

WALKING IN UMBRIA



About the Author

Gillian Price was born in England but moved to Australia when young. After taking a degree in anthropology and working in adult education, she set off to travel through Asia and trek the Himalayas. The culmination of her journey was Venice where, her enthusiasm fired for mountains, the next logical step was towards the Dolomites, only hours away. Starting there, Gillian is steadily exploring the mountain ranges and flatter bits of Italy and bringing them to life for visitors in a series of outstanding guides for Cicerone.

When not out walking with Nicola, her Venetian cartographer husband, Gillian works as a freelance travel writer (www.gillianprice.eu). An adamant promoter of public transport to minimise environmental impact, she is an active member of the Italian Alpine Club CAI and Mountain Wilderness.

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WALKING IN UMBRIA

by Gillian Price

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CONTENTS

Overview maps	7–9
Legend	7

INTRODUCTION	11
A potted history	12
Plants and flowers	12
Wildlife	15
Getting there	15
Local transport	16
Information	16
When to go	16
Accommodation	17
Culinary delights	18
What to take	21
Maps	22
Dos and don'ts	23
Emergencies	24
Using this guide	25

1 ALTA VAL TIBERINA, GUBBIO AND MONTE CUCCO	27
Walk 1 Monte Santa Maria Tiberina	30
Walk 2 Monte Falcone	33
Walk 3 Rocca d'Aries	37
Walk 4 Monte Tezio	41
Walk 5 Monte Foce	44
Walk 6 Above Gubbio	48
Walk 7 Monte Cucco	53
Walk 8 Val di Rio Freddo	56

2 LAGO TRASIMENO AND ENVIRONS	59
Walk 9 Tuoro and Monte Gualandro	62
Walk 10 Passignano Ridge	66
Walk 11 Isola Maggiore	69
Walk 12 Isola Polvese	72
Walk 13 Montemolino and Montesperello	74
Walk 14 Paciano and Monte Pausillo	78
Walk 15 Monte Arale	82

Front cover: One of the well-established vineyards near Montefalco

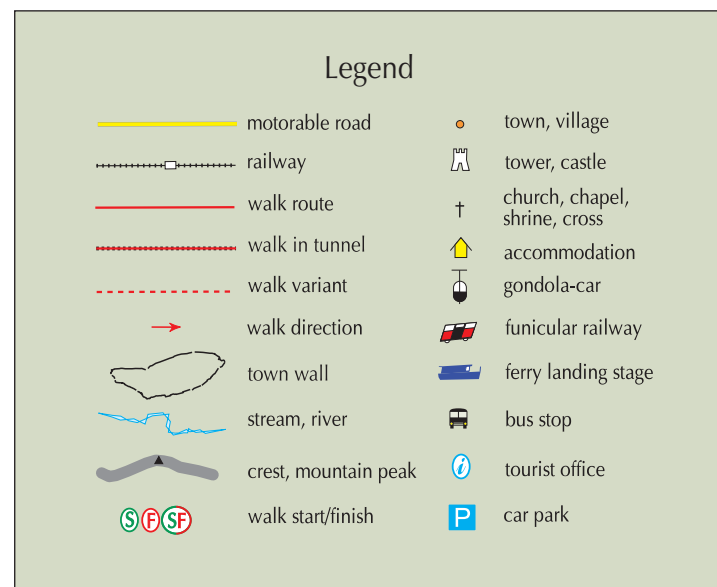
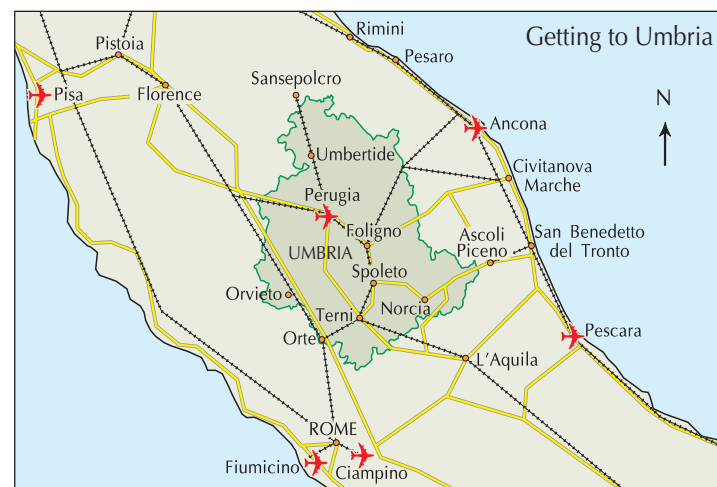
3 ORVIETO AND TODI	85
Walk 16 Orvieto ring walk	88
Walk 17 Orvieto Aqueduct loop	91
Walk 18 Orvieto to Bolsena	94
Walk 19 Titignano Loop	99
Walk 20 Titignano to Roccaccia	102
Walk 21 Civitella del Lago	104
Walk 22 Todi and the River Tiber	108
Walk 23 Vasciano–Montenero	111

