

City of More than Just Silence

A drum beat begins and trumpets join in. Twenty young men, costumed in brocade tunics with matching caps and tights, rush in formation on to the *Piazza Grande* in Gubbio, holding vibrant flags over their heads. There's a hushed moment before they throw the flags into the air to begin a show of precise tossing and twirling that originated in this town in the 14th century.



"The Gubbio flag throwers, the *sbandieratori*, they are very famous," says the *signora* standing next to me.

"They were in *Torino* for the Olympics. And all my years watching them, even when there is wind, I have never seen one of them drop a flag."

I watch in awe from this excellent spot — a wide stone expanse at the top of town, flanked by two *palazzi*, with an amazing view of the surrounding forest. The crimson, blue and yellow flags are thrown higher and higher into the fading light of the evening sky. Lucky for me, I've arrived in time for a police convention, and this show is being put on in their honor. Just like the *signora* said, not one flag is dropped.

I'd heard about Gubbio through California friends who'd recently

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relocated to nearby *Umbertide*. They sent me an ecstatic e-mail report of their experience at Gubbio's most famous event, *The Race of the Ceri*. Every May 15th, three 20-foot wooden statues, representing the town's patron saints, are run through the streets and up the slopes of *Mount Ingino*.



Sant' Ubaldo, Gubbio's patron saint

Three days of festivities surround the race and thousands of people come to Gubbio for the celebration.

The rest of the year, besides the periodic *sbandieratori* shows, a crossbow tournament and the lighting of *Mount Ingino* that creates what's claimed to be the biggest Christmas tree in the world, Gubbio lives up to its "city of silence" nickname. Set in northeastern *Umbria*, it's a beautifully preserved medieval hill town that has somehow not been compromised by tourists and retains a small town, authentic atmosphere.

As I approach Gubbio on a bus, it appears as a creamy city of Oz — a terraced cluster of ivory church steeples and buildings roofed with burnt orange tiles, backed by shimmering deep green hills.

The Relais Ducale

My base is the *Relais Ducale*, which I'd found through JDB Hotels. Fabulously located right on *Piazza Grande*, the hotel was the 15th-century guest house

of the Duke of *Montefeltro*. The Duke's name means nothing to me until *Paolo* at the hotel desk shows me a portrait of him that hangs in the *Uffizi*. I immediately recognize the *Piero della Francesca* masterpiece: a profile of a man with a hooked nose, wearing a flat red hat and matching jacket. "He had to be painted showing just his left side," *Paolo* told me. "In a jousting tournament the other side of his face got cut by a sword. He lost an eye and the bridge of his nose, his whole right side was disfigured."



Palais Ducale

Just as in *Piero della Francesca's* masterpiece, the Duke's good side plays out in his guest house, which was expertly renovated in 1997. All 30 rooms are unique, retaining the original structure's arched ceilings and brickwork, which blend with dark polished wood floors, elegant sage and gold draperies and antique furnishings to create a warm, luxurious atmosphere.

I find myself lingering in the comfy connecting rooms that make up the lobby or at the tiny *Bar Ducale*, which is attached to the hotel entrance, facing the piazza.

"My mother's antique shop is right

near here," *Daniela Mencarelli*, the hotel director tells me, as she marks an "X" on my map. When her husband, *Sean*, joins the conversation in perfectly unaccented English, he catches my look of surprise. "I'm from *Jessup, Pennsylvania*," *Sean* tells me. "It's the sister city of Gubbio. Lots of people from here immigrated to *Jessup*. There's always been Italians and Americans going back and forth, which is how I met my wife."

Daniela and *Sean* are a most attractive and sophisticated couple who are part of the younger generation of *The Mencarelli Group*, a company founded by *Daniela's* father. The *Mencarellis* own the *Relais Ducale*, along with other hotels and restaurants in Gubbio and have a passion for welcoming guests to their home town, which sets the tone for their



Daniela Mencarelli with husband Sean

enthusiastic staff. No matter whom I end up chatting with, each takes their time offering advice for my stay, and though they all speak English, they're patient and encouraging with me as I practice my stumbling Italian. All this kindness and attention makes me feel like I'm part of the family.



