



# The way of St Francis

*Following the footsteps of Italy's patron saint St Francis, six people set off on a 60km walk through the undulating Chiasco Valley region with its small farms, forests, rivers and fields of poppies.*

**Words & photography ROSAMUND BURTON**

Open the wooden window shutters of the hotel bedroom to the sight of the red terracotta roofs of the medieval city of Gubbio being circled by swallows. The sound of a nearby church bell reverberates in the cool air.

My husband Steve and I are walking the 60km Path of Peace, part of St Francis's Way, from here to Assisi, with my cousins, Charles and Carolyn, her partner Graham and their son, Wolf.

## St Francis and the Wolf

As Charles leads us through the cobbled streets to Taverna del Lupo for Sunday lunch, he explains to 18-year-old Wolf the significance of his namesake — *il lupo*, the wolf — to this city.

In the early 13th century, a wolf was terrorising the people of Gubbio and they sought the assistance of Francis, the monk from Assisi. When Francis went to the wolf's lair it lunged at him but then apparently suddenly stopped in its tracks when he made the sign of the cross. Francis spoke quietly to the wolf, addressing him as brother and when he finished speaking, the wolf placed its paw in his hand.

They walked together to the town and the wolf lay at his feet while Francis told the people that they had negotiated a deal: if the people of Gubbio provided the wolf with food every day it would no longer harm anyone. In front of the crowd, the wolf again placed its paw in Francis's hand and for the next two years until its death the wolf went daily from house to house collecting food.

In the stone-vaulted restaurant, we feast on bruschetta, homemade pastas and traditional Gubbio cuisine before heading up to the impressive Piazza Grande. We've arrived a week before Gubbio's Ceri Festival, which dates back to the 12th century. Inside the Palazzo dei Consoli we see the *ceri* (candles), three large, heavy, hollow wooden structures. On top of each candle is placed a statue of a saint: St Ubaldo, the patron saint of builders; St George, of craftsmen and merchants; and St Anthony Abbot, the protector of farmers. The candles will be carried in a race through the city and up the steep slopes of Mount Ingino to the Basilica of Sant'Ubaldo.

The following day, we wander the walled city with its stone archways and narrow streets. Since the 15th century, Gubbio has been renowned for its ceramics and Caro and I visit the pottery shops, admiring the colourful designs.

We pass the Church of St Francis of the Peace, where Brother Wolf was buried. When the building was renovated in 1872, a wolf's skeleton was found under a stone slab outside, brought into the church and placed under the altar. But sadly, we're unable to see the final resting place of the *Canis lupus* as the church is closed today.

**This page:** Wolf, Carolyn and Graham.  
**Opposite page; clockwise from top:** Carolyn and Charles walking to Valfabbrica. Archway near St Francis's birthplace in Assisi. Church of St Francis, Gubbio. A statue of St Francis and the Wolf and Santa Maria della Vittoria, Gubbio. A mural in Valfabbrica.

Beyond the city walls are the remains of the Roman Theatre, built in the 1st century BCE, with its ancient archways and grass-covered seats. Nearby is the 13th-century Church of St Francis erected on the site of the home of Francis's friend Giacomo Spadalunga, with whom Francis stayed when he fled Assisi.

## St Francis' early life

St Francis was born in 1182, the son of Pietro di Bernardone, a successful cloth merchant of Assisi, and his Provençal wife, Pica. He was christened Giovanni but Pietro insisted he be called Francesco, "the Frenchman". Growing up, he was a ringleader and his adoring father spoilt his extravagant son, who liked to dress like a prince.

Having been fitted out as a knight by his father to join the papal fighting forces, he was heading south from Assisi when he heard God's voice bidding him to return to Assisi. Now his extravagance turned to gifts for poor churches and beggars. He spent hours in prayer and, in a little ruined chapel below Assisi, while gazing at a painted crucifix, he heard a voice saying, "Francis, go and repair my church."

