



The Italian province of Umbria is in the center of Italy. Famous as an agricultural heartland its hills are covered with fruit and olive trees and the vineyards produce excellent wines. The central valley is less than 100 miles north of Rome. In the 1500s the region became part of the lands ruled by the Pope.

Because the region belonged to the papacy there was very little commercial development—



not great for the gross national product but fantastic when it comes to preserving the region's natural beauty. The most dramatic elements are the mountains that form the Subasio group. Mount Subasio, itself, supplied the pink stone that was used between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries to build the province's most famous town—Assisi.

Assisi was built on a hill that has been inhabited for about 4,000 years. Umbrian tribes were in residence when the Romans arrived in the 89B.C. and named the town Assisium.

You can still see the Roman walls that date back to the second century before the birth of Christ. They say that the stones that were used to build Assisi have absorbed the prayers of the millions of pilgrims that have come here over the centuries. And now the stones radiate a sense of peace and quiet that has a spiritual effect on visitors.

In the center of town is a Roman temple that was built in 25 B.C. to honor the goddess Minerva. Minerva, who was called Athena by the Greeks, was associated with art and poetry. And she appears to have done well in Assisi. No other city in Italy has had a greater impact on Italian painting.

The underlying cause for the great art in Assisi is

St. Francis who was born here in 1182 and died here in 1226.

### SAINT FRANCIS

Francis was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. He learned to read and write Latin and speak French and had a romantic and heroic view of the world. He dreamed of becoming a knight and living a life of adventure.

It was a time of continuous warring between the rival city states of Italy. The city of Perugia was the great enemy of Assisi and Francis took part in one of the many battles between them. He was captured by the Perugian forces and held prisoner for almost a year.

His health started to fail and he began questioning the meaning of his existence. If he lived through this, what was he supposed to do with his life? After his recovery he decided to join the army of the Pope. He saw himself as a knight defending good against evil. But on his way to Rome he had a vision that told him to return to Assisi where he would be called to a new kind of knighthood.

A series of encounters took place that began to show him the road he was to follow. During a pilgrimage to Rome he dressed in rags and joined a group of beggars outside Saint Peter's Cathedral.

He had a deep fear of lepers and always avoided them until one day when he found himself giving alms to a leper and suddenly kissing the leper's hand.

The most important experience, however, took place in the ruined chapel of the church of San



Damiano just outside Assisi. As Francis prayed, he heard a voice coming from above the altar telling him "Repair my house which has fallen into ruins."

Francis went home, took some clothing from his father's warehouse and road off to a nearby town where he sold both the cloth and the horse. He tried to give the money to the priest at San Damiano but the priest refused it. Francis threw the money out a window.

Francis' father found his son's behavior unacceptable and had him called before the Bishop of Assisi. But before his father could say anything, Francis peeled off his clothes and gave them to his father. Standing completely naked, he said; "Until now I

have called you my father on earth. But from now on I can truly say: My Father is in heaven." The Bishop was astounded and gave Francis a cloak to



cover himself. Francis renounced his family and all worldly goods and embraced a life of poverty.

### THE MESSAGE

A turning point in Francis' life came during a mass on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1208. Francis was listening to the Gospel According to Matthew: *"And as you go, preach the message, the kingdom is at hand. Take no gold, nor silver, nor money in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staff; for the laborer deserves his food. And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay with him until you depart."*

This was the message Francis had been waiting for. He removed his shoes, discarded his staff, put on a rough tunic and set off to preach repentance. Even though he did not have official authority to preach publicly he did, and immediately attracted a group of followers.

Francis was committed to imitating the life of Christ. Poverty was his bride. He was a social worker, a traveling preacher, a lover of nature, and a protector of animals. He thought of all creatures as his brothers.

In 1209, Francis took a group of 11 of his disciples

to Rome in the hope of getting approval from Pope Innocent III and to demonstrate his recognition of papal authority. It was a long shot but Francis lucked out.

