

35 AMAZING DEALS FROM COSTA RICA TO CALIFORNIA

# TRAVEL+ LEISURE

## HOTELS SPECIAL

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Leisure.com June 2011





It Remakes a




Across the Italian countryside,  
entrepreneurs are turning  
abandoned hamlets into luxury  
retreats. Peter Jon Lindberg  
asks: Can a hotel transform  
a village in order to save it?

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MARTIN MORRELL

GUIDE > PAGE 190

# Village



Sunset at Borgo Finocchieto, near Montalcino, Tuscany. Opposite:  
The view from a pool at Castel Monastero, in the Ombrone Valley of Chianti.



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JOHN PHILLIPS WAS ONLY LOOKING FOR A VILLA. THAT he wound up with a village says something about the scale of his enthusiasms, his impetuous streak, and the curious state of the Italian countryside at the beginning of the 21st century. But really, he insists: he never intended to buy the whole town.

For two years, Phillips, a prominent Washington, D.C., lawyer, had been scouting for a house in Tuscany. He'd begun his search in Chianti, but found little that suited his needs. Finally he turned his sights to the Val d'Orcia, 40 miles south of Siena. And there, in August 2000—on seven overlooked and overgrown acres that one might call the middle of nowhere, were not the famed wine town of Montalcino just 15 minutes away—Phillips came upon the tiny medieval hamlet of Finocchietto.

For two generations the hilltop farming village (whose name means “fennel fields”) had lain abandoned and forlorn. At its pre-World War II peak Finocchietto counted 60 resi-



# Finocchietto was, in short,

dents, mostly sharecroppers who worked the fields along the hillside. But postwar industrialization, coupled with agriculture's decline, led to a rural exodus across Italy, as farmers sought new work in larger towns and cities. Finocchietto's last holdouts moved away in the 1960's.

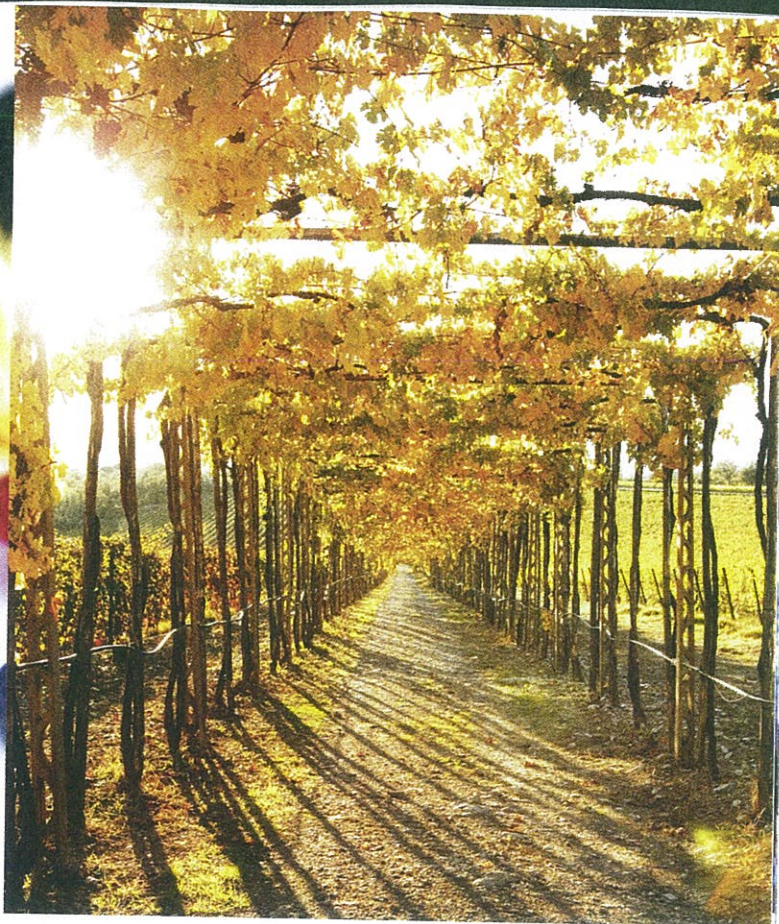
What they left behind looked not so different from what their ancestors had known seven centuries earlier: a cluster of tiled-roof houses and farming sheds, connected by meandering footpaths, with a modest green and a courtyard at its heart. From the edge of the green the views stretched out for miles, across cypress-fringed pastures and vineyards and undulating hills. Finocchietto was, in short, an archetypal Tuscan village, or *borgo*, albeit in severe disrepair. By 2000 the footpaths were choked with weeds, the green turned to mud. Roofs had collapsed; trees were uprooted; the chapel was filled with rotting hay. Starlings nested in the 500-year-old communal brick oven where residents once gathered to bake the daily bread.

