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## The Italian escape for people who can't stand package holidays

From beautiful Italian architecture to an abundance of fresh olives, the region feels remarkably untouched



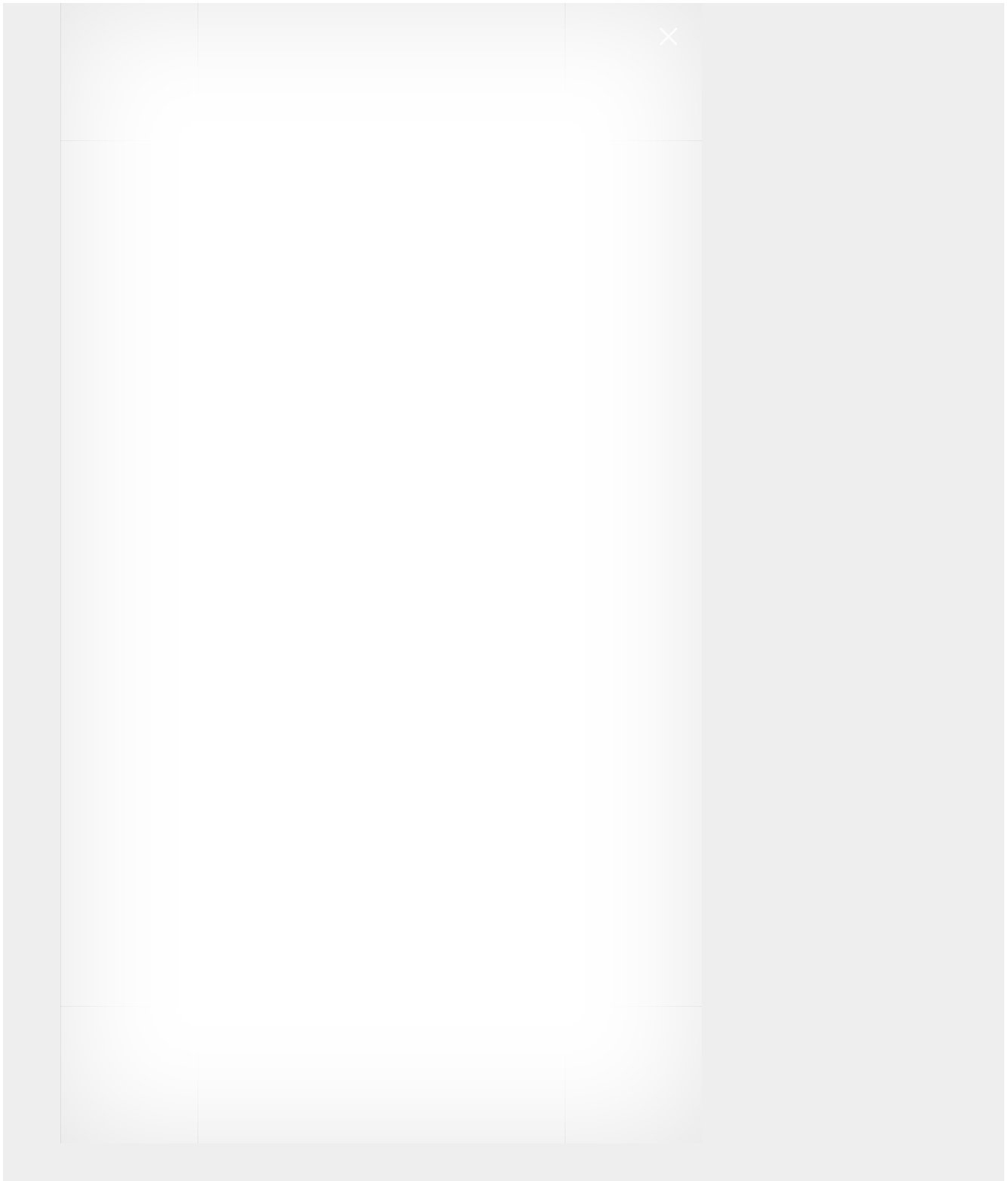
The hilltop town of San Casciano dei Bagni is steeped in ancient history Credit: Alamy

**William Cook**

04 November 2024 1:17pm GMT

In Alleron, a sleepy village in rural Umbria, I'm helping Elizabeth and her husband Paolo with their annual olive harvest. I'm so clueless that their daughter Naomi has to show me how to do it. "You brush the branches like hair," she says, running a little rake across the leaves. Sure enough, loads of ripe olives come tumbling down. Thanks to Naomi, I gradually get the hang of it, and by the time we break for brunch (fresh bread, tangy cheese and spicy salami, washed down with fiery Umbrian red wine), her father's pick-up truck is laden with crates and sacks of olives.