The Pope had a dream in which Francis was holding up the church of San Giovanni in Laterno which is the official church of the Pope in Rome. The Pope saw his dream as a sign that he should give his approval to the work of the Franciscans.

It was at this time that the order was officially founded. Known as the Friars Minor, they were without possessions and preached in the streets. They brought monasticism out of the monasteries and into the towns. His friars did not live as monks in remote monasteries—they worked among the people advocating a return to the moral values demonstrated by the life of Christ. They preached first in their native Umbria region and then throughout Italy.

Francis spent much of his life on the road as a preaching pilgrim. In 1214 he traveled to Santiago de Compostela on the northwest coast of Spain to visit the Cathedral which is believed to contain the remains of Saint James the Apostle.

When Saint Francis returned to Assisi he discovered that his order had grown to over 5,000 members. St. Francis is one of the most venerated figures in Christianity but he is also important to Buddhists and Muslims. In 1979 Pope John Paul II recognized him as the patron saint of ecology.

### BUILDING THE BASILICA

Less than two years after the death of Francis in 1226, planning for the construction of the Basilica of St. Francis had already begun.

Francis was not even Saint Francis at the time. But there were three influential groups that wanted the Basilica as fast as possible.

The Papacy wanted it because the Franciscan



movement was largely made up of lay people and the Basilica of Saint Francis would bring them within the Church. The Franciscan brothers wanted it because it would honor their founder. And the city of Assisi needed it to make Assisi an important and profitable place of pilgrimage.

The Pope, who had been a longtime friend of Francis, announced that the Basilica was being built on land own by the Pope and would forever be under the control of a Pope— and only a Pope. No other authority would be allowed to influence events in the Basilica or the Franciscan order. The Basilica became a fortified papal residence. The Pope gave the friars custody of the buildings and control of the local treasury.

### THE BASILICA OF SAINT FRANCIS



The Basilica of Saint Francis is actually made up of two churches—one built on top of the other. The unusual design of the lower church

is a result of the fact that it was built on the lower ridge of a steep hill.

The lower church is a huge crypt containing the body of St. Francis. The area is always dark in keeping with its primary use as a place of veneration. The floor plan is in the shape of a Tau Cross which has become associated with St. Francis.

Francis first came across the Tau form when he was working with lepers. He was assisting the followers of St. Anthony the Hermit, who used a cross as protection against the plague and skin diseases. Eventually Saint Francis came to use the “T” as his own signature. It was part of his pledge to serve the outcasts of society.

Saint Francis saw his friars in their religious tunics and outstretched arms as a Tau cross. The habit mirrored the shape of this cross, and at the same time wrapped each friar in his life-long commitment to become a walking crucifix, the incarnation of a compassionate God.

On the south wall of the lower church are five

episodes from the life of St. Francis.

On the north wall are five parallel episodes from the Passion of Christ.

The Upper Church is the model for all Franciscan churches around the world. The façade has a double portal under a pointed arch which is typical for places of pilgrimage.



The Basilica of St. Francis is the cradle in which Italian Renaissance painting was born. Before these frescos were created, painters were limited by a set of rules that gave most of their work a formal and controlled look. The Basilica of St. Francis was the first time that the artists were free to show what people really looked like, and what they were feeling. The artists were also allowed to place the figures in scenes that were recognizable.

Everyone from Assisi who saw this picture of St. Francis receiving homage from a simple man recognized the temple of Minerva in the background. The actual Temple is in the center of Assisi’s town square.



The upper church is filled with stories from the Book of Genesis and the Gospels. Narratives from the Old Testament are on the north wall, the New Testament is on the south wall—beneath each is the Legend of Francis.

In order to avoid interfering with the daily services of the monks, the work was carried out one bay at a time. These works mark an extraordinary moment in the history of art.

In the past religious events were presented within the classic tradition of Byzantine painting—a tradition that came out of the Greek world of the Mediterranean. Byzantine art asks you to take its story on faith.

