



the world's sexiest small city

Our writer flies to
Italy to see if he
can fall in love.

by DAVID LANSING photographs by JUSTIN GUARIGLIA



I've come to Perugia on a bet.

My old college roommate, Hardy McLain, wagered that if I saw this art-and-history-drenched provincial capital in central Italy, I'd fall in love. "How could you not?" he said. "Perugia is the sexiest little city in the world."

The bet came up during a guys' night out in which we were regaling each other with tales of our travels. A discussion of favorite cities we'd seen turned—after the second round of whiskey—to a question of which cities are "sexy," with hastily formed criteria to refine our choice.

A sexy city, we agreed, should be seductive but not garishly provocative, revealing its secrets slowly; it should be classy yet able to please all your senses; and it should stir your emotions even when not at its best, say, when the landscape has gone bare in winter or when the city has aged a bit past its prime.

"Think Sophia Loren as a city," I mused.

"I know the perfect place," McLain said in a whisper. He took a pull on his cigar. "It's been years since I was there, but it's like a song you can't get out of your head. If you go, I bet you'll fall for it."

"You're on," I said.

Now, after a late-evening arrival in Perugia—in a cold, drizzly rain, only to find my hotel room cramped and the bed too small—I have my doubts.

NEXT DAY, DETERMINED TO GIVE Perugia a chance, I'm at the National Gallery of Umbria, eavesdropping on a tour for college students led by a brassy Italian guide wearing Gucci glasses and faux-fur coat. I hang back at the edge of the group, listening as the guide points out how to recognize prostitutes in medieval paintings.



Opening pages: Some in Perugia say that their city, set in the rolling hills of Umbria, has the mysterious allure of a beautiful woman. Above: Iglis Meloni (at left) and Letizia Pinturo share an intimate conversation. Left: Evening strollers fill the Corso Vannucci, a historical street lined with bars and shops.

(They're the ones without veils or hats on their heads.)

"In the Middle Ages," she says, "the prostitutes were part of high society. They were paid richly by noblemen and clerics for their services, and when they were too old to work, it was off to a convent."

As the group moves on to a painting of the Madonna, I tag along to see what else I missed during my eight years of parochial education. "Focus on just one item in this painting at a time," the guide tells the students. "Look at the Madonna's face and then her eyes, her lips, the little wisps of gold curls spilling from her lacy veil. Don't you see the artist falling in love with her?"

When we move on to yet another painting, the guide stops herself. "Excuse me," she says, looking at me sternly. "This is a private tour." She waits until I move away, a bit embarrassed, before she continues.

Still, her sensual words about the Madonna give me a fresh perspective on sacred art. Maybe actor Roberto Benigni was right when he said that nothing is sexier than religion. At least that seems true in Perugia. Near the National Gallery, I find a desanctified medieval church that has been converted into a jewelry store selling antique wedding rings. Inside, two Englishwomen are examining a large diamond ring from the early 19th century. "If my husband gave this to me," says one of the women, "I'd know immediately that he'd been very bad."

Over the next couple of days, I wander Perugia with a "must do" list from my friend McLain. Unfortunately, I'm finding

the layout of the city confusing, even with the help of maps. Built on a hilltop for protection, this medieval town has narrow *vicoli* (little streets) that suddenly dead end or circle back—the better to confuse enemies chasing you with swords.

Perugia was part of a group of fortified towns in Umbria that also includes Spoleto, Assisi, and Gubbio, all feckless participants in centuries of political strife. These outposts, each its own fiefdom in medieval times, are now like communal sisters, with Perugia, the largest, a good base for making day trips to the others. But before doing that, I need to get my bearings here.

The hotel concierge is of little help: He describes everything as being next to someplace else. The restaurant Osteria il Gufo, where McLain had a delectable meal of braised wild boar with fennel, sits "across from the old cinema," but which old cinema? The truffle shop "is on the same street as the *gelaterie*." But there are countless gelato shops in Perugia. Again, which one?

"The best one, *naturalmente*," says the concierge.

"What's it called?"

"I don't recall."