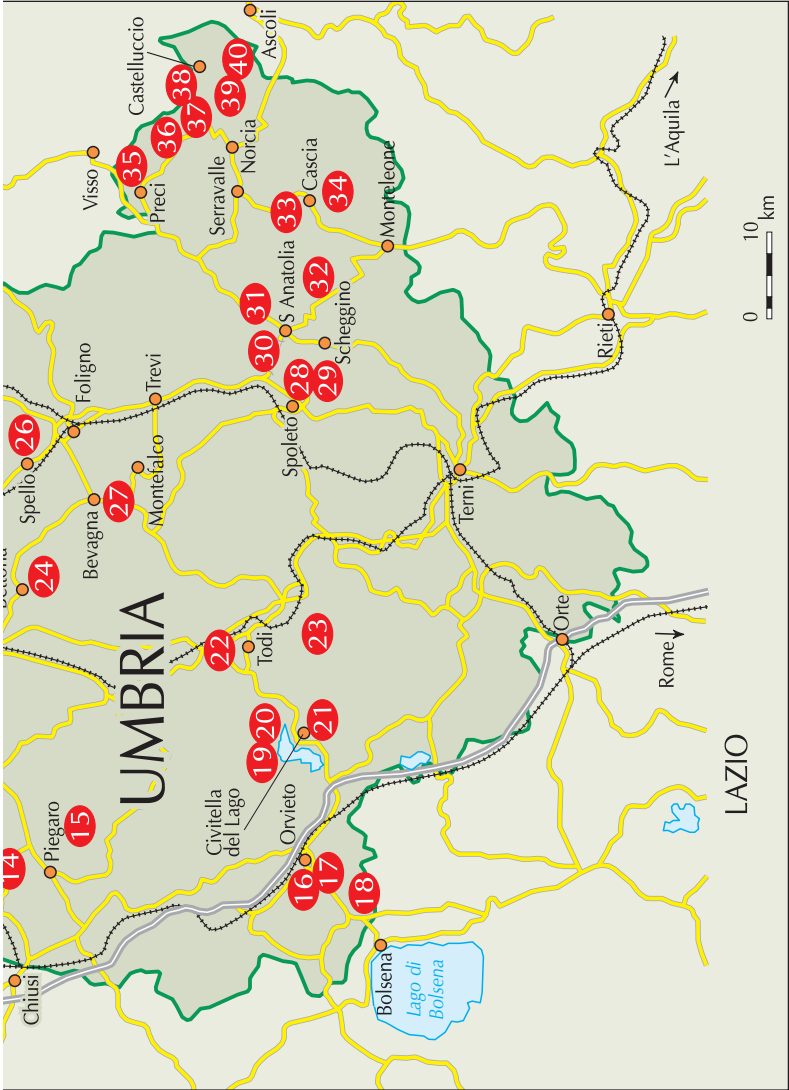
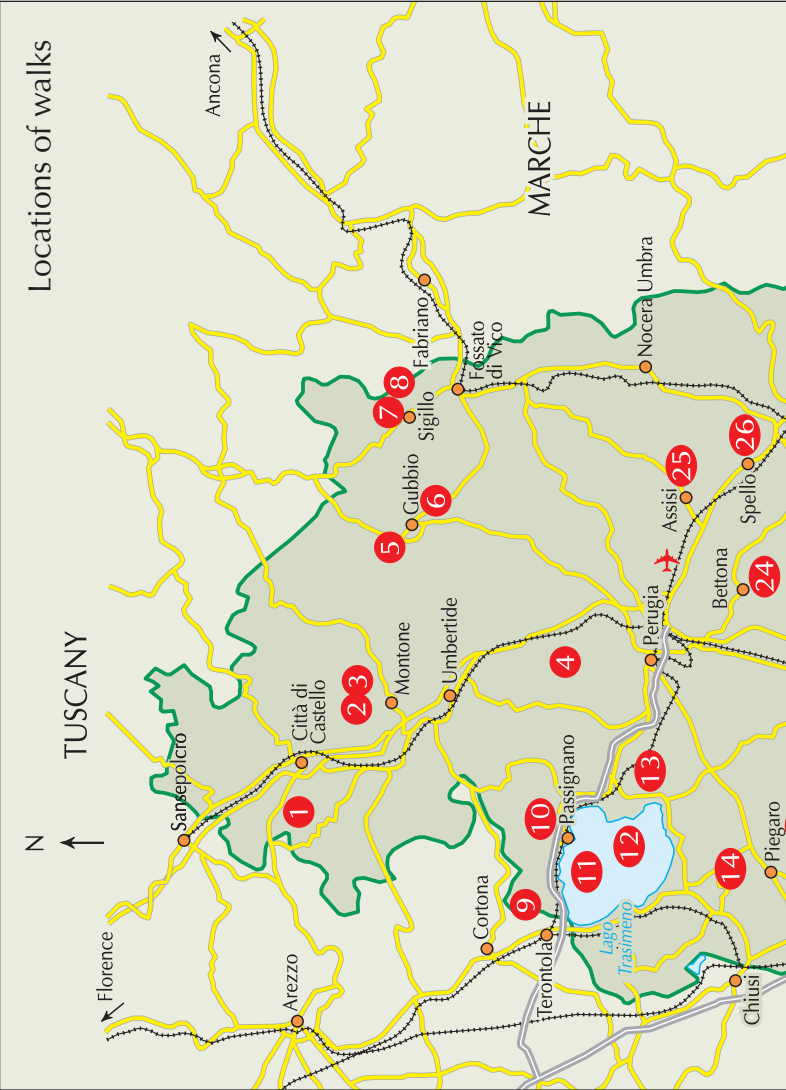
4 ASSISI AND AROUND	115
Walk 24 Bettona–Collemancio	117
Walk 25 Monte Subasio	121
Walk 26 Spello and Monte Pietrolungo	125
Walk 27 Bevagna to Montefalco	130