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Paolo and Elizabeth aren't farmers: Paolo Marchetti is a stonemason; his wife, Elizabeth Heath, is an American journalist who runs a small, bespoke travel company called [Villaggio Tours](#). Their crop comes from about a dozen trees growing in their pretty but compact garden. As Liz tells me, this is a typical sideline here in Umbria. "Everyone who has a

piece of land has olive trees, or they grow their own wine,” she says.



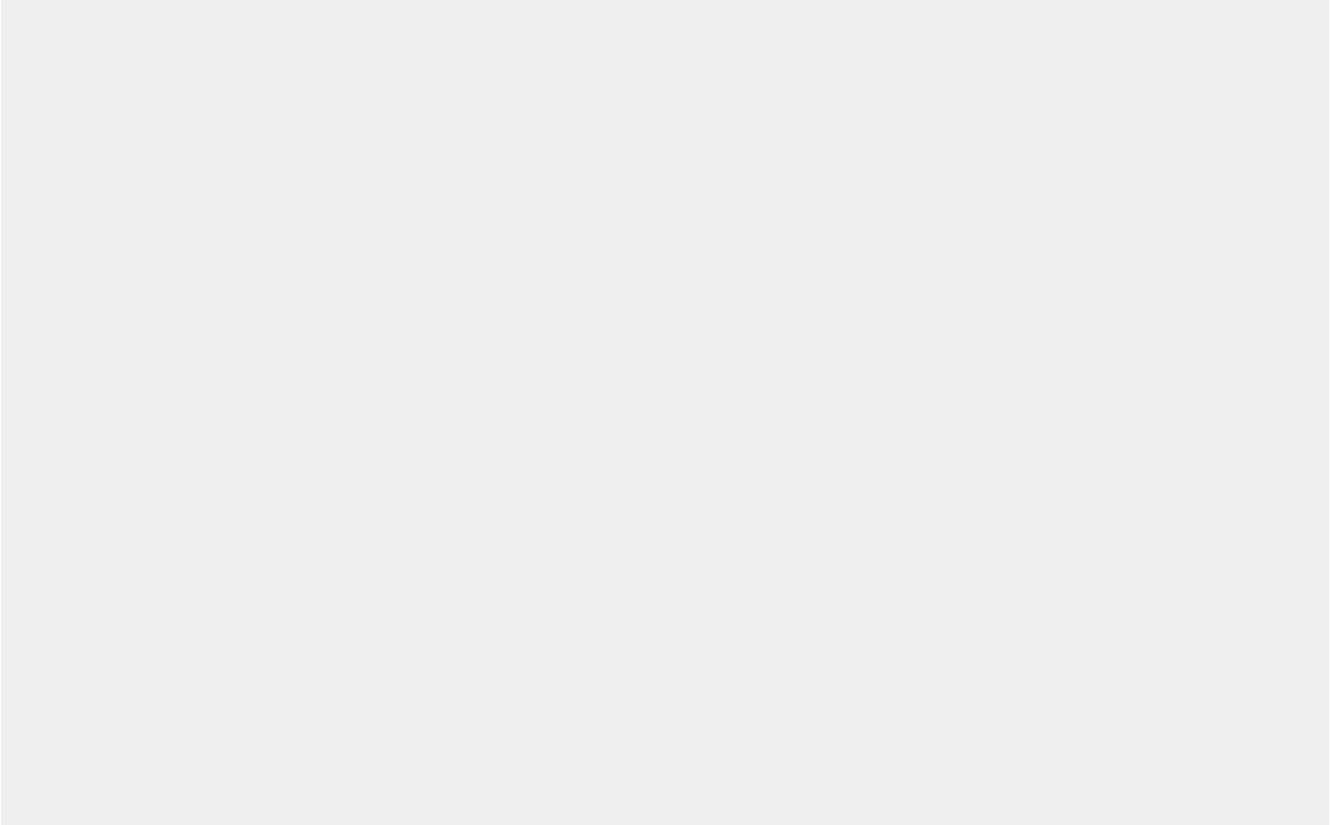
Alleron locals Paolo, Elizabeth and Naomi Marchetti grow olives in their garden