McLain told me I'd love the cheese in Perugia. So one afternoon I go off in search of *caciotta al tartufo*, a sheep milk cheese flecked with black truffle. But, turned around as usual, I end up instead sampling sausages sliced thinly for me by Leonardo Spulcia in a shop called Cacioteke (although only the name "Giuliano" appears in big blue letters above the door).

Spulcia, handing me a slice of chewy sausage called *coglioni di mulo*, tells me that, for Perugians, good food is the antechamber of romance.

"It's like an aphrodisiac—peppercorn, saffron, truffles, cheese, sausages. It's all very sensual, no?" He opens a bottle of wine, a sangratiño called Scacciadiavoli. As he pours me a glass, he tells me the story behind the name:

"A nobleman decided to help out a young woman possessed by the devil," Spulcia begins. "Sleep with me," he told her, "and the devil will run away." This made perfect sense to the woman and her husband, and in time, the woman was cured. But sometimes the devil reappeared, and the poor woman had to go back to the nobleman for further treatment. To reward her husband's patience, the woman always brought home a bottle of sangratiño from

the nobleman's vineyards. The variety became known as Scacciadiavoli, which means 'chasing away the devils.'"

Back at my hotel, I've moved to a larger room that overlooks one of Perugia's most historic and picturesque streets, Corso Vannucci. One afternoon, I sit on my balcony eating a lunch of wild boar sausages the size of my thumb. Below me is a café. I can smell the espresso and hear the lilting Italian of couples sitting at outside tables. Across the way, an old woman pokes at a large planter of somnolent wisteria on her balcony, as if demanding to know why it

refuses to bloom, even in late April. Above her, a lone swallow flits about beneath the red tile roof. The scene is all very pretty, but I'm still not in love. That evening, I send McLain a text message: "Not feeling the romance. U bst pay off bet."

NEXT MORNING I HAVE BREAKFAST AT Sandri, a revered pastry shop dating to 1860 whose senior waiters dress in scarlet red

waistcoats and matching bow ties. The long narrow room, as elegant as a wise-cracking Cary Grant, has carved wooden display shelves full of chocolates and confections, and a ceiling that's domed and painted like a church vestibule.

The place is jammed, all the tables full. There's a single spot open at the counter, and I have to wedge myself in, clearing my throat so that the woman beside me, standing over an espresso and a plate of small

chocolates, will move her faux-fur coat out of my way. Oh, no. I recognize the coat. It belongs to the pretentious Italian guide who scolded me at the National Gallery.

I apologize for having bothered her, and she snaps, "You're the rude man who interrupted my tour."

"I wasn't rude," I tell her. "I just wanted to hear what you had to say about the art." The *pasticcere* looks up from washing cappuccino cups and waits for my order.

Above: Francesco Martinelli, a junior waiter, keeps a close eye on pastry lovers seated on the terrace at the Pasticceria Sandri. Opposite: At L'Alchimista Enoteca, a wine bar in Montefalco, proprietor Patrizia Moretti serves a famous *strangozzi*, or "priest strangler" pasta, which is cut like a narrow rope.



"Well, normally people pay for my services," she says icily.

"I'd be happy to pay for your services," I tell her. "As a guide, I mean."

"Well, I'm very busy."

"Of course."

She downs her espresso in a single gulp and dabs at her rose-colored lips with a linen napkin, leaving a bright stain.

"When would you like to hire me?"

"What?"

"You said you wanted to hire me."

"Fine," I tell her as she opens a compact and applies another layer of red lipstick. "You're hired."

And so I've hired Maura Baldoni as my guide—but to what? My breakfast comes, a cappuccino with a foil-wrapped chocolate on the side and a cream-filled pastry. I take a sip and wonder what to do with Baldoni.

While I finish my coffee, she takes the Bacio chocolate that came on my saucer and peels off the silver foil. Inside is a slip of paper. She reads it aloud: "*L'amore osserva non con gli occhi, ma con la mente.*"

"Which means what, exactly?"

"It's from Shakespeare," she says.

"You've heard of Shakespeare?"