5 SPOLETO AND THE VALNERINA	135
Walk 28 Spoleto and Monteluco	138
Walk 29 Giro dei Condotti	143
Walk 30 Spoleto to Sant'Anatolia di Narco	147
Walk 31 Valnerina	152
Walk 32 Monte Coscerno	155
Walk 33 Roccaporena to Cascia	159
Walk 34 Monte Meraviglia	161

6 NORCIA AND THE SIBILLINI	165
Walk 35 Preci and Sant'Eutizio	168
Walk 36 Campi to Norcia	172
Walk 37 Monte Patino	176
Walk 38 Monte delle Rose	179
Walk 39 Piano Grande di Castelluccio	182
Walk 40 Dogana Loop	186

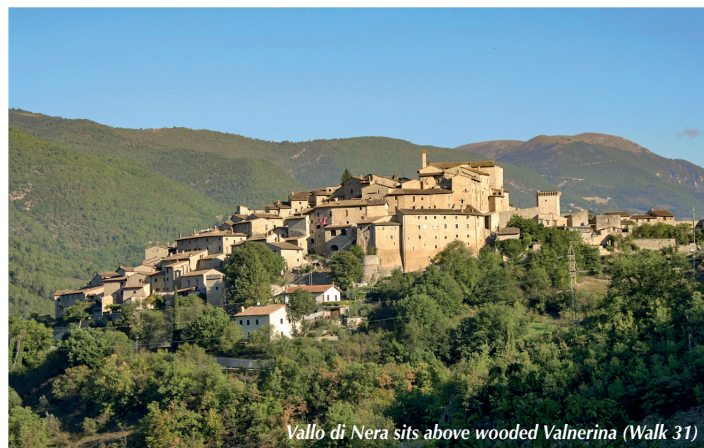
Appendix A Route summary table	190
Appendix B Italian–English Glossary	193
Appendix C Useful contacts	197