Compelled by these words, he went home and took some of his father's cloth and a horse and sold them, then gave the money to the chapel priest before he walked the streets begging for building materials.

As Francis turned to God and embraced poverty, his father despaired and also felt humiliated. He took Francis to the ecclesiastical court for the return of his stolen property.







Francis took off his clothes and laid them at his father's feet, saying that he not only returned the money he owned his father but also the clothes he was wearing, which were also his. He renounced his own father for God the Father and left the court wearing a workman's tunic with a piece of rope for a belt. It was winter and he walked north through the snowy hills to Gubbio, where his friend Giacomo Spadalunga took him in.

### The Path of Peace

We're a spiritual rather than religious band of pilgrims and we set off the following morning, stopping at the markets to buy rolls and fruit for lunch before we pass out of the city gates and along the Via Frate Lupo.

We reach a bronze statue of St Francis and the wolf outside a small 9th-century church. It was near here that Francis first encountered the wolf.

The Path of Peace follows a narrow straight road for three kilometres across the valley. We pass fields of broad beans dotted with poppies and flowering peas. Fig trees grow beside houses, a donkey brays as chickens peck the dirt and old men tend their vegetable gardens.

After coffees in the bar at Ponte d'Assisi we ascend a steep hill. I catch the sweet smell of the flowering elder when I pause to look back at Gubbio on the far side of the valley. The countryside is a blaze of green and beside the track grow briar roses, celandines, bellflowers and cistus. On the ridge is a wild sage bush and an orchid catches my eye.

St Francis is renowned for his praise and gratitude for all aspects of the natural world, which he expressed in his *Cantic of the Creatures*, and walking through the Umbrian countryside it's impossible not to see the glory of this beloved saint's world.

*Clockwise from top: Basilica of St Francis, Assisi. Ponte dei Galli near Assisi. Setting off from Hotel Gattapone, Gubbio. Carolyn at a pilgrim stone cairn before Assisi. Opposite page: St Francis.*

The walk establishes a rhythm fluctuating between two or three of us laughing and chatting together and at other times a solitary stroll. We stop to eat our rolls, sitting on a grass slope silently chewing, as a cock pheasant pops its head up and down like a jack-in-the-box in the wheat field before us.

The path passes the Madonna delle Grazie shrine. Tied to the iron grille across the entrance of the tiny stone building are rosary beads, ribbons, a couple of scallop shells (the symbol of Spain's Camino de Santiago), crosses and wooden taus. Tau, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, was a symbol much loved by Francis, symbolising his Christian devotion and life of poverty.

Steppingstones ford a river before another steep ascent; having all run out of water, we start to flag. Charles points out a castle on a hill in the distance.

"That's where we're staying," he says. All of us baulk at the distance still to go and another steep hill, but particularly Graham who, although very fit, is 75 and has a heart condition.

Further up the hill, we reach several buildings opposite which rose bushes grow around a trellis of vines. I ask a man picking lettuces if we can have some water and he leads us to his garden tap. I fill my large metal bottle. The water is cold and delicious and, gulping it down, I realise just how thirsty I am. Then, as we continue walking, the man presents Caro and me each with one of his beautiful pink roses.

We've walked 24km when we reach the *agriturismo* — a working farm that accommodates guests — near Biscina Castle. Graham hobbles in exhausted and declares that sadly, he can't walk tomorrow.

### From Biscina to Valfabbrica

So, the next morning, Graham clammers into a taxi and the rest of us set off down the hillside. "Would you like a stick?" Caro asks me as we approach the town of Valfabbrica and see a large wood pile. Two men are sitting nearby and I tell her I think it's their wood. They come over. One climbs onto the pile and finds us straight, strong staffs, each one the ideal length for our heights. They're from Albania, they say, and have been working in the woodlands here for a couple of years.

I reach the town square ahead of the others and buy some cherries and a salami for us to eat tomorrow.