Phillips was undeterred. “The whole place was dilapidated, but there was such tranquillity,” he says. “I'd never heard quiet like that. You could see it had amazing potential.”

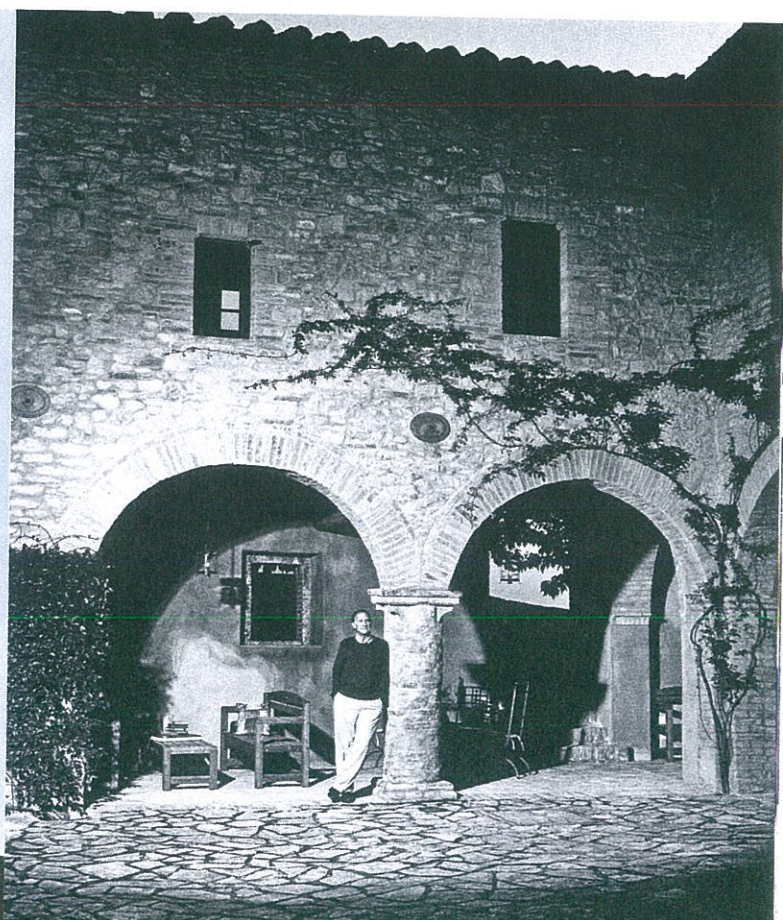
**VILLAGE LIVING** Clockwise from top left: Guests in the Castel Monastero piazza; a fruit salad of berries, persimmon, and grapes at Castel Monastero; the vineyards of Hotel Borgo San Felice, in Chianti; owner John Phillips at Borgo Finocchietto; a carved-stone detail at Castel Monastero; the Galileo Room at Borgo Finocchietto.







an archetypal Tuscan village.







Damiano Caramagno, *chef de partie* of Hotel Borgo San Felice. Opposite: A dinner of zucchini frittata and roasted vegetables at Borgo Finocchieto.







As was often the arrangement in rural villages, the former residents of Finocchieto did not own their property but rented from a landlord. The current owner was a wealthy signor who still lived in a castle just up the hill. Phillips made inquiries and learned that the man was prepared to sell—but he refused to break up the village. It was the whole *borgo* or nothing.