I assure her I have. She smiles. "It means 'Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind.'"

"Rubbish," I tell her. "And why do they put fortunes in the chocolates anyway? That's supposed to be only for Chinese cookies."

"They're not fortunes," Baldoni says.

"They're love notes." She clicks her tongue in disgust. "You have much to learn about Perugia. For instance, there is a story about the Baci chocolates made here. Do you know what 'baci' means in Italian?"

"Tell me."

"Kisses."

Perugina chocolate was founded by the Buitoni and Spagnoli families, she explains. They made a little chocolate called *cazzotto*, shaped like a fist. It didn't sell well. "Meanwhile, Luisa Spagnoli, the wife of one of the founders, began an affair with Giovanni Buitoni, son of her husband's business partner. Every morning, Luisa would place a love note beneath a cappuccino on a plate with some chocolates and bring it to Giovanni. This inspired him to change the shape of the *cazzotto*, call it Bacio, and put a love note in each one."

Baldoni smiles, then plops the dark, mounded chocolate into her mouth. "Now. Shall we go out and see the city?"

EVERYONE IN PERUGIA, IT SEEMS, knows Baldoni. Waiters at the sidewalk cafés across from the duomo leave their tables to rush over and give her a kiss on the cheek; a young woman selling daffodils in the piazza offers her a free bouquet. Even a Capuchin monk dressed in a pointy little hood and on his way to Assisi, stops to give her a hug. As we head down a shaded street, Baldoni suddenly stops and looks



around, as if for the first time. "I love this street," she says. "Via Maestà delle Volte. It's one of the most sensual streets in Perugia. Do you see what I mean?"

Frankly, no. To me, it's dark, dank, narrow. A bit claustrophobic.

"You're blind, aren't you?" She sighs. "Look," she says, pointing up the street. "Focus. Pay attention. This street is like a woman, full of arches and curves. It is *vuoto* and *pieno*—empty and full. You see?"

Slowly, I do see. The gorgeous arches above the vicoli, the inviting openings that entice you onward. The play of shadow and light, the different textures and colors. She's right. It's incredibly sensual. Why could I not see this before?

We continue down the hill as Baldoni explains to me that Perugia has always had

the lines of a woman. "It was founded on two hills," she says, "with the flat space—Corso Vannucci—between them." She stops and faces me. "You see," she says, directing my attention to the mounds of her chest with both her hands, "this is what Perugia looks like."

Point well taken.

We end up on the edge of town where a round church sits on a nob in a tranquil setting of rose gardens and cypress trees. She has brought me to San Michele Arcangelo, one of the oldest Christian churches in Umbria, dating to the late fifth century. It is intimate, simple, peaceful, and quite beautiful.

There is no one inside. I walk around its circular walls, touching the well-worn stone. "It's something special for us, this church," Baldoni tells me as we sit on a wooden bench. "A popular place for Perugians to get married."

This time she need not explain the romantic nature of the architecture. This little church is sweetly feminine, inviting you into its intimate space, making you feel tranquil and happy. As we walk back up the hill, I admit to Baldoni that although I've been here for almost a week, I feel like today was the first time I actually saw Perugia.

"Even Dante needed Virgil," she says. "We see only what we know."

"Perhaps we can continue tomorrow," I say.

She looks at me surprised. "Perhaps," she says. "I will have to check my schedule."

That night, lying awake in bed, I think hard about what she said: We see only what we know. Before turning off the light, I send a text message to McLain: "Starting to enjoy Perugia."

THE NEXT DAY, BALDONI PICKS ME UP in her VW Beetle and hands me a Bacio. (The note inside this one reads, "The heart has its reasons which reason does not know.") We are off on a field trip to Assisi, less than 20 minutes away. It's home to the most grandiose church in all of Umbria, the Basilica di San Francesco. Inside, Baldoni explains the famous frescoes by Giotto and Cimabue, Lorenzetti's Madonna and Child, and some story about a saint, I forget which one.

