

Scott Williams

The Sunday Times

16 June 2024

June 16, 2024

THE SUNDAY TIMES
Travel
TRAVEL SECTION OF THE YEAR

**Travel
Awards
2024**

Vote for your holiday
favourites for a chance to win
one of nine great trips **18**

Plus Inside Taylor Swift's Cotswolds **5** Secret Umbria with Rory Kinnear **7** Zagreb city guide **30**

Travel Italy

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

Sometimes just the idea of a holiday can keep you going. With the UK's weather in May attempting to wrest April's crown as the cruellest month – its teasing, stop-start nature somehow even more pernicious than its predecessor's relentless grey – I found myself limping towards the May half-term break, buoyed only by the prospect of a return to Umbria, in Italy.

I had been to the area once before with my partner and two children, now 13 and 10, when we signed ourselves up for a holiday in a farmhouse described as an “agriturismo”. It taught me that you should always read all of a booking website's details. We were surprised to find we'd be sharing our house with Alberto, his two Pyrenean mountain dogs, eight cats and a wasp's nest handily

positioned by the swimming pool. But we eventually got over ourselves and committed to the ethos, joining Alberto's friends in making passata, weeding the cucumber vines and helping him to finish off that year's batch of homemade mulberry liqueur. What's more, we fell for the area – its charming hilltop villages, its unspoilt rolling countryside and the warm welcome we were afforded wherever we went. In an endearingly insouciant way, the region provides a wealth of options for a family holiday.

I should make a confession: I have a tourism problem. If I'm within striking distance of something I've read about in a guidebook, I find it physically painful not to go and see it. I tell myself I save the worst excesses of this compulsion for when I'm travelling alone for work, but I also know I'm kidding myself; my children have seen the inside of more churches than an itinerant preacher. My partner, on the other hand, is far better at relaxing: happy to explore, but happier to prioritise time together as a family around the pool or dining table. I know she's right and I'm trying to change, but the car steering wheel seems to have a life of its own when it sees a little brown sign marked “cappella” or “monumento storico”. Big cities, you understand, do not make for a relaxing holiday break.

A villa holiday in the Umbrian countryside was therefore the ideal compromise. The region south of Tuscany

seems to sit contentedly in its neighbour's shade, in terms of tourism and price, but is so rich in history that there are more than enough sights for me to feel fulfilled. Meanwhile, by secluding ourselves in a villa among the rolling hills, I could save my family from the worst of myself.

This time we had upgraded from an agriturismo to stay at Podere Polino, one of a handful of superbly appointed villas on a hillside overlooking the town of Piegara. The villa has a huge, magnificently designed garden, a hypnotically calming warren of olive trees, jasmine and roses set over five levels cut into the hillside. Either side of the house two handsome stretches of lawn are lined with lavender, rosemary and lemon trees, which proved perfect venues for home and away legs of the Kinnear Ashes (we had brought stumps).

It is the kind of place that almost tempts me to throw the guidebook away. Sitting at the vast marble table on the veranda watching the breeze ripple the water of the infinity pool – and beyond, the leaves of the property's vineyards and olive groves (yes, they do make their own wine and oil, and yes, they do provide guests with handsome samples of it) – I could almost allow my mind to stay in the present rather than wandering to the 15th century. But as sensational as the view was from any number of vantage points around the property, I could see a medieval village, and the church

Continued on page 8 →

Rory Kinnear and his partner, right, at Villa Podere Polino, below. Bottom: the rolling hills surrounding Chiusi, Umbria



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."

Piegario and its festival, held at the town's glass museum in the building that formerly housed the 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 town's famous bottles.

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 passed another historic belltower – that of the imposing church of San Michele Arcangelo, jutting into the central piazza like a cliff-top – 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 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 £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 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 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 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 swim 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 to see and do in the area that it could have felt overwhelming. Instead, to my surprise, I felt inspired, by the Umbrian approach, to put the guidebook down and follow my heart – and my stomach – for which my family will be eternally grateful.

Rory Kinnear was a guest of Scott Williams, which has seven nights' self-catering for ten at Podere Polino from £15,100. Pizza-making evening from £42pp; wine-tasting from £42pp (scottwilliams.co.uk). Fly to Perugia



A painting by Pietro Vannucci at San Sebastiano Church, Panicale, top. Right, Chiusi. Below, dining alfresco at Podere Polino

“Fortunately for my children, the tulle museum was closed”



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 (small 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 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 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 20-minute drive north of Piegario, close to Lake Trasimeno.