"So on my final day in Tuscany, in a fit of irrational exuberance, I decided to buy the entire thing," Phillips says, sounding bemused by his decision still. His wife, Linda Douglass, did not share this exuberance. "When Linda first came to see the *borgo*, she began to cry," Phillips recalls. "Not tears of joy, but tears of 'What the hell were you thinking?'" Douglass now laughs at the memory. "It was as if my husband had gone to the store for milk, then came home to announce that he'd bought Safeway," she says.

But the deal was done, and now the question was what to do with the property. They certainly did not require an entire 300,000-square-foot village for a vacation home. Phillips began to conceive a different and grander role for Finocchieto: not quite a private retreat, not quite a hotel, but something in between.

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HE IDEA OF TRANSFORMING DERELICT towns into lodgings is not new in Italy. In fact it was pioneered here some 30 years ago, by a tourism marketing consultant named Giancarlo Dall'Ara, as a means of rehabilitating a struggling village in Friuli. Dall'Ara's notion was to convert the village's empty apart-

ments and houses into B&B-style lodgings, independently owned but managed as a collective. Guests would eat their meals in town, interact with residents—for some villagers did remain—and play out the age-old traveler's fantasy of living like a local. Dall'Ara called the concept an *albergo diffuso*—a "diffuse" or "scattered" hotel. (His Friuli project, called Albergo Diffuso di Comeglians, is still in operation.)

Since then, scores of abandoned or near-abandoned Italian towns have been reimagined as village hotels. The Associazione Nazionale Alberghi Diffusi, of which Dall'Ara is president, now counts 48 member properties across the country, with dozens more currently taking shape. (Continued on page 190)