Walking out of town, we pass vibrant murals depicting the life of St Francis and when we reach the Agriturismo il Pioppo several kilometres later we find Graham happily ensconced in the busy bar. The owner, Giancarlo, a large man with bushy black eyebrows and black-rimmed spectacles balanced above them, moves between the tables with plates of food. With our walking completed for the day we sit down to a late lunch.

Also staying here are two Dutch walkers. "We have the illness of pilgrims," one tells us with a grin, explaining they have previously walked the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain and later in the year plan to walk from Assisi to Rome.





## Walking into Assisi

Fluff from the poplars lines the sides of the road and floats gently through the air as we set off the next day. A narrow dirt track weaves through an oak woodland; then, when we're back in the open, we catch our first glimpse of the citadel of Assisi.

The Basilica of St Francis looms large on the side of the mountain ahead of us as we approach Assisi. A stone bridge crosses the river and a narrow road leads up to Porta San Giacomo. Through the stone archway we find ourselves among the bustle of the medieval city. Graham meets us and we sit in the Piazza del Comune eating pizza and gelato and celebrating our arrival.

Being the birthplace of the founder of the Franciscan order — and Italy's patron saint — and having been a place of pilgrimage for centuries, Assisi attracts millions of visitors every year. But, as photography is not allowed in the churches, despite the crowds the sacred serenity of the place remains strong. Chiesa Nuova is the church built over Francis's family home. Here we see the shop from where Pietro di Bernardone ran his cloth business and also the tiny room where he locked his son up after finding him dressed in rags and walking the streets begging for building materials.

In the simple stone crypt of the 800-year-old Basilica of St Francis lie the saint's remains. The walls of the rest of the basilica are covered with stunning frescoes, including a series by Giotto depicting the life of the saint. One is the meeting with Sultan Malik al-Kamil when Francis went to Egypt. The Christian crusader armies were besieging Damietta and, despite the sultan's offer of a golden ducat for the head of any Christian, Francis and Brother Illuminato set off to visit him.

Francis spent several days with the sultan and the two men had a profound impact on each other. Before the visit, Franciscans were allowed to engage Muslims with the goal of converting them. After the trip, Francis revised the rule to say it was also permissible to live peaceably among Muslims without trying to convert them, which was revolutionary at the time.

I stand captivated in front of Giotto's painting of St Francis preaching to the birds, which apparently gathered around him and remained motionless while he talked.

We walk up to Eremo delle Carceri, the hermitage built around the caves on Mount Subasio above Assisi, where Francis went to retreat from the world. A shiny stone ledge is believed to be where he slept.

As I stand on the railway platform taking a last look up at old Assisi on the hillside I feel immensely grateful that I was not only able to visit this sacred spot — the home and final resting place of St Francis who, with his spiritual devotion, has inspired people of all faiths, as well as animal lovers and environmentalists — but also to have stepped away from the crowds and followed his footsteps through the Umbrian hills. 🍷

*Rosamund Burton is a freelance writer and author of Castles, Follies and Four-Leaf Clovers: Adventures Along Ireland's St Declan's Way. [rosamundburton.com](http://rosamundburton.com)*

**Envy**  
BOUTIQUE TRAVEL

PRESENTS

*Haty Wellness Escape*  
AWAKEN YOUR SENSES

### INCLUSIONS ARE:

- Return Economy flights to Milan • Transfers
- 1 night accommodation Milan twin share
- 6 nights accommodation Lefay Resort & Spa Dolomiti twin share incl. breakfast
- Group Pilates Sessions with Mind2Body Retreats
- Group Sessions with Soul Alchemy – Deep self connection, Transformation, Freedom.

FROM

**\$5999\***

The above price is subject to availability at time of booking. Limited space available. Business class available on request at additional cost. Single rooms available on request at additional cost.

IN COLLABORATION WITH



P. 0424 180 500 E. [enri@hatzell.com](mailto:enri@hatzell.com) [savenio.com.au](mailto:savenio.com.au)

[www.envyboutiquetravel.com.au](http://www.envyboutiquetravel.com.au)

Envy Boutique Travel @envyboutiquetravel @envytravel