

Travel

Big trips, short breaks and going green Edited by Chris Moss

Happy snappers

Hoping to get more out of her camera than souvenir snaps, **Anna Norman** goes on a photography holiday in Abruzzo

Sipping prosecco around the long table at Hotel Villa Danilo on the first night, it soon became clear that, while the group was diverse – ranging from a young animator to a retired documentary filmmaker – all of us had the same reason for being there. We weren't happy with our snapping skills. We cherished only a handful of holiday photos taken in the past. We didn't know our cameras as well as we should, often resorting to the automatic settings. Solution: go to Italy on a photography holiday.

But was this going to be work or a holiday? And were we expected to already know the technical basics? As the antipasto and vino started to appear, we were all quietly anxious.

Abruzzo, some 50 miles east of Rome, is one of Italy's least touristy regions. Perhaps that's why the waiters who served us were refreshingly non-blasé. When I saw the portions, and tasted the delicious food, it was obvious that the trip was going to be as much about eating as it was about F-stops. Would I become a better photographer? Dunno. Would I be plumper? Yep.

After a flight from Stansted to Pescara, where we all met up, and then a minibus ride to the hotel, we were feeling weary. So, after tucking in to the pasta we tucked ourselves in to bed. In preparation for the next day, I lay awake trying to recall rules about shutter speeds, aperture and depth of field learned on beginners' courses over the years, but which were still not second nature.

The first tutorial, around the hotel pool the next morning, whisked away any technical phobias I might have had and reminded me why I was interested in photography in the

first place. The focus of the class was composition, delivered by Henry Carroll, a Royal College of Art graduate, former A-level teacher and modern dandy in his skinny jeans, colourful socks and white canvas shoes. He emphasised how composition is the essence of photography; without an awareness of it, you can't make an interesting picture. Instead of taxing us with facts or numbers, he focused on the romance involved in image-making.

Henry was the antithesis of your clichéd photography geek, and his probing questions – 'What do you feel about your subject?', 'What are you trying to say with the image?' – reinvigorated my passion for taking pictures.

The locals were bemused by our fascination with shadows

Then, with the rule of thirds and leading lines and images by Cartier-Bresson and Elliott Erwitt in our heads, we hopped on to the minibuses to set off on our first assignment – to photograph the medieval town of Pescocostanzo. Here, we scattered and wandered the sleepy streets, sometimes bumping into each other at corners with our cameras close to our faces. We felt like snipers on a war mission, but the locals were simply bemused by our childlike fascination with shadows, door knobs, dogs, washing lines and old people. Crouching down, bending round, and standing on top of things – Henry had emphasised the importance of being 'active' photographers – we were taking to our new roles like light to a sensor.

It wasn't long before we were surrounded by food again, this time

at a picnic table in the woods of the Majella National Park. The group was starting to bond, through food and photos, helped along by Henry and the two other tutors/directors, James and Selwyn, whose enthusiasm made the experience a sociable break rather than a dry study holiday.

The next morning, en route to our second hotel – the Cape in Torricella – and feeling groggy thanks to pints of limoncello the night before, we tackled the E-word: exposure.

Despite the technical nature of the topic, the tutorial was approached in a way that made it as memorable as our class on composition. For all the books, YouTube tutorials and iPhone apps available, there really is only one way to develop a proper understanding of aperture and shutter speeds, and that's practice. As we sat on the steps, pressing our shutters, I had a hallelujah moment, grasping how shutter speed could be used for creative effect. After instruction in the use of F-stops for shallow depth of field, we went off to take photos of the nearby Roman ruins surrounded by flower-filled meadows.

The routine was set for the rest of the holiday: a mix of photography tutorials and mini projects, local food and wine, with extra activities laid on – including a truffle hunt (Abruzzo is famous for both the black and white varieties), a pasta-making demonstration and a performance by a local choir (more fun than it sounds). We visited the hilltop towns of Gessopalena and Roccascalegna, met the mayor, and were served good local cuisine in two of the region's *agriturismos*, the farm-ranch-hotels rural Italy specialises in. We took as many photos as our memory cards could hold, consumed as many truffles, cheeses and local delicacies as our stomachs would stretch to, and imbibed as much wine as our livers would tolerate. Photography was the focus of the holiday, but our tutors' good relations with the

locals meant that wherever we went we received a warm Abruzzese welcome.

Someone with more of an interest in street photography might opt for one of Friuli's Marrakech or Istanbul trips. But Abruzzo is a great choice if you're looking to take some time out in a gentle, largely unspoiled landscape. You'll go home a stone heavier, but you'll gain loads of new skills – and possibly new friends. We were encouraged to keep in touch afterwards – Friuli organises one-day events in London – and to keep on swapping ideas as we progressed with our photography skills. Until, of course, Magnum or Corbis come knocking.

Get packing

Fly

Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) flies from Stansted to Pescara; return flights currently cost £73.37.

Package

Friuli was set up in 2005 after a trip to Abruzzo, and the company has since expanded to include photography tours to Istanbul, Marrakech, Syria, Istria and Ireland, as well as painting and cookery holidays. The next Abruzzo holiday runs September 8-12, costs £899 and includes accommodation, transfers and all meals (7241 5006, www.friuli.co.uk). Flights are extra.

The L'Aquila earthquake

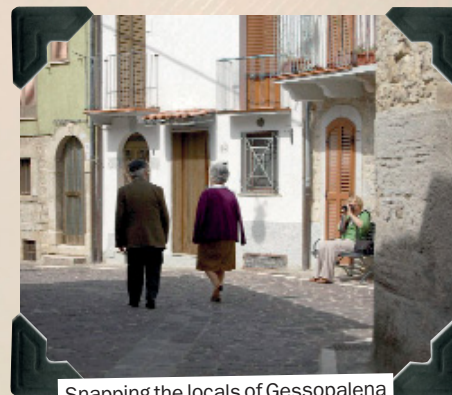
Abruzzo hit the news on April 6 2009, following the deadliest earthquake in Italy since 1980. The epicentre was near the city of L'Aquila, some 70km from Pescocostanzo, and the majority of the 308 deaths occurred here and in nearby villages. Most areas of Abruzzo are now open for business and tourism helps regenerate the local economy.



Practising shallow depth of field in the Majella National Park



Anna getting technical with tutor Henry



Snapping the locals of Gessopalena



Picnicking in the woods



Detail shots in the town of Pescocostanzo

Techie tips

Get a digital SLR

You'll need an SLR for creative control and digital is best as your images can be uploaded for the evening feedback sessions. If you don't have one, you can hire one from Friuli for £15 per day.

Buy some storage

Get the most capacious memory card(s) you can afford – and a hard drive to save your photos.

Be prepared

Be mentally prepared not only for a creative break but also for a sociable group experience.

Wear the right gear

No, we don't mean a sleeveless khaki jacket with a zillion pockets. Bring comfortable shoes or trainers for the truffle hunt and other activities.

Can you adapt?

Don't forget to bring a European plug adaptor – with all that snapping, you'll doubtless be charging your camera battery every evening.

Get in the swim

Take your swimsuit. It's not all snapping and snooping.