

Sunset at one of Italy's biggest lakes, Lago Trasimeno, looks like the stuff of film sets.

Pictures: Peter Riches

Fiat's the way to go for Italian tourists

P. D. Riches finds chestnuts and wild boars on a holiday in the Umbrian hills

On the first morning of our stay at Casa San Gabriel, I wandered out on to the terrace of our guesthouse and took in the view. As the mist began to lift from the valley below, I could hear a strange cacophony emanating from the oak forest.

"That will be the beaters for the boar hunt," explained our host David when I quizzed him later.

The hills around Perugia are known for their summer truffles and cinghiale, or wild boar. The job of the beaters is to make as much noise as possible by banging whatever objects are handy as they walk in a line through the forest.

Another line of hunters, armed with proper weapons instead of just old saucepans and sticks, lies in front of the beaters waiting and ready to shoot the fleeing pigs.

Not surprisingly, this tends to agitate the cinghiale — and probably every other creature within earshot.

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David is originally from Australia and his wife Chrissie is English. They bought Casa San Gabriel five years ago, restoring the original farmhouse and converting the other buildings into guesthouses.

They have managed to provide all the necessary mod cons while retaining the charm of the original structures. There is La Cantina, formerly the wine cellar, and Il Fienile, the hayloft. We stayed in La Stalla, the old pig stalls.

Guests experience all the beauty



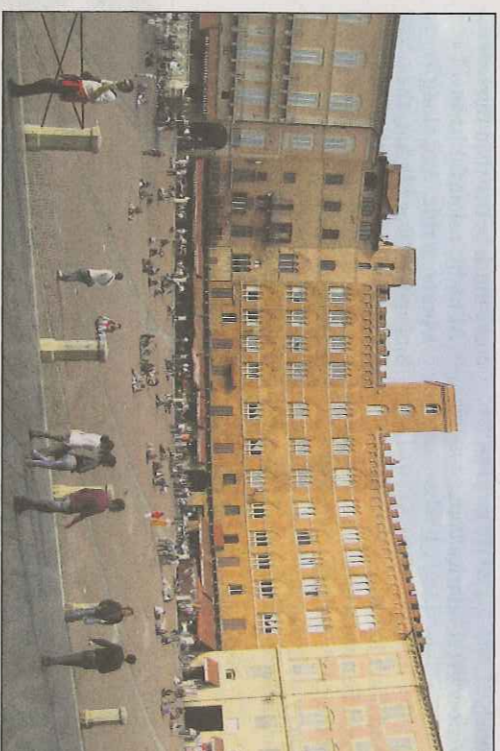
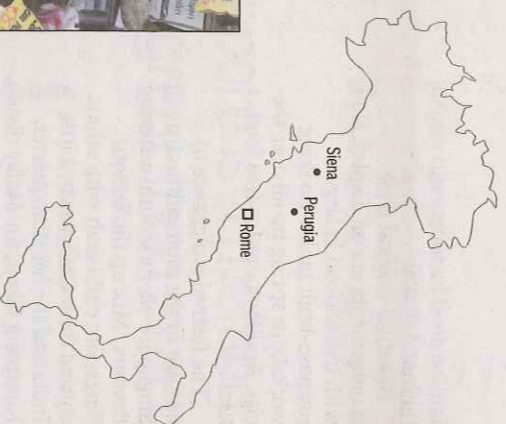
Umbrian goodies.

of an Umbrian villa, complete with views that belong in a photography exhibition, swimming pool and gardens. David cooks dinner for guests every Thursday night in the original wood-fired pizza oven. He also makes his own orangecello, a potent liqueur guaranteed to put you in a holiday mood.

We arrived in Perugia by train from Rome. David met us at the station in his Fiat Panda to take us up to Casa San Gabriel, about a 20-minute drive.

As I was to discover over the next few days, the Fiat Panda is the perfect car for Italian roads. Generally, they are driven only by the elderly and tourists so locals tend to give you a wide berth as they tear past at a frantic pace.

Our first excursion was to Gubbio, a medieval town full of the wonderful winding, narrow



