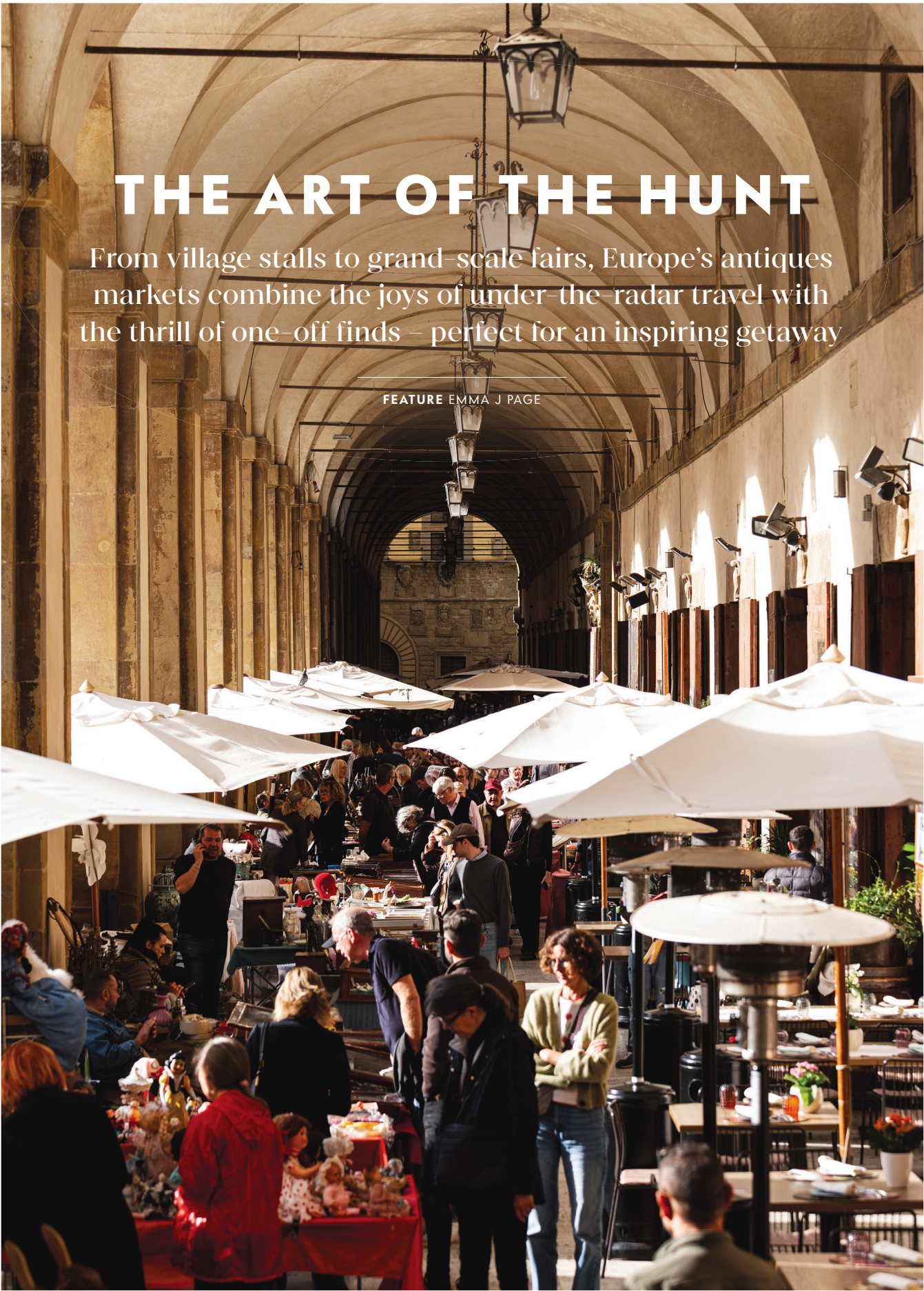




THE ART OF THE HUNT

From village stalls to grand-scale fairs, Europe's antiques markets combine the joys of under-the-radar travel with the thrill of one-off finds – perfect for an inspiring getaway

FEATURE EMMA J PAGE

PHOTOGRAPHS (THIS PAGE) DOC BZ/AREZZO: ANTIQUES FAIR; (LOGGE VASARI) INTERIOR DESIGN BY AND IMAGE COURTESY OF FABBRI SERVICES; (PIAZZA GRANDE) ENRICO CARACCILOLO

A chunk of Murano glass glinting seductively in the sunshine, the patina of a gilded mirror partially obscured by a swathe of velvet, the hand-turned edge of a wooden sideboard: unearthing the perfect vintage treasure is never less than thrilling. Sometimes, it's about the satisfaction of finding a much-longed-for one-off piece destined for an empty corner or shelf at home; on other occasions, it's the joy of discovering something you didn't know you needed.

