

# A sketching holiday in Italy

By Linda Inoki

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Passport; ticket; camera; sketchbook. The last item doesn't normally figure on a list of travel essentials but perhaps it should. Instead of clicking a camera we could look back to an earlier age, when sketching helped to cultivate the art of travel. Moreover, there is freshness to fixing our impressions with the simplest of tools – a sharp, subtle pencil.

With this in mind I packed my eraser for a sketching holiday in the Marche region of Italy. I reflected as I flew in over the northern Apennines, that my ambitions were modest. If John Ruskin could capture a crumbling palazzo in a few strokes of graphite, why couldn't I?

Although the Victorian sage was not a trained artist, his lyrical sketches of Venice were pivotal in the history of architecture and art. Indeed, they still inspire people to discover Italy. Surely I could manage a Gothic arch or two to illustrate this article?

Admittedly, I have only ever published flower paintings but Ruskin, again, seduced me. "If you can paint one leaf," he said, "you can paint the whole world." So, with this promise fizzing in my head I joined a small, convivial group for adventures in seeing.

Our home for the week was a pleasant hotel on the Adriatic coast, high up in the nature reserve of Monte Conero. Originally a reclusive monastery, it has been run by the sociable Melappioni family for three generations.

We arrived through an antique arch to a promising start. From the courtyard of olive and oleander trees, to the carvings in the Romanesque church, every angle whispered "picturesque".

It was clear why hermits had chosen this summit. It was so hushed I was startled to encounter a couple of monks, marching down the path in brisk conversation.

My simple bedroom hints of past austerities. But opening the shutters reveals a landscape de luxe.

Fortunately, the hotel restaurant, where we dine every night, is comfortable and elegant. After a good dinner of local everything – wine, fish and fruit – I am raring to fill my sketchbook with early impressions.

Ace, the organiser of the trip, chooses its course leaders carefully. On this occasion our guide is Tessa Henderson, a respected artist and illustrator. She speaks "fluent but flawed" Italian and clearly loves this corner of Italy. With her "nervous hand" and constant eye, she sits on the church steps after breakfast and dips into a pot of ink. Within minutes, a ravishing sketch appears.

Inspired, we scatter like bees after nectar and are soon busily scratching away. Several guests are proficient painters or printmakers, but some are novices. One man turns out lines as thick

as tyre tracks and our tutor has to wrench the pencil out of his paws and teach him how to hold it. I feel somewhat smug: my lines are as thin as a spider's knitting.

But when we break for coffee on the terrace, I have to face the horrid truth: my arches are wobbly and my columns are positively dangerous to approach. Never mind. The first lesson has been learnt: to be "loose and free" is not shorthand for "wildly inaccurate".

Over the next few days our tutor coached us on basics such as perspective and contrast. Of course, it was difficult to pour an ocean of talent into an egg cup but we were keen to learn and our heads ached with the puzzle of putting what we saw on paper.

In case we went mad with isolation, we were taken off the mountain to visit scenic villages and the pilgrim's shrine of Loreto. Inside the church, the sight of a priest counting a pile of money would normally have me longing for a camera. But now I ache to whip out a sketchbook and, hallelujah, I can. (Pencils are often allowed where flashbulbs are not.)

By midweek we were getting braver: laying down quick washes of watercolour and superimposing details in ink. Gathering our paraphernalia, we hit the nearby village of Sirolo, where a pretty main square looks down to the sea.

Some people tackled the waves and cliffs but I zoomed in on a quaint alley, bursting with flower pots. A collie dog yawning in the sun would be my visual *coup de grâce*.

And yet, while I was sitting like patience on a monument, the small incidents of village life spooled round me like a film. Neighbours stopped for extravagant chats; a nun went calling, ringing a rusty bell; and old men waved their sticks at the sea.

But it was the grand drama of Urbino that shredded my illusions. Fast behind its towering walls, Urbino's honey-coloured palace soars like a kite in a heavenly sky.

Although a World Heritage site, there were few tourists in mid-autumn and the ducal palace swallowed us in one gulp.

Federico da Montefeltro, ruler of Urbino from the mid-15th century, made his fortune as a soldier. But he was also a hero of the Renaissance. Raphael was born just a few streets from his palace, nurtured in this citadel of art. Architecture was the duke's great passion. The inner court of his palace is full of light and grace. It is wonderful to reflect that this was the first of its kind, setting a pattern of harmony that was copied in Florence, Rome, London – the list is long and growing still.

The most evocative room is the duke's private study. It is entirely decorated in panelling inlaid with exquisite images, the figures designed by Botticelli.

Despite my own artistic comeuppance, I enjoyed the experience, not least for the chance to discover an underrated corner of Italy. Will I pack my sketchbook on future trips? Definitely. But as for Ruskin, I will never trust that arch-deceiver again.

[Peter Aspden: Postcards from the id](#)

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In the picture

Linda Inoki travelled to Italy as a guest of [Ace Study Tours](#) (tel: +44 (0)1223 835055). Its seven-night Sketchbooking in Monteconero tour is available as a tailor-made trip for a minimum of four people. Costs £1,690 per person inclusive of return flights from London to Ancona, transfers and accommodation in the Hotel Monteconero, a former monastery set in the National Park. Also included are breakfast, dinner, several excursions and all tuition.

[Bellini Travel](#) (tel: +44 (0)20 7602 7602) specialises in bespoke luxury visits to Italy and can organise “hands-on” courses for aspiring artists as well as access to private art collections. Guests can choose from a portfolio of private villas, country homes and palace apartments in and around cities such as Florence, Venice and Rome.

From May to October H & G Italy Ltd ([www.paintinginitaly.com](http://www.paintinginitaly.com), tel: +44 (0)1580 767554) run painting courses and art-themed excursions in Umbria and Tuscany from £1,099. Non-painting partners are also catered for with activities such as guided walks or Italian cookery.

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