



The cave-church of Sant'Emidio alle Grotte.

The characteristic little Baroque church of **Sant'Emidio alle Grotte** is to the north of the city, c. 30min walk from Ponte Nuovo. This hill of tufa, with several caves, was the early Christian necropolis. After a terrible earthquake spared Ascoli in 1703, it was decided to build the church as an ex-voto, and Giuseppe Giosafatti was chosen to carry out the project; it is thought to be his masterpiece.

AROUND ASCOLI

South of the town, dominating the River Castellano from a strategic natural rampart, is **Castel Trosino** (418m) a village surrounded by woods of oak and beech. In the centre of the town is a medieval house called *Casa della Regina*, said by some to be the dwelling of a Lombard queen, by others that of Manfred, son of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen. An important Lombard necropolis was discovered accidentally near here in the 19th century.

North of town **Monte Ascensione** rises abruptly to a height of 1103m. It has always been considered a sacred mountain; the ancient population considered it the home of the goddess Esu. Early Christians believed that Polisia, the Roman governor's daughter baptised by St Emygdius, and for whose conversion he suffered martyrdom, found refuge in a cave here. Since the Middle Ages it has been dedicated to the Madonna, and in May pilgrims accompany the statue of the Madonna from the little village church of Polesio to another church on the top of the mountain. Around the base of the mountain you will see many *calanchi*, small parallel gullies and ravines caused by the topsoil being washed away from the underlying clay deposits, creating a landscape of 'elephant's feet'.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

GETTING AROUND

- **By train:** Porto d'Ascoli is on the main Bologna–Ancona–Pescara line.
- **By bus:** Autolinee START, T: 0736 342243, www.startspa.it, runs services to Civitanova Marche, San Benedetto del Tronto, Fermo, the Sibylline Mountains and Rome.

INFORMATION OFFICES

Visitors' Centre, Municipio, Piazza Arringo, T: 0736 298204; Associazione Turistica, 54/A Via Salaria, T: 0736 801291. Many of the smaller churches mentioned in the text are normally closed to the public, they can be visited during the summer, Christmas and Easter 4.30–7.30 except Mon; Info: Cooperativa Pulchra, 16 Via Vidacilio, T: 0736 256417.

HOTELS

- €€€€ **Hotel Palazzo Guiderocchi.** In the heart of the old city, a beautiful aristocratic palazzo, carefully restored. Comfortable rooms, good restaurant with selected wine cellar, however they skimmed a little on the bathrooms. 3 Via Battisti, T: 0736 244011, info@palazzoguiderocchi.com
- €€€€ **Marche.** Simple hotel in new town, with a restaurant. 34 Via Kennedy, T: 0736 45475.
- €€€ **Pennile.** Modern structure, good value for money, restaurant, garage, garden, in new town. Via Spalvieri, T: 0736 41645, www.hotelpennile.com
- €€€ **Roxi Miravalle.** Hotel with

restaurant, pool and tennis. Via Pianoro San Marco, T: 0736 351100.

€ **Pensione Cantina dell'Arte.** Rather spartan, but a charming little place with a restaurant, in the heart of the old city, 8 Rua della Lupa, T: 0736 255620.

FARM ACCOMMODATION

Conca d'Oro Villa Cicchi. ■ A farm producing organic food, while the farmhouse is a carefully restored aristocratic villa, open summer only. Very pleasant, and their Rosso Piceno wine is absolutely superb. 137 Via Salaria Superiore, Abbazia di Rosara, T: 0736 252272, www.villacicchi.it

Il Castagneto. A small farm, in a hillside position with good food. Via Colle San Marco, T: 0736 351097.

Castel Trosino

Le Sorgenti. Lovely spot near the lake, home cooking, open year round. 155 Frazione Lago di Castel Trosino, T: 0736 263725

Roccafluvione

La Locanda della Civetta. This is a tiny, ancient inn; the ideal place for a quiet country holiday. Open May–Oct only. 1 Via Caserine, T: 0736 365135.

