

# Heart of the matter

Abruzzo is a stunning region in Italy filled with rolling hills, medieval towns and Roman ruins. In tracing his family tree to this area, teacher and writer **Luciano Di Gregorio** found a place he can truly call home.

PHOTOS LUCIANO DI GREGORIO & ITALIAN TOURIST BOARD



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efore the plane lands to a dramatic chorus of cheers and clapping, I scribble in my journal: If we are all a product of nature and nurture, shouldn't we look into our past for a deeper understanding of

ourselves? The sentence hovers before me in the cabin. Keen to experience only the fun and frivolity of travel, for years I had been avoiding this question like the plague. How would I reconcile my Italian side, born and bred in the central region of Abruzzo, with my Australian upbringing? Had the Italian part of me faded in the artistic buzz of Melbourne? The crisis had begun to creep up on me like an infuriating mosquito – always there, refusing to go away...biting periodically. And so I trudge the 15,000km back to Abruzzo, a region patiently awaiting the limelight of international tourism. I set out to research my ancestry and resolve this identity crisis, shaped by years of living with one foot in Australia and the other in Italy.

### Finding a way home

Days later, having devoured various genealogy 'how-to' manuals and exhausted all available family records at Pescara's town hall, I set off deeper into the hills. My uncle's 1970 Fiat 500 splutters and coughs as it negotiates the steep, windy roads up to the ancient town of Città Sant'Angelo. Every hairpin bend reveals spanning views across the region, and I try to reconcile the blue-green waters of the packed beach below with the snow-capped peaks of the soaring mountains, a mere 40km away. In the distance, ancient villages hug the sloping cliffs.



(Facing page) A stunning vista at Gran Sasso National Park; (this photo) a car moves slowly past a rustic scene in Abruzzo; Abruzzo's unhurried pace means there's plenty of time to stop and chat

In town, the breeze is thick with summer and the peach-hued streets are abuzz with morning activity. Old ladies, self-professed matriarchs of the town, clack and waddle merrily down the street. The young, complacent of the magnitude of history that surrounds them, line the benches with their backs on the town's thousand-year-old cathedral. There is a note of deep belonging to this place in the complacent attitudes towards their cultural patrimony. The history of Abruzzo is at their core.

## ■ Homecoming

Inside the imposing medieval structure, Don Francesco, the cathedral's minister, helps me wade through dusty record books written in Latin by the hands of his predecessors. Two hours later, the 18th-century baptisms book thuds in a cloud of dust. Don Francesco points to my tattered map: "You need to go – here." Thank yous are exchanged and I am on my way.

Wild berry bushes cloaking the 16th-century stone villa in the pre-Roman town of Penne, the birthplace of my father, mean I almost drive straight past. The villa is at once majestic and imposing. The wooden door creaks as I open it and I am met with an unexpected scene: I have stumbled on a group of British tourists who, together with some Germans, are slowly discovering the delights of regional Abruzzo. Flour is afloat about the room and stains the aprons of the would-be cooks, who are attempting to find their culinary genius in the land of olive oil and pasta. Laughter rings through the air, thick with the smells of the traditional dishes being concocted – sweet ravioli with ragu, roasted Abruzzese lamb, chocolate tarts to be washed down with a creamy saffron drink.

The Abruzzese women communicate with the English speakers through a mixture of emphatic gestures and flashes



of pearly whites. Language barriers may create a distance, but the solidarity of a common goal has bridged any fundamental gap between the two cultures.

### In nonno's footsteps

The following week, I head for Santo Stefano di Sessanio, a pre-medieval village perched on rocky cliffs deep in the Gran Sasso National Park. Years ago, my *nonno* (grandfather) journeyed to the town on foot, and I park the beaten-up old Fiat

10km away and follow his example. The gentle planes are juxtaposed by the harsh peaks of the Gran Sasso and the road is strewn with olive groves. Not far, a group of women gather the corners of an olive net scattered with the fruits of their trees. I sit, diary and pen in hand, observing them – but I am quickly distracted by the scene before me. In the distance, the striking medieval castle of Rocca Calascio commands the valley.

I wonder if my great-grandfather's great-grandfather, whose records I now search, gazed across this very valley to the magnificent castle above. Would he also have marvelled at its presence? Or was the castle a symbol of oppression to

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(Facing page, from top) Colourful heritage buildings in Chieti; Loreto Aprutino, a village in the Abruzzo region; (this page, right) Local men relaxing over card games in front of a cafe; (below) cattle grazing on Monte Genzana mountain, near the town of Scanno in the Abruzzo region



him, rather than a testament to the cultural heritage of the region? I'm forced to let the thought slide as the women approach me, enlisting my help. Soon, I have become their adopted grandchild. I am ushered into the garden of a small cottage not far away and fed until walking proves difficult. In the smiles of these women, I see a reflection of my own late grandmother, and in their families I see my own. My upbringing is easily contextualised, and I am overcome with a sense of relief.

It is not long before Pio, the burly and commanding husband of one of my adopted grandmothers, invites me to the town of Guardiagrele where his friend is the mayor. Two days later, car packed with culinary gifts from my new grandmothers, we crisscross through the region to Guardiagrele. In a narrow lane at the heart of the charismatic old town, which clings to the slopes of the Majella mountain ranges, I am joined at a restaurant by two Australian journalists.

After a plentiful lunch consisting of no less than five courses, Gino, the head-chef, informs us that the mayor of Guardiagrele has sent us one of the town's staple desserts: Sise de Mòneche, Breasts of Nuns. The journalists, having spent only a handful of days experiencing the hospitality of Abruzzo, are somewhat astonished; they wonder at how such a religious nation could possibly fathom producing a dessert bearing such a name.

I am not taken aback at the mayor's wicked sense of humour and the ability of the people of Abruzzo not to take themselves too seriously. I don't bat an eyelid at the eccentricity of the region's delicious food. I'm not perturbed by the sudden friendly gestures of strangers bringing me into their homes and treating me as their own. Unexpectedly, I smile to myself and realise that this remarkable place has always run deep through my veins and I no longer need to look for it. 📖

**i** The writer has also authored a guidebook on Abruzzo, under the Bradt Travel Guide series and available at leading bookstores

**✈** Malaysia Airlines flies non-stop from Kuala Lumpur (KUL) to Rome (Fiumicino Airport, FCO); from there, you can connect to Abruzzo International Airport (PSR) in Pescara