



# Travel with Robin McKelvie

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# Todi is a real gem of an Italian hill town

**T**HE idea of finding that ideal Italian hill town, an oasis laden with cute stone houses commanding its own bluff overlooking swathes of gorgeous countryside, is one of travel's holy grails.

I've been disappointed by some Italian hill towns, especially in Tuscany, that are deluged with tourists and no longer feel authentic.

So I was pleasantly surprised on my recent visit to Umbria when I unearthed the little gem of Todi.

Todi lies just half an hour from the city of Perugia, but it's a million miles away from big city congestion and hasn't yet been swamped by the tourist hordes.

It may still be something of a secret among British travellers, but it certainly isn't among Italians as they've voted it the best place to live in Italy in a number of newspaper polls.

Such famous names as Robert De Niro and Goldie Hawn obviously agree about the merits of Todi as they are both said to have been impressed recent visitors.

It's easy to see why they loved the laidback pace of life here and also the fact they were left to get on with their lives in a corner of Italy where life is still pleasantly simple and has remained that way for centuries.

## Sleepy

Todi today may be a relatively sleepy place, but its impressive appearance from afar hints at a far grander past. This is, after all, a town built on Roman and Etruscan foundations where the past is never very far away and history is something to be lived in and around.

The city's golden age was the 13th Century and it says a lot that the locals still talk dreamily of those days.

The heart of the town is the Piazza del Popolo. Elegant and imposing buildings line this gorgeous square, with a highlight the cathedral, a voluminous space that is breathtaking whatever your religious beliefs.

Then there's the Todi Museum, which is housed in its own palazzo and features everything from the treasures dug in local archaeological digs through to fine art.