Gubbio ceramics

Eat Like a Native

With trusty restaurant recommendations from the hotel, I take off for a taste of Gubbio's specialties. At the formal *Taverna del Lupo*, a waiter in a black jacket and matching bow-tie serves me delicious rabbit stuffed with fennel. A legend surrounds the *lupo* (wolf) from which the *Taverna* got its name. The story goes that *Saint Francis* tamed a wolf that used to come and eat lunch right here. These days, the award-winning *Taverna* is critically



Gubbio is considered one of the most

acclaimed for its refined versions of regional specialties, with a menu featuring many dishes that incorporate truffles found in the nearby forest.

On another evening, I get a folksier experience at the *Osteria Dei Re*, where the smell of *salami* hits me as soon as I enter. Workmen sit at a wooden bar drinking red wine from tumblers and watching a soccer game on TV. The entertainment for me is watching a young waitress in jeans cheerfully maneuver truck-tire-sized *terracotta* platters heaped with cured meats and cheeses up and down stairs to the dining room below. I lunch on fresh *Pecorino*, spicy salamis, smoky ham and *mortadella* — all complemented by a glass of *Rosso di Montefalco* wine. On the wall, a painting of pigs (obviously a revered animal around here), catches my eye and gets a laugh out of me.

Exploring the Town

Locals offer me friendly *buon giornos* as I wander, getting a little workout on the steep cobblestone streets. I peek into antique shops, empty Romanesque churches, and hang around the outdoor market — a lively scene, abundant with crates of apples, onions, mushrooms and lettuces.

Ceramic shops are crammed with stunning pieces. Gubbio's pottery, which features Renaissance motifs and a brilliant gloss, has a distinctive look because it is created with a third firing to create a style called "*lustro*."

Paolo, who turns out to be a history expert, takes me on a town tour. We start off at the Roman amphitheater that in summer months hosts a concert series. "Caesar came through here with

his troops, after proclaiming *alea iacta est* (the die is cast) and Gubbio supported him on his campaign against Pompey. He rewarded them by making the town a Roman municipality," Paolo tells me.

Senior citizens in quilted jackets and wool caps play bocce on the lawn in front of the theater, while Paolo gestures to all the open space, saying, "Not much new construction happens around here, because every time the ground is opened, more Roman ruins are found."

The tour is fascinating, full of details about Gubbio's rich history. When Saint Francis first took his vows, he walked here naked from Assisi and ended up at a friend of his family's house, the *Spadalongas*, who owned a Gubbio wool factory. "The gray robe they threw over him

became the vestment of the first Franciscan friars," Paolo says as we stand before a statue of the saint.

Dante, when exiled from Florence, was welcomed here at the *Renaissance Bosone Palace*, which now is

another Mencarelli hotel. And one of Gubbio's oddities is its "Fountain of the Mad," which sits in front of the *Piazza del Bargello*. Local folklore says that if someone runs around the fountain three times and then splashes water on himself, he can be certified as insane. Lunatic certificates are available for sale at shops near the fountain.

I opt out of the ritual, telling Paolo I want to remain completely sane for tomorrow's adventure.

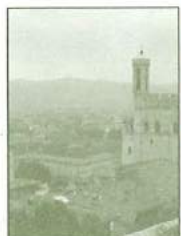
The Truffle Hunt

The fact that I could tag along on a truffle hunt was a major factor that brought me to Gubbio. I'm crazy for Italian truffles and don't need a certificate to prove it. I love their earthy flavor and smell, which the Romans called "vaguely sexual." The Catholic Church caught on to this and in the Middle Ages banned truffles, saying they were so indulgent they had to be the sign of the devil. When Paolo makes arrangements for me to go on a hunt, I'm thrilled.

At exactly 6:30 a.m., *Marino Aringolo*, who I'm told is the best truffle hunter
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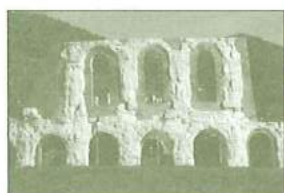
Bocce players



View from Piazza Grande



Fountain of the Mad



Roman amphitheater

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beautiful medieval towns in Europe.



