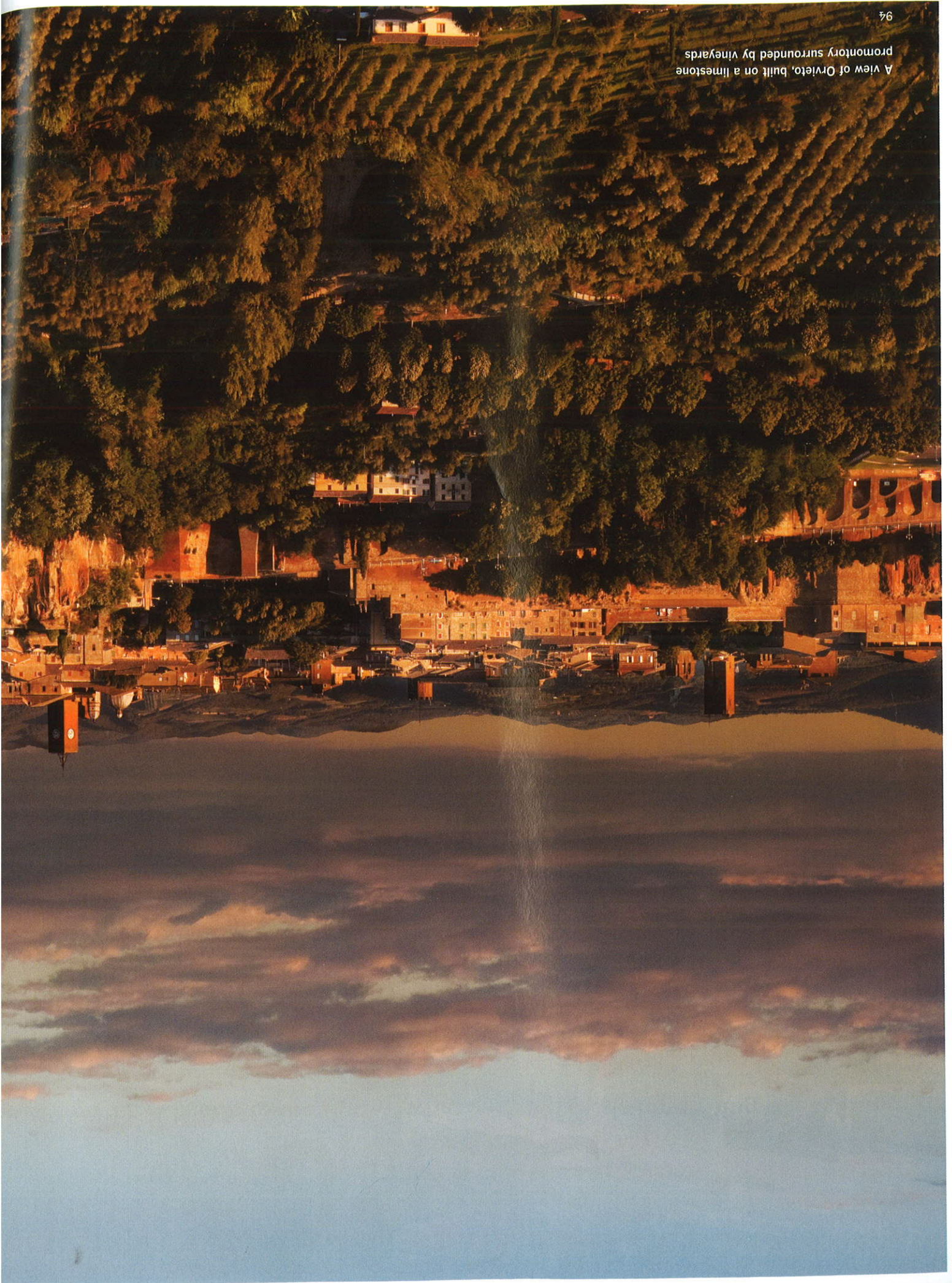


HIGH ART

The Umbrian hill town of Orvieto, set on a natural pedestal, lives up to its elevated position: it is unspoilt, uncrowded and home to some of the most beautiful buildings in Italy

WORDS BY **LEE MARSHALL** PHOTOGRAPHS BY **STEFANO SCATA**

A view of Orvieto, built on a limestone promontory surrounded by vineyards



ORVIETO GUIDE

WHERE TO STAY

Orvieto has some lovely places to stay – but the best options are in the countryside around the town.