Unusual finds – whether valuable or sentimental – speak to us on many levels, from the craftsmanship they showcase to the whisper of countless untold stories they hint at. And when those pieces are discovered at a market or local *brocante* abroad, they are also bound up with the romantic notion of capturing an otherwise fleeting mood or moment, laced with the exotic.

Curiosities and collectables have been beguiling treasure hunters across Europe since the Middle Ages, when travelling traders first started to curate passed-down finds, such as textiles, furniture, art and objets. It's worth noting the difference between antique and vintage: often of more sentimental than commercial value, vintage pieces tend to be less than 70 years old; antiques, meanwhile, are best-in-class versions of their genre, generally holding or increasing their worth over time.

These days, our increasing desire to shop sustainably coupled with the ever-seductive thrill of the chase has put antiques fairs and *brocantes* firmly back on the map. From the cobbled streets of Amiens to the cafe-studded squares of Brussels, there are countless opportunities to combine travel with treasure-hunting. Here's our pick of the best...

AREZZO ANTIQUES FAIR, TUSCANY

This eastern Tuscan town hosts what is thought to be the oldest antiques fair in Italy (opposite and below), right in Piazza Grande, its main square, every first Sunday of the month, as well as the preceding Saturday. More than 400 stalls packed with wares – from antique chests to old coins – spill out onto the side streets and alleyways.

'It feels like travelling back in time,' says interior designer Paolo Moschino. 'You never know what kind of treasure you might find. Try to arrive early because that's when you can see the best pieces before they get sold. The fair is large and spreads all over the historic centre, so take your time and explore street by street instead of rushing. What makes it even more special is the atmosphere of the city itself. The streets are always lively and the buildings have that unmistakable Tuscan character that makes everything feel unique. During the fair, Arezzo has a different energy, full of stories to hear, people to meet and objects waiting to be discovered.'

fieraantiquaria.org



TRAVEL TIPS

Stay at 17th-century monastery-turned-hotel Badia di Pomaio is an escape in nature a few miles outside the city.

Eat at Logge Vasari (above) on Piazza Grande is cosy in winter and open onto the terrace in summer, serving classic Tuscan dishes.

Don't miss View the elaborate interiors, including frescoes and tempera paintings, at the home of the Renaissance artist Giorgio Vasari. →





A console by Laurids
Gallée at Objects
With Narratives
Gallery on the Place
du Grand Sablon

SABLON ANTIQUES MARKET AND PLACE DU JEU DE BALLE FLEA MARKET, BRUSSELS

An excellent and sometimes overlooked city for sourcing and browsing, Brussels has a diverse art and antiques offering ranging from classical to late-20th-century design. Exploring the city beyond the markets is essential, with its spectacular offering of historic house museums, art and culture.

‘There are two main areas, both organised around modest weekend markets, that I enjoy visiting,’ says designer Scott Maddux. ‘Both are small and intimate, located in the central squares of their respective neighbourhoods, and very different in their character and offering. In the “upper town”, the weekend Sablon Antiques Market, popular with locals and visitors since the

1960s, is the place to find ceramics, glassware, silverware, jewellery, paintings and furniture. It’s also a good spot to start your exploration of the surrounding streets, which offer a diverse selection of classical art and antique furniture, art nouveau and art deco furniture and objects, late-20th-century and contemporary design, vintage clothing and tribal art.’

Meanwhile, in the Marolles neighbourhood, in the ‘lower town’, Place du Jeu de Balle (above right) hosts a flea market daily. ‘The neighbourhood is fun and lively, full of cafes and bars,’ says Scott. ‘I have found some wonderful treasures here, though be prepared to sift.’

markets.brussels.be



TRAVEL TIPS

Stay at Rocco Forté’s Hotel Amigo between the Grand-Place and Manneken Pis or NH Collection’s Brussels Grand Sablon if you want to be right on the market square.

Eat at Find the major chocolatiers on Place du Grand Sablon. For dining, Scott recommends Au Vieux Saint Martin (below) for its steak tartare and bold design.

Don’t miss Rue Haute and Rue Blaes are packed with small shops and multi-dealer spaces where the focus is more on 20th-century furniture and objects.



PHOTOGRAPHS (GALLERY) SCOTT MADDUX; (MARKET) VISIT BRUSSELS;
(AU VIEUX SAINT MARTIN) BORIS DEBUSSCHER



TRAVEL TIPS

Stay at Hôtel Massé (left) – one of Bryony's favourites, this is a quietly luxurious, newly opened space in Pigalle, which feels like staying in a beautifully curated home.