INTRODUCTION



Vallo di Nera sits above wooded Valnerina (Walk 31)

Landlocked Umbria, with its array of fabulous landscapes, inspirational for so many artists and writers over the years, is rightly celebrated as the 'green heart' of Italy. Rolling hills swathed in dense woods, hilltop after marvellous hilltop occupied by charming walled villages which time seems to have left untouched. This region has much to offer outdoor enthusiasts, with superb walking guaranteed year-round on hundreds of kilometres of marked paths. These routes can be enjoyed in peace and quiet, for week upon week of memorable holidaying. They lead through beautifully cared for olive groves, along romantic river valleys, and explore regional and national parks

alive with animal and bird life and masses of brilliant wildflowers. There is something for everyone – relaxing strolls for novice walkers through medieval and Renaissance villages and towns, flat routes around lakes and islands, as well as mildly strenuous paths to Apennine mountaintops and breathtaking viewpoints.

More good news? Life proceeds at a gentle pace in Umbria, which has little of the crowds and higher prices of its neighbour Tuscany. This is the first English-language walking guide to provide a comprehensive coverage of the walking possibilities, with a selection of 40 circular and one-way itineraries. The walks are clustered around the Unesco World Heritage towns

of Assisi, Spoleto, Gubbio, Perugia, Norcia and Orvieto, each one a treasure trove of exquisite art works from the medieval and Renaissance times, as well as an excellent holiday base well served by public transport.

Umbria inspires great passion and affection, and visitors who take time out to explore this enchanting countryside on foot are sure to be captivated by its magic and want to come back time and time again. Be warned!

A POTTED HISTORY

Visitors to Umbria will encounter scores of reminders of the region's long and varied history in towns and across the countryside. The ancient tribe of the Umbri were the first recorded literate inhabitants of the region, probably around the 12th century BC. The more sophisticated Etruscans came next, leaving a fascinating heritage of necropolises or 'cities of the dead', and sophisticated craftwork (excellent examples of which can be admired in Orvieto).

The Romans fought their way onto the scene in 295BC and proceeded to play a decisive part in shaping the region. Road builders par excellence, they opened up access to and around Umbria by building the Via Flaminia, the Via Amerina-Tiberina and the Via Orvietana. Original paving stones are still visible at staging-post towns. Aqueducts (at Spello) and monumental theatres (at Gubbio) are also easily recognised as Roman.

As elsewhere, the end of peace and prosperity was marked by the decline of Roman domination and raids by 'barbarians' such as Huns and Goths passing through. The territory became fragmented, plague and famine rife, and local feudal systems took over, until the 6th-century invasion of the enlightened Lombards. Medieval times were characterised by the establishment of numerous so-called *comuni* or independent city states such as Spoleto and Assisi. Landmark town buildings date back to this period as do the heavy fortifications. Local skirmishes were the order of the day.

From the 1200s the *comuni* were gradually taken over and incorporated into the great conglomeration of the Papal states. This lasted through the Renaissance – when art and architecture flourished and the immense *rocca* forts (such as the one in Spoleto) were built – and up to the arrival of the French and Napoleon at the dawn of the 19th century. Not long afterwards, the great Italian patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi and his troops swept through on their northward campaign to free Italy of foreign domination, resulting in the unification of the country as the Kingdom of Italy in 1861.

