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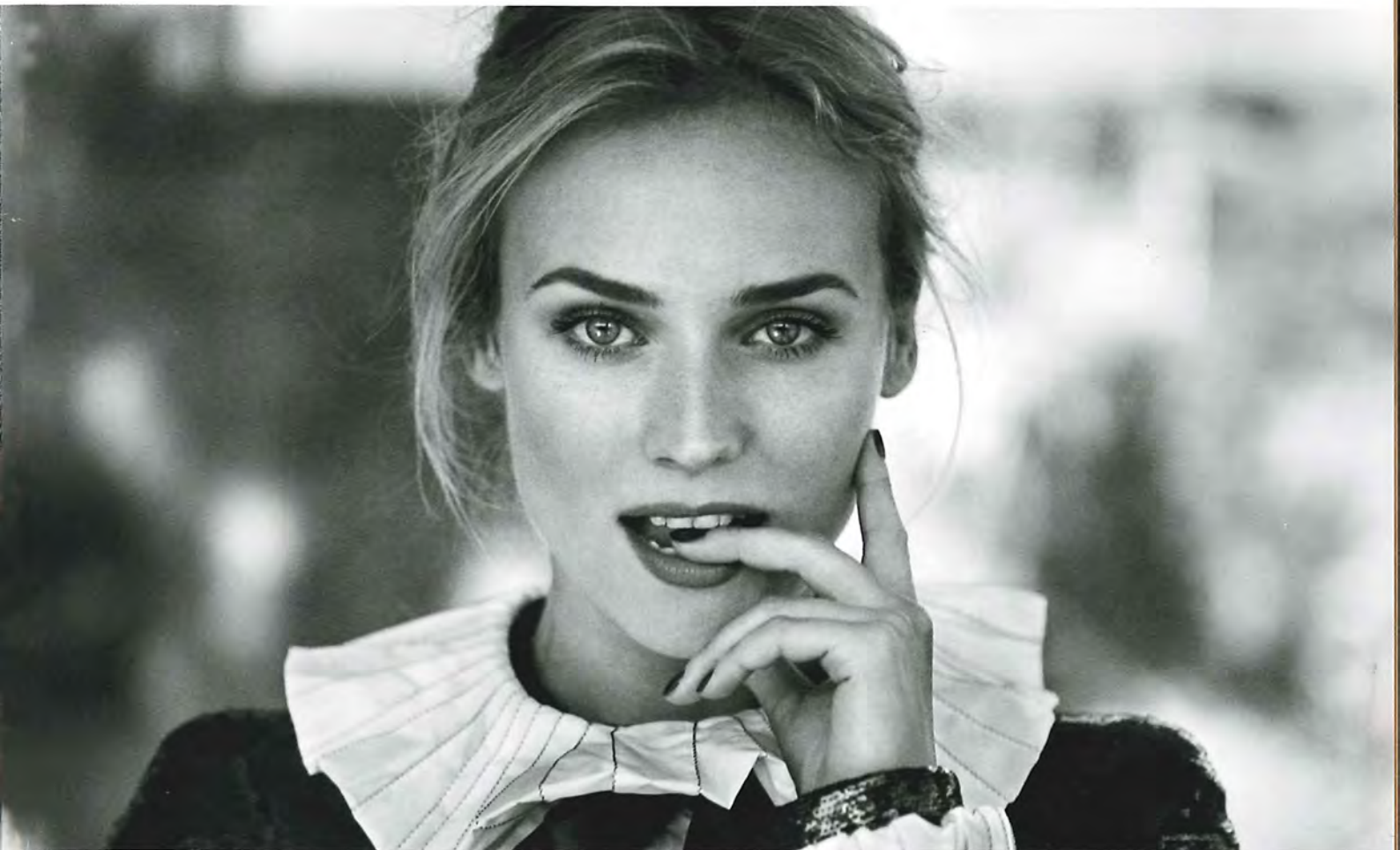
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# TRAVEL



## ESTATE SECRETS

*All over Italy, landowners have turned large properties into wonderful places to stay*

*Sophia Martelli*

In the lower right quadrant of Da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa', a seven-arch bridge is pictured: this is the Ponte Buriano and it has spanned the Arno since 1277. Too narrow for two lanes of traffic, waiting an eternity for the light on the south side to change is normal; driving across, the experience is almost too brief to be appreciated. But you will have left the industrial sprawl surrounding Arezzo behind and entered a timeless, green, undulating cypress-strewn landscape complete with olive groves and a sprinkling of very desirable stone houses.

Italian property, I am assured by estate agents and specialist lawyers, is a great investment — and now is apparently a brilliant time to buy because at the top end of the market, prices are down 20 per cent. 'The market is flat, Italians are not buying or selling and they're not advertising either,' says Georgia Catarama of Withers Worldwide. This may not sound promising, but 'if an owner knows someone is interested, they are often happy to sell in a private, off-market negotiation' — and with a price tag the buyer is happy with.



The trouble with property is that one tends only to hear the I-picked-it-up-for-a-few-million-lire-and-now-it's-worth-millions-of-pounds stories (particularly prevalent in Tuscany in the mid-2000s). So what do you do if you didn't? The obvious answer is that — for far less capital outlay and without the headaches that come with ownership — you can experience the Italian dream by staying in one of the country's many gently restored ancient properties.