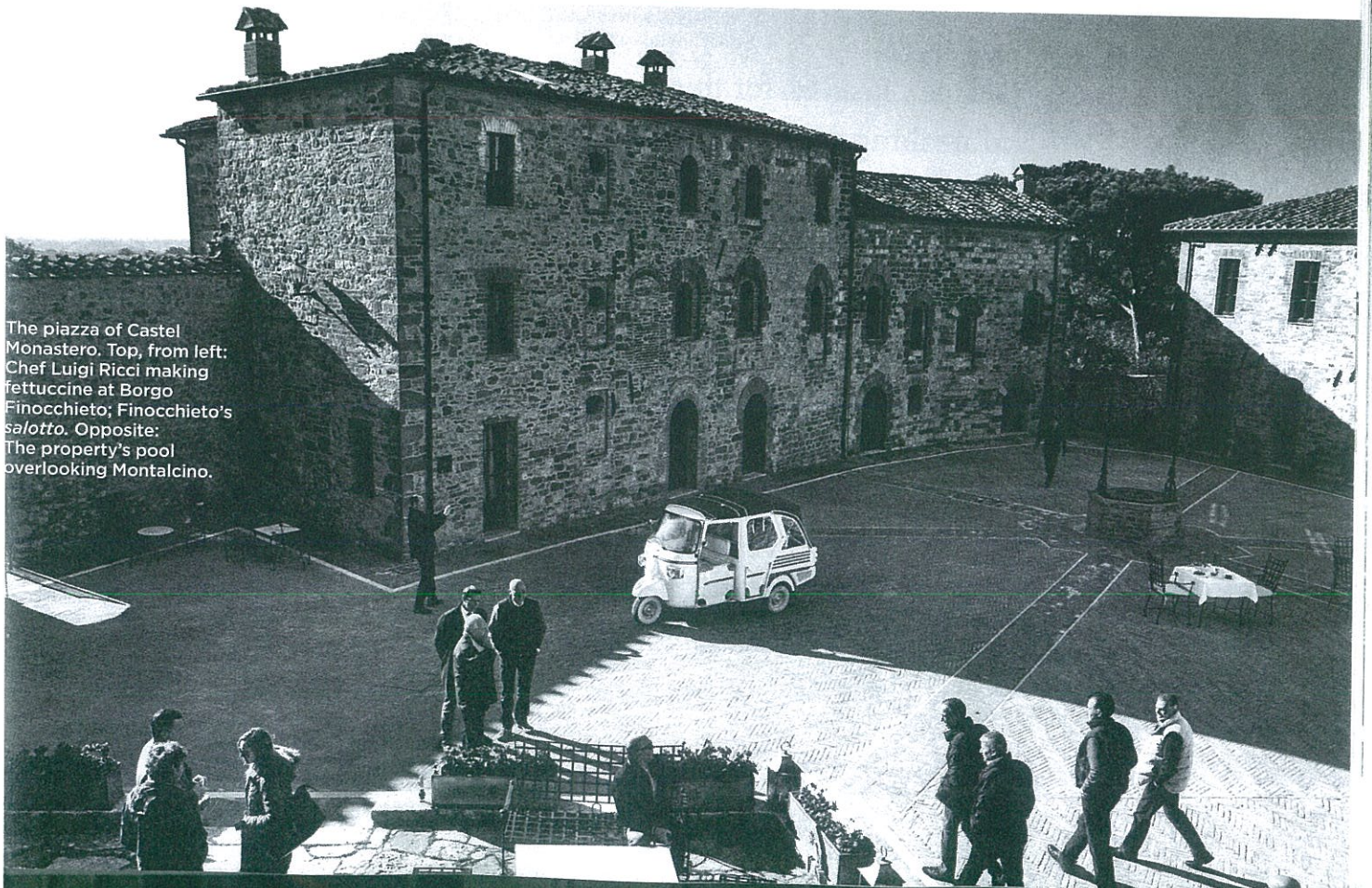
## Passed over by development, these







villages were suspended in time.



The piazza of Castel Monastero. Top, from left: Chef Luigi Ricci making fettuccine at Borgo Finocchieto; Finocchieto's *salotto*. Opposite: The property's pool overlooking Montalcino.



# Italian Villages

(Continued from page 160)

Meanwhile, the Swedish-Italian hotelier and philanthropist Daniele Kihlgren has raised the bar with his Sextantio brand, creating hardcore-authentic *alberghi diffusi* out of a 15th-century mountain village in Abruzzo and, even more impressive, inside the Sassi di Matera cave dwellings in Basilicata. (Kihlgren has acquired nine more sites across southern Italy, which await similar transformations.)

Ironically, the economic stagnation that nearly decimated so many Italian villages in the 20th century wound up saving them for the 21st. Mired in poverty, passed over by modern development, they were essentially suspended in time. In a country whose celebrated hill towns are commonly littered with Vodafone signs and Benetton shops, this is a welcome outcome indeed.

And the *albergo diffuso* turns out to be a sustainable model for both development and preservation. Repurposing existing structures costs less, and has a much smaller carbon footprint, than constructing new hotels. *Alberghi diffusi* create jobs for area residents and, if they source products locally, help sustain traditional crafts and

trades. Furthermore, they pass along much of the cost of preservation to a demographic that strongly benefits from it: travelers. That last part is crucial. Tourism is so often blamed, sometimes accurately, for reckless and degrading development. (See: Vodafone signs and Benetton shops.) But under the *albergo diffuso* rubric, tourism becomes an agent for preservation, providing both the catalyst and the capital. And hotels, rather than overwhelming the historic fabric, can form an integral part of it.

**W**HAT'S REMARKABLE IS how many of these ghost villages still exist in Italy, ripe for the taking and re-making—untold hundreds, emptied out by rural flight and barely touched, or even much noticed, in the decades since. This, in one of the most well-charted and tourist-trafficked landscapes on earth.

