


THE BEAUTY OF ABRUZZO

Whether it's a hair-raising ski adventure or a leisurely time cruising the slopes and soaking in the surroundings, Abruzzo has something for everyone, reports **Luciano Di Gregorio**.





My feet sink knee-high into the spongy, white snow and touch the damp sand beneath. There's a striking incongruence to the moment that never fails to amaze. Not six months ago, Abruzzo's gleaming beaches had been their usual escape haven for the smattering of shivering northern Europeans seeking the glow of a Mediterranean sun and the company of oil-slicked, tanning Italians. The smell of jasmine filled the warm air, and their streets awash with sunshine, the Abruzzesi people ushered in the summer with beaming smiles. The current reality is the harshest winter for a decade and, city roofs doused in a blinding shade of porous white, I head away from Pescara, Abruzzo's stylish capital and my

city of birth, to the ancient towns, mountain crests and skiing pistes of the nearby mountains.

The drive inland from the coast through the gently rising hills inspires pride in the most humble of locals, and whilst the rattling of the rickety Fiat Uno's snow chains might be thunderous, the focus is on the dramatic scene of jagged mountains piercing heavy clouds. Snow spills freely from their steep faces and ancient villages, sprinkled across the mountains like icing sugar, cling to rocky cliffs, having defied the laws of physics for untold generations and confident of doing so for many more. Their laneways, often so narrow that a facing neighbour's window ledge is but an arm-length





Top: Busy button ski lifts in Ovindoli, Italy

Bottom: Skiers in multicoloured fashions cover the mountain in Ovindoli, Italy

away, are drenched in a thick blanket of snow and lined with coloured lights welcoming in the festive season and creating an ineffably convivial atmosphere. Indeed, Abruzzo's central Apennines, boasting the tallest summits in non-Alpine mainland Italy, are a vision of pearly white during the colder months, when, in utter contrast to the unspeakably hot summers the region experiences, snow falls aplenty. With the peaks and plateaus of three expansive national and regional parks, Abruzzo is the 'it' spot for the thrill and adventure of winter sports and a veritable playground for those wishing to don boots, goggles and skis in order to conquer the numerous and diverse mountain runs on offer.

Accompanied by Davide, a newfound friend from my forays researching a guidebook to the region, the first stop is the ancient town of Ovindoli, nestled since pre-Roman times on a plateau between the towering crests of the Sirente and Velino massifs. Mirroring the rest of regional Abruzzo, life has a particularly slow pace here despite the countless Italians who, in the months of December and January, descend on this place with as much gusto and fervour as they would a gelato (ice cream) on a hot summer night. Resulting from its mountainous territory, Abruzzo enjoyed relative isolation for hundreds of years, but since the construction of the railway spanning from Rome through the depths of the region in the 1890s, Ovindoli has been a hotspot for winter sporting activities and Davide, a local in the area, whisks me away to experience the town's possibilities first-hand.

Ovindoli lays proud claim to the peaks of Monte Magnola, a majestic mountain rising to heights of over 2,200 metres above sea level. Accessing the skiing runs, which all begin from some 200 metres below the summit, is an easy feat from Piazzale Magnola, located just outside Ovindoli's old town. On this square, skiing schools and equipment providers jostle for space and beg you to part with your well-earned money. But all for a good cause: the rewarding immersion into a winter wonderland of snow and fast-paced skiing. At Topolino, a piste marked as one of the easiest on the mountain, enthusiastic children, carefully monitored by parents and instructors,



plough the 350 metres run with equipment that, in true Abruzzese fashion-conscious style, is perhaps more apt for an expert skier rather than a dabbling youngster. Conversely, the 3000 metres of Pistone, one of the most challenging runs in and around the area, is decked with keen amateurs rubbing shoulders with Italy's most elite professional skiers. Being neither particularly proficient nor newcomers to the world of skiing in Abruzzo, we chose Fontefredda, a medium-difficulty run seemingly invaded by 20-something snow-obsessed Abruzzesi who look as if they were born for the sole purpose of triumphing over the mountain slopes. The run begins with a gentle decline before ceding to a somewhat steeper and consequently hair-raising segment. Never failing to marvel at the speed gathered when gliding along the silky snow, the resulting buzz gives way to a sense of thrill as a cyan sky frames glimpses of the whitewashed town through curves in the track and breaks between mountain peaks.