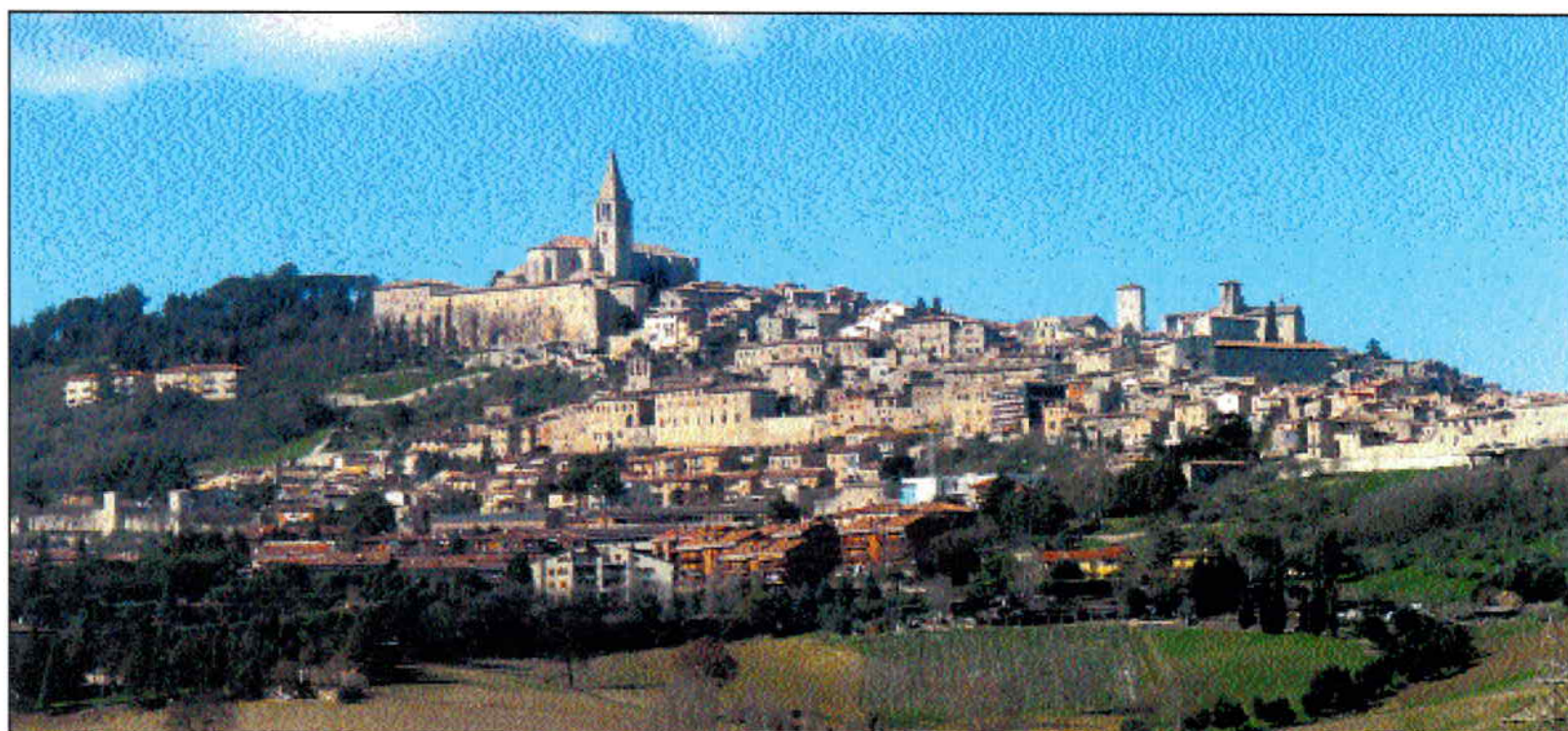
For the most impressive view in Todi

## Hotel of the week

**CRAMER HOUSE APARTMENTS** — London hotels and restaurants are notoriously expensive, but recently I checked out another option in the capital that allows you to cook all your own food. The apartments at Cramer House are modern and comfortable and our one-bedroom duplex had plenty of space for my wife, baby daughter and me, and the friends we invited around for brunch the next day. It had a well equipped kitchen and the location could not have been better, around the corner from Baker Street underground and within easy walking distance of Regent's Park. Apartments from £125. Tel. 0208 944 1444. [www.apartmentservice.com](http://www.apartmentservice.com)

## Flight of the week

**ONE** OF the rising city break stars at the moment is Berlin. At this time of year easyJet's direct flights from Glasgow to the German capital offer the chance to recline in the beer gardens and sunbathe in the Tiergarten park. Then there are the river cruises that offer a welcome breeze and the venerable museums that help shed light on the fascinating history of the city and the country. The euro exchange rate isn't great just now but Berlin is, on the whole, cheaper to eat in than the likes of Paris and Rome. Returns from £76.98. [www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)



■ Robin loved the setting of Todi on its hill with the rolling Umbrian countryside spread out below.



■ Robert De Niro and Goldie Hawn were both impressed by Todi.

## Factfile

■ **RYANAIR FLY** direct to Perugia from London Stansted, from where there are buses to Todi. [www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)

■ **FOR MORE** information on the city and the area round about see Lonely Planet's *Tuscany And Umbria* and Dorling Kindersley's *Umbria*.

head up the steps of the Campanile di San Fortunato.

From here you can admire the town's grand trio of churches and the square below, as well as the views out over the countryside. Fields and vineyards stretch off towards the distant hills in a timeless scene.

My base was suitably grand, dating to the days when Todi was a major player in the region. I love castles so really enjoyed reclining like a king up at Todi Castle ([www.todicastle.com](http://www.todicastle.com)).

The man behind the reinvention of the castle as a plush accommodation is Mario Santoro, a photographer with a passion for history and culture who has thrown his soul into refurbishing it.

Over a long, lazy lunch Mario filled me in on the story behind the castle.

He said, "I moved to Umbria to revamp and run this castle, which has been a real labour of love. We've

worked hard to get it into the state it's in today and now tourists staying here can enjoy a unique experience.

"We encourage them to try the local food, much of which comes from our grounds and the surrounding villages, and to get involved in local life."

## Famous

Mario must be doing something right as he says many of his guests say their stay has been the best holiday they've ever had, including his most famous guest, Goldie Hawn.

He said she enjoyed the relaxed pace of Todi and also the quality of life here.

I agree with Mario that if these are important things for you then you'll enjoy visiting Todi as much as he enjoys living there. I was just happy to have finally found my ideal Italian hill town and my very own castle.



■ A misty early-morning view from a high point in Todi.



■ The ancient and beautiful Piazza del Popolo.