The secret is out. More and more wealthy buyers are acquiring defunct villages as their own private vanity fiefdoms. Not surprisingly, many of these latter-day dogs—call them the borgolomaniacs—are from overseas: Americans, Koreans, Russians, Japanese. But *borgo* fever has swept the home country as well. Rare is the Italian designer who hasn't accessorized with

a village. Alberta Ferretti bought up the tiny hamlet of Montegridolfo, in Emilia-Romagna. Brunello Cucinelli took over most of the Umbrian village of Solomeo. And Massimo Ferragamo has spent four years—and untold millions—turning the medieval *borgo* of Castiglion del Bosco, just downhill from Finocchietto in the Val d'Orcia, into an extravagant resort and residential complex.

Ferragamo's is the latest and most over-the-top entry in a variant breed of village hotel, which takes the same humble setting and rusticated trappings but ramps up the luxury quotient. Examples can be found across the Continent: from Castelnau des Fieumarcon, a fortified Gasconne village that became a 33-bedroom retreat, to Aman Sveti Stefan, a Montenegrin hamlet turned hotel care of Amanresorts.

Still, Italy is the nexus of the *alberghi diffusi* movement, and a good number of them, unsurprisingly, are in Tuscany. One of the high-end pioneers of the trend—and still among the most convincing—was Hotel Borgo San Felice, which occupies a 1,300-year-old church and settlement in Chianti, 13 miles northeast of Siena. Converted to a hotel in 1979, and now a Relais & Châteaux property, it makes clever (re)use of original village (Continued on page 194)

## GUIDE TO EUROPEAN VILLAGE HOTELS

### FRANCE

**GREAT VALUE** **Castelnau des Fieumarcon** Gascony; 33-5/62-68-99-30; gascony.org; doubles from \$212 per night, including breakfast; houses from \$1,762 weekly.

### ITALY

**GREAT VALUE** **Albergo Diffuso di Comeglians** Comeglians, Udine; 39-0433/619-002; albergodiffuso.it; doubles from \$41.

**Borgo Finocchietto** Bibbiano, Siena; 202/657-6828; borgofinocchietto.com; suites from \$1,022 per night, including breakfast, three-night minimum.

### Castel Monastero

Monastero d'Ombone, Siena; 39-0577/570-001; castelmonastero.com; doubles from \$626, including breakfast.

### Castiglion del Bosco

Montalcino, Siena; 39-0577/191-3001; castigliondelbosco.it; doubles from \$782, including breakfast.

### Hotel Borgo San Felice

Castelnuovo Berardenga, Siena; 800/735-2478; borgosanfelice.it; doubles from \$512, including breakfast.

### GREAT VALUE La Galatea

In the historical center of a small Apulian town only a few miles from the Ionian Sea. Galatone,

Lecce; 39-3336/784-170; albergodiffuso.lagalatea.com; doubles from \$141.

### Sextantio

Via Principe Umberto, Santo Stefano di Sessanio, L'Aquila; 39-0862/899-112; sextantio.it; doubles from \$283, including breakfast.

### Sextantio Le Grotte della Civita

28 Via Civita, Matera; 39-083/533-2744; sassidimatera.com; doubles from \$353.

### MONTENEGRO

**Aman Sveti Stefan** Sveti Stefan; 800/477-9180 or 382/3342-0000; amanresorts.com; doubles from \$989.



The enoteca at Hotel Borgo San Felice.



## Italian Villages

(Continued from page 190)

details: street names and address numbers were left intact, while restaurants and shops are marked with old-fashioned signage.

A short drive away, in the Ombrone Valley, the two-year-old Castel Monastero resort was carved out of a medieval *borgo* that began life in A.D. 1050 as a monastery. Developers retrofitted the 13 original build-