PLANTS AND FLOWERS

A fascinating array of plants and flowers, both Mediterranean and alpine, is there to be admired from



Clockwise from top left: rock roses; poppies clustered under olive trees; the fruit and blossom of the strawberry tree; curious eryngo.

spring all the way through to autumn. Look out for wild asparagus, whose tender springtime tips are prized for sautéing; at a later stage the plant becomes prickly and straggly. Curious giant fennel plants known as *ferula* produce bright green feathery leaves in spring, before shooting up a metre or so in summer. April and May will mean meadows of crocus and squill, primroses, cowslips, green hellebore and violets. As summer arrives one of the best places to catch a colourful display is the Piano Grande di Castelluccio, which will be ablaze with lemon yellow mustard, brilliant blue cornflowers, gay red poppies, campanulas, yellow gentians, scented pinks and thrift.

Attentive walkers will spot the exquisite insect orchids, as well as the more common larger purple and yellow varieties. One curious find is the bizarre orchid look-alike broomrape, a parasite lacking green pigment that has rich golden-red or pale yellow flowers and stalk.

Aromatic herbs are widespread, and walkers will be treated to the perfume of wild mint or thyme releasing their delicious smell when they are trampled by boots. Everlasting, a silvery plant with leaves like conifer needles and a delicious curry smell, sports a yellow flower head and is found on dry sunny terrain and crannies in stone walls. Its habitat is shared by delicate paper-like rock roses in rainbow hues.



The Mediterranean shrub and tree types commonly encountered include tree heather, which grows several metres tall, sports pretty clusters of tiny white bells and is gathered in late summer for use as brooms for street sweepers. A smaller species of heather has red-purple flowers. Heavenly scented yellow broom is common in early summer as is the attractive smoke bush with its fluffy orange blossoms in autumn. The peculiar so-called strawberry tree is widespread: glossy green leaves accompany both delicate creamy bellflowers and fruit at the same time. The latter are small nutty globes that turn red when ripe – however, as a taste will confirm, one is enough – as suggested by the Latin name *Arbutus unedo* ‘eat one’.

A native to the Mediterranean region, *Quercus ilex* or holm or holly oak, is a large evergreen tree with a

dense foliage of dark green leaves that are slightly toothed and have light grey undersides. Another omnipresent tree that needs little introduction is the cypress. Slender and pencil thin, it lines many an avenue and is silhouetted on many a ridge. A native of the Middle East, it was reputedly introduced to Italy by the Etruscans as the fragrant, knotty wood was prized for storage chests. One gigantic specimen – 30m tall and with a 2.45m girth – can be admired in the hill town of Todi: it was planted in 1849 to honour Giuseppe Garibaldi and is reputedly the world's tallest.

An autumn flowering marvel is field dweller eryngo, spiky globes with outstretched thistly leaves and stems stained bright mauve; another is the tiny exquisite cyclamen, which brightens up shady woodland. A less common aromatic is the bushy winter savory plant which flourishes

in clearings and produces delicate white-lilac blooms long after summer has finished.

Autumn walkers will also notice weird and wonderful funghi sprouting in woodland undergrowth and on tree trunks. While many are edible and prized by gourmet Italians, others are highly poisonous – avoid handling them and visit the local restaurants if you want to taste the best.

WILDLIFE

The hills and mountains and wooded valleys of Umbria are crawling with wildlife. Plentiful wild boar leave tell-tale hoof prints in the mud but the animals themselves are an extremely rare sight. The young ones, shaped like a rugby ball and coloured like a cappuccino with creamy stripes, sometimes venture out alone, while adult specimens may show their snouts close to villages at dusk. Spectacular but timid crested porcupine carelessly drop their dark brown and cream quills on paths; they were considered a great banquet delicacy by the ancient Romans who brought them to Italy from north Africa. As suggested by road signs warning of their presence, both roe and red deer are common and may well be seen in early morning or towards the close of day, much to the delight of wolves which are gradually returning to Umbria amid controversy.

Snakes are not unusual but the only dangerous species for humans is the viper, recognisable for its silvery

diamond markings and easily distinguished from the fast-moving but harmless black colubrid. Very timid, the cold-blooded viper will usually slither away in great haste when approached, often from a path where they have been sunning themselves.