RESTAURANTS

€€€ **Gallo d'Oro.** Historic restaurant close to the Baptistery, family-run, with local specialities. Closed Sun, Christmas–New Year and Aug. 13 Corso Vittorio Emanuele, T: 0736 253520.

€€€ **Il Boccon Di Vino.** Hidden away in an alley; serves fabulous antipasto. 29

Galleria Nazionale delle Marche

The vast Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, one of the most important art galleries in Italy, both for the number of works on display and for their excellent quality, is on the first floor, reached by Laurana's splendid staircase, in the apartments opening onto the loggia around the lovely golden-hued courtyard of honour, with its rigorous geometry.

Appartamento della Jole: Contains many sculptures. Some rooms were frescoed with figures of Warriors by Giovanni Boccati. Federico's room, *L'alcova*, was decorated with tempera by Giovanni da Camerino; the furniture is 15th century.

Appartamento dei Melaranci: Contains 14th-century works, including a splendid polyptych by Giovanni Baronzio of the *Madonna and Christ Child with Saints and Stories of the Life of*

Christ (1345), a painted Crucifix by the Maestro di Verucchio, and a *Madonna* by Allegretto Nuzi (see p. 53).

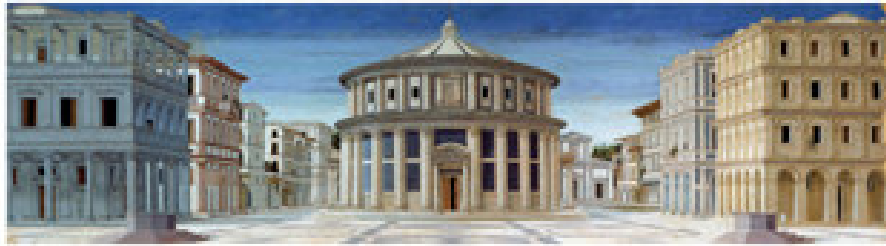
Appartamento degli Ospiti: Includes a room stuccoed by Federico Brandani, representing the emblems of the Montefeltro and della Rovere families; there are 15th-century wooden sculptures, a hoard found in Mondavio of 103 15th-century gold coins, and paintings by Carlo and Vittore Crivelli, Giovanni Bellini, and Alvise Vivarini.

Piero della Francesca: *Flagellation* (c. 1469).



GALLERIA NAZIONALE DELLE MARCHE FIRST FLOOR





Luciano Laurana (attrib.); *View of an Ideal City* (15th century)

Appartamento del Duca Federico:

The most precious works of art are housed here. In the **Sala delle Udienze**, with lavish decoration in carved and inlaid marble, where Federico held his audiences, is the famous *Flagellation* by Piero della Francesca, painted on poplar wood, where the refined perspective acquires an allegorical significance—the human figures, indifferent to the torture taking place behind them, seem less vital than the architectural lines of the city where the scene takes place. Also by Piero is the enigmatic *Senigallia Madonna*, where the solemn, colossal Christ Child appears to accept His future sacrifice, symbolised by the coral necklace around His throat, and the white rose in His left hand. Calm and silent, His mother supports Him as if she were an element of the architecture. The scene is imbued with impending tragedy; the only lighter touch is given by the basket of nappies on the shelf in the background.

Studiolo del Duca: The inlaid woodwork on the walls of this room (**Di**), Federico's study, is by Baccio Pontelli, using designs by Botticelli, Bramante and Francesco di Giorgio Martini. Joos

van Ghent painted the portraits of 28 *Illustrious Men* for this room; 14 of them, now in the Louvre, have been replaced by reproductions.

Camera da Letto del Duca: Federico's bedchamber (**Di**) has the famous portrait of *Federico da Montefeltro* with his son *Guidubaldo* by Pedro Berruguete; and a panel painting of the *Madonna* from the atelier of Andrea del Verrocchio.

Sala degli Angeli: This room (**Di**) has some famous works, including the *Miracle of the Profaned Host* by Paolo Uccello, and the famous *View of the Ideal City*. Authorship is disputed between Luciano Laurana, Piero della Francesca, and Fra' Carnevale, though it is most usually attributed to Laurana. Apart from a couple of pigeons on the building on the right, no living creature is in sight, but the half-open door of the church in the centre seems to invite us to enter.