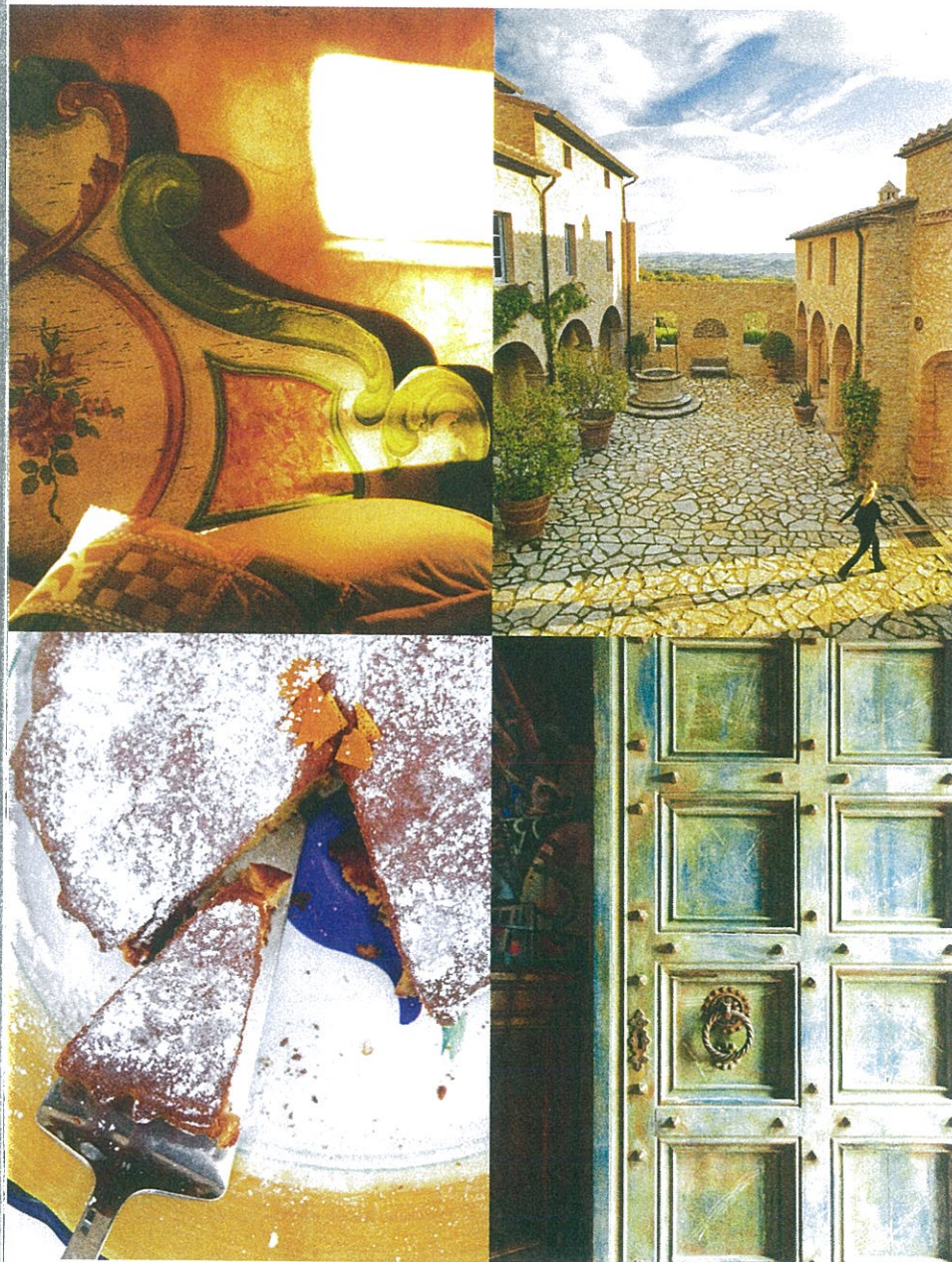
ings with 75 guest rooms, a private villa, a wellness center and spa, an art gallery, and—apparently just because they could—a Gordon Ramsay restaurant. Rubelli fabrics, rough-hewn timber beams, worn terra-cotta floors, and faded 19th-century frescoes set a mood of carefully rusticated opulence. Of course, Castel Monastero and its ilk are missing a key component of the traditional *alberghi diffusi*: actual villagers. Giancarlo Dell'Ara's original model in Friuli was set in a still functioning (if strug-

gling) village, with which it was and remains interdependent. Other properties continue to follow that example. Physically speaking, the best *alberghi diffusi* may retain the integrity of their traditional townscapes and historical details. But without their original residents—without giving guests the sense of being in a community, surrounded by everyday people and not just hotel staff—a village hotel risks feeling like a conventional resort.

