



Footpaths of Umbria

Walks, art and wine between Arezzo and Assisi

16–23 September 2024 (MK 431)

8 days • £3,260

Lecturer: Nigel McGilchrist

Six walks of between 5 and 7.5 km between Arezzo and Assisi through the inimitable Umbrian countryside.

Enjoy the art of Piero della Francesca, Luca Signorelli and Giotto.

Visit isolated hermitages, churches and cathedrals associated with St Francis.

Umbria brings together art and architecture of the highest importance, unspoilt countryside of breath-taking beauty and pockets of rare tranquillity. Land-locked, and located more or less in the centre of the peninsula, the region is criss-crossed by ancient paths, used for millennia by myriad travellers, traders, pilgrims and preachers. Two itinerant denizens in particular are encountered time and again on this tour: St Francis of Assisi and Piero della Francesca.

Stimulated by the movement of people, goods and ideas along the Via Flaminia, the main route from Rome to Ravenna, the economic and artistic life of Umbria began to flourish in the Middle Ages. Ideas absorbed from Byzantium were encountered and transformed by stylistic novelties from Rome, Florence and Siena.

In the early 13th century, the son of a rich cloth merchant in Assisi, one Francis, came to prominence in the region; he shunned the material excess and increasing secularisation around him and embraced humility, simplicity and harmony with nature as an alternative Christian approach. Perambulating throughout Umbria and central Italy he preached with fervour, touched the hearts of thousands and attracted devoted disciples. Out of this movement the Franciscan Order grew.

Building work on the Basilica di San Francesco began two years after Francis's death in Assisi in 1226; the fresco cycles here are some of the most art historically important in Italy. Cimabue, Giotto, Cavallini, Pietro Lorenzetti and Simone Martini are all thought to have been involved in the work and, despite varying degrees of restoration and preservation, they constitute one of the great achievements of western civilization.

The early Renaissance painter Piero della Francesca is also associated with the region.



Assisi, St. Francis, by Frank Fox publ. 1915.

Born c. 1412 in Sansepolcro, which lies just over the border in Tuscany, like all artists of his time he led a peripatetic existence, travelling wherever work took him. In many ways, he stands like a lone star, one who did not leave an obvious trail in terms of followers, but one so bright as still to shine today. Our Piero trail also includes *The Resurrection*, dubbed by Aldous Huxley 'the best picture', and the quiet power and subtle beauty of *The Legend of the True Cross* in Arezzo's Basilica di San Francesco.

Itinerary

Day 1: Città di Castello. Fly at c. 8.00am from London Heathrow to Bologna. Spend the first of four nights in Città di Castello.

Day 2: Montecasale, Sansepolcro. St Francis passed through the Convent of Montecasale in 1213 on his journey to the Adriatic and Jerusalem, and a small community of friars have continued to provide pilgrim accommodation since then. Walk from Montecasale to La Montagna: c. 7.5 km, c. 2 hours. A high-level walk on paths, tracks and exposed ground, and through woodland. It is graded as challenging given the uneven nature of the paths and a long downhill section at

the end. Lunch in Sansepolcro, then visit the museum in the former town hall, where Piero della Francesca's early masterpiece, *Madonna della Misericordia* and the marvellous *Resurrection* fresco are housed.

Day 3: Le Celle, Cortona. Begin the morning's walk from the immaculately kept Eremitage Le Celle, which Francis visited in 1226: c. 5 km, c. 2 hours. This is a moderate walk that starts gently downhill, on woodland tracks outside Cortona, before joining a cobbled Roman path that leads uphill to the town centre. Cortona is highly attractive and has a good art gallery, notable for paintings by Fra Angelico and Signorelli.

Day 4: Arezzo, Monterchi. Drive to Arezzo to see Piero della Francesca's great fresco cycle, *The Legend of the True Cross*, painted for the Franciscan order and executed over a 20-year period. After lunch, walk from Monteatello to Monterchi: c. 5.5 km, c. 1½ hours. This is an easy, gently undulating walk on farm tracks and country roads. Piero della Francesca's beautiful *Madonna del Parto* has its own museum in the village.

Day 5: Montefalco, Bevagna, Trevi. Known as the 'Balcony of Umbria', Montefalco's medieval church houses 15th-century frescoes of the Florentine and Umbrian school; the town is also well known for its inky and full-bodied Sagrantino wines. An easy walk on country trails and lanes from Montefalco to Fabbri: c. 5 km, c. 1½ hours. Drive to Bevagna, the Roman Mevania, home to one of Italy's most harmonious squares. First of three nights in Spoleto.

Day 6: Assisi. Morning walk from Pieve San Nicolò to Assisi: c. 6 km, c. 2 hours. This is a moderate walk on a *strada bianca* (rough farm track), minor roads and woodland paths. The path predominantly descends, although the last section is uphill through the Bosco Francese. The walk ends through the city gate which leads directly to the Basilica. Here we see one of the greatest assemblages of medieval fresco painting, including the cycle of the *Life of St Francis* which some attribute to Giotto. There is time to walk through the austere medieval streets and visit the church of Sta. Chiara.

Footpaths of Umbria
continued

Day 7: Collepino, Spello. Drive to Collepino, a restored medieval *borgo* with views of Monte Subasio and, on a fine day, the Monti Sibillini. Walk from Collepino to Spello: 6 km, c. 2 hours. This easy route is mostly downhill and on a level track to Spello, through olive groves running alongside the Roman aqueduct built to supply the 'splendissima colonia Julia'. There is time to enjoy Spello's harmonious architecture and the richly coloured Renaissance frescoes by Pinturicchio in the church of Sta. Maria Maggiore.

Day 8: Spoleto. Spend the morning in Spoleto before driving to Rome. Fly from Rome Fiumicino to Heathrow, arriving c. 8.15pm.

Lecturer

Nigel McGilchrist

Writer and lecturer who lived in Italy for over thirty years, latterly in Orvieto where he produced olive oil and wine. Worked for the Italian Ministry of Arts in the field of wall-painting conservation and has taught at Rome University, the University of Massachusetts and was Dean of European Studies for a consortium of American Universities. For six years he walked every path and village of the sixty inhabited Greek islands which culminated in the twenty volume *McGilchrist's Greek Islands*, abbreviated to the *Blue Guide to The Aegean Islands*. He now lives on the island of Kythera.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,260 or £2,960 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,570 or £3,270 without flights.

Included: flights (Euro Traveller) with British Airways (Airbus 320); travel by private coach; hotel accommodation; breakfasts; 5 lunches and 4 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer, tour manager and walking guide.

Accommodation. Hotel Tiferno, Città di Castello (hoteltiferno.it): central, 4-star hotel, renovated respecting the original architecture. **Hotel San Luca, Spoleto** (hotelsanluca.com): A comfortable 4-star hotel, located in an elegantly converted former tannery, just within the city walls. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? This is a walking tour, graded moderate. There are six walks, three are easy, two are moderate and one challenging. It is essential for participants to have appropriate walking footwear, be in good physical condition and to be used to country walking with uphill and downhill content. If you are used to them you may find walking poles useful. Average distance by coach per day: c. 60 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 18 participants.