara on the Adriatic coast on Ryan Air (www.ryanair.com).

GETTING AROUND

A sturdy small car is essential in Abruzzi, but if you're not one to explore on your own, try Go Abruzzo (866-462-1160, www.goabruzzo.com), a small knowledgeable tour company in [Philadelphia](#) that organizes excellent epicurean tours.

WHERE TO STAY

L'Aquila is an ideal base for exploring Abruzzi's interior. The Sextantio Albergo Diffuso (39-085 497-2324, www.sextantio.it) in Santo Stefano di Sessanio is about 20 minutes away. Double rooms start at 140 euros, or about \$182 at \$1.30 to the euro.

Closer to L'Aquila is the more traditional Hotel Villa Dragonetti (39-086 268-0222; www.villadragonetti.it), in the little village of Paganica. Rates at the luxurious 10-room hotel, with an intimate restaurant and outdoor pool, start at 135 euros.

The award-winning cheesemaker, La Porta dei Parchi (39-086 449-595, www.laportadeiparchi.it) also rents out simple apartments in Cocullo and nearby Anversa degli Abruzzo for less than 100 euros a day.

WHERE TO EAT

Le Salette Aquilane, Via Ciavola, 27, Coppito — just outside L'Aquila — (39-086) 231-1445. A meal for two with wine cost us 55 euros.

Elodia, Strada Statalo 17 bis del Gran Sasso, 37, Paganica (39-086) 260-6219. Tasting menu for two plus wine comes to about 100 euros.



Santo Stefano di Sessanio in Abruzzi is a remnant of medieval Italy in a region of mountain views and rugged terrain.