



one perfect village

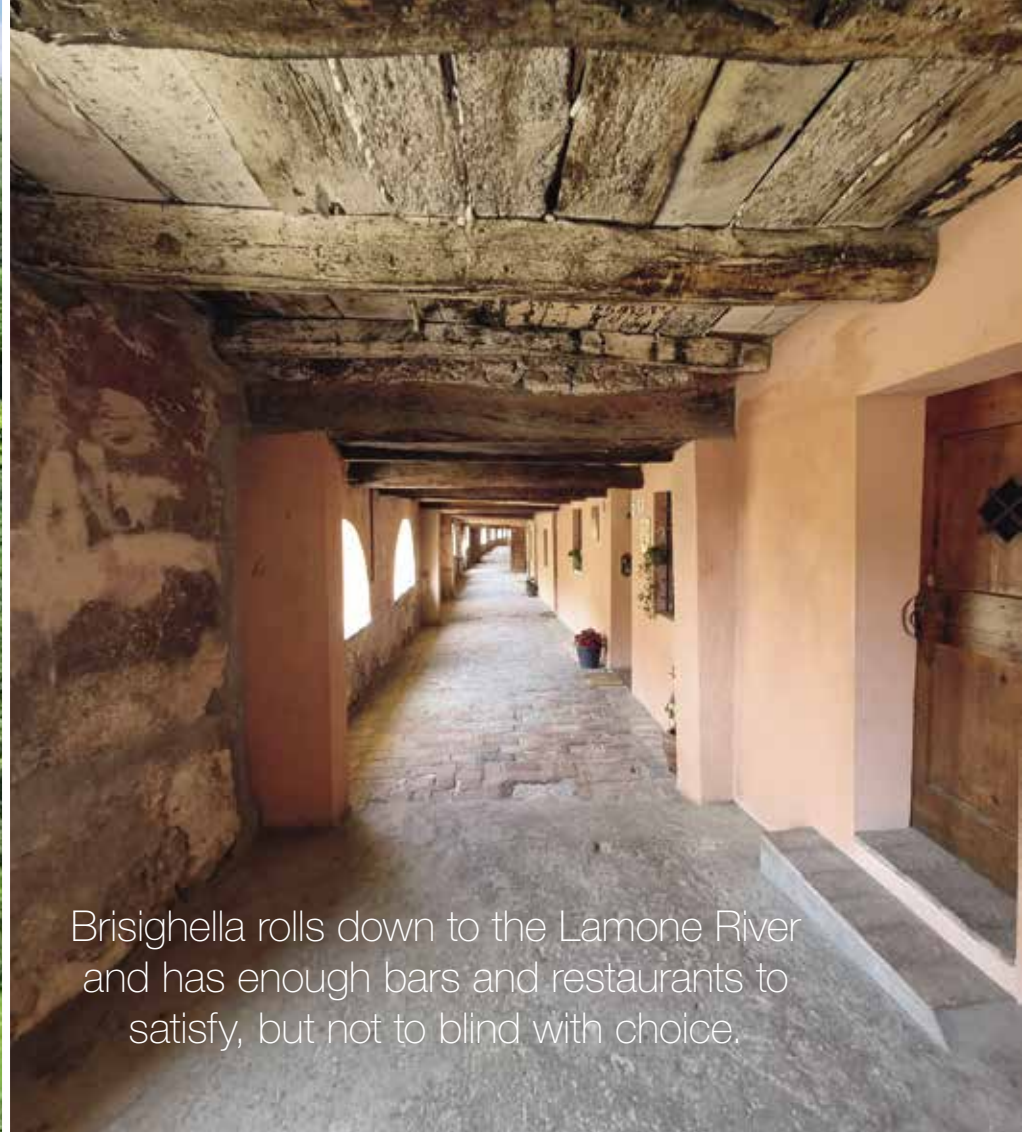
PHOTOGRAPHS HUW KINGSTON

It's 12 years since HUW KINGSTON first cycled through Brisighella, a picturesque hillside village in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy. He explains why he's returned many times since, and how the devastating landslides in May made this year's trip particularly memorable.

MIND YOUR HEAD'. For years at the Highland Fling mountain bike race we put this cheeky sign up, where riders rode under a bridge near the finish line at Bundanoon Pony Club. Although the bridge was way above the helmet of the tallest rider, nearly every participant would duck as they rode through.

The first time I went through Brisighella's Via Degli

Asini, 'the way of the donkey', was a dozen years ago. It was also in a mountain bike race, a seven day epic through the Apennines, the spine of hills supporting the boot that is Italy. The rollercoaster, uneven floor of this low ceilinged, medieval passageway required concentration, a low profile, and a head for heights to avoid a bashing. Even for conventional tourists on foot, it's memorable: the unique walkway runs along the second storey of a row of buildings, with entrances to homes on one



Brisighella rolls down to the Lamone River and has enough bars and restaurants to satisfy, but not to blind with choice.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT LOOKING ACROSS THE ROOFTOPS OF BRISIGHELLA FROM THE CLOCK TOWER – LA ROCCA CASTLE IS TOP RIGHT; VIA DEGLI ASINI, ‘THE WAY OF THE DONKEY’, WAS USED BY GUARDS IN THE 14TH CENTURY; RIDING PAST POPPIES.

side and arched openings on the other, used by guards in the 14th century.

A few days after the race, my wife Wendy and I returned to Brisighella to stay at Hotel La Rocca and, in the years since, we have returned many times to one of our favourite hotels in one of our favourite Italian villages.