This olive harvest is one of the activities Liz arranges for her guests. She started the company last year, with the idea of giving visitors a taste of real life in rural Italy. [I met her in Trieste last summer](#), and was intrigued by her life story: how she moved to Italy from the United States, met Paolo, and became immersed in traditional Italian family life, in a traditional Italian small town. The holidays she arranges mirror her own experience: cooking with her in-laws, shopping in local markets, and encountering people and places normal tourists never see.

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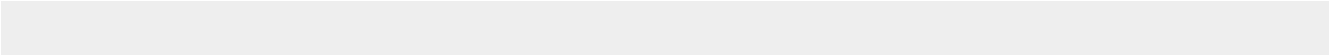
It's intimate and authentic, entirely unlike a conventional package holiday. It's also symptomatic of a wider movement which has deep roots here in Umbria. [Cittaslow](#), founded 25 years ago in [nearby Tuscany](#) but with its headquarters in the Umbrian town of Orvieto, champions slower travel and a gentler way of life. It's partly about promoting sustainable tourism but it's also about preserving the distinctive lifestyle that prevails in places like Allerona: [fewer cars](#) and more foot traffic; fewer chain stores and more independent outlets; fewer big tour groups, more individual travellers. No wonder the Cittaslow logo is a snail.

I start my trip in Orvieto, a historic citadel honeycombed with caves and tunnels. Squeezed onto a steep hill, it only has around 20,000 inhabitants, but its antique architecture gives it a grandeur quite out of keeping with its compact size. The stand-out sight is its intricate cathedral, but for me, the biggest thrill is getting lost in its labyrinthine alleys, littered with stylish shops and cafés. I stop for a drink and a bite to eat in a chic bolthole called [Bottega Vera](#) and then check in to my hotel, the discreet and debonair [Palazzo Petrus](#). I climb the stone stairs to my baroque bedroom, fall into bed and sleep like the dead.