The other risk is that they wind up fetishizing the rural life, selling a sanitized brand of peasant chic. A genuine village stay, after all, would not be nearly so restorative: those crumbling stone floors wouldn't be swept and polished just-so, the bathwater might be only lukewarm, and *nonna's* handwoven blankets might not be so artfully arranged on the bed. But for certain upscale travelers, the implication of authenticity is still preferable to none at all. And few things can make a world-weary mogul feel better about himself than a week spent pretending he's a 13th-century shepherd. Especially if he still gets turndown service.

**f**OR JOHN PHILLIPS, IT TOOK two years of negotiations with Italian authorities before he could begin to restore Finocchietto. The renovation itself, overseen by a local architect (with Phillips flying in every few months), took another five years. Strict local preservation laws forbade changes to the footprint or contour of the buildings—all exterior walls and fenestrations had to remain as they were. Where structures had deteriorated or collapsed, they were rebuilt according to the original village plans, which are kept on archive at the local preservation office.

Certain interior adjustments were allowed. "The second story of the main house was on all different levels, so we had to raise and lower floors and ceilings," Phillips says. "Here and there we reconfigured staircases, shored up ceiling beams, and unbricked archways to increase flow and light." Ultimately, 22 bedrooms would occupy the *borgo's* five buildings: nine in the main house, five in the smaller house, four in the chapel, and two in each of »



**TUSCAN CRAFTSMANSHIP** Clockwise from top left: A painted headboard in the Galileo Room of Borgo Finocchietto; crossing a courtyard at Borgo Finocchietto; the door to the Hotel Borgo San Felice chapel; a *torta d'arancia* at Borgo Finocchietto.



## Italian Villages

the former storage sheds. Bathrooms were updated, but not overly so. (The guest directory devotes two whole pages to plumbing instructions.) Each of the four outbuildings has its own kitchen, dining, and living room; in the main house are two dining rooms, a parlor, a library with a vaulted ceiling, a cantina for wine tastings, a banquet and conference hall, and a brand-new, retro-modern kitchen.

From the outside, however, the *borgo* looks pretty much as it does in the sepia-toned photographs displayed in the library—albeit with tidier lawns. Footpaths were relaid with flagstones; flowerbeds were planted with lavender, rosemary, sage, and thyme, which perfume the breeze that slips over the hills. All the functional anachronisms—the air-conditioning system, the laundry, the 18-car garage—have been concealed underground. A sleek gym and spa were cleverly tucked into the hillside behind a nine-foot wall of glass, out of the sight lines of the village above. The swimming pool and tennis and basketball courts are likewise hidden down the hill. Stand on that manicured green, squint, and you might believe this was still a working village.

Borgo Finocchietto officially opened in spring 2008, and has since operated mainly by word of mouth. Word passed quickly. The exuberantly social Phillips knows approximately half the population of Washington, D.C., and Douglass, a former ABC News correspondent and traveling press secretary on the Obama campaign, likely knows the rest. In one hallway is a framed note from Teddy and Vicky Kennedy, who visited the *borgo* in 2006, in the midst of renovations. Alice Waters, another friend of Phillips, is Finocchietto's unofficial culinary consultant.

While it has the services and polish of a luxury resort, including a full-time staff of nine, Borgo Finocchietto is not a conventional hotel. The target clientele is not so much independent travelers (though individual bookings are welcome) but groups, who might book a single house or even the entire village. Phillips anticipates a mix of celebratory gatherings (family reunions, birthday or anniversary parties)

and high-minded retreats (academic conferences, educational programs, think-tank summits). Ultimately he sees the *borgo* becoming “a place for culture, arts, food, music, policy, and ideas,” on the model of, say, the Aspen Institute—or, for that matter, the American Academy in Rome, of which Phillips is a trustee. “This place works so well in bringing people together, even people who didn't know each other beforehand,” he says.