Details B&B doubles from £81 (anticosipario.com)
Katie Bowman

Scott Williams

thetimes.co.uk

16 June 2024

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

The Times homepage:




VIDEO

Rory Kinnear: I've found the sleepest 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:

THE  TIMES

Today's sections ▾


Past six days

Explore ▾

Times Radio

Times+

My account ▾


Search 

Travel

VIDEO

Rory Kinnear: I've found the sleepest 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



0:03 / 1:17

Share

Save

Sometimes just the idea of a holiday can keep you going. With the UK's weather in May attempting to wrest April's crown as the cruellest month — its teasing, stop-start nature somehow even more pernicious than its predecessor's relentless grey — I found myself limping towards the May half-term break, buoyed only by the prospect of a return to Umbria, in Italy.

I had been to the area once before with my partner and two children, now 13 and 10, when we signed ourselves up for a holiday in a farmhouse described as an “agriturismo”. It taught me that you should always read all of a booking website's details. We were surprised to find we'd be sharing our house with Alberto, his two Pyrenean mountain dogs, eight cats and a wasp's nest handily positioned by the swimming pool. But we eventually got over ourselves and committed to the ethos, joining Alberto's friends in making passata, weeding the cucumber vines and helping him to finish off that year's batch of homemade mulberry liqueur. What's more, we fell for the area — its charming hilltop villages, its unspoilt rolling countryside and the warm welcome we were afforded wherever we went. In an endearingly insouciant way, the region provides a wealth of options for a family holiday.



Rory Kinnear and his partner at Villa Podere Polino

RORY KINEAR

I should make a confession: I have a tourism problem. If I'm within striking distance of something I've read about in a guidebook, I find it physically painful not to go and see it. I tell myself I save the worst excesses of this compulsion for when I'm travelling alone for work, but I also know I'm kidding myself; my children have seen the inside of more churches than an itinerant preacher. My partner, on the other hand, is far better at relaxing: happy to explore, but happier to prioritise time together as a family around the pool or dining table. I know she's right and I'm trying to change, but the car steering wheel seems to have a life of its own when it sees a little brown sign marked "cappella" or "monumento storico". Big cities, you understand, do not make for a relaxing holiday break.

A villa holiday in the Umbrian countryside was therefore the ideal compromise. The region south of Tuscany seems to sit contentedly in its neighbour's shade, in terms of tourism and price, but is so rich in history that there are more than enough sights for me to feel fulfilled. Meanwhile, by secluding ourselves in a villa among the bucolic, rolling hills, I could save my family from the worst of myself.



Villa Podere Polino, overlooking the town of Piegaro
KRISTIAN SEPTIMIUS KROGH

This time we had upgraded from an agriturismo to stay at Podere Polino, one of a handful of superbly appointed villas on a hillside overlooking the town of Piegaro. The villa has a huge, magnificently designed garden, a hypnotically calming warren of olive trees, jasmine and roses set over five levels cut into the hillside. Either side of the house two handsome stretches of lawn are lined with lavender, rosemary and lemon trees, which proved perfect venues for home and away legs of the Kinnear Ashes (we had brought stumps).

It is the kind of place that almost tempts me to throw the guidebook away. Sitting at the vast marble table on the veranda watching the breeze ripple the water of the infinity pool — and beyond, the leaves of the property's vineyards and olive groves (yes, they do make their own wine and oil, and yes, they do provide guests with handsome samples of it) — I could almost allow my mind to stay in the present rather than wandering to the 15th century. But as sensational as the view was from any number of vantage points around the property, I could see a medieval village, and the church 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.”



A glass-blowing artisan at work in Piegara, Umbria
ALAMY

Piegara 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.

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 passed another historic belltower — that of the imposing church of San Michele Arcangelo, jutting into the central piazza like a clifftop — 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.



Panicale has remarkable views over Lake Trasimeno
GETTY IMAGES

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 seems to hold 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 likeable 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.



Graphic by The Times and The Sunday Times

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 was on hand to point 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 all too easily get used to. In Citta della Pieve, where we ate at the charmingly collegiate Trattoria Serenella, alongside locals sharing tables and catching up, 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 £7.50; Piazza Matteotti).



Dining alfresco at Podere Polino
KRISTIAN SEPTIMIUS KROGH

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 ourselves for two memorable evenings, both organised through the villa company. One time, two pizza chefs came to start up the wood-fired oven and helped the kids get hands-on with a vast array of toppings (pudding was a pizza base topped with chocolate spread and whipped cream). Another evening, Raffaello Chierico and Giacomo Casaioli, two extremely 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 swim in, wine tours, cycling, truffle-hunting expeditions, go-karting or simply sitting by the pool watching the hummingbird-like hawk moths gorge on the jasmine flowers, there is so much to see and do in the area that it could have felt overwhelming. Instead, to my surprise, I felt inspired, by the Umbrian approach, to put the guidebook down and follow my heart — and my stomach — for which my family will be eternally grateful.

Rory Kinnear was a guest of Scott Williams, which has seven nights' self-catering for ten at Podere Polino from £15,100. Pizza-making evening from £42pp; wine-tasting from £42pp (scottwilliams.co.uk). Fly to Perugia

Prepared by Susie Aust Communications Ltd