On the walls of the Basilica of Saint Francis art was transformed by a new approach—an



## WHERE TO STAY

Nestled into the hill next to the Basilica is the Hotel Subasio. The building has an old world charm and is less than 50 feet from the entrance to the Basilica courtyard. West facing rooms have a picturesque view overlooking the valley.

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approach developed by Gothic artists who had been working north of the Alps. The Gothic artists took a realistic view to their work.

The natural world around them was their model. The new Gothic art placed the stories in familiar settings. Gothic art said—you don't have to take this story on faith—you can see it with your own eyes and identify where it took place. The old Greek style was out. The new Latin style was in. The Renaissance was under way.

The great master of this new approach was a Florentine artist named Giotto.

Giotto's twenty-eight panels illustrating the life of St. Francis was also the first time that an artist used the walls of a church to tell the entire life story of a saint who was buried in the building. It is a story set in familiar places and creates a totally recognizable vision.

## OUR LADY OF THE ANGELS

In the valley west of Assisi is the Church of Our Lady of the Angels.

It is a monumental baroque building that was begun in 1569 and modeled after St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. When it was finished it turned out to be the seventh largest church in the Christian world.

This magnificent church, however, was built as a cover for a small chapel known as the Porziuncola which means "the little portion". The Porziuncola was originally put up in the year 353 by a group of hermits. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century it passed into the hands of Saint Benedict and it was the Benedictines who gave it to Saint Francis. It is the tiny structure in which St. Francis organized the Franciscan order. And symbolically, it sits at the very center of this gigantic structure. But the Franciscans were not the only order organized by Saint Francis.



## POOR CLARES

Clare belonged to a noble family in Assisi. When she was eighteen years old she heard Francis speak and decided to give up her privileged life and follow the teachings of Francis.

In those days, many of the homes in Assisi had two doors—one for daily use and one which was used only to remove a dead body for a funeral. Clare left her home through the door of the dead.

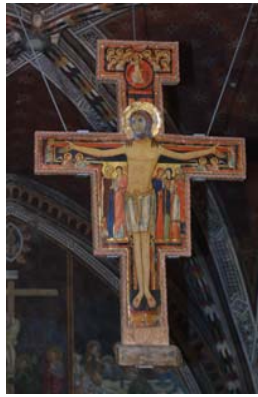
She met with Saint Francis and had her hair cut short to mark the change in her life. In 1215, with the help of Saint Francis she organized the order of Poor Clares. They followed the rule of Saint Francis and existed on charity.



In 1257, construction began on a Basilica to honor St. Clare. It was based on the design of the upper church of the Basilica of St. Francis. The interior was once covered with a series of magnificent frescos illustrating events in the life of St. Clare. The frescos, however, were so impressive that they attracted thousands of tourists, who disturbed the contemplative life of the nuns. So, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century the nuns had the frescos covered with whitewash, but there are

still a few interesting works.

You can also see the crucifix that was originally in the ruined church of San Damiano and spoke to St. Francis. This type of cross is known as an icon cross because it contains images of the people who have taken part in the story that the cross presents. Icon crosses are traditionally found in the Eastern Church and were used to teach the meaning of an event. This cross contains the story of Christ's death, resurrection and ascension.



St. Clare is buried in the Basilica that honors her, and the Poor Clare order of nuns still exists with its center here in Assisi.

The convent of the poor nuns was damaged by the earthquake of 1997 but was quickly repaired with help from the United States through the efforts of the Knights of Columbus.

The early years of the 13<sup>th</sup> century saw an enormous increase in religious activity among women. They wanted to acknowledge the call of God but did not want to leave their families. Saint Francis responded to their need by organizing the Third Order of Brothers and Sister of Penance—a lay group that did not take religious vows but in their daily life carried out the principles of the Franciscans.

By the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, donations to the Basilica of St.

Francis made by women greatly outnumbered those given by men.