Birds of prey such as kites, kestrel and hawks may also be seen circling overhead, keeping high above the ubiquitous huge grey-black hooded crows that inevitably attempt to chase them off. Open moorland and fields are home to colourful pheasants, who give themselves away with a guttural coughing croak. European jays are a familiar sight, their bright metallic blue plumage glinting in the trees. Woodlands are also home to cuckoos and cooing wood pigeons.

Grassland is often alive with twittering skylarks, alarmed by the presence of humans and intent on launching full-scale alarms. In late spring the hill towns and villages become home to clouds of screeching black swifts who make their home under roof tiles, as well as quieter swallows that build straw and mud nests in overhanging eaves.

GETTING THERE

Several international airports can be used to reach Umbria. The most convenient is Perugia (www.airport.umbria.it). On the Adriatic coast are Ancona (www.aeroporto Marche.it) and Pescara (www.abruzzoairport.com). Pisa on the opposite Tyrrhenian

WALK 1

Monte Santa Maria Tiberina

Start/Finish	Palazzetto, Monte Santa Maria Tiberina
Distance	10km
Ascent/Descent	200m/200m
Difficulty	Grade 1–2
Walking time	3hr
Maps	Alto Tevere Umbro, Fogli Città di Castello e Cagli 1:40,000 Monte Merli Editrice
Refreshments	In Monte Santa Maria Tiberina, there is a tiny grocery shop and café alongside Ristorante Oscari and its panoramic terrace.
Public transport	Monte Santa Maria Tiberina is linked to Città di Castello by a weekday bus.
Access	The Palazzetto crossroads can be found on the western approach to Monte Santa Maria Tiberina, 1km from the town centre.

Beautiful Monte Santa Maria Tiberina is a tranquil hill town close to where Umbria meets Tuscany in the Upper Tiber Valley. Perched on a mountainous conifer-clad knoll, the settlement is dominated by a splendid rambling grey stone palazzo-cum-castle in 17th-century style. In the winter months when the winds are piercingly chilly, the population shrinks to 16 – the faithful restaurateur included – and they occasionally get snowed in. However, during summer when the plains cities are sweltering, Monte Santa Maria Tiberina guarantees cooling breezes – and that's when foreign and Italian property owners return, bringing life.

This pleasant ring walk (Anello n.10) starts a short distance below the town walls and follows a series of lanes and unmade roads. It wanders through woodland and open fields, and opportunities abound for appreciating the lovely hilly rural ambience. Red/white waymarking is mostly clear and frequent except for a couple of spots on the return leg, when extra care is needed at forks.

From **Palazzetto** (617m) and the mapboard showing the itinerary, take quiet country road Via San Martino SW



along a ridge through a rural area. It descends past the cemetery to an **intersection** (571m), continuing straight ahead and unsurfaced between open fields with views across rolling countryside dotted with farms. There are gentle ups and downs as woodland alternates with open moorland colonised by scented broom, orchids and pheasants. The way bears gradually W past **Col dei Fabbri** to touch on the abandoned 11th-century hamlet of **Piantrano** (637m). An uphill stretch leads to a power pole where you ignore the signed fork left (n.156) and continue on a short way towards Poggio dei Contadini to the turn-off right for n.153a (1hr).

Go N at first on a sometimes muddy track through masses of broom – keep right at the next fork as marked by red/white on a tree – and alongside a small pine plantation soon in descent NE on a rougher lane. The isolated houses of **Grignano** (676m) are touched on and you get nice views to the hamlet of Prato well below. Further downhill past masses of tree heather and **Poggio dei Cerri** is a saddle where the way veers left to avoid the knoll **La**



Soon after Poggio del Cogno, the village comes into sight

Rocchettina, dropping steeply to the cluster of houses **La Rocchetta** (545m). Continue NE on the lane – n.153 now – keeping left on the lower lane at derelict houses soon encountered. At the saddle **Poggio del Cogno** (538m, 1hr) and an old wooden cross, Monte Santa Maria Tiberina comes into sight, impressive on its remarkable perch.

