

Follow the flock for a real getaway

In spring, the shepherds of Abruzzo lead their sheep to higher pastures, and now tourists can join in the tradition too, says **Tom Kington**

To get off the beaten track in the mountains of Abruzzo, it pays to get onto one that has been trodden for centuries, not by tourists or even pilgrims, but by sheep. The tracks are not on any map, so to avoid getting lost you need to get in with a flock of your own and climb through gorges to abandoned villages, lonely lakes and high pastures where bears roam and the sheep head for summer grazing.

The man who can arrange all this is handing out warm ricotta and coffee at 6am as the sun seeps through the mist in the valleys below the village of Anversa. Around him five sheepdogs are marshalling a few hundred sheep for the climb.

Nunzio Marcelli is a diehard advocate of the *transumanza*, the fast-disappearing practice of shepherding flocks up mountains in the summer and back into the valleys when the snows come.

"There used to be three million sheep in Abruzzo, now there are 200,000 and they are trucked to summer pastures if they go at all," says Marcelli, local boy, economics graduate and now sheep farmer. "I am trying to reverse that."

To find Marcelli and his flock means heading east out of Rome on the L'Aquila highway, a ribbon of asphalt on stilts that twists through tunnels and past fairytale villages clinging to the side of canyons.

Turning off before L'Aquila, the city devastated by an earthquake in April 2009, the road winds up to Marcelli's farm. There, wannabe shepherds get a simple room for a night and an evening meal that is worth the journey alone, starting with an antipasto of Marcelli's pecorino – hard sheep's cheese – and his dark, sweet salami made from sheep's liver, honey and stewed grapes, followed by gnocchi with ricotta and roast lamb, topped with a liver ragù, and chased down by a shot of Genziana, a bitter *digestivo* made from local herbs.

After supper, two teenage lads turn up with accordians to play for the handful of curious Italians who have arrived for the *transumanza* and are smoking under nearby fig trees. Marcelli pays the boys off with hunks of pecorino and suggests an early night to his new shepherds.

By 6.30 next morning the group is under way, led by two of Marcelli's regular shepherds, whose whistling guides the retrievers and *maremmano* sheepdogs over the sound of the sheeps' bells.

Behind Anversa, the sheep are steered down a narrow road clinging to the side of the gorge of the Sagittario river, which roars unseen hundreds of metres below. The flock courses across bridges and through tunnels hewn out of the rock, pausing only when Marcelli stops to chat with a local bus driver.

Once out of the gorge, the sheep insist on devouring a bank of mint, which combines with their muttony smell to give off a disconcerting whiff of Sunday lunch, just as the sun hits the village of Castrovalva, clinging to the rocks above.

Drawn by Dutch artist Escher in 1930 during his search for gravity-defying Italian villages, tiny Castrovalva boasts absurdly large *palazzi*, evidence of its centuries-old role in the transhumance.

"In the 13th century, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II started the restoration and safeguarding of three pre-Roman transhumance routes from Abruzzo down into Puglia," says Marcelli. "Right now we are on a smaller feeder route, and the flock owners who got rich thanks to Frederick came to Castrovalva to build."

Past the village, the wilderness opens up, valleys unfold behind and hot sun glints off the slate path. Roberta, who is originally from Naples but now lives locally, belts out an Abruzzo folk song in dialect. After an hour, the group stops for a rest in a meadow filled with yellow daisies and liquorice, where Mario, a



Sheep set the pace on the annual two-day *transumanza* through the mountains of Abruzzo, Italy, to higher grazing ground. Photographs by Tom Kington

As we enter the village, it's clear why the people of Abruzzo were so stoical about the L'Aquila earthquake. Frattura crumbled in its own quake in 1915, sending locals fleeing down the hill to build a new village, leaving their roofless stone cottages to fill with lizards and butterflies. We set up camp by a stream under a willow tree in the ghostly square. Mario trades cheese for a bottle of wine with a local who arrives to tend the kitchen garden he keeps among the ruins.

Having left us at Castrovalva, Marcelli arrives in Frattura by car to deliver a huge tub of pasta and a choice: pitch a tent under the willow or get a lift back to the farm. "Either way," he says, "we push on from here first thing tomorrow."

The two-day transhumance saves the best for last – a 20km push up through woods, meadows and over 2,170m Monte Genzana, where Abruzzo spreads out as far as the sea. Marcelli doesn't say much but he has an evangelical glint in his eye when he describes the links between the

transhumance and the land. "Without us, the villages will empty and no one will keep an eye on the countryside," he says.

His zeal has taken him as far as Afghanistan, where he taught nomadic shepherds from the Kuchi tribe to make longer-lasting sheep's cheese. "Theirs only lasted 15-20 days," he says. "We showed them fermenting techniques which allow the cheese to be formed faster and stored for a year or more. They are the same methods we have used since the Roman empire."

At home, Marcelli is winning awards for his ricotta smoked over juniper wood, as well as orders from Manhattan restaurants. He is also dreaming up ingenious plans to stay solvent, such as an adopt-a-sheep scheme, where subscribers are sent a photo of their lamb, then cheese, then woolly socks and then, inevitably,

a kilo of salami at the end of the season.

The pens come into view at Chiarano, a secret stretch of green surrounded by mountains at 1,600m, where Marcelli's shepherds will keep the sheep until the return trip to the farm in November. "Don't be fooled by the idyllic scene: we need the pens at night to keep out the bears and wolves," he says.

A van arrives from the farm and everyone piles in, squeezing between boxes of smoked ricotta destined for restaurants such as Robert De Niro's Locanda Verde in New York, where it is served in a salad with tomato, watermelon and basil.

"It is great to build a name," says Marcelli, "but mothers round here used to tell their kids, 'You'd better study or you'll end up a shepherd.' That is the mentality we have to change to keep this land as it has been for thousands of years."

teacher, divvies up chunks of his bread and cheese.

"The problem is that people up here think tourism should mean big new hotels, not walking up a mountain with sheep," says Roberta.

Walking with sheep should not be confused with hiking, and should be avoided by people who like to get a brisk rhythm going. But anyone who likes to wander up stunning mountains – pausing frequently to chat, snooze and admire the view – will appreciate the company of animals who dawdle, drift off and stop for anything green and edible. The job in hand – getting the sheep to their grazing grounds – is a bonus for anyone who thinks there is something pointless about just hiking from A to B.

When the dogs have had their heads scratched and got their breath back, the sheep scramble up through a line of firs to the top of a rise, and distant Anversa disappears for good. Ahead, scudding clouds and even bigger mountains rear up above Scanno lake, which blinks from sunlit green to black shadow far below.

Somewhere in the middle sits the village of Frattura Vecchia, 1,300m above sea level, 15km from Anversa and the half-way point in the transhumance.

ESSENTIALS

La Porta dei Parachi (00 39 086 449492; laportadeiparchi.it) offers *transumanza* walks in June and July, with dates fixed 15 days before departure. The trip, including a night at the farm with dinner and breakfast, food for the two-day journey and one night camping, plus transport back to the farm costs around €100 per person. Ryanair (ryanair.com) flies to Rome Ciampino from several UK cities from £26.



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