Scott Williams **The Sunday Times** 16 June 2024



Rory Kinnear likes to go sightseeing; his family prefer the pool. But a secret corner of Italy kept everyone happy

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How sleepy Umbria won our hearts

Travel Italy

→ Continued from page 7 belltower, and I learnt there was a glassblowing festival on that weekend and, and ... "Kids, put the inflatables away, we're getting in the car.

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More local craft knowhow was on show in another nearby small town, Panicale. Our Fiat Panda just about made it up the winding roadside there, its clutch protesting noisily and fragrantly but, as we parked precipitously just outside the ancient town walls, we were rewarded with some remarkable views over Lake Trasimeno and its islands. Strains of Chopin being rehearsed for an upcoming concert accompanied our wander through Panicale's cobbled streets. We of the imposing church of San Michele Arcangelo, jutting into the central piazza like a cliftop – a wonderful theatre, like a doll's house version of the Royal Opera House, and a museum dedicated to tulle, the local handicraft. Fortunately for my

children, it was closed. Closed, too, was the Church of San Sebastiano, just outside the town walls. It holds paintings by Raphael and Perugino, who was born nearby, but it can be seen only through an appointment with the tourist office. That was closed too. In fact, there is something remarkably charming about how close to its chest Umbria holds its cards. Tours of the catacombs in Chiusi were taking place on select days, but not

the day we were there, and Google maps didn't have the faintest idea how we could find the sumptuous Santuario Madonna di Mongiovino, overlooking the town of Tavernelle. Luckily, the locals did. In fact, it can sometimes feel that so little fanfare is made of the area's many glories that the only

way to discover them – Renaissance frescoes, Etruscan treasures - is to stand in front of them almost by chance. Perhaps that's what comes of an embarrassment of riches - or maybe they've seen what the worst excesses of tourism can do to a place.

The same ethos appears to hold for the area's restaurants. The rule, seemingly, is

that if they're trying to attract your custom, they might not be worth going to. Luckily for us, the team that manages the villas on site pointed us in the right direction. Without it we might not have had some of the most wonderful meals: heaped plates of homemade pasta, and perfectly grilled and seasoned meats, surrounded by Italians gulping down their wine and grappa in anticipation of that day's siesta. It's a lifestyle I could get used to. In Citta della Pieve, where we ate at the charmingly collegiate Trattoria Serenella, alongside locals sharing tables, we were told a chair is always tables, we were told a chair is always kept empty for the priest. He wasn't there the day we were and, thankfully, despite the portion size, I didn't need the last rites, though I should probably have made confession (mains from Chiusi

£7.50; Piazza Matteotti). More remarkably, just outside the gates of our villa, was the property's own restaurant, built by the original owner to host family or community events. But we had it to Citta della Pieve ourselves for two memorable evenings organised through the villa company. One time, two pizza chefs came to start up the wood-fired oven and helped the up the wood-fired oven and helped in kids get hands-on with an array of toppings (pudding was a pizza base topped with chocolate spread and whipped cream). Another evening, Raffaele Chierico from the Coldibetto Detate and Gingene Compile form Age Estate and Giacomo Casaioli from Agricola Casaioli, two talented winemakers from the area, came in to host a tasting they also did a mean sideline in sensationally tender salami. With wonderful hiking to be had in

the surrounding woodlands, rivers to wim in, wine tours, truffle-hunting expeditions, cycling, go-karting or simply sitting by the pool watching the hummingbird-like hawk moths gorge on the jasmine flowers, there is so much

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Lake

Panicale

Perugia

 Tavernelle • Piegaro

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Pietro Vannucci at San Sebastiano Church, Panicale, top. Right, Chuisi. Below, dining alfresco at Podere Polino