Eat at Laurent (above) offers classic Parisian glamour with white tablecloths, a beautiful garden and a sense of occasion. Cibus is candlelit and intimate.

Don't miss Wander Saint-Germain-des-Prés for its cluster of antique galleries and design shops and stop at Astier de Villatte for its milky-hued ceramics.



LES PUCES DE SAINT-OUEN, PARIS

The beating heart of Parisian antiquing, this is one of the largest flea markets in the world (below left), open every weekend throughout the year. It dates back to the late 19th century when rag-and-bone merchants were pushed outside the city's walls, gradually evolving into a labyrinth of permanent markets and specialist dealers just north of Paris.

Today, it is less a single market and more a collection of distinct worlds stitched together. From the polished, gallery-like halls of Paul Bert Serpette to the romantic disorder of Vernaison's winding alleys, it encompasses everything from museum-worthy antiques to joyful bric-a-brac. Furniture spans centuries and sensibilities, from ornate Louis XVI chairs, weighty marble consoles and sleek mid-century pieces to the occasional Italian 70s gem. Decorative objects include gilt mirrors, Murano glass, sculptural lamps, hand-painted ceramics and objets.

'The atmosphere is electric but never rushed,' says Bryony Rae Sheridan, buying director and luxury specialist. 'The best time to visit is early on a Saturday or Sunday morning when dealers are fresh and the light hits just right. I love to drift from piles of forgotten silverware and lace to impeccably curated stands of 20th-century design. Art is everywhere, from serious gallery-level works to charming, anonymous oil paintings and stacks of vintage posters. Price-wise, it ranges wildly. You can find something small and accessible for a few euros or invest in significant pieces that rival gallery prices. My only rule is simple: if you love something and you have never seen it before, you should probably buy it.'

pucesdeparissaintouen.com →

LA GRANDE RÉDERIE D'AMIENS

For more than a century, bargain hunters, vintage enthusiasts and professional dealers have been heading to this open-air market in northern France. The city – famed for its production of textiles as well as being the home of novelist Jules Verne – transforms into the largest flea market after Lille twice a year (every second to last Sunday in April and every first Sunday in October).

There's no entry fee and the market unfolds organically through the streets, so you can dip in and out among its 2,000 sellers. Despite its size, it's easy to navigate, relaxed and accessible, with a lively atmosphere. You'll find a broad offering, from reasonably priced furniture and linens to ceramics, artwork and decorative objects.

'We'd recommend arriving the day before,' suggests Rachel McKenna, co-founder of antiques emporium Custodian. 'Many dealers begin setting up from around 6pm the night before, which gives you the rare chance to browse as items are being unpacked. A torch is essential if you're going to be hunting throughout the night, and comfortable shoes are a must as you'll cover a lot of ground. We always bring cash, a trolley for carrying finds and try to brush up on a little French, particularly numbers, as it makes negotiating much easier. Downloading the flea-market map in advance is also helpful, as it's easy to lose your bearings once you're in it. We usually leave with lots of interesting objects, such as Murano glass pendants, unusual pieces of art and colourful ceramics.'

grande-rederie-amiens.com



TRAVEL TIPS

Stay at Une Maison en Ville

(above) is a 19th-century townhouse that feels more like a private home than a hotel. There's also a spa - the perfect treat after a day spent walking and browsing.

Eat at Hyacinthe (left) is great for seasonal French suppers. Le Café Pinson is a good pit-stop for brunch or coffee between browsing.

Don't miss Notre-Dame d'Amiens (top) is the largest Gothic cathedral in France. Wander along the canal and visit Quartier Saint-Leu with its cobbled streets and colourfully shuttered houses.

PHOTOGRAPHS (NOTRE-DAME) MAXIM ZISSEL LESZED; (UNE MAISON EN VILLE) COURTESY OF UNE MAISON EN VILLE; AMIENS; (HYACINTHE CHEF) JEAN-PAUL FRÉLLET



MERCANTEINFIERA, PARMA

Attracting professionals, collectors and the curious, this twice-yearly fair (below right) takes place a few miles outside northern Italy's Parma – known for its art, architecture and, of course, its prosciutto. More than 1,000 exhibitors gather in a vast trade centre that feels like a temporary village, with a dedicated bus service between the fair and town centre.

You'll find heritage pieces, from 19th-century cabinets and glassware to affordable curios, including 20th-century accessories and objets d'art. Two services can help refine your buying: Ask the Expert offers a free appraisal service for those seeking a opinion on authenticity and market value, while the Vintage Help Desk offers evaluations of fashion and accessories.