● **Locanda Palazzone** (Rocca Ripesena 67; 00 39 0763 393614; www.locanda-palazzone.com; doubles from €170) is the hospitality offshoot of the Palazzone winery –

one of the area's most innovative and quality-conscious. The seven suites are all located in the main building, a fascinatingly incongruous stone palazzo, left, built by a 13th-century cardinal as a sort of country townhouse. The soothing contemporary decor can feel a little bland, but the views are splendid (particularly from Rooms 2 and 7). There's a lovely little pool in the midst of the vineyards, and a talented Japanese chef, Masayoshi, on hand to cook for guests in the evening (no fusion experiments here: Italian regional cuisine is his speciality). And the wine, from the Palazzone cellar next door, is spectacular.

● For suave and luxurious rural style, it doesn't come much better than **I Casali di Monticchio** (Vocabolo Monticchio 34; 00 39 0763 628365; www.monticchio.com; doubles from €265), below, a 12-room resort spread over a series of restored stone houses in what was once a busy borgo, or agricultural village. Everything here is just perfect, from the spectacular grounds with their cypresses, banks of gorse and well-kept kitchen gardens, to the chic, country-style decor.



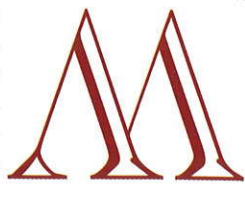
The in-house restaurant serves dishes based around what's in season in the garden. Views stretch across the surrounding crete (eroded clay hills) to Orvieto and beyond. There's also a small spa specialising in massages, mud baths and beauty treatments.

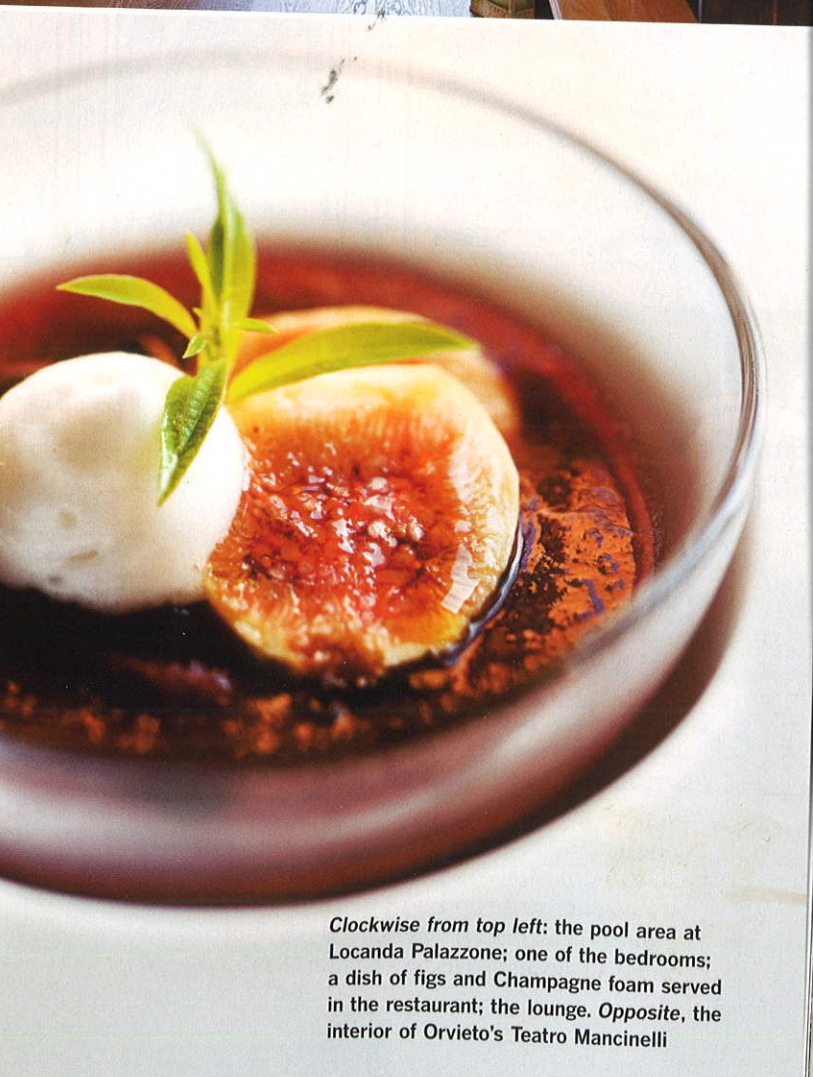
● On the opposite side of the train line and the A1 motorway from Orvieto town – but thankfully not subject to noise from either – **Inncasa** (Località San Giorgio 6; 00 39 0763 393682; www.inncasa.eu; doubles from €117) offers rural luxury on a budget. You choose between a room or suite in the main *casa padronale* or a



HAT IS IT ABOUT central Italian hill-towns like Orvieto? Their appeal goes far beyond the picturesque. I think it has to do with the sense you get, when you're walking around, that these are still, in some sense, proud city states, rather than places where 20,000 people happen to live quite close together. Orvieto, in particular, seems to have been designed for civilised living. Its lofty position and impregnable cliff walls were chosen for security at a time, in the Middle Ages, when the area between Rome and Florence was prey to warring clans looking to extend their territories. But within its gates, this castle-city could turn its mind to culture and civic embellishment.