Brisighella sits at the northern end of the Apennines, where the hills start to lower towards the Po valley, the only really flat country of any dimension in all of Italy. An hour from Bologna and two from Florence, it is an easy place to reach. The little rattling train to or from Florence is a scenic option.

Nestled below a 14th century castle on one hill and a 19th century clock tower on another, Brisighella is one of those places that sizes up perfectly. More village than town, it rolls down to

the Lamone River and has enough bars and restaurants to satisfy, but not to blind with choice. It is known but not too well known.

In his family for four generations, Daniele now runs the show at La Rocca, although his mum is usually on hand to warmly welcome guests. Like the village it sits in the midst of, La Rocca is the right size: 20 or so rooms, a ground floor dining area that flows onto a shady terrace coloured by bougainvillea. Three floors above, the rooftop area is ideal for lounging with a glass of the local sangiovese.

Daniele is not only hotelier but chef, the kitchen his real happy place. For me the measure of any great dish is never wanting it to end. Forking ever smaller portions, eyeing the last one with a sense of both satisfaction and sadness. On my visit this year, Daniele’s asparagus risotto was hard to finish,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP BUCKLED ROAD ABOVE PREDAPPIO;
A CONFERENCE OF DUCKS DISCUSSING THE FLOOD IN MODIGLIANA;
THE SUNNY ROOFTOP TERRACE OF LA ROCCA HOTEL.

Spritz, and not because it mirrors my name. Both are enjoyed sitting in the park by Bar Gelateria Carletto before dinner, and later you can stroll through the streets with a gelati.

If you need some of the exercise Mirena gets, then climb straight up behind the town to the clock tower perched on its rocky outcrop. Then continue across to La Rocca itself, the castle, built in 1310 with its tower added in the early 1500s. From here you'll look across the tiled rooftops, over the Lamone valley, to the vineyards and the chalky scars of this limestone region.

This year we looked across to a landscape dotted with very recent scars. Those of the terrible flood and landslide event that hit the Emilia-Romagna region in May 2023, the worst in 200 years.

Indeed the few relaxing days that Wendy and I enjoyed again in Brisighella had been preceded by my Biking the Boot tour. For the past dozen years, I've run this three-week mountain biking tour, a ride that winds through Lazio, Umbria, Tuscany and into Emilia-Romagna, before a final week in the mighty Dolomites.

The tour always stays a night in Brisighella. Always except in 2023.

As the rain eased, Margherita, the friendliest Carabinieri in all of Romagna, permitted us to leave but warned us to take great care.

At our hotel in tiny Campigna, high up in the Apennines, two days before we planned to reach Brisighella, a weather warning came through for some rain, a little heavy but not too much. That same night I was explaining to the crew that, unlike Australia where we still build on flood plains and other inappropriate places, the 'old' countries have reached a sort of equilibrium with their land after thousands of years of construction, not our couple of hundred. Land that might flood, hills that might slide, are now avoided.

The following day we rode, in ever more torrential rain, keeping to the blacktop for simplicity and safety. The rivers rose, rocks rolled onto roads. Soaked to our skin, we arrived at our hotel in San Benedetto in Alpe. We stayed the one night as planned, then another as the deluge continued. Landslides now blocked our way out, roads disappeared. Where the waters rushed out from the mountains, the beautiful old towns of Faenza and Forlì suffered terrible flooding.

Reaching Brisighella was now impossible. Faenza, some 50 kilometres away, was a possibility. As the rain eased, Margherita, the friendliest Carabinieri in all of Romagna, permitted us to leave but warned us to take great care. Ten hours and 90 kilometres later, after clambering over landslides, mud often up to our knees, through fields where roads had once been, diversion upon diversion, we eventually came to Faenza. The old city was devastated, mud from the receding waters everywhere. Scenes we'd seen too often in Australia these past years. So much for that equilibrium. Loading bikes and bodies onto and into a minivan, we escaped and drove the four hours to the Dolomites that same night.

It was 10 days later when Wendy and I returned to Brisighella, and a region very much in recovery mode. Day trips to Riolo Terme or Tredozio, Marradi or Modigliana, or to Dante's Ravenna were still blocked. But all is reopening now, the scars are healing and Brisighella and this beautiful region is once again saying 'Benvenuto'. Welcome. **HL**

For information, visit brisighella.org/en/ or albergo-larocca.it/

so desperate was I to hold on to the taste. Equally so the fried polenta with squacquerone cheese and caramelised figs, or the spoja lorda, a local pasta speciality. And his secrets are takeaway too – Daniele also runs a cooking school.

Another plus point for La Rocca is the bathrooms are actually fit for purpose. Despite Australian real estate agents and bathroom suppliers singing the praises of Italian bathroom fittings and ceramics, as often as not in their home country hotels, the shower water flows toward door not drain, taps leak or plugs have gone missing in action.

While it is tempting to enjoy La Rocca's fare day after day, there's a fine selection of other bars and restaurants in Brisighella. Little Ristorante Stryx 'the witch', sits beneath the Via Degli Asini. Well, its dining area does. Chef and owner Mirena runs back and forth across the street to her home kitchen, returning with pappardelle to die for and other delights. God knows how many kilometres she travels each day.

The craft beer scene is now well established in Italy – no longer just Peroni or Moretti – and Caffè Della Loggia offers a great selection, including from the local brewery at nearby Marradi. Some might enjoy an Aperol Spritz, but I dislike the drink with the same degree of passion I love a refreshing Hugo

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