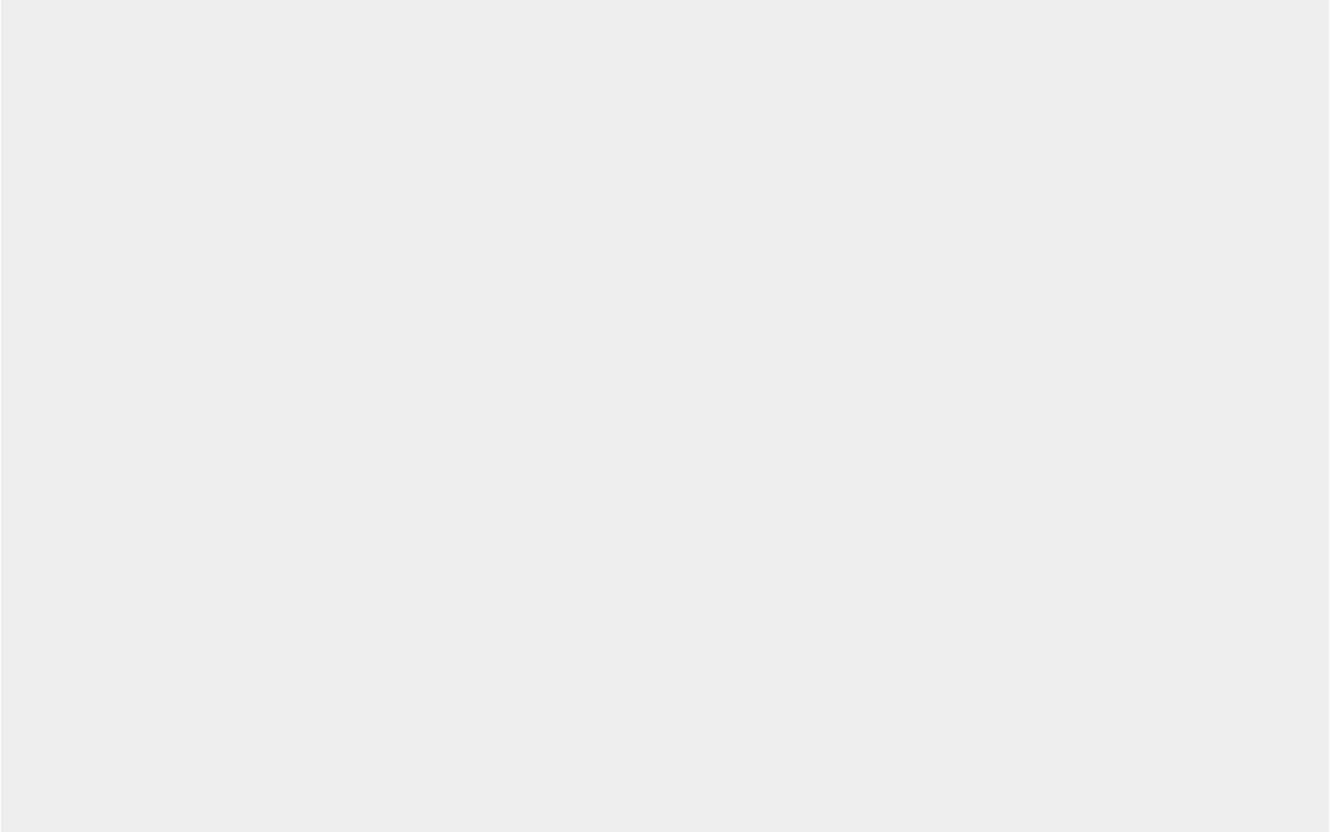
The hillside town of Orvieto only has 20,000 inhabitants, but is littered with stylish shops and cafés. Credit: The Image Bank RF

In the morning, after breakfast in the courtyard of the palazzo, I meet up with Liz, who drives me the 10 miles to Allerona, a huddle of stone houses on a craggy summit ringed by robust battlements. A soft, fine rain is falling. The valley below is cloaked in mist. Liz tells me not to stop under the clock tower. It's supposed to be bad luck to stand underneath it when it chimes. We walk up to my apartment, a cosy hideaway called Bed & Basta. It's on a cobbled square, opposite a medieval church – austere without, ornate within. Liz and Paolo were married here.



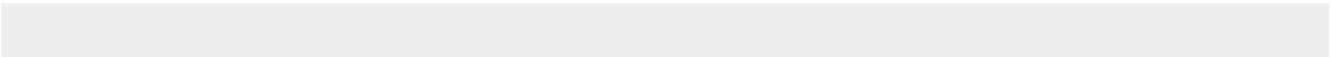
We eat lunch at an elegant osteria called La Panatella – it is remarkable to find such fine food in a village with only a few hundred inhabitants – but there’s an even bigger treat that evening when Liz takes me to meet Girolamo [Misciatelli Bernardini](#), whose family have been making olive oil in Alleronia for over 200 years. They have lived in this dark backstreet palazzo for just as long. From the outside, it doesn’t look like much, but inside it’s palatial, unchanged since the 1800s. We feast on pastries, cold cuts and lots and lots of local wine.

The next morning we drive into Tuscany, to San Casciano dei Bagni. This hilltop town is beautiful, but the main attraction is the thermal springs in the valley beneath. These steamy pools have always been popular with locals, who come here to lounge and paddle in the warm water, but only a few years ago archaeologists made a spectacular discovery: a perfectly preserved Roman shrine, a place of healing and worship for many centuries.



With few cars and more independent shops, the rural village of Alleronna is a perfect getaway Credit: Edi Solari

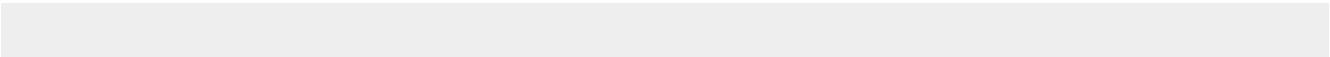
As they excavated [this ancient site](#), they found thousands of Roman coins, tossed into the water by bathers praying these waters would cure their ailments. They also found dozens of Etruscan statues. It seems the Romans built this bathhouse upon an even earlier Etruscan shrine. It's still a work in progress, and that's what makes it so thrilling. Who knows what further treasures they'll unearth here?



