

Time after time. Visiting Abruzzo

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From somewhere deep within, a loyalty, pride and protectiveness for "my" region is emerging. Through our extended travels that have now covered most of the other regions, I have discovered that Italy can be stunning and quirky, but also abrasive. Sometimes I may pass judgment on Italy, but if I hear a person or tourist of non-Italian background criticising Italy, I become suddenly defensive. It is a strange position to be in.

Misty clouds swirl around the village. The top half of Monte Circolo is not visible at all. Today is Friday the 13th. I wander around the silent, darkened rooms. The foot-thick stone walls and the drizzle combine to muffle any sounds of the village. I do not even hear a Vespa or the usual shouts in Italian. I switch on the naked bulb hanging above the dining table and sit down to write.

About an hour and a half later, Roger emerges. He makes French toast for breakfast and then heads to L'Aquila, having no intention of being made housebound by the rain. His love for Italy and all things Italian only grows in fervour and he is determined to make the most of every minute here.

I am content to stay in the dry, cosy house, high in the mountains, during foggy, rainy weather. For me it is perfect weather for writing.

At 1pm, Roger bustles back in, full of verve. From the bags of produce he has collected, he unpacks a round of sheep's milk pecorino, made at a local farm. It is just like Granny Maddalena used to make when she lived in this house 70 years ago. Zio Elia told me that one of the sheep they owned and milked was very smart and would come to them like a dog.

"When I was buying the agretti, two carabinieri were getting tips from the grocer for a particular salad," Roger tells me. He loves this Italian way of life.

The rain has stopped and the temperature is lifting so we decide to have lunch on the balcony. I make linguine with butter and sage.

Unlike the rainy quietness of the morning, the clearing weather brings the village to life. Just as we sit down, a chainsaw starts up in the nearby woods, shattering the serenity. Then a power tool begins to whine in one of the houses further along.

Near the main piazza, a man wields a relentless, droning Whipper Snipper, despite the long grass being wet from the rain. The theme song to the detective show Columbo blares from an open window above us. And, just when I think it can't get any noisier, a young guy comes out on to his skerrick of a balcony below us to yell into his mobile phone. We sigh and twirl our pasta.

A moment later, it becomes comical. A convoy of about 20 cars suddenly bursts through the village, all of them blasting horns in a celebratory manner. They take the road towards the monastery. Minutes later they drive back down the mountain, snaking their way through Fossa once more, all honking their horns in a jumbled cacophony.

We start laughing. Roger speculates that their team has probably just won a football match. I wonder whether I glimpsed a bride in one of the cars.

We are wiping our plates clean with the last crusts of bread when a white van lumbers into Fossa. Recorded piano accordion music bellows from its rooftop speakers. The van pulls up outside the church.

Roger and I lean over the balcony railings to watch. It is a dry-cleaning service attracting its customers with music, much like an ice-cream van does in Australia. People come out in droves. I can literally hear doors banging and running footsteps on the cobblestones.

A dying rural town with an ageing population this is not.

Several years ago, on our first visit, it seemed to be, but now it is bustling and full of younger families, though it still has its fair share of the ageing. I notice several nonni, dressed all in black, some with headscarves, making their way to the van.

Heading down the road for a walk later in the afternoon, Roger and I come across a trio of women sitting on wooden chairs around a doorstep in a cosy sewing circle. We smile and greet them.

The two old women raise their heads to reveal kind eyes like squashed raisins.

"Buonasera," they chorus back.

The younger woman, who looks to be in her 30s, keeps her head down, intent on her lacework. A little further on in the lower reaches of the village we come to Fossa's original church. Built in the early 13th century, Santa Maria di Cryptas Chiesa is guarded by two small lions, now chipped with age. With a low-pitched roof and tiny bell arch, the almost windowless facade is more forbidding than welcoming.

This unassuming shoebox of a building has none of the outward ornateness of other Catholic churches we have seen, yet inside 800-year-old frescoes cover the walls, typical of gothic-byzantine art in the Abruzzo. They follow a logical sequence: the Creation; an agrarian calendar; a cycle of Christ with the stories of the Passion, the Crucifixion and the Sepulchre; and then 12 episodes from the life of the Virgin Mary.

I love that the 15th-century fresco of the Madonna and child depicts the baby wearing evil-eye amulets around his neck; an Abruzzese touch, perhaps. The frescoes of the saints and crusaders Giorgio and Martino and their protector, San Maurizio (represented, as usual, with his right hand of six fingers), lend support to many theories that the Templar Knights came here.

Assuming that the village would have had no more than a few hundred people when they built Santa Maria di Cryptas Chiesa, the detail and workmanship in the frescoes is astonishing. I particularly like the concept of the agrarian calendar, with each month depicted by local activities significant to that time of year -- something important and relevant to a rural community.

These paintings were not merely decoration; they illustrated stories for the illiterate. The colours have now faded to earthy ochres, sand and auburn. Sections of plaster have detached, caused by the earthquakes the area has experienced over time, leaving ghost-like pale gaps in several frescoes. The thick stone walls contain only a couple of slits for windows, which let in very little natural light and weather, perhaps explaining why these frescoes have survived eight centuries so far.

Legend has it that Dante Alighieri visited this church and was so overwhelmed by the Last Judgment frescoes, particularly the scenes depicting hell, that he was inspired to write *Inferno*. It can be substantiated that he visited L'Aquila and the churches there, making this legend plausible.

On the outskirts of Fossa, the houses thin out to unkempt paddocks containing tussocks of grass and trees gnarly with age. We come across an abandoned vineyard with rampant grapevines escaped from their trellises to crawl across the thick grass. Roger stands beside a drunken fencepost, its wood now weathered to silver, as he surveys the neglected vines.

"It would be my dream to get one of these vineyards into working order again."

I smile. Who knows what the future holds.

This is an edited extract from Mezza Italiana by Zoe Boccabella (ABC Books, \$29.99).

Source: [The Australian, 23 July 2011](#)