

Skiing on Italy's secret slopes. Abruzzo spells great wine, food and skiing,

says Graeme Spratley

The expression "best-kept secret" is often used to promote lesser-known destinations, although might equally suggest "unsuccessful marketing" – rather like "could do better" on a school report. Every now and then, though, the "best-kept secret" turns out to be exactly that, and the ski areas of Abruzzo fit that category.

The region of Abruzzo lies in central Italy, occupying 130km of the Adriatic coast. Inland, the Appenine mountains soar to an altitude of 3,000m and bring heavy snowfall and a ski season from December until April. And it all lies within two hours of the airports of Naples, Rome and Pescara.

Roccaraso is by far the biggest of Abruzzo's ski areas, with over 120km of piste, and is around 90 minutes by road from Naples. It's also Abruzzo's most established resort, celebrating its centenary this year. (Ski trivia buffs may be interested to know that it was the second resort in Italy, after Cortina d'Ampezzo, to install chairlifts.)

The village of Roccaraso stands at 1,250m, about 5km from the slopes; guests who choose to stay there access the pistes using the frequent ski buses. However, you can also stay at hotels at the base of three of the ski lifts – Pizzalto, Aremogna or Monte Pratello – and enjoy the benefits of skiing to the door.

For me, a breakfast of meltingly fresh pastries and coffee in the Hotel Pizzalto was bettered only by the sight outside of a clear blue sky sitting above brilliant white snow, unruffled by so much as a breath of wind. I'd looked forward to this moment for some time, curious about skiing so far south in Italy.

At the base of the Pizzalto quad chair, I met Giovanni, who seemed straight out of Italian Ski School central casting: tall, slim, with a bronzed face and looking as cool as the snow beneath his feet in white wraparound sunglasses. Giovanni's mission was to show me as much as possible in the time I had in Roccaraso. So we stepped on to the ski lift and soon set about our task, one made all the more pleasant by the perfectly groomed snow beneath our skis and the sight of just enough fellow skiers to dispel the thought that our endeavours would be too lonely.

Having said that, the slopes certainly weren't busy. Giovanni and I skied from piste to piste and from lift to lift without so much as a hint of a queue, which gave us plenty of time for a mid-morning espresso.

But there was still plenty of skiing to do. There are 65 named pistes in Roccaraso, including 11 black runs, with the rest split evenly between red and blue; there are 27 modern ski lifts, too.

From the top station of Toppe del Tesoro (2,142m) the views down the high plain towards the distant and dominant Gran Sasso massif are images that will linger for a long time, as will the experience of skiing among beech trees (in contrast to the pines of the Alps), their bronze, brittle leaves stubbornly hanging on throughout the winter.

The road journey north-west from Roccaraso to Ovindoli is characterised by a series of medieval villages clinging to hilltops. One such is Rovere, close to the ski resorts of Ovindoli and Campo Felice, which is the location of the imaginative Hotel Robor Marsorum, the next stop on my itinerary. Here the owners have bought up a scattering of medieval houses down in the lower village and converted them into cosy and characterful hotel accommodation, while thankfully retaining the original integrity of the buildings.

Ovindoli, Campo Felice and the more distant Campo Imperatore can all be skied on the same ski pass. Between them they offer more than 80km of skiing, though the majority of this is in Ovindoli and Campo Felice, which are separated by a 15-minute ski-bus ride.

In Ovindoli, I was met by Desi, who is the daughter of Giancarlo Bartolotti. Signor Bartolotti is the man of vision who bought the mountain and developed it into a ski resort, building two hotels in the process. One is in the resort and a smaller one lies at the arrival station of the Le Fosse gondola, which links to the upper mountain chairlifts.

The aptly named Amphitheatre chairlift to the top of the mountain disgorges skiers into a bowl above the treeline, well suited for learners as well as experienced skiers. It's home to Europe's longest covered "magic carpet" beginners' lift, a gentle ride of 235m. On the lower mountain below Le Fosse, red and black pistes rake down through a valley, flanked on both sides by the now familiar beech trees.

After a busy morning following Desi in my bid to tick off all of Ovindoli's marked runs, the focus of the afternoon was at neighbouring Campo Felice, where another 13 ski lifts open up 30km of pistes, most of which are off a long ridge overlooking a wide, glaciated valley. On both mountains, the snow conditions were perfect (though nature is backed up with the insurance of comprehensive snowmaking), the slopes were uncrowded, the ski lifts modern. Given the proximity to Rome and Pescara – both are about an hour away – the area has got what it takes for a superb short break.

Every visit to Italy requires the traveller to worship at the altar of food. This was where Gabrielle stepped in, waving down Desi's car as we made our way through Ovindoli. From his dress of white coat and blue pinstripe apron, I assumed he was the local butcher, but Gabrielle is a self-styled "Master of Taste". His old-fashioned, low-lit emporium in the centre of Ovindoli is crammed with salamis hanging from the ceiling, while the counter is piled high with Abruzzo cheeses and delicacies of every sort.

Gabrielle created exquisite spuntini (approximating to tapas) for us to sample, with combinations of cheese, salami, local bread and home-made gels flavoured with white wine, chilli and rose hip. We sipped Montepulciano d'Abruzzo red wine, and weren't allowed to leave without sampling his home distilled Genzian spirit.

I passed on the opportunity to buy a jar of Viagra d'Abruzzo – a fiery, chilli based delicacy said to do more than stimulate the palate. It sounded like a secret that would be best kept that way.

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