### **SAN DAMIANO**

At the edge of the city and surrounded by olives groves, San Damiano is the little church complex that Saint Francis was told to repair. It is also the place where St. Clare spent most of her life.

The chapel contains an unusual crucifix that was carved in 1637. It shows the head of Christ with three different expressions—agony—death—and

tranquility. Which face you see, depends on where you are standing—left, right or center.

Everything about San Damiano speaks of the simple life that both St. Clare and St. Francis believed in.

### **THE PARDON OF ST. FRANCIS**

While praying in the little chapel, Saint Francis had a vision that told him to ask the Pope to grant an indulgence forgiving the sins of anyone who confessed and received the sacraments in the church.

Much to the surprise of his Cardinals, Pope Honorius III granted the request but limited the period for pardon to a block of 24 hours and only once a year. It runs from evening prayers on August 1<sup>st</sup> to sunset on August 2<sup>nd</sup>.

After the death of St. Francis, thousands of pilgrims started coming to Assisi. The idea of having their sins forgiven was extremely attractive. The event became known as "The Pardon of St. Francis" and was eventually extended to all Franciscan churches around the world. However, the limited hours of availability still stand.

### **RETURN OF THE PILGRIMS**

When Francis died in 1226 his body was buried in the Church of Saint George. But when the Basilica was almost finished, the authorities decided to move St. Francis to the new building.

As the body was about to be brought inside it was suddenly taken away by a group of monks. They were afraid that their enemies from the city of Perugia would come and steal the body. The monks hid the body of St. Francis inside the church and they did such a good job that no one could find it for over 600 years.

In 1818 the remains of St. Francis were discovered. The result was a renewed interest in pilgrimage to his Basilica. A new railway line opened and connected both Florence and Rome to Assisi.

And new hotels were built to accommodate the pilgrims. The first



was Hotel Subasio which opened next to the entrance to the Basilica in 1868.



It's still open and the most convenient place to stay. The owners have made all the necessary technological improvements but they have also made a great effort to retain the feeling that the hotel had when it originally opened.

### CHRISTMAS CRIBS

A three-dimensional presentation of the birth of Jesus as described in the Bible is known as a Christmas Crib or crèche which is the French word for "crib." The scene usually shows the newborn baby Jesus in a stable, surrounded by his mother and Joseph, the wise men, the shepherds, an ox and an ass, a few angels and a star. The moment is often made to look as if it was taking place locally—

somewhere that was easily recognizable—near the town or the church. The idea of creating this form of Nativity scene came from St. Francis.



A landowner in the town of Greccio near Assisi had given Francis a plot of land on a wooded mountain side. It was the perfect spot for Francis to build a small, secluded retreat. On Christmas Eve of 1224, Francis turned the structure into a stable and presented the Nativity—

included were a live ox and an ass. The ox and the ass have been part of Nativity scenes for hundreds of years. They refer to a passage in the Bible (Isaiah) where God expresses his disappointment. God says, "The ox knows its owner, and the ass knows the manger of its master, but my people do not know me."

The Nativity crib has become a traditional part of Christmas all over the world.

### THE MYSTIC

Throughout history people have divided the world into opposites—dark and light, male and

female, ying and yang. Our cultures have been organized in terms of contradictions and conflicts.

But from time to time someone comes along with a different view. They see a greater truth. They believe that opposites are not really opposites—not two things in disagreement but one thing in harmony—the way down is at the same time the way up. People who express this point of view are often called mystics and St. Francis was a mystic.

St. Francis believed that he was in direct contact with heaven and that his responsibility was to live a life as close to the life of Christ as possible. He preached understanding.

He called all the animals his brothers.

Even during the final days of his life when he was blind and in great pain his vision did not alter and he welcomed "sister death."

During the days I spent in Assisi, I met Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and some people who were not interested in religion at all.

But they all appreciated Saint Francis and his message of love and respect for everything—people, animals, and our natural environment.

## TO LEARN MORE . . .

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