Go right here (still n.153), and after about 5min, as the lane curves right, leave it for a faint track left (red/white marking on tree). ◀ This drops SE through woodland, bearing right past a field, then down and over a stream, Fosso Erchi (640m). Cross straight over an unmade road and up the other side, following the red/white markings through woodland. Further up, as you reach farm buildings, fork right through the property and up through a wire gate to join a decent lane. Here, at a sign for **Agriturismo Petralta** go right uphill to the tarmac – fork right again and in a matter of minutes you will be back at **Palazzetto** (617m, 1hr).

If you enter the hamlet of Arcalena, you've missed the turn-off.

WALK 2

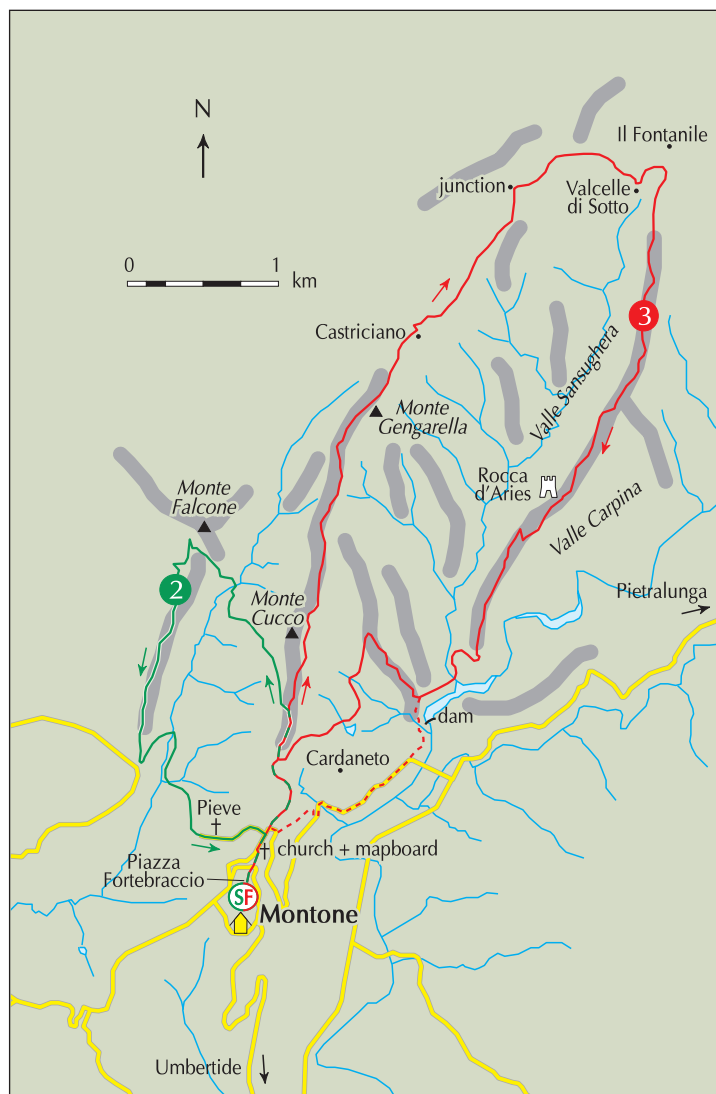
Monte Falcone

Start/Finish	Piazza Fortebraccio, Montone
Distance	8.2km
Ascent/Descent	315m/315m
Difficulty	Grade 2
Walking time	2hr 15min
Maps	Alto Tevere Umbro, Fogli Umbertide e Gubbio 1:40,000 Monte Merli Editrice
Refreshments	Montone has a grocery shop, café and restaurants.
Public transport	Occasional weekday buses link the village with Umbertide.
Access	Piazza Fortebraccio is the central square in the village of Montone. Park outside the walls.

Beginning in utterly medieval Montone in the Upper Tiber Valley, this wonderful loop climbs up and down ridges through the rolling farming district. For the most part it follows easy lanes, but be aware that the central section takes steep paths first down then up abrupt hillsides, possibly with overgrown tracts. Overall, waymarking is clear and fairly constant, however, extra care is essential in the woods so as not to lose the way. The first stretch is in common with a longer route, Walk 3.