La Vialla, an *agriturismo* estate about ten minutes (by car, not cart) from Arezzo, is a good place to start. Comprising 3,000 acres of a hillside, with vineyards, olive groves, grazing sheep and a few discreet solar panels, it's a collection of farms that was bought by four families in 1978 and developed into a wonderfully efficient and stylish *agriturismo* by the Lo Franco family.

*Coppola first visited his family's village in Italy in 1962. 'It was like hearing about a fairytale setting and then suddenly finding it was a real place. I was enchanted'*

Above: The grounds and golf course of Castelfalfi

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The three sons now run it with the helping hands of their parents, and until last year the youngest, Bandido, lived in the main farmhouse with his young family.

There are over 23 restored and secluded farmhouses on the estate that you or I can stay in — large, clean rooms; wood fires (as well as central heating); space to eat and admire the views; and a distinct lack of wifi. Wild boars in the woods. Simplicity itself, really, and excellent value for money: Spedale, which sleeps ten, is rented out for €130 a night. There's even a ready-made social life should you want it: on Tuesdays and Wednesdays guests and locals can eat at communal tables under the trees, often with 80 or 90 at a sitting.

Apart from the salami — which is local — the good, uncomplicated food is all produced by Fattoria La Vialla: bread and biscotti straight from the bakery (the mill that grinds the wheat came from the monastery at nearby La Verna, on condition that it was used; it is, daily); salty, creamy Pecorino cheese from the grazing sheep (via the space-age, super-hygienic dairy); pasta sauces from the vegetable garden. Antipasti of bruschetta with artichoke or chicken liver pâté or roasted red pepper, delicious fennel and chilli marinated olives issue from the kitchen — as do olive oil and wine (Chianti, sparkling, Vin Santo), which are brought up from the cellars on a very regular basis, and are made on the premises in enormous, EU part-funded steel vats. You can even taste La Vialla at home, by ordering food directly from their lavish hardback catalogue-cum-recipe book (which also includes accounts of walks around the area, reviews of nearby restaurants, a short history of the Tuscan farmhouse, and family photographs — for example, the Lo Franco brothers with their wives, on Vespas and looking like Jamie-and-Jules-Oliver in triplicate). This place is what I would call a 'find'.

So too is La Foce, in Val d'Orcia, the estate famous for its early 20th-century garden designed by Cecil Pinsent, tended by the aristocratic American writer Iris Origo. As well as the extraordinary vistas, there are ten luxuriously restored properties available to make your own for a week, and they come with swimming pools (but at more aristocratic prices than, say, La Vialla). Even the pig sty has been done up, to excellent effect.

If you're looking to do a similar thing yourself but don't want to get your hands dirty, you could look at Toscana Resort Castelfalfi, once a near-deserted medieval hilltop hamlet in the municipality of Montaiione (population: 5) and since 2007 the property of German holiday company TUI. The entire estate is being restored and when it is finished (chalked up for 2015, though this is Italy), Castelfalfi will have three hotels, several hundred apartments, 11 newbuild villas, 18 farmhouses dotted around the grounds, a 27-hole golf course, spa, cookery school, several pools and a restaurant. If it sounds busy, it isn't: only 0.3 per cent of the land will ever be built on. Apartments start at a rela-

tively reasonable €230,000 for a two-bed and go up to €805,000; the newbuild golf villas are from €1.2 million. The restored farmhouses start at €1.8 million for the smaller size and €2.5 million for the larger *casalis* (or farmhouses). All houses come with their own pools and garden.

Someone who has got the restoration bug in a big way is director Francis Ford Coppola; he moonlights in property restoration and has become a hotelier 'by chance' because so many people have come to stay in his sumptuously designed properties. This is to his guests' advantage, as all his projects are supremely individual, and they're available by the night: in his latest property, Palazzo Margarita in Bernalda, south Italy, you can lounge in Sofia Coppola's bed and admire the faux marble and gold trompe l'oeil trellising.

The whole project is inspired by his family, as his grandfather was born in this small, sleepy-bordering-on-comatose village. Twenty minutes from unspoilt white beaches, Bernalda remains largely unchanged by tourism. With the memories of his parents and paternal grandparents, who had settled in Detroit, looming large in his imagination, Coppola himself first visited in 1962. 'It was like hearing about a fairytale setting and then suddenly finding it was a real place,' he recalls. 'I was enchanted.' After hearing so much from his grandfather, Agostino, he wasn't disappointed. 'Many places, the square of the old village, the church, the castle and the walls were as he described.'

As a result the hotel was a labour of love and he was 'totally involved in each step'. He still has cousins in the village and is always drawn back: 'the great unique food, wine, the character of the people, the little mini festivals always going on — the region itself, the Ionian sea'. While his grandfather painted a picture of the home they had left behind — largely, you imagine, unchanged in the years since — Francis Ford Coppola knew him after he had lost his sight to diabetes. His strongest memory is of his grandfather making out the shape of his features with his hands. Fittingly, the hotel has its own cinema and a vast collection of Italian films.

However, if a few nights isn't enough: to buy or not to buy? What a question — and maybe the problem is the obsession with couching these decisions in commercial terms. Yes, Italy's advantageous capital gains tax (20 per cent for five years, and none after that) is great, but that may change as often as its government does. The thing with these 'investments' is if you really fall for a place — and among the evergreen mist-wreathed slopes of the Italian countryside, well really, who wouldn't — why would you think of selling it?

[www.lavialla.it](http://www.lavialla.it)

[www.coppolaresorts.com/palazzomargarita](http://www.coppolaresorts.com/palazzomargarita)

[www.castelfalfi.co.uk](http://www.castelfalfi.co.uk)