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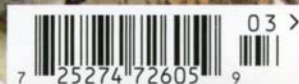
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CASTEL MONASTERO

On a hillside overlooking woods and vineyards north-east of Siena sits Castel Monastero, a newly opened hotel and spa, complete with its own chapel, set within the ancient walls of a small medieval village. Originally home to an order of nuns, the village was subsequently adopted by the noble, Sienese Chigi Saracini family, who owned and farmed the surrounding land.

Three years ago, Monastero dell'Ombrone, as the village was then called, was acquired in its entirety by the Eleganza group of hotels – Forte Village in Sardinia is part of the same group – and under the exacting eye of general manager Andrea Prevosti has undergone a discreet renovation to provide 76 rooms and suites, situated in the various buildings that cluster round the original village square. No exterior details have been changed and great pains have been taken to ensure that the interior spaces remain as unaltered as possible. Barring the odd bump to the head from the low doorways – people were smaller in the thirteenth century – the result is extraordinarily successful.

A few suites have their own terrace, but all rooms are opulently furnished to combine a sense of Tuscan tradition with modern technology. Two things stand out particularly: first, the main reception rooms, which were decorated, while I was there, with more white roses than I deserved to see in a lifetime; secondly, the staff, who were so charming and helpful that no request was too much trouble.

Castel Monastero has two restaurants. Breakfast is served at La Contrada on the piazza – a space that mutates at night into a pricey, candlelit, Gordon Ramsay extravaganza. Alternatively, and more to my taste, is the authentic Tuscan menu on offer in the original wine cellars, where the pièce de résistance is the stunning, barrel-vaulted brick roof.

Set within the gardens is a cascade of three swimming pools – sadly none very deep – directly below the extensive spa and wellness centre. In many ways, it is this that defines the property: Castel Monastero is not a family hotel but designed rather for a grown-up, international clientele lured by a celebrity chef and the indulgent spa. The surrounding countryside, however, is exquisite, and lovely Siena is so near that excursions beyond this medieval enclave of twenty-first-century hospitality are a must. **LE** □

Liz Elliot stayed as a guest of Castel Monastero (00-39-577 57 0001; www.castelmonastero.com). Double rooms cost from €530 per night, B&B

Castel Monastero (above) sits on a hillside northeast of Siena overlooking woods and vineyards. The hotel is set within the walls of a small medieval village