Appartamento della Duchessa: Devoted to 16th-century works, including *La Muta* (1507) by Raphael, one of his finest (and most enigmatic) paintings, dating to the period when he had returned from his stay in Florence. Also

by Raphael is the earlier *St Catherine of Alexandria*. The magnetic portrait of *Christ Blessing* is by Bramantino. More splendid works are in the **Duchess's bedroom**, including the *Last Supper* and the *Resurrection* by Titian, the *Annunciation* by Vincenzo Pagani, and

the *Coscie Tapestries* (see box overleaf). **Sala del Trono:** This imposing apartment, used by the duke as a setting for his parties, has another series of Flemish tapestries on the walls, the famous *Acts of the Apostles*, for which Raphael provided the designs.

LA MUTA

Considered a masterpiece of portraiture, the painting (oil on panel) reveals the influence of Leonardo da Vinci in the pose, the careful rendering of the simple dress and jewellery of the sitter, and above all her gentle personality. Little is known about the history of the painting, which appears for the first time in 1710 in a list of works belonging to the Uffizi in Florence. Still less is known about the sitter, but nowadays many scholars believe her to be Giovanna Feltria della Rovere, daughter of Duke Federico da Montefeltro, who lost her husband in 1501. Analysis of the work shows that the original drawing was of a younger version of the lady, made at the start of Raphael's career; he painted her later with a slightly different attire, before completing the portrait probably in about 1507, ageing her features each time. Her recent widowhood would explain her sad expression of mute pain, and the name by which the picture is universally known.

Second floor

The second floor of the palace, known as the **Appartamento Roveresco**, was designed by Bartolomeo Genga for Guidubaldo II della Rovere. It is now the **Museo della Ceramica**. The first section is dedicated to paintings, especially by Federico Barocci and his school, while the second has a vast display of pottery, from Urbino and also from Siena, Deruta, Faenza and Castelli; the pieces on show are frequently changed. On the walls are fine prints and drawings.

Ground floor

On the ground floor, on the left-hand side of the courtyard, is the **Museo Archeologico Urbinate**, consisting mainly of two collections of stone inscriptions and sculptures: that of the local intellectual Raffaele Fabretti, and that of Cardinal Gianfrancesco Stoppani, both ardent 17th-century collectors. There are many pagan and Christian gravestones, and urns decorated in relief. The same courtyard gives access to the vast **Sottterranei**, the underground rooms which served as the stables, baths, kitchens and storerooms; one, the *neviera*, carefully packed with snow during the winter, was like an enormous refrigerator; while the baths were fully equipped with hot and cold water and drainage.

THE SIBYLLINE MOUNTAINS

This stretch of the Apennines, the watershed between the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Adriatic, is now one of Italy's most beautiful and interesting national parks, where the mountains and valleys, scattered with numerous small medieval communities, illustrate the centuries-old, often precarious existence of the inhabitants in an extremely fragile environment and in perfect ecological balance. The park, which protects one of the most important mountain systems of Europe, is situated partly in the Marche region and partly in Umbria. At least 20 of the mountains are more than 2000m high. With a series of limestone peaks and deep ravines, lush forests and alpine meadows, gullies, waterfalls and rushing streams, it is a natural paradise, which also holds a fascinating, age-old air of mystery. There is something here to interest everyone: botanists, climbers and skiers, birdwatchers, free-flyers, artists and photographers, and some well-signposted trails provide itineraries for ramblers, trekkers and mountain bikers. The institution of protective measures has brought a certain degree of prosperity, and besides wildlife, several varieties of orchard fruits (notably the *mela rosa* apple, so called not for the colour, which is green and red, but for its aroma of roses) and farm animals (such as the *sopravvissana* sheep) have been preserved from extinction and their production much intensified. Demand for the tasty Castelluccio lentils, or the local truffles, is now worldwide.