From **Piazza Fortebraccio** (482m) walk past the Municipio building and under the covered archway bearing a plaque to Polidori, a local boy who fought with Garibaldi. ▶ Outside the walls, turn left to the corner and benches and take the path forking right in descent 'Percorso pedonale Macchia del Negrone'. Steps lead past picnic tables to an abandoned **church and map-board** on the roadside. Turn right here but soon branch left (N) off the road on a lane with red/white marking and signed n.111. It is not far uphill past a fork for Cardaneto to where the path shortcuts through open woodland where orchids bloom. The lane is resumed further up for a lovely stretch amid cultivated fields and vistas over the Upper Tiber Valley towards Città di Castello as well as back to photogenic Montone.

The piazza is named after the 15th-century condottiero Fortebraccio – meaning 'strong arm'!



The walk begins in the village square, Piazza Fortebraccio

At a fork, keep left (NW) on the white gravel lane signed n.111b for Monte Falcone (parting ways with n.111/Walk 3 to Rocca d'Aries). You continue on the midriff of Monte Cucco past cypress trees, looking over rolling rich farmland and a patchwork of yellow and green fields. As the lane reaches a farm, keep to the upper way past sheds to where waymarks point you downhill left. Bear right around a vineyard for the start of a plunge into the woods. Watch your step and be sure to follow the red/white paint stripes on the trees. The path narrows progressively, ending up at the bottom of the valley

where a stream needs crossing. This area may be a little overgrown. Markers lead up the other side to a power line and a steep but clearer slog NW to finally emerge at a small olive grove. Keep left up to a lane then right to a signed junction below a house on **Monte Falcone** (539m, 1hr 15min).

The way is more straightforward from now on. Branch left on the wide lane S in gentle descent along a scenic ridge alternating conifers with mixed wood and fields. Soon, as well as the attractive expanse of fields and rows of trees on the plain, the outlook takes in triangular Monte Acuto northwest beyond Montone. About 30 minutes from Monte Falcone as you approach a surfaced road, the marked route n.111 suddenly forks sharp left (NE) down a muddy sheep track and over a stream. Accompanied by poplar trees it resumes the southerly direction parallel to the watercourse before heading uphill along the very edge of a field. It finally emerges on a quiet road amid olive trees and a vineyard, and turns left. Past **Pieve**, an old church and adjoining farm, it joins the Pietralunga road where you go right. The abandoned church and mapboard are soon reached, where you turn right uphill to return to **Montone** (482m, 1hr).

The village comes back into view towards the end of the walk



WALK 3

Rocca d'Aries

Start/Finish	Piazza Fortebraccio, Montone
Distance	15km
Ascent/Descent	550m/550m
Difficulty	Grade 2
Walking time	4hr 15min
Maps	Alto Tevere Umbro, Fogli Umbertide e Gubbio 1:40,000 Monte Merli Editrice (partial coverage)
Refreshments	Montone has groceries, café and restaurants.
Public transport	Occasional weekday buses link the village with Umbertide.
Access	Piazza Fortebraccio is the central square in the village of Montone. Park outside the walls.

This superb albeit lengthy circuit starts out from the beautiful walled village of Montone along a series of wonderfully scenic ridges, woodland and rural landscapes to the landmark castle Rocca d'Aries, also spelt Aria. It corresponds to the local Anello 17 (ring route 17); signposted forks and red/white waymarking are fairly constant although by no means omnipresent so it is important to keep an eye out. The first stretch is in common with Walk 2, a shorter route.

► From **Piazza Fortebraccio** (482m) walk past the Municipio building and under covered archways bearing a plaque to Polidori, a local boy who fought with Garibaldi. Outside the walls turn left to the corner and benches for the path forking right in descent 'Percorso pedonale Macchia del Negrone'. Steps lead past picnic tables to an abandoned **church and mapboard** on the roadside. Turn right here to a batch of signposts where you branch left uphill (N) on n.111. It is not far to the fork for Cardaneto (where the return route slots back in) – ignore it for the time being and keep on to where the path shortcuts through light wood bright with wild orchids. The unsurfaced road is resumed further up on a lovely stretch amid cultivated fields with vistas over the Upper Tiber Valley and to photogenic Montone.

For route map see Walk 2.