



Pack up and go...

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Home or abroad, our weekly travel page has all the best deals and ideas you need for getting away

Taste of Italy!

With its rolling hills and medieval hilltop towns and castles, Le Marche in central Italy is one of the most interesting and unspoilt areas of the country, writes **Yvonne Gordon**.

Located between the Adriatic Sea and the Apennine Mountains, it is not unlike nearby Tuscany and Umbria — but without the masses of tourists and high prices.

Our first stop when exploring the region was the beautiful walled city of Urbino.

This Renaissance city is where Duke Federico of Montefeltro set up his famous court in the 15th century, building the huge Ducal Palace which still stands, full of period art. There are also beautiful churches, monuments and a university.

We continued our journey to La Tavola Marche, an agriturismo set in a 300-year-old stone farmhouse which is an inn, farm and cooking school in the countryside.

Set up by former New York chef Jason Bartner and his wife Ashley, guests visit to take cooking classes or just relax beside the outdoor swimming pool which is fed by a sulphur spring.

The hosts can arrange all sorts of activities, such as five-course feasts, truffle hunts and visits to local winemakers and there's a weekly pizza night where guests and visitors eat outdoors, under the starlight.

I took a half day 'farm to fork' cooking class which started down at the vegetable patch where we picked everything from lettuce to strawberries and rhubarb, before learning how to prepare them using traditional Italian country recipes

Soon we were tucking into broad bean crostini, stuffed aubergine and roast veal at



FARMHOUSE FUN — La Tavola Marche and below, the views from Casal dei Fichi

the outdoor lantern-lit tables.

Totally relaxed, a few days later we drove south, dropping into some of the numerous medieval hill towns dotted throughout the region — such as the beautiful city of Macerata, with its 15th and 16th century architecture. Macerata hosts an opera festival each July and August in the open air theatre.

Our final destination was another restored farmhouse in the south of Le Marche region — Casal dei Fichi.

You drive through fields of sunflowers to get there and the house has

sweeping views over the rolling countryside.

Casal dei Fichi is a traditional brick farmhouse which the owners have divided into six luxury apartments. Each has its own outdoor space and there's an outdoor pool.

Within reach are the Sibillini Mountains, which make a great day trip, or the beautiful Mezzavalle beach at the slopes of Monte Conero on the Adriatic coast.

The apartments are self-catering and

guests can help themselves to seasonal fruit, herbs and vegetables from the garden and eggs from the hens.

Guests can also take five litre demi-john bottles to be filled at the local vineyard — it works out at just €7.50 for 5 litres of wine.

There's also a pizza party each Monday where guests learn how to make pizzas in the traditional brick oven.

Le Marche is a beautiful, unspoilt and culturally rich region of Italy.

FACT BOX

■ A three-night gourmet holiday in La Tavola Marche, including a cooking class, costs €340pp and a seven-night family holiday is €1,200 for a family of four, see www.latavolamarche.com.

Apartments at Casal dei Fichi for two sharing cost from €510 to €840 per week, extra person €30 per week, see www.casaldefichi.com.

■ Ryanair flies from London Stansted to Rimini from €30 each way, or Stansted to Ancona or Pescara from €36. Dublin to Stansted starts at €16 each way, see www.ryanair.com,

Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to Bologna from €55.99 each way, see aerlingus.com.



OFFER OF THE WEEK

A GIANT DEAL FOR VISITING THE CAUSEWAY

The Olympics opening ceremony featured stunning footage of the Giant's Causeway in Co Antrim.

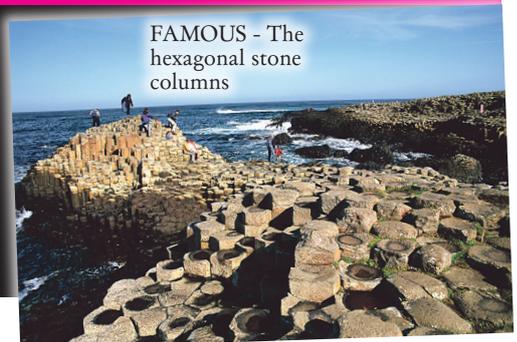
The good news is that if you fancy visiting this legendary scenic spot, you can enjoy two nights' accommodation with breakfast and one evening meal all for just £109 (approx €140) per person sharing at the Bayview Hotel in Portballintrae.

The Giant's Causeway is the North's

most popular attraction and its only UNESCO world heritage site.

It recently unveiled its new visitor centre and you can also see a unique installation by German artist Han Peter Kuhnworthy called *Flags*, running from August 20 to November 4.

For further information about the Bayview hotel deal, call 1850 230 230 or click on www.discovernorthernireland.com



FAMOUS - The hexagonal stone columns