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JUNE
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SIGNS OF SUMMER

ANNIE BELL'S RECIPES WITH HERBS AND GORGEOUS GARDENS
IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE, UMBRIA AND CALIFORNIAN WINE COUNTRY

THIS PAGE FROM TOP Hiking in Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park. A Marsican brown bear. Autumn is the best time to see this rare sub-species. OPPOSITE The spectacular mountain scenery

Cub scouts

IN THE MOUNTAINS OF CENTRAL ITALY, NIGEL TISDALL GOES BEAR WATCHING WITH THE EUROPEAN NATURE TRUST

‘Doing anything for the weekend?’ a colleague asks. ‘Yes,’ I reply, trying not to sound smug. ‘I’m going to look for bears and wolves.’

You might assume this requires an expedition to Alaska or Kamchatka, but come Friday afternoon I am bombing along an *autostrada* east of Rome in a minibus filled with fellow ursus chasers. It is hard to believe, but some 50 Marsican brown bears still live in the mountains of central Italy. A sub-species of the brown bear, they start life ‘as small as a 500g bag of pasta,’ explains our guide, Valeria Roselli. A full-grown male can reach 2 metres, but these bears are non-aggressive, a trait that may have evolved as a means of survival – if you pose no threat, it is suggested, you are less likely to be killed on sight.

The base for this active and educational long weekend is Pescasseroli, headquarters of the Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park, which was founded almost a century ago. At Albergo Villino Quintiliani, a family-run four-star hotel, a local wildlife expert, Umberto Esposito, tells us about Salviamo l’Orso (Save the Bear). This was set up in 2012 to protect these critically endangered animals and among its supporters is the organiser of our trip, The European Nature Trust (TENT), a London-based charity that works to raise awareness of Europe’s wild places.

The next day, we are up at 5.30am to start the search. Valeria drives us to a viewpoint, where we walk across a meadow that has been torn up by wild boars. It is October and the trees are a colourful blaze. Spring and autumn are the prime times for bear watching, while the snows of winter are best for spotting packs of wolves.

As the early-morning sun gathers strength, we study the landscape with binoculars, until someone spots... Other People. They are down in the valley already, taking photos and unwittingly ensuring the bears lie low. It is a blunt lesson in the popularity of this park, which is almost the same size as the New Forest and unfenced. The bears do not know its boundaries, of course, and come down from the hills to raid the orchards, gardens and beehives of neighbouring villages. The result is a saddening conflict of man vs wild animal that is replicated across the globe. What

can be done? At Salviamo l’Orso’s visitor centre in Pizzone, a volunteer explains about life on the extinction frontline. It is a grim battle against road accidents, hunters, poison, dogs, habitat loss and ignorance.

Fortunately, there is also a fun side to our weekend. Valeria takes us on a yomp above the treeline, where we spy deer and chamois. I gulp down lungfuls of clean mountain air and listen to the distant sound of cowbells. A late lunch follows in the sort of scruffy roadhouse restaurant that I would normally prefer to drive by. Wrong – in Italy, the best grub is invariably found when you go local and unpretentious, and so it proves as we tuck into fettuccine al cervo e porcini and silky organic wines from Molise.

Come Sunday, it is another 5.30am start. This time, we drive to a river bridge that is enchantingly misty, but the bears are not there either. Umberto cheers us up with an exhilarating forest tear-around on electric bikes, capped off with a picnic, then it is time to hike to Rifugio Terraegna, a bungalow-style refuge at 1,800 metres. Far away from other humans, there is abundant evidence of bears: stones upturned in the quest for insects and tree trunks scratched to leave scent.

Arriving just before dark, I am pleased to find a jovial cook, Michela, preparing dinner. We cosy up beside a log-burning stove to feast on cavatelli pasta and scamorza cheese. The ensuing night is spent in a freezing dorm, where the massed sound of snoring is so thunderous, it is a wonder the roof stays on.

At dawn, I text my colleague: ‘It’s Monday morning and I’m on an Italian mountain. Jealous?’ But, silly me, there is no signal. The bears remain elusive on the three-hour descent, until Umberto stops at a camera trap. It plays back first a boar, then a walker, then – oh my – a mother bear and two cubs rubbing themselves against a tree.

It is a touching sight and so very digital age that my closest encounter with the Marsican brown bear has come via a screen. But I am not disappointed, for it is heartening to know that this brave little gang is still clinging on in these ancient forests, and that an equally tenacious band of supporters are doing their utmost to ensure that things stay that way.





Ways and Means

Steppes Travel (01285 601050; steppestravel.com) offers tours to Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park from £1,695 per person for four nights, full board, based on two sharing, including transfers from Rome, guides and a £500 donation to TENT. Groups have eight to 12 guests and trips usually operate year-round on a bespoke basis. TENT offers similar weekends devoted to wildlife conservation in Scotland, Spain and Romania. Visit theuropeannaturetrust.com and salviamolorso.it □