

Marmore Falls

Down the rapids

Centuries-old history and arresting landscapes are all on offer at one of Europe's highest waterfalls. Words: Rebecca Ann Hughes

“Forward... stop! Forward... brace!” shouts rafting instructor Ronny as we careen towards the seething rapids. Only minutes ago, he's had to berate our team of four for lack of coordination. But now, we're like a well-oiled machine. Boot-camp style, Ronny barks out instructions and we respond instantaneously, plunging our paddles into the water to power forward, then leaping to one side to avoid capsizing.

We're navigating the torrents that rush downstream from the Marmore Falls, one of Europe's highest waterfalls. They're found in the central region of Umbria, dubbed Italy's green heart: with just under 900,000 inhabitants and a couple of modest-sized cities, it's dominated by verdant hills that roll as far as the eye can see. It's heaven for hiking and cycling, but here in the Nerina Valley, where the falls are fed by the Velino River and plummet down a cliff into the Nera River below, water takes centre stage.

The starting point of today's rafting experience, offered by local outfitter Rafting Marmore, is beneath the last of the waterfall's three tiers, right beside the thundering cascade. These giant steps are carved out of a densely forested cliff face, where mist hovers fog-like among the canopy. It surges over the railings, so that we're wet before we even reach the water.

As with our paddling, the experience itself has to be perfectly timed, coinciding with the 'turning on' of the waterfall. Despite seeming like a great wonder of nature, this 541ft cascade has been controlled by man ever since its inception in 271 BC. At the time, the Velino River would flood the hills above the local town of Rieti, spawning marshy, stagnant areas of water full of malaria-bearing mosquitoes. To solve the issue, a Roman consul ordered the construction of a canal to channel the water off a cliff. The Marmore Falls were born — a 2,000-year-old testament to human ingenuity.

Much of the water from the Velino River is now rerouted into a hydroelectric plant, meaning the falls are, most of the time, nothing more than a gentle stream. But to the delight of visitors and thrill-seekers alike, twice a day the entire waterway is once again directed to plummet over the cliff.

When in full flow, the pounding water is a sublime spectacle. This makes paddling strenuous, but the effort is rewarded by sudden plunges over rapids, which fling water into our faces and make us grip the raft for fear of being jolted overboard. By the time we've finished, my arms ache, but I find myself wanting more of the rush.

Later that day, I follow a hiking trail around the falls. I stop en route at the Lovers' Balcony, a terrace so close to the cascade that I'm buffeted by spray carried up by the wind. I reach the higher viewing platform, up some 600 steps. At the top of the falls, I'm rewarded with a dazzling rainbow; not even the Romans could have manufactured this.