

TRAVEL



Castelluccio (1452 metres) is the highest settlement in the Apennine Mountains of central Italy. Located in Umbria, it sits above the Piano Grande (Great Plain, 1270 metres), in the Monti Sibillini National Park.

As a young girl, I had vivid dreams of running through fields of wild flowers in slow-motion, dressed in creamy muslin with a floppy hat. Four decades later, I found those fields near a tiny Italian village in Umbria. Some of the details did not quite match up — I was wearing shorts, a T-shirt and cap — but it was a dreamy place, all the same . . .

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The stuff of dreams . . .

by Justine Tyerman

High in the heart of Umbria's Monti Sibillini National Park, we came upon a vast open plain, the Piano Grande, and the untouched mountain village of Castelluccio perched atop a hill amid an ocean of wild flowers.

The peaceful scene was a balm to our bruised spirits after hot, hectic days in crowded cities and mayhem on motorways.

We waded, slow-motion — of necessity — through knee-deep scarlet poppies, yellow rapeseed and blue gentians, marvelling at the riotous colours of "The Flowering", an annual spectacle on the plain surrounding the village.

Apart from a few hardy trekkers, there were no other foreigners — but as we wandered the steep streets and pathways of the village, there were signs of ancient stone buildings, dating back to the 13th century, undergoing a spruce-up to attract the tourists' euro.

It was sad to think of the thousands who would no doubt swarm over this quiet place where only a few hundred people lived.

We watched a young shepherd follow a small flock of sheep and lambs, wearing name tags and bells, through the village and up to

a green hillside pasture where he spent the afternoon in the shade of an umbrella.

An elderly man was harvesting wild flowers with a hand scythe.

Little shops were selling local delicacies — wine, sheep-cheese, salami and hams made from wild boar — to stout housewives in aprons and head scarves.

The powerful aroma of these unrefrigerated products displayed at summer room temperature was the only aspect that did not quite fit my vision!

Postcards of the scene in winter showed a blanket of snow over the mountains, village and plain, and skiers on the small ski-field nearby. I imagined my dream transforming into a winter version and being compelled to return to this most beautiful place.



An elderly man (above) harvesting wild flowers with a scythe; wine, sheep-cheese, salami and wild boar hams (below) in a village shop; a flock of sheep and lambs (below left) pass through Castelluccio on their way to a pasture.