I can't keep up. Vividly painted scenes from the Old and New Testaments—the



Above: Perugia is the home of Baci chocolates, whose manufacturer, Perugina, offers a short chocolate-making course for visitors. Perugia also hosts a chocolate festival each October. Right: Fragrant lanes in the medieval walled city of Spello—19 miles from Perugia—are ideal for a springtime stroll.

creation, original sin, annunciation—make me dizzy. Baldoni, sensing my confusion, touches my arm and tells me to look up. The domed ceiling is a sky of China blue with stars ablaze. It takes my breath away. There is nothing to think about this painted sky. You just feel it, like a cool breeze, a soft rain. We stand there, heads raised to the heavens, blissful.

"Sometimes the most beautiful things are the simplest, no?" says Baldoni. Yes.

On Saturday, Baldoni takes me to the nearby town of Gubbio, where we meet Evelino Vagnarelli. He makes clear that he, like most Gubbini, is passionate about truffles. "There is something incredible about the perfume of the truffle," he says as the three of us huff and puff our way up a hill, passing beneath medieval Roman gates, spiraling towers, and long stretches of rough-hewn stone walls built in the 14th century to defend the town.

We end up at a little restaurant for a simple lunch of black truffles shaved over tagliatelle noodles. "For centuries, old lovers in Gubbio have eaten truffles to make them more virile," Vagnarelli says. "That is why the women put it in so many dishes."

After lunch we continue our walk up the hill to the base of Mount Ingino. There we find a funicular, a favorite of local lovers, Vagnarelli says. It's an odd contraption, an oval birdcage with no bars on the top half and only big enough for two people, standing. "You two go," Vagnarelli says. "I have seen the view many times."

So Baldoni and I, leaning against each other for balance, take the 15-minute trip to the top. The hillside is lush and green from the spring rains, the air crisp and thin; perhaps because of this, I'm finding it hard to breathe.

I take deep breaths. "I smell wisteria but I don't see any beneath us," I tell Baldoni. She laughs and half turns to face me in the funicular. "It's my shampoo," she says. "Glicine."

Ah. Of course. Why is it that I am just now noticing?

My last day in Umbria. The day is warm, the sky cerulean. Baldoni won't tell me where she's taking me. We drive through a landscape of hillsides terraced

in olives and vines, valleys of sunflowers and fields of barley, spelt, chickpeas, and the small lentils Umbria is famous for. There are cows, sheep, goats. Thick woodlands, slender cypresses. The land looks and smells ripe, fertile, fecund.

Suddenly the fields open up to a magnificent lake mirroring the sky, Lago Trasimeno. We follow the road around to the town of Castiglione del Lago, where we stroll along the banks of the lake as Baldoni tells me how it got its name. "They say there was a man, Trasimeno,



Simone Liberati and Lina D'Alimonte observe the local tradition as they meet on the Vicolo Baciadonne, the Street of Kisses.

who came to the lakeshore and heard a nymph singing. Her song was so beautiful that he followed her into the water, where they live together today. The story is either tragic or romantic, depending on what you think," she says. "What do you think?"

"I think it is romantic," I tell her. "Me too."

On the shores of the lake, the wisteria—or glicine—has just begun to bloom. "In a couple more weeks, it will be the best time to see it," Baldoni says. "It has a big profumo, no?"

"Bella," I tell her. "Molto bella."

"Your Italian is improving," she says. "I'm learning."

Before heading back to Perugia, Bal-

doni insists on stopping at the village of Città della Pieve, the home of Perugino, the 15th-century artist whose work we saw in the National Gallery on my first day in Perugia.

"Do you know why the Madonna always looks the same in Perugino's paintings?" Baldoni asks me.

"No."

"Because the model was his wife. And he was madly in love with her and kept trying, over and over again, to show the beauty of her lips, the paleness of her skin, the gracefulness of her hands."

I assume Baldoni is taking me to the town's cathedral, where several of Perugino's paintings are on display, but instead we wander past the church, stopping before a lane less than three feet wide, said to be the narrowest in all of Italy. It is the Vicolo Baciadonne, the Street of Kisses.

