



ADVENTUROUS IN CENTRAL ITALY

THE ITALIAN IDYLL TOUR
with Beach's Motorcycle Adventures

When these houses in the town of Cingoli were built 500 or more years ago, the streets were considered quite wide.



Top, left: The medieval town of Pitigliani was easily defensible, with a sheer cliff on one side. **Above:** The old harbor at Porto Santo Stefano now has modern yachts, playthings rather than the working vessels of yore. **Left:** The shows at the Roman Coliseum attracted thousands of spectators several thousand years ago; now it has thousands of tourists.

By Clement Salvadori

Photos by Sue Salvadori and Gretchen Beach

The tree-shaded road is cut into the side of the mountain, approaching a village that has been on the hilltop for a thousand years or more. An elderly man is walking his dog through the fallen leaves—it is October—and offers a minor salute as we pass. The asphalt gives way to cobblestones as the road narrows entering the village, where the front doors of the houses open directly onto the street.

Back when these places were built, traffic was mainly pedestrian with the occasional wealthy fellow on a horse, and maybe a hundred sheep being herded in for protection from thieves and wolves. Sheep rustling has pretty much vanished from the Abruzzo, but wolves still exist.

The street opens onto a small piazza, church on one side, café with outdoor

tables on the other, flanked by a tobacco shop and a bank. We pull up, dismount, leave our gear on the bikes, and settle down for 20 minutes of cappuccinos. Several old boys are at another table, and one leans over to ask who we are. “Americans,” I am quick to say in my rough Italian, as our bikes are licensed in Germany, and some locals still remember World War II.

“Ah, I have a cousin in the Stati Uniti,” says another, “in Ohio. Do you know him?” Our 20 minutes soon goes beyond a half hour. They want to know why we travel by motorcycle; why we have come to their little town. Not simple questions to answer. We want to see new places, meet new people. Learn about their history and culture. And, of course, eat new foods, drink new wines—but only at dinner, not lunch.

Not to mention riding new roads.

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Above: There was only one flat tire on the trip, on the road out of Nemi, but the faithful van driver soon showed up. Right: This picturesque ruin sits in a field near Bracciano, with nary a sign to say what it once was; very Italian.



The GPS routes took us along delightfully untrafficked roads, this one in Monti Sibillini National Park.

When you are on a tour run by Beach's Motorcycle Adventures you are signing up for some serious riding, with many, many curves every day. And probably half-a-dozen U-turns when your GPS says that you are no longer on the purple line. All for the fun of it. The word "adventures" in the company's title is not to be taken lightly.

Rob Beach runs tours in the Alps and Central Italy, and

personally accompanies every one, so anyone having a complaint can buttonhole the CEO at dinner. He programs three or four different routes into the GPS units for every day of riding. There is usually an easy route, a middling route, and then the famous, occasionally infamous, "Rob Road" route. Prep is either at dinner the evening before the day's ride, or at breakfast. Pay attention.

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Snap in the GPS unit when you get out to the bike, turn it on, and punch in your route. Mileage and estimated time is noted. Want a four-hour day? Or eight-hour? Rob is perfectly happy to have people following him, but he also enjoys it when everybody is off on their own, exploring the roads at their own pace, stopping for coffee or photos whenever they wish.

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The "Italian Idyll" trip begins in the superb hillside town of Fiesole just north of Florence. Fly into the small Florentine airport on Sunday and a car takes you to the Pension Bencista, with a view over Florence beyond compare. Knowing of the jet-lag problem, the next day one can rest or ride a loop in the Apennine Mountains north of the city, either over the fabled Futa Pass or the less-known and lesser-trafficked Sambuca Pass—much more fun!

On Tuesday, we head east toward the Republic of San Marino, a very small (24 square miles, 30,000 population)



Above: Our hungry lot of motorcyclists are having lunch at an “agri-turismo” hostel, where food is locally grown. **Far left:** We are in the Campo Imperatore in the Gran Sasso National Park, looking up at the 9,500-foot Corno Grande. **Left:** Our hotels were consistently excellent and interesting; this is the Villa Scacciapensieri in Siena, with gardens all around.

hilltop country that claims to have been a republic since 301 A.D. And we have our first taste of Rob Roads. Of course the main highway is open, but Rob has a route going down into a valley on a small road, which appears paved on Google. But is not. Rob knew that his previous route had been washed out in a recent flood, and programmed this new road before being able to ride it himself. We do slow our pace and sensibly take the dirt hairpins with considerable caution, cheering when we cross a bridge over a small river and find asphalt. We toast Rob that evening for having brought us along such a fascinating byway.

Devotees of the Beach adventures understand well the charm of such roads, where a modicum of skill at the handlebars is useful. Rob delights in his specialties, and says the nervous riders are always welcome to take the more conventional highways.

After a night in San Marino, the tour goes south toward Spello, an ancient hillside town high above the contemporary metropolis of Foligno. We stay at an old villa at the very top of the town, opposite a medieval monastery where the nuns sing matins early in the morning—though the walls are too thick for the music to be heard unless one is in the courtyard.

Rob likes two-night stay overs, and we have five on this

two-week trip. I like them, too, as it allows us time to either explore the town or take one of the loop rides that were to be found on the GPS. At Spello, my wife, Sue, chooses to stay behind while I climb Monte Subasio behind St. Francis’s town of Assisi, as well as circle Lake Trasimeno...neither of which I would have done had we pushed on to Norcia. Which we do the next day.

Sue and I are riding our RT along with a couple from Colorado on their BMW R 1200 GS Adventure (all our bikes were BMWs), and I am leading on the road to Visso. Only to realize that I have missed a turn. The GPS indicates we would catch up with the purple line by continuing on, but I want to see what mischief Rob had organized. We U-turn and find serious mischief, and great fun.

Climbing upward on bad single-lane asphalt we come to Nemi, a very, very small village, where the road turns to dirt as it continues up the mountain.

Asking a local about the condition of the road, he says, “No problem.” Great GS country; not quite so good for an RT, but manageable. We eventually get to the Sanctuary of Macerato... and a paved road. It is a wonderful ride, and very memorable.

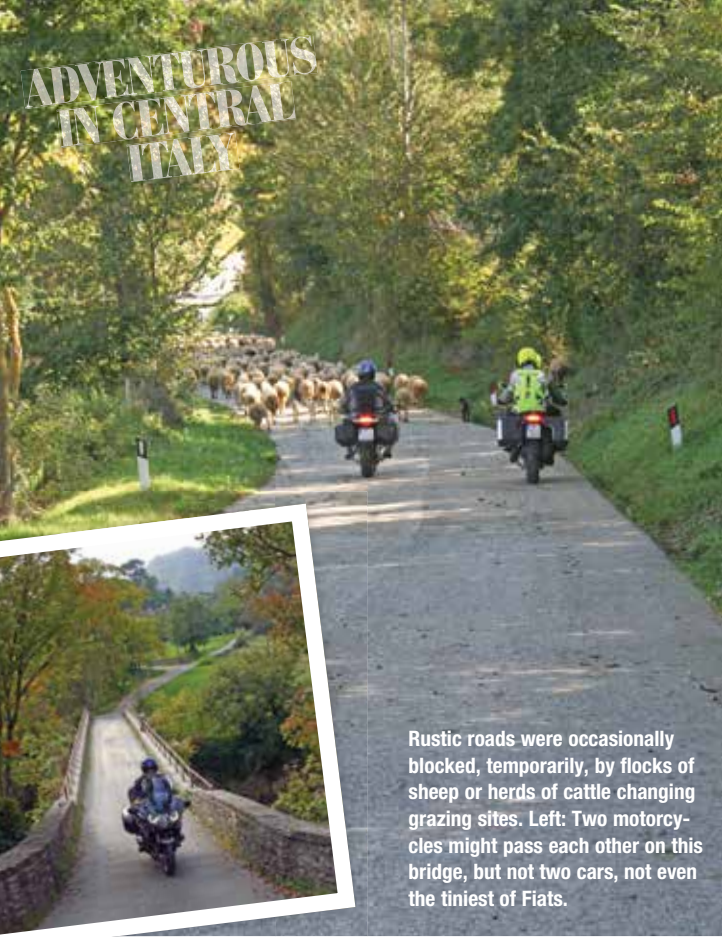
Rob likes small groups, so that they can stay in interesting hotels that have fewer rooms. We have five couples and three



The 14th-century Rocca Maggiore castle protected the town of Assisi, made famous by St. Francis.



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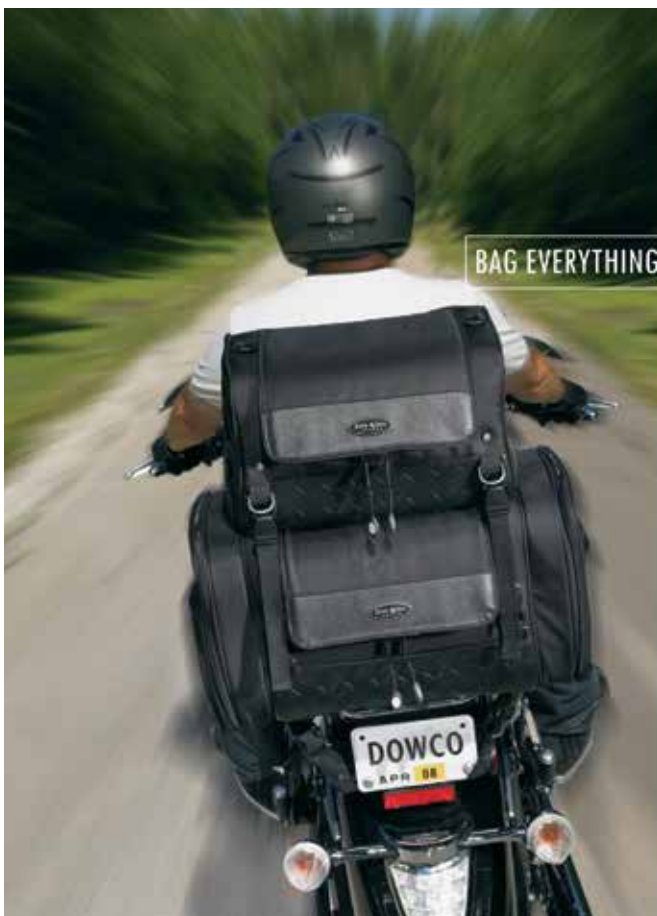


Rustic roads were occasionally blocked, temporarily, by flocks of sheep or herds of cattle changing grazing sites. Left: Two motorcycles might pass each other on this bridge, but not two cars, not even the tiniest of Fiats.

solos, and eight rooms are quite doable. At Norcia we stay at the 16th-century Palazzo Seneca, a hotel since 1850.

The tour takes us on to the Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga National Park. Few Americans are aware of this magnificent mountainous park in the Abruzzo region. Herds of horses and cows and flocks of sheep are still grazing on these high plains before wintering in lower altitudes. From the Campo Imperatore we descend to Santo Stefano di Sessanio, an ancient village not far from Rome that some enterprising business types of the “green” persuasion have been preserving and developing for a few years. A number of separate houses have become incorporated into one hotel, and healthy eating is on every menu. On our second night there, we find a restaurant where the owner—it is a slow Sunday night—insists that people come into the kitchen to see how dishes are prepared. And ends the evening by offering us home-brewed liquor made from radishes; I doubt it will ever be a bestseller in this country.

Rome is a two-nighter, and the hotel relatively easy to find as it is outside the great circular road. Rob understands the chaos that is Roman traffic and has arranged for an all-day tour of the city by mini-bus and foot. Having worked in Rome years ago, I know the city well, and took a ride in the country while Sue and our compatriots walked shoulder-to-shoulder with thousands of tourists in the Piazza Navona, the Campo de’ Fiori and the Sistine Chapel.



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Then on to a one-nighter at the Porto Santo Stefano, on the semi-island of Monte Argentario off the west coast of Italy—semi because two very narrow five-mile stretches of dirt and sand connect the island to the mainland. Staying at the Hotel Filippo II gives us an outstandingly delicious five-course dinner, the first four involving the freshest of seafood. So far nobody has successfully created a fishy dessert.

Motoring on to Siena, a middling-sized city, we have another two-nighter. Great history here, including a tower, the Torre di Mangia circa 1352, with 507 steps up and another 507 down. I decline, having done the climb when I was 15. Architecture is the selling point of such ancient towns, from the shop-lined streets in the old section to the cathedral begun in the 12th century and more or less finished 250 years later—buildings were built to last back then.


Finally, last day on the trip—and a very fine Rob Road. The main road goes straight, but the purple line points to the right, a sign reading Rocca di Sillano. We venture steeply upward on one-lane pavement; when a dirt road continues up toward the long-retired Sillano fortress, the purple line goes forward. Asphalt turns to broken asphalt, broken asphalt to dirt, rutted, stony dirt as it makes a steep descent. Again, the GS models rule, while the RTs struggle.

We stop for an excellent lunch in Volterra, which has reasonable longevity for a city, begun by the Etruscans 2,800 years



This was as close to a group shot as we got, since the riders tended to leave whenever they wished.

ago—that's how old these places are. Then on to Fiesole and our farewell dinner.

I did love the trip, both for the visuals and for Rob's choice of roads. That ride up from Nemi will undoubtedly stay sharp in my memory for many years to come. Adventurous roads are the key to my happiness. 

Beach's offers many different tours in Europe; see bmca.com for details. The Italian Idyll Tour will run in May and October 2015.

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