'There's a really broad spectrum of pieces, quality and prices, so it's best approached with an open mind

and plenty of time – it usually takes me a day and a half,' says interior designer Max Rollitt. 'It's not always the case that I'll find anything, but that can be part of the fun. Some favourites that I've picked up are a Italian giltwood oval frame and an early-19th-century painted sideboard with trompe l'oeil faux-panel fronts (above left). Italians are masters of this kind of painted furniture, and when the paint is still in its original condition, it's such a good find.

'Bear in mind that it can be easy to get swept up in the romance and fall into the trap of buying something that looks glorious in the moment but doesn't work later. In Italian homes, ceilings are often twice the height – furniture is taller and colours are often brighter. So, it can look wonderful in situ, but keep in mind the setting that you're buying for.'

mercanteinfiera.it →

TRAVEL TIPS

Stay at Palazzo Dalla Rosa Prati (below) is a boutique guesthouse in the middle of town, while cosy and modest Hotel Torino is a bolthole favoured by Max.

Eat at Just around the corner from the main civic square, traditional Italian espresso bar Caffè Cavour has a pleasingly old-school interior.

Don't miss Teatro Farnese (left), Parma's famed wooden Renaissance theatre, conceived in 1618 by Giovanni Battista Aleotti.



PHOTOGRAPHS (TEATRO FARNESE) GIOVANNI HÄNNINEN; (PALAZZO DALLA ROSA PRATI) COURTESY OF PALAZZO DALLA ROSA PRATI; (CHEST) MAX ROLLITT; (MARKET) MERCANTEINFIERA



TRAVEL TIPS

Stay at The 18th-century farmhouse and trulli at Masseria Mozzone (below) offer an atmospheric escape.

Eat at Garden Ristorante Pizzeria in Ceglie Messapica serves simple dishes, Osteria del Tempo Perso in Ostuni has a rustic vibe, and locals head to La Manna del Pozzo.

Don't miss Natalie's favourite local ceramicists include Ceramiche Nicola Fasano (left and bottom) and Mena Fuego Studio.



SMALL-TOWN MONTHLY MARKETS, PUGLIA

Deep in this southern Italian region are a host of small villages and towns, each with their own flea markets. What makes them attractive is not just the thrill of unearthing pieces such as monogrammed linens that have been passed down through the generations, a pair of silk lampshades or a forgotten painting, but that the markets are nestled in the heart of a clutch of villages studded with trulli, baroque buildings, Roman ruins and majestic churches.

'The region is my favourite for vintage,' says Folie Chambre's founder Natalie Tillison. 'Every town has a rotating roster of antiques markets during the summer months.'

Usually, Martina Franca's is the third Sunday of the month, Ostuni's is the second, Cisternino's is the third and Lecce's is the fourth. Of special note is Martina Franca's annual antiques fair, which is held during the second week of August around the Piazza Marconi and inside the atrium of the Istituto Comprensivo Statale G. Marconi. Comprising antiques, modern art and vintage, prices are super reasonable – you'll need a few extra suitcases. Be aware that market days in Puglia's towns are subject to change at short notice so make sure you check before you set off.

How to shop like a pro

Tips of the trade from Westland London's director Laura Dadswell

- The early bird catches the worm. It's worth seeing pieces as they're being unloaded from vehicles. With time, you'll learn which dealers you would like to visit first. Travelling with a shopping list means you're less likely to impulse buy and regret it later.
- The markets are a steep learning curve. Initially, you might see something charming and seemingly one-off, only to spot the same piece many times over at subsequent fairs. Look for something that feels unique, of good design, with natural patina and if you're in any doubt, ask. Good dealers are usually keen to impart their knowledge and enthusiasm for their collection.
- A tape measure is a must and pens are essential to label your purchases and fill out export paperwork if you're having larger pieces collected by a shipper. Take photographs of all your purchases too.
- Prices are, of course, negotiable, but it's important not to be insulting. First, consider the shipping costs and work out if the piece is right for you. Usually, dealers will be willing to offer up to a 20% discount. Frustratingly, I have a long list of pieces I regret not buying just because I was feeling a little mean on the day. I have a far shorter list of pieces I regret purchasing.
- Before you travel, get in touch with a UK-based specialist shipper, such as Hedley's, who operate at the markets. You'll usually be charged by the cubic metre. They'll also handle the paperwork, packing and direct collection from the dealers. 📧

PHOTOGRAPHS (CERAMICHE NICOLA FASANO) LETIZIA CIGLIUTTI; (MASSERIA MAZZONE) FABIO STAZIONE