Built over several generations, the Duomo is one of the seven wonders of Italy; and the dense, organic, medieval fabric of the town dictates the human scale of today's *centro storico*, with its cafes and restaurants, its bookshops, artisans' workshops and antique emporia, its lack of traffic and general air of cultured, calm well-being. Orvieto's civic pride comes through in such events as the annual Corpus Domini festival, when more than 400 citizens process through the streets in medieval costume, or in pretty little Teatro Mancinelli, one of those well-attended provincial theatres, full of mirrors, chandeliers and florid neoclassical frescos, that Italy is so good at. First-timers should try to approach on the Bolsena road which, at a certain point, crests a ridge opposite Orvieto. The picture that greets you here is a distillation of Italian virtues: a cluster of towers, churches and terracotta-roofed houses at one





Clockwise from top left: the pool area at Locanda Palazzone; one of the bedrooms; a dish of figs and Champagne foam served in the restaurant; the lounge. Opposite, the interior of Orvieto's Teatro Mancinelli



The Duomo, Orvieto's cathedral, which was begun in the 13th century and completed in the 20th. Opposite, top right, a view of the countryside near Orvieto from Via Ripa Medici, on the western edge of the town.

➤ separate cottage with its own little garden. Rooms are decorated in a rather functional, contemporary-country style, but they're spacious for the price, and it's the extras that count here: not one but two swimming pools (though neither is



particularly large); a spa with massage rooms, a sauna, a Turkish bath and a heated plunge pool; and slides and a five-a-side football

pitch for kids. The restaurant, *left*, does good country cooking at competitive prices, and there's an excellent wine list (the hotel's owner is a professional sommelier). Another plus is that, unlike most country hotels in the area, Inncasa is open all year except for January.

● Hotels in town are more of a problem; I was impressed neither by Palazzo Piccolomini, the rather cold historic 'boutique' option nor the staid, traditional four-star Aquila Bianca. The best choice, if you want to be right in the centre, is probably the **Hotel Virgilio** (piazza del Duomo 5/6; 00 39 0763 394937; www.orvietohtotelvirgilio.com; doubles from €120), which has a side view of the Duomo. Recently refurbished, it's clean and bright, the service is friendly, and its 13 rooms are enlivened by stencilled decorative details. Another delightful *centro storico* address for those on a budget – or anyone looking for a charming alternative away from the main tourist streets – is **Ripa Medici** (vicolo Ripa Medici 14; 00 39 0763 341343; www.ripamedici.it; doubles from €65) a B&B on a pretty lane that runs along the top of the walls at the western edge of Orvieto's *rupe*, or rock platform. It has just two lovely rooms, with breathtaking views over the surrounding countryside.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK



Orvieto has a quietly confident gastronomic scene that attracts lunch and dinner custom from as far afield as Rome and Florence.

● My tip for the best-value gourmet meal in town is **Il Saltapicchio** (piazza XXIX Marzo 8; 00 39 0763 341805; open daily), a restaurant and wine bar that opened in 2008 under young local chef Valentina Santanicchio, *above*. Set on a square ➤



with the hill they rise from, surrounded on all sides by a bucolic landscape of vineyards, olive groves and smallholdings.

But most visitors arrive by train or on the A1 motorway from Rome or Florence; and here, on the eastern side, Orvieto is more rock than town. The volcanic outcrop on which the town nests looms above the plain like a bluff that has somehow drifted here from Monument Valley. It has moods, according to the sky and weather. On gloomy days I've seen it looming black like the mountains of Mordor. In summer it goes dusty and washed-out in the glare of the midday sun, but then fires up russet-red as evening approaches. After rain, it's the colour of wet earth, and seems just as prone to crumble away.

ORVIETO ALSO DEMONSTRATES the eminently sustainable, eco-friendly nature of the Italian hill-town. The narrow streets limit traffic, and in any case this is not a town where you would ever need a car. Most visitors arrive by train and take the funicular railway up to piazza Cahen, where little electric buses wait to transport them into piazza Duomo. Those who do arrive by car can park near the station and take the same route, or leave their wheels around the western side of the walls in the Foro Boario, where an escalator and lift excavated in the rock function as time machines, depositing one in the heart of the medieval town.