Three affordable Umbrian hotels

HOTEL VANNUCCI, CITTA DELLA PIEVE

Since Hotel Vannucci is in the lovely Citta della Pieve, with its excellent restaurants, this is a good Umbrian option if you don't have a car. The grand 1903 villa conversion has a restaurant and a café of its own and is walking distance from shops, churches and museums, as well as the weekly market on Piazza Matteotti. There's also a sun terrace and outdoor pool with loungers, and the hotel can arrange cooking classes, wine tastings and bike hire. Details B&B doubles from £144 (hotel-vannucci.com)

RELAIS CASTELLUCCIO PALUSSE. CITTA DELLA PIEVE

A converted castello (smal castle) in the rural outskirts of Citta della Pieve — set amid farmland and olive groves Castelluccio Palusse gives you the chance to live the VIP-villa life without forking VIP-villa life without forking out for the whole place. The rooms are decked out in period finery, with velvet swags, gilt mirrors and fresco ceilings. You've got an outdoor pool in the princely gardens, as well as a hot tub, all of which makes the rate a steal, especially when you consider that you can reach Citta della Pieve's social reach Citta della Pieve's social scene and restaurants on foot

Details B&B doubles from £127 (castellucciopalusse.com)

ANTICO SIPARIO, PACIANO

You'll find Antico Sipario, the "old theatre", in historic Paciano, which has appeared in several "prettiest villages in Umbria" lists over the years. The medieval building was abandoned when the present owners bought it, but they've restored it and, in keeping with its former role, have given every room a theatrical theme. You're a 20minute drive north of Piegaro, close to Lake Trasimeno. Details B&B doubles from £81 (anticosipario.com) Katie Bo

Prepared by Susie Aust Communications Ltd

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Link: https://www.thetimes.com/travel/destinations/europe-travel/italy/rory-kinnear-the-sleepycorner-of-umbria-that-cured-my-tourism-problem-z2h0v78rc

The Times homepage:



VIDEO Rory Kinnear: I've found the sleepiest corner of Umbria

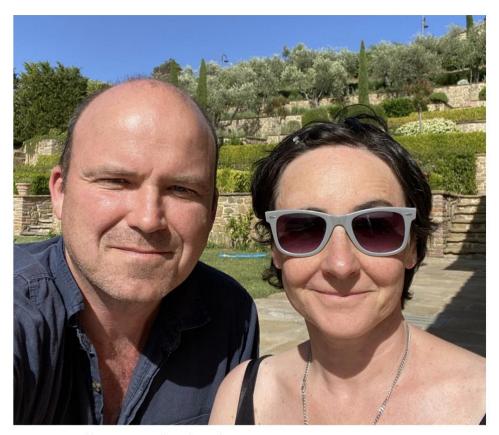
The English actor can't resist a local church, his family prefer to relax around the pool. Here's how one fabulous villa kept them all happy

Feature, including a 1:17 film naming Podere Polino and Scott Williams, narrated by Rory:



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Rory Kinnear and his partner at Villa Podere Polino RORY KINEAR

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Villa Podere Polino, overlooking the town of Piegaro

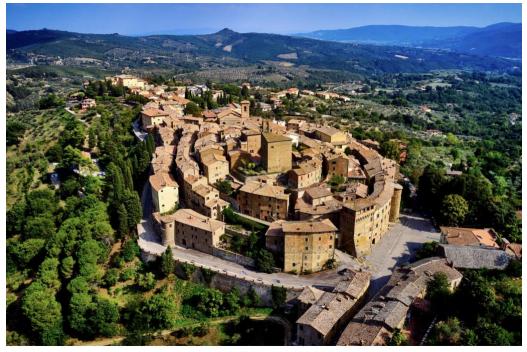
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A glass-blowing artisan at work in Piegaro, Umbria

Piegaro and its festival, held at the town's glass museum in the building that formerly housed the village's bottle factory, proved as attractive up close as they had from afar. We watched as two women heated, twisted and blew molten sand into a delicately wrought glass dish, while two other ladies displayed their decades of experience at weaving straw into baskets for the village's famous bottles.

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Panicale has remarkable views over Lake Trasimeno

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Dining alfresco at Podere Polino

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