Baldoni starts walking down the dark passage with me following right behind her. Halfway through, she abruptly stops and leans against the dark wall.

"They say when a man passes a woman in this street, they are so close they must kiss," she says.

The air smells heavily of wisteria. My mouth has gone dry, my hands sweaty.

"Now what?" I ask her.

"That," she says, "is up to you."

She smiles. "Of course, you might be refused."

BACK IN MY HOTEL ROOM, IT is early evening. I open the windows over the Corso Vannucci and take in the scene beneath me. College students stroll, arm in arm, around the piazza. Young parents buy gelato for their children in the shop across the way. From the distance floats the sound of a saxophone playing jazz. The old woman I'd noticed my first morning here is back on her balcony with a watering can; her wisteria has finally bloomed. Dozens of wallows rise and dive in the twilight, happily chasing their dinner.

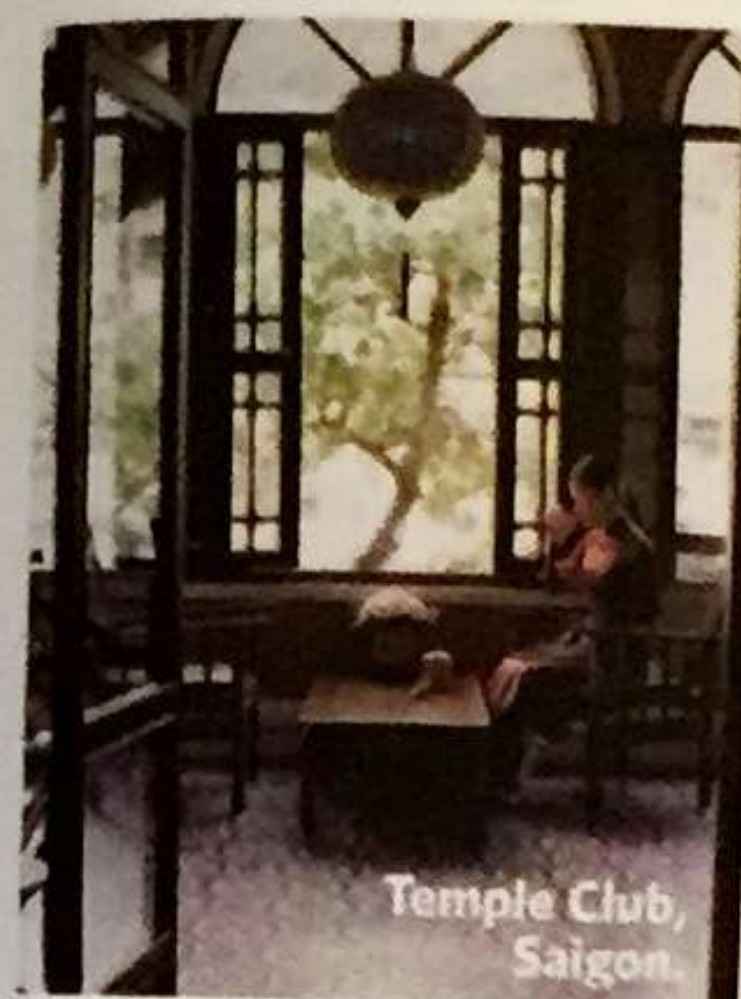
I text McLain a message: "U win."

Writer David Lansing contributed to our "Mexico: 50 Discoveries" section in September. While studying art history in Venice, photographer Justin Guariglia learned Italian, which "opened doors on this assignment."

CULTURE

Besides Perugia: More Sexy Cities

Our world-wise photographers make the case for their favorites.