If one building could sum up the glory that small, independent communes like this could achieve in the Middle Ages in central Italy, it's the Duomo. This stripy miracle in alternate bands of pale and dark marble was built, like all Italy's great Gothic cathedrals, over several decades or even centuries, like an oak tree planted for future generations. Sensibly, the locals used it while it was still a building site: the first mass was celebrated here in 1297, seven years after pope Nicholas IV laid the foundation stone; but the façade, with its geometric game of triangles, squares and circles, its gilded mosaics and ornate pinnacles, was not properly in place until 1380, while the lofty interior was a work in progress until the beginning of the 17th century. In fact, one might argue that that Duomo was not properly 'finished' until 1970, when three sets of bronze doors made by sculptor Emidio Greco were installed in the façade to replace the temporary wooden ones that had been there since the 14th century.

The first thing that strikes you about Orvieto's Duomo is its celestial scale; the second is the humanity of the details. The façade seems designed to dazzle, but walk up the steps and observe the four bas-relief marble panels that flank the three doors. Here, in a series of Old and New Testament scenes, are some of the most exquisite Gothic sculptures in all Italy. The higher ones are difficult to view without binoculars or a zoom lens, but luckily some of the most exquisite modelling is on the lower level. In the Creation of the Fish, Birds and Plants, sculptor Lorenzo Maitani has somehow managed to convey, in marble, the effect of fish swimming just below the surface of a fast-running stream.

The interior is majestic in scale; but the soft, burnished light that filters through the alabaster windows, and the simplicity of the single nave divided by arch-bearing

– make this one of Italy's most peaceful and spiritual cathedrals. columns – more Romanesque than Gothic, more Early Church than Catholic pomp
 There is, however, one aspect of the Duomo that is rich, theatrical and showy: the Last Judgement frescoes in the Cappella di San Brizio, painted between 1499 and 1504. Here, Luca Signorelli left behind an artistic testament that is as impressive in technique and conception as Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. In these scenes of the Antichrist, the Resurrection of the Flesh and the Calling of the Saved, Signorelli was caught between the theological need to awe and educate, and his desire to show off. In the Resurrection of the Flesh, there's a gratuitous body-building contest going on, encouraged by an artist keen to show his grasp of musculature and his mastery of perspective. Something similar happens in the End of the World lunette, where three plague victims are laid out head to toe in an audacious display of foreshortening. It's a confident Renaissance party piece, a long way from the self-effacing piety of the facade, but no less enjoyable for that.
 The other thing to do in Orvieto is to go underground. The tufa platform on which the town stands is honeycombed with more than a thousand cellars, grottoes, passageways and vertical shafts. When used in building blocks, tufa is as strong a load-bearing stone as marble; but you can dig into it with a teaspoon. Using rather more efficient tools, the locals have been doing just that since Etruscan times, to create wine cellars, storage rooms, water conduits and secret refuges from surface war and strife.
 Organised by the town's tourist office, the 'Orvieto Underground' tour is a good introduction to this alternative, subterranean city. Tracing a route through just two of



away from the main tourist routes, it serves a seasonal menu (summer dishes on my visit included delicious ravioli filled with courgettes and burrata ricotta) based mainly on fresh produce from Santaricchio's mum's farm, while her partner Moreno is a personable front-of-house host and good wine adviser. The decor is bright and contemporary – in keeping with the jazzy background music, which for once enhances rather than interferes with the meal. Allow €30 a head with a decent bottle of wine.
 ● **Giustino Volpe** is the larger-than-life chef-host at **Piazza del Popolo** (piazza del Popolo 2/3; 00 39 0763 343463; closed Thurs), the place to go for good-value gourmet food. He is a man of strong opinions on everything from food to politics, and he likes to share them with his guests. Don't be put off by the rather dowdy decor: Volpe is one of the most talented chefs in Orvieto. He likes to pick and mix from Italy's regional traditions and products: in one persuasive dish, *canevelli* dumplings from up north are combined with scallops, Gaeta olives, fresh pea purée and Tuscan mortadella made from the meat of Cinta Senese pigs. At around €40 a head, wine included, this is a good place to have a sumptuous meal without going for broke.
 ● Though it gets into all the guides, I'm less enamoured of **I Sette Consoli** (piazza Sant'Angelo 1a; 00 39 0763 343911; closed Wed). The walls are beige and so is the atmosphere, while the service, though professional, has a gruff edge. Foodies may forgive all this, however, when they taste chef Anna Rita Simoncini's cuisine: dishes such as Grangnano spaghetti with a pesto of rocket, sun