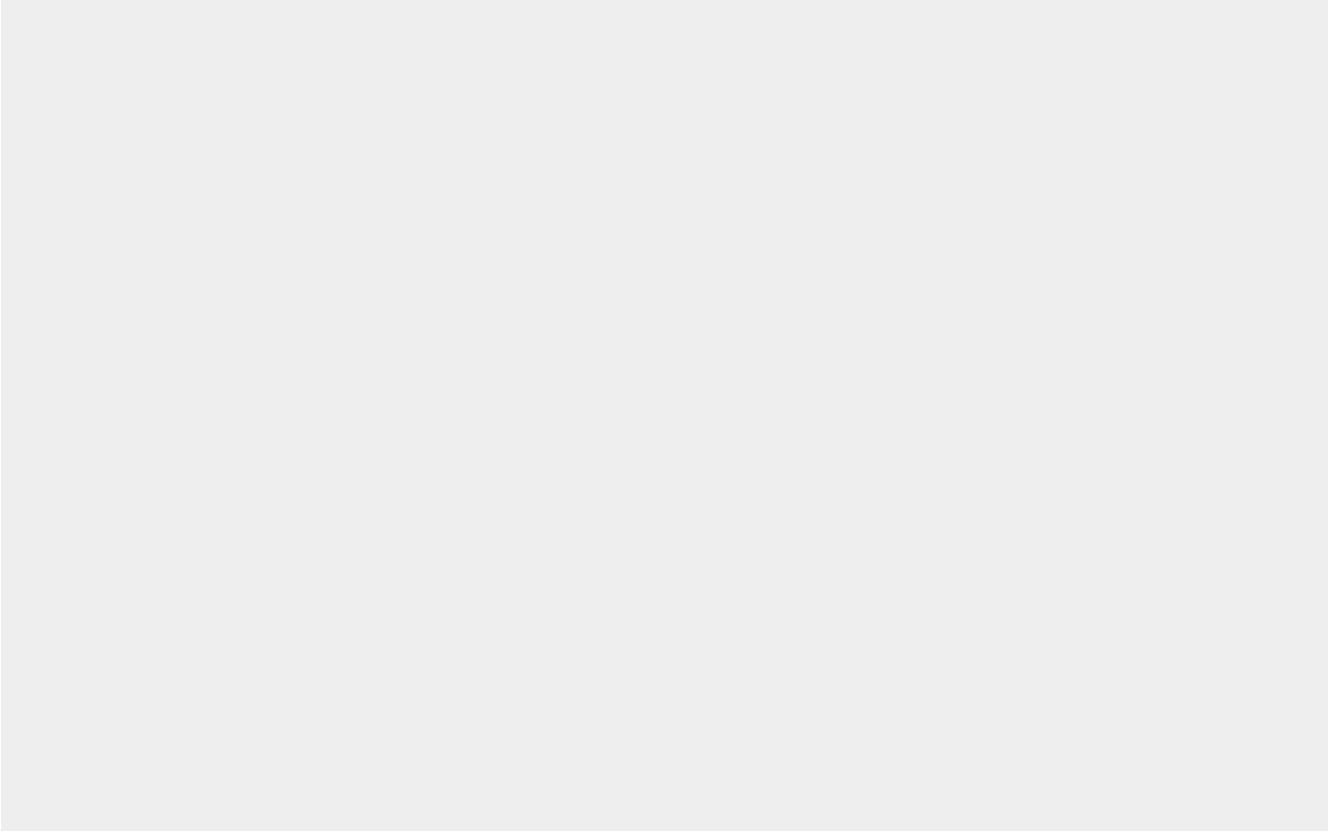


We eat lunch at a down-to-earth restaurant called [Hosteria di Villalba](#). The food is fairly rudimentary – homemade pasta with bacon, chicken and fried potatoes – but it’s my favourite meal so far. Like all the best meals, it’s simple: local ingredients, freshly cooked, no mystery. After lunch, the affable head chef, Adio Provvedi, takes us on a walk through the woods where he forages for herbs and mushrooms.