That was certainly the case during my visit. The *borgo* was near-full, giving it the lively air of a proper village. At traditional country resorts, one's instinct is to seek out a private corner and keep to oneself, but at Finocchietto an easy communal feeling prevailed. For all the time and money spent on renovations, the *borgo* maintains a remarkably unpretentious, even homey, feel; there's a softness, a worn-ness to the place that can only come from centuries of everyday use. The crowd that weekend was a balance of hotel guests and a few old friends of Phillips. My wife and I knew not a soul among them, but within a few hours of arriving we were bonding over a rowdy 12-person bocce tournament. We all lingered long over breakfasts on the terrace—oven-warm cornetti, prosciutto di Parma with melon from the garden—then went our separate ways in the afternoons, biking, touring wineries, visiting Siena or Montalcino. At sundown we reassembled for communal dinners in the main house, under forged-iron candelabras and ceiling beams the size of tree trunks. Luigi Ricci, the *borgo*'s chef, who spent 20 years working with Paul Bocuse, conjured great rustic feasts of Cinta Senese, Chianina steaks, luscious housemade mozzarella, and papardelle with rabbit ragù.

Alice Waters herself happened to be at the *borgo* that weekend as well. On our final Sunday she was inspired to clear the cobwebs from the 500-year-old oven, gather some olive-wood kindling, and fire up some note-perfect crostini with ricotta and honey. We devoured it while sitting on the lawn, gazing out over the shimmering fields of the Val d'Orcia, then settled in for one last postprandial round of bocce. There are worse afternoons. +

Peter Jon Lindberg is T+L's editor-at-large.

## BUYER'S GUIDE

### NEWSFLASH: FASHION

**PAGE 50** Rachel Olesker (Viceroy Anguilla; 264/497-7000; viceroyhotelsandresorts.com); Myne (W Hotels, The Store; 800/453-6548; whotelsthestore.com); Samba Soleil by Tina Bossidy (Escape at the Cove, the Cove Atlantis, Bahamas; 242/363-3000; atlantis.com); Virginia Johnson (Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita, Mexico; 52-329/291-6000; fourseasons.com); Maloles (select One&Only Resorts; 866/552-0001; oneandonlyresorts.com); Anya Hindmarch (Le Sereno, St. Bart's; 888/537-3736; lesereno.com).

### STYLISH TRAVELER: TRAVEL UNIFORM

**PAGE 52** Tropic Air (tropicairenkya.com; price for helicopter safaris upon request); Lemarti's Camp (lemartiscamp.com; doubles from \$1,500); Etro (select Etro stores; etro.com); Worn Jeans (800/927-7671; zappos.com); Ed Hardy (Macy's; 800/289-6229; macys.com); Carolyn Roumeguere (carolynroumeguere.com); Anna Trzebinski (studio@annatrzebinski.biz); L.L. Bean (800/809-7057; llbean.com); Bose (800/444-2673; bose.com); Maglite (800/289-6241; maglite.com); Prada (prada.com); Boots (888/476-0035; shopbootsusa.com); Dr. Hauschka (800/247-9907; drhauschka.com); Ren (732/553-1185; renskincare.com); La Mer (866/850-9400; lamer.com).

### STYLISH TRAVELER: FASHION

**PAGE 56** Ralph Lauren Collection (select Ralph Lauren stores; 888/475-7674; ralphlaurencollection.com); Mandarin Oriental, New York (866/801-8880; mandarinoriental.com; doubles from \$750).

**Travel + Leisure** (ISSN 0041-2007) is published monthly 12 times a year by American Express Publishing Corporation, 1120 Ave. of the Americas, New York, NY 10036. Subscription: 12 issues, \$45.00; in Canada, \$57.00 (publisher's suggested price). Single copies \$4.95. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Publications Mail Commercial Sales Agreement No. 40036840 (GST #129480364RT). Publications Mail Agreement 40036840. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: Travel + Leisure, P.O. Box 134, Stn. Main, Markham, Ontario L3P 3J5. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright ©2011 by American Express Publishing Corporation. All rights reserved.

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