When *Traveler* asked contributing photographers to name candidates for "world's sexiest city," their replies went beyond the obvious—Paris, Barcelona, San Francisco, Rome—to offer some surprises. ■ **"Copenhagen, Denmark,** has become one of the largest fashion centers in Europe," say Sisse Brimberg and Cotton Coulson. "Nightlife is everywhere. New boutique hotels like Skt Petri are springing up. People bicycle all over, and in summer, spend evenings along the beaches socializing, swimming, and sailing. Copenhagen has a contemporary edge but seems to take you back hundreds of years." ■ **"Prague, Czech Republic,** has all the attributes of Paris or Rome," says Palani Mohan, "the old streets, the lakes, the bridges, the music, the food, the modern nightlife—but in a much smaller package. Above all, it's visually stunning." ■ **"Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam,** still commonly known as Saigon, is where French heritage meets Southeast Asian culture, food, and style," says Justin Guariglia. "Trendy, tropical, and urbane, Saigon is the New York to Hanoi's Washington, D.C. Its sexiness is epitomized by women wearing the traditional *ao dai*, a silk tunic slit up the sides to the waist. This business capital has lovely tea-houses, a strong food culture, and young people always ready to go out on the town."

SOURCEBOOK

Visiting Perugia and Umbria

THE BASICS

Entry requirements U.S. citizens need a valid passport to enter Italy. **Time difference** Six hours ahead of eastern standard time. **Currency** The euro; for conversion rates, go to www.oanda.com. **Phone calls** To call Italy from the U.S., dial the international access code, 011, country code 39, the local code (shown), and the number.

MENTIONED IN THE STORY

Basilica di San Francesco Piazza Superiore di San Francesco/Piazza Inferiore di San Francesco, Assisi; 075-819-001; www.sanfrancescoassisi.org.

Cacioteka 1 Via Danzetta, Perugia; 075-572-9316; www.cacioteka.it/index-english.htm.

L'Alchimista 14 Piazza del Comune, Montefalco; 074-237-8558; www.montefalco.wines.com.

National Gallery of Umbria 19 Corso Vannucci, Perugia; 075-574-1413; www.galleria.nazionaleumbria.it.

Osteria il Gufo 18 Via della Viola, Perugia; 075-573-4126; www.osteriailgufo.it/italiano/osteria.htm.

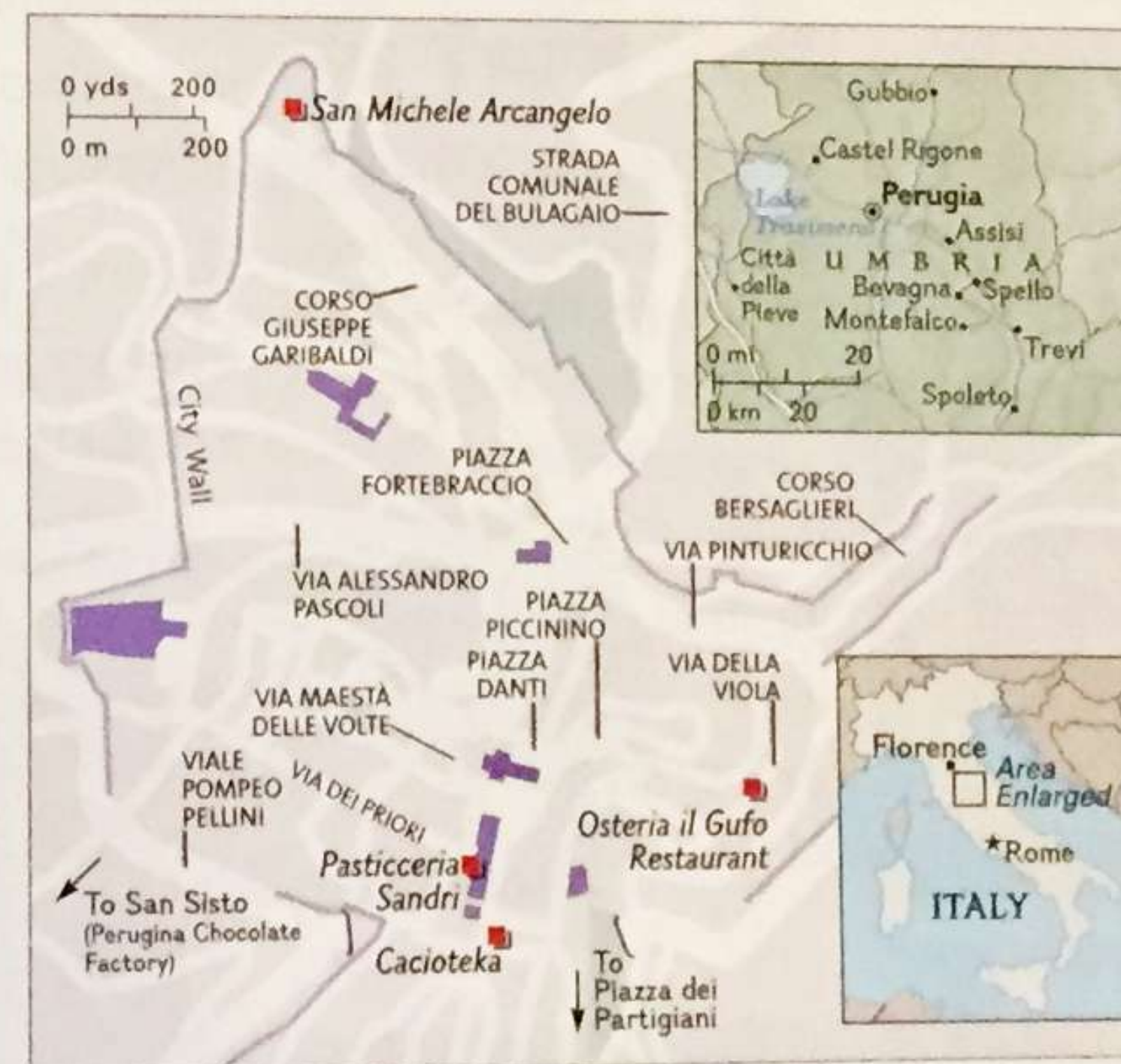
Perugina (factory), Strada Pieviola, San Sisto; 075-527-6796; www.perugina.it.

