

Perugia Of And By The Famous

University aside, Perugia and Umbria have long been magnets for travellers. French writer Michel de Montaigne found much to admire in 1581, particularly “the sight of a thousand different hills. These were covered everywhere we looked, creating a most pleasant effect, with the shadow of many different types of plantation, from fruit to the most beautiful kinds of crops you could imagine.” He lamented however that there was no butter to be had and everything was cooked in oil, that there was no fresh fish and that Umbrians did not know how to cook vegetables. Not much has changed really. A little earlier in 1510, a modest Augustine priest said mass in the giant church in Corso Garibaldi. Just a few years later the very same Martin Luther started the Reformation.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe passed quickly in 1786 through Perugia (never mind, he barely gave the Basilica of Saint Francis a second look either) on his way to the Temple of Minerva at Assisi. More rapturous was George Gordon Byron upon seeing the Clitumnus Springs in 1817. “In thy sweetest wave, of the most living crystal that was e’er, the haunt of river-Nymph to gaze and lave her limbs where nothing hid them, thou dost rear thy grassy banks whereon the milk white steer gazes - the purest God of gentile waters!” In 1833 Hans Christian Andersen, after being tormented by flies and mosquitoes, had a heavenly vision at Lake Trasimeno before continuing on to Perugia and Foligno. “From above and beyond the stretches of olive-groves, we admired the very same lovely landscape which reflected in Raphael’s eyes as it had done in those of Augustus when he was dedicated the Arch of Triumph in squared stone,” he waxed. Alexandre Dumas stopped overnight in Perugia two years later while being deported from the Papal States for being, tut-tut, a subversive writer. Arriving at the Locanda della Posta hotel - which still exists - the staff noted his entourage of carabinieri and assumed he must be a VIP, thereby giving him excellent treatment (he later mentioned the hotel in the epic *The Count of Monte Cristo*).

Charles Dickens visited the waterfalls near Terni and Perugia in 1845: “Perugia is endowed with great means of defence thanks to its natural setting and the hand of man. It rises sharply on an elevated plateau above the plain where the purple mountains blend with the farthest limit of the horizon.” Ten years on George Sand was particularly impressed with the main piazza. “The Cathedral square is truly noteworthy. It is there in front of a rich Gothic cathedral and a fountain by Giovanni from Pisa, which is a masterpiece, and other monuments of varying ages, that a large building stands in Venetian style. It is a strangely proud monument from the 13th or 14th century of a dark red colour, decorated with black iron ornaments. It has openings with the capricious irregularity which was greatly scorned after the corrected lines and purity of the Renaissance.” Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Marble Faun* culminates in a scene set in Perugia, which he visited in 1858. “They wandered about here and there losing themselves in those strange, steep passageways that in Perugia they call roads. Some are like caves because of the arches covering them above all their length. They then suddenly plunge towards an unknown darkness which, once you have walked right through it, brings you back into the light which you thought you would never see again.”

American writer Henry James was in Perugia in 1872 on one of several Italian journeys. “The obscure and tortuous city is full of character, but the sights are always somehow present when you turn your back to them or when fifty house walls shut them out to you and you continuously rush along the back streets stopping at the corners hoping to catch another glimpse. Then when it opens out in front of you in all its enchanting immensity, it is too great and too perfect to be described.” Virginia Woolf, who stopped in Perugia in 1908, said she had never seen such a lovely city. Those Barren Leaves, an Aldous Huxley novel published in 1924, contains a passage where the main characters drive through central Italy including Perugia, Foligno, Spoleto and Narni. The description of the Hypogeum is delightful. “In the blue sky, above Subasio, a few large, white clouds were sailing. The cars were driving silently down the hill. At the foot of it, protected from the sun in the delightful freshness of their tomb, the obese Volumni lay on the lids of their marble urns as if on the beds of triclinia. In the eternal waiting for their next succulent dish they smiled, and they would continue smiling forever. We enjoyed life, they seemed to be saying, and we looked upon death without horror. The thought of death was the condiment which made our twenty-five thousand banquets on this earth all the more appetising.”

German historian Ferdinand Gregorius visited Perugia in 1861, observing that Pope Gregory IX had lived in the old convent of San Pietro for two years. “Its church, a beautiful basilica, with ancient granite columns, is held as the most precious gem of the city. He also noted that the “friars have now instituted a school of

agriculture for fifty students.” The modern-day Faculty of Agriculture of the University grew from this enterprise. French chronicler Jean-Jacques Ampère was most impressed by the scenery between Perugia and Gubbio during his 1840 journey: “To the right the highest peaks of the Apennines rise, which the Tuscans call, because of their shape, the breasts of Italy. The moment in which I discovered them for the first time was for me an event, because that sight awoke a Dantesque memory. Dante sought refuge for a time at the feet of the high peaks, amid those breaks of rock. The road climbs its winding way along a wide subsidence full of magnificent oak trees. On the horizon, African-looking mountains formed three pyramids. I have never seen anything as impressive as this landscape.” His countryman André Suarès was also oddly seduced by Gubbio. “On stormy days, people still go out in the rain and wind. The storm itself in Gubbio is a civil war, a war of streets at the Greek fire, the banners of lightning crack in the fire and the flames take the crossroads sideways. The houses on opposing sides of the street show each other their teeth and nearly bite each other. You could jump from the windows of either house in order to attack the other one. It would be divine for a lover to steal away his lover from her family on a windy night in Gubbio.”

Composer Felix Mendelssohn travelled somewhat uncomfortably through Italy in 1831 - his fourth symphony is entitled ‘Italia’ - developing a loathing for Roman coachmen, country inns and Jesuits. “What a miserable situation! I enjoyed myself very little and if nature had not bothered to serve me up some moonlight on Trasimeno Lake and if the surrounding countryside had not been so beautiful, and if in every city there were no interesting churches, if in an entire day’s travelling we had not come across a large city ..., if, but you see that I am never pleased.” Quite. Richard Wagner also stopped in Perugia at the old Brufani Hotel in 1880 although it was the caves of Sybil (Norcia) and the accompanying legend of Venus that formed the basis for his opera Tannhäuser. Philosopher Hippolyte Taine described Umbria as “the most beautiful museum in the world.” Nobel Laureate Hermann Hesse made a brief journey through Umbria on foot in 1901. “The eight days during which I roamed through Umbria on foot represent the crowning and magnificent sunset of my youth. Every day new sources would spring forth in me as I contemplated the festive spring landscape full of light. It was as if I had been gazing on the benevolent eyes of God.” Perhaps the last word we can leave to French novelist Marcel Brion: “Umbria is a garden in which the joy of life is sweeter, more intense and more seductive than anywhere else.”