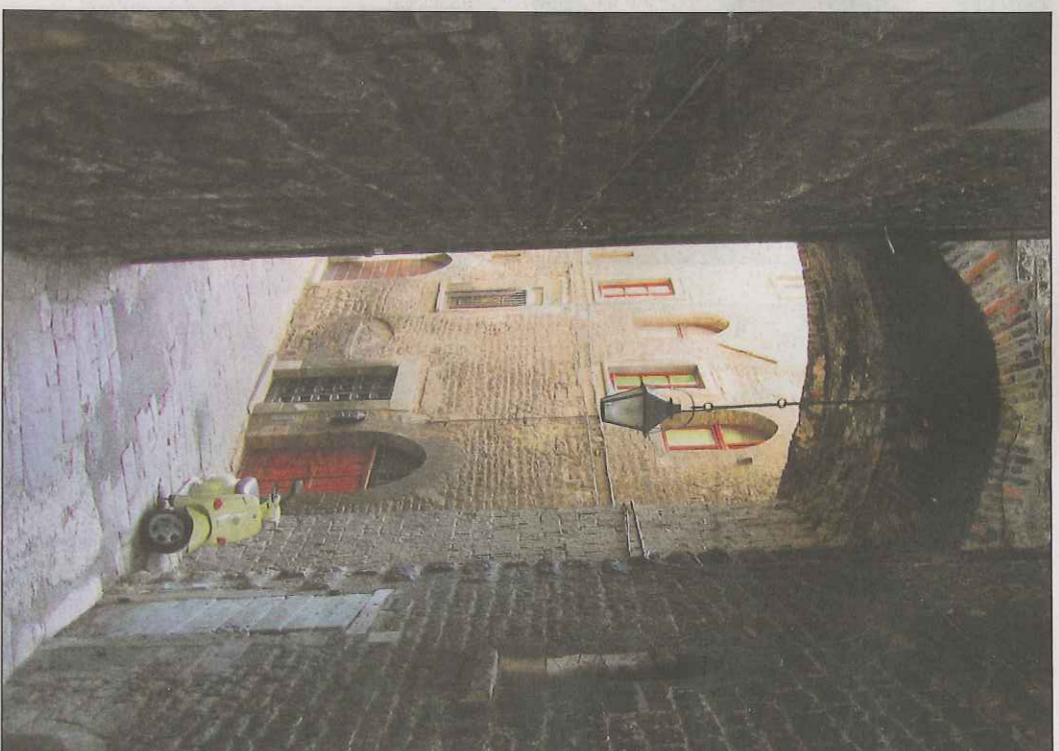
Siena's Piazza del Campo is one of Europe's great medieval squares.

alleyways the Italians do so well.

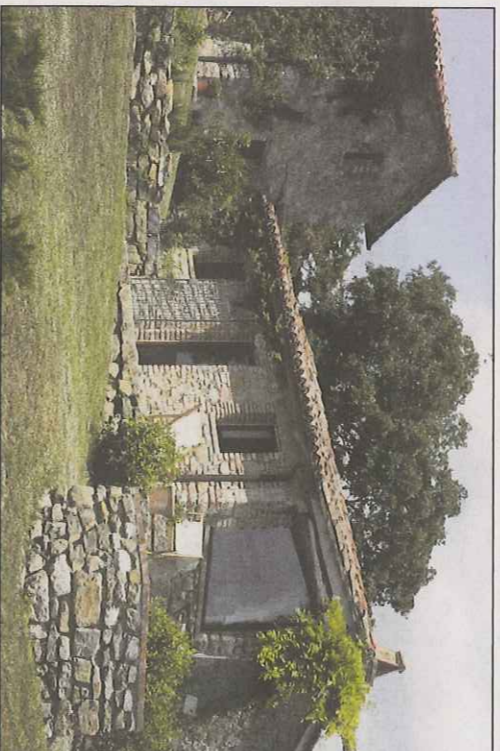
Another day trip took us to neighbouring Tuscany where we stopped at Cortona, the town featured in the film and book Under the Tuscan Sun.

After a basic but delicious lunch of rosemary and potato pizza, we headed to Siena. In the city centre we discovered the Piazza del Campo, a huge concave public space of red brick paving.

We were also treated to an impromptu five-minute opera performance by a young baritone who emerged to serenade the crowd on one of the surrounding balconies. It did cross my mind that he may have been in the employ of the Nazionale del



One of the wonderful winding alleyways in Gubbio.



Now Casa San Gabriel guesthouse, La Stalla used to be pig stalls.

to arrive shortly.

Sure enough it did, and we were soon winding our way into town.

As festivals go, the Chestnut Festival, or Sagra della Castagna, was a master class in keeping things casual. We wandered from venue to venue — usually someone's house decked out especially for the occasion — and were served a range of chestnut-inspired delights accompanied by homemade wine in recycled Ewan water bottles. It was cheap, it was tasty, and there was hardly a tourist in sight.

At one place we noticed the people inside were enjoying a particularly sumptuous-smelling stew. I tried asking the man next to me what it was.

The man's son wisely decided to explain through hand signals, raising his hands to his face and imitating a particularly ferocious tusk.

"Ah, cinghiale?"

"Si, si."

We headed inside to enjoy a steaming bowl of wild boar stew. It was about 11 and the streets were just beginning to fill when we finally decided to call it a night. Each transit bus from the carpark ejected a full load of revellers ready to kick off the night.

No wonder the carpark was so empty when we arrived — who else but a tourist would turn up to a festival in Italy at the officially advertised time?