Sandri Pasticceria 32 Corso Vannucci, Perugia; 075-572-4112; www.pasticceriasandri.it.

San Michele Arcangelo Via Sant'Angelo and Corso Garibaldi, Perugia; 075-572-2624.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Italian Government Tourist Board, 630 5th Ave., New York; 212-245-4822; www.enit.it. Also see www.perugiaonline.com and www.umbriatourism.com.



NUTS & BOLTS

Things to Know Before You Go

■ **How do I get to Perugia?** Fly from Milan; catch the 3.5-hour bus from Rome's Fiumicino Airport; or take the Rome-Florence train to Terontola (1.5 hours), then transfer to a Perugia-bound train (40 minutes).

■ **What's the best way to get around?** Walking the narrow streets is best. Car rental is available at the Perugia airport or near Fonti di Veggio, outside the medieval city center (see www.perugiaonline.com/nolopgus.html). The center has six public parking lots. The Minimetrol tram serves seven stations. To travel beyond Perugia, a regional bus serves 50 towns, including Gubbio and Lago Trasimeno (see www.apmperugia.it/canale.asp for routes).

■ **When is the best time to visit?** Umbria is at its best during the summer's bookend months: April to May, and September to October. Summer itself is hot and humid, and the towns get crowded with visitors.



ONLINE

Best of Umbria

■ In *The Lady in the Palazzo: At Home in Umbria*, author and chef Marlena de Blasi recounts her experiences with her new Italian husband renovating a palazzo in Umbria, seasoning the tale with some authentic regional recipes. This is just one of the books set in Italy in our **Ultimate Travel Library**, www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler/extras/travellibrary/library.html.

■ Learn about Tuscan and Umbrian ceramics, lace, and other handcrafted Italian wares in our **Authentic Shopping Guide**, www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler/extras/shoppingguide/shopping.html.

■ Link to favorite websites on Italy in our online **TripMarks**, www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler/extras/toolbox/tripmarks.html.

■ Find Italy facts, maps, videos, and more in **Travel and Cultures**, <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/places>.

■ Enjoy a sampler of Italian music in our online **World Music Guide**, <http://worldmusic.nationalgeographic.com>.