Marino Aringolo, Lady and black truffle



Susan Van Allen with Fido and Lady



Baseball cap with black truffles

in town, pulls up to the Piazza Grande in his dusty gray hatchback to take me into the forest with him. In his 50s, Marino has a round, kind face, deep sincere eyes framed by wire-rimmed glasses, a short, compact workman's build. If he walked into a Hollywood casting office, he'd be booked on the spot to play a friendly handyman.

We head into the forest with Marino's dogs — a black lab he calls "Fee-doh" and a white pointer he introduces to me as "Lah-dee." There are no paths. I follow close behind Marino, who's been hunting this territory for 40 years. The forest floor is damp and soft with fallen leaves, darkened by tall oak trees. The only sound is our footsteps and the rustling of the dogs through ferns and bushes.

"Guarda bene, guarda bene," (look well, look well), Marino calls out to them.

The dogs sniff around, with Marino keeping close watch. The forest thickens and he stops to hold back branches for me as we zigzag downward to a meandering creek.

When both dogs suddenly stop and paw at a mound of dirt by the side of a tree, Marino rushes over, shoos them away and starts digging. I join him as he smells the dirt. To me, it smells, for lack of a better word, *truffle-ish*.

I get excited that we just may uncover a white truffle that sells for \$6,000 a pound, and I'll be Marino's good luck charm. But digging only leads to more truffle-ish smelling dirt.

It is only October, after all, which is a month early for white truffles. And Marino tells me since it's been a dry season there may not be many *tartufi bianchi* this year. As we criss-cross the creek, he points out all the spots where his dogs dug up *tartufi bianchi* in past years. "Cosi," he says, holding his hands in the shape of a CD, indicating how big those truffles were.

It's so pleasant just being in this forest I'm getting into the head that I really don't care whether we find truffles or not. I've heard stories from other travelers who've gone on truffle hunts that were obviously fixed, and I'm feeling good about being a part of a real one.

I lose track of the time, but when I feel how warm it's become since we started, I realize we've probably been at this for hours. Marino heads us uphill, out of white truffle territory. "*Tartufi neri*," he says, pointing to a meadow, where black truffles are found all year round.

Fido and Lady rush to the meadow's border of trees, furiously paw and both come up with black truffles that Marino swiftly grabs out of their jaws. He opens up his vest pocket, where he keeps a baggie of mortadella chunks and tosses them out as rewards to the

The Details

Where to Stay

Hotel Relais Ducale

Via Galeotti, 19

(39) 075 9220157

www.mencarelligroup.com

Rates: Start at 90€ for a single room to 265€ for a junior suite that sleeps three. All include breakfast.

Your travel agent can book you a room at the Ducale through JDB Hotels (800-346-5358; www.jdbhotels.com) or can book JDB's "Gubbio at Your Choice" package, which includes:

- 3 nights at the Relais Ducale with breakfast
- dinner at Taverna del Lupo
- tasting of local wines and specialties
- gift from the manager and the option of one of the following —
 - a cooking class
 - half-day mini tour around the area
 - truffle hunt

Rates: From 780€ for two guests.

Where to Eat

Taverna Del Lupo

Via Ansidei, 21

(39) 075 9274638

www.mencarelligroup.com

Open Tuesday through Sunday, 12:15 to 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. to midnight. Closed Monday.

Osteria Dei Re

Via Cavour, 15

(39) 075 9222504

Closed Wednesday.

ravenous dogs. Their tails wag and they chomp away, then rush back to the trees for more digging.

Within 15 minutes they've dug up enough black truffles to practically fill my baseball cap. It's as if we've switched movie sets, from a slow-paced surreal film in that forest to an action packed lightning speed romp up here in the meadow. I'm startled, to say the least, inhaling the knock-out smell of the dirt-encrusted black treasures.

When Marino drops me off at the Piazza Grande, he insists I keep the truffles. "Share them with your friends in Rome," he tells me. His generosity overwhelms me. I give him a heartfelt *grazie mille*. The church bells clang as I watch him drive away.

In Rome the next night, I have dinner at a friend's apartment. We shave the black truffles over *tagliatelle*. They toast me for bringing back such booty.

I toast Marino and all the serene, rich, delicious treasures of "the city of silence."

— Susan Van Allen

Susan Van Allen wrote about Pisa in the February 2008 issue of Dream of Italy.

Gubbio's most famous export is the balestra (crossbow).