The next day, back in Alleronia, we eat a hearty home-cooked lunch at Paolo’s mother’s house. There are a dozen people round the table – aunts and uncles, cousins, nieces, and a few of Paolo’s friends who’ve come to help out with the olive harvest. After a few glasses of Orvieto, I soon lose track of who’s who. The food is much the same as yesterday, but that doesn’t matter. Who needs variety when you can do the basics so well?




After lunch, Paolo takes his olives to the nearby mill, [Frantoio Cecci](#), and a few of us tag along. We watch as the olives we picked this morning are mashed into a thick paste and then squeezed into a rich green goo. While we’re waiting, Maurizio Cecci shows us around the mill and talks us through a tasting of several varieties of [olive oil](#). They’re all delicious but to my uncultivated palate taste much the same.



'I was soothed to sleep by the hubbub of tipsy conversation at the Allernona bar outside my bedroom'  
Credit: Edi Solari

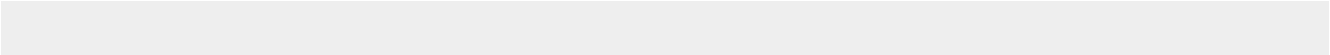
That evening I'm too tired to eat or drink or even talk – I'm not accustomed to honest toil – so I retire early to my snug lodgings. I lie there in the bleary twilight, feeling completely sated, soothed to sleep by the hubbub of tipsy conversation from the hole-in-the-wall bar outside.



Morning comes quickly, a clear blue sky full of promise. Paolo's mum is taking a cooking class today, but I need to head back to Rome. Liz drives me to Orvieto to catch my train. Waiting at the station, I remember something she said yesterday, about her life in Italy. "It's not all chianti and accordion music." No, it's not, I can see that, but in a way, it's even better. It's about family and community, and who can ask for more than that?

## How to do it

[Villaggio Tours](#) offers a fully escorted three-night Invitation to Umbria tour from \$1,199 (£928) per person, or a fully escorted, week-long Immersive Umbria Tour from \$4,099 (£3,175) per person. Doubles at [Palazzo Petrus](#) from €400 (£336) with breakfast.



[British Airways](#) flies to Rome from London Heathrow, [ITA](#) from London City, [Wizz Air](#) and [Vueling](#) from London Gatwick, [EasyJet](#) from Gatwick and Bristol, [Ryanair](#) from Edinburgh, and [Jet2](#) from Birmingham, Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester and Newcastle. A train from Roma Fiumicino Airport to Orvieto takes around two and a half hours, from €17.45 (£14.70) each way.

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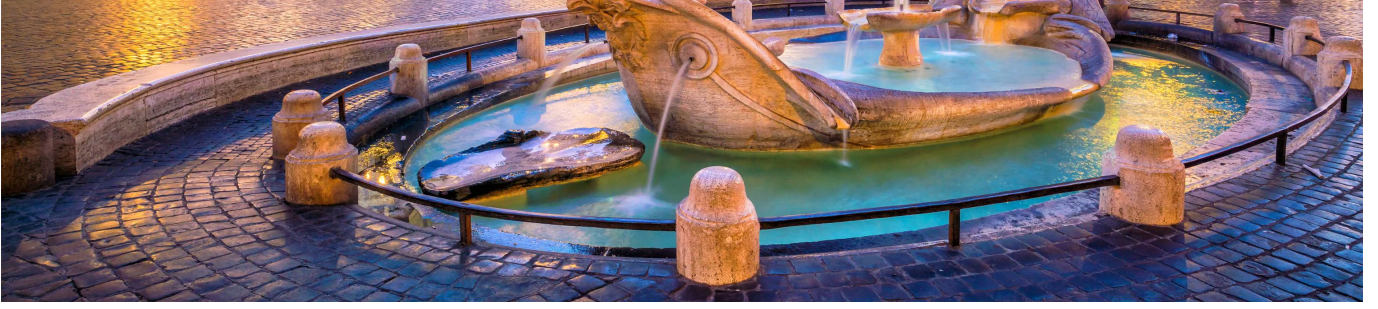
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