At the finish line, the elation of a mountain conquered brings a not altogether surprising desire for a hearty meal and a warm drink to thaw the fingertips. At a restaurant

in nearby Celano, a large town dominated by the fortified walls of a stately castle and evincing layers of history that span from the pre-Roman Italic tribes, the main course is served directly by the beaming chef. The *chitarra al tartufo fresco* is a squared-shaped homemade spaghetti with fresh truffles and is not only a welcome carbohydrate overload to fill any groaning belly, but a true gastronomic workout.



Top: Celano castle in the Abruzzo region, Italy.



With lightning speed, a waiter pours a glass of the region's famed Montepulciano d'Abruzzo and swishes it vigorously around the wineglass.

Refusing a second (and indeed third) course seems wise but, with little choice in the matter, a dessert is quickly ushered out.

The chef declares himself as being from the town of Guardiagrele, on the eastern outskirts of the Majella National Park, and with pride, presents the town's staple dessert. Small, dome-shaped sponge cakes filled to the brim with fresh custard and topped with a sprinkling of castor sugar. After devouring the delightful treat, the meal is capped off with a ratafia liqueur, an Abruzzese

digestive of medieval origins that would be enjoyed by nobility to 'ratify' a contract or agreement over anything from an exchange of property to an accord of marriage. Conversation flows with the restaurant and hotel's friendly owner, who is reeling from the recent catering of a ski-themed wedding with no less than 250 guests.

That's about the entire population of the historic centre of Pescocostanzo, the next stop, an hour southeast of Celano. A nearby hill lends perspective over the terracotta roofs and spiralling laneways of the town, its iconic pastel-hued flowers of summer blending into piles of snow being shovelled vigorously from doorways by shop owners. The historical centre of the town with its 14th and 15th century civic buildings is undoubtedly one of Abruzzo's most majestic. Charming turrets adorn stone buildings that have stood the test of time and church spires and domes grace the skyline. The likes of frescoes and imposing palaces aside, the immediate area is yet another hub of winter sporting activities and the town is one of three, alongside nearby Roccaraso and Rivindoli, used as a base to access the diverse runs on offer. Where Ovindoli caters to all ability levels but with a focus on

Top: A view over the valley with the Celano castle overlooking the town.

Bottom: Obelisco Flaminio, Piazza del Popolo, Rome, Italy

practiced or accomplished skiers, the Pescocostanzo area is the perfect place for beginners and eager amateurs, where there are no less than ten runs classified as a welcoming 'easy'. Indeed, overzealous youngsters trounce various pistes with relative ease, much to the contentment of skiing instructors from the first-rate schools that have set up base in the area. We take one such run, La Valletta, effortlessly. The 650 metre piste descends gradually in all its white glory, snow creased with the numerous marks made by previous skiers. The run peters out moments before the sun begins to steal quickly behind the mountains, and a local cup of mulled wine in town is a welcoming idea.

Eager for the day to continue, a decision is reached: one more stop is in order. It is a relatively lengthy drive to the labyrinthine town of Tagliacozzo. After meandering through the empty snow-strewn streets and being moved by the whitewashed cupolas of the town's myriad churches, we start back down the steep laneways towards Piazza del Obelisco, the town's grand medieval piazza, for dinner. The square,

framed by a bright cornucopia of shimmering lights in time for the festive season, is a playground for locals who line its smattering of restaurants. Our meal, enjoyed to the clattering sounds of the busy kitchen and the emphatic gesturing of enthusiastic locals, begins with a filling portion of gnocchi with chickpeas. Following this usual surplus of carbs is a welcoming plate of thick polenta. The meal is finished with warm patterned wafers filled with a glutinous mixture of berry jam and chocolate sauce, accompanied by a robust espresso.

Back under the glimmering lights of the ancient square, I smile and am overcome by a sense of pride as the region beds down for the evening. In eclectic Abruzzo, the imposing snow-covered mountains create a stunning contrast with the rolling plains and endless Adriatic coastline. Covered in flowers and unique flora from April to October, they mercilessly give way to oodles of snow during the colder months and beckon to adventure seekers and skiing enthusiasts to create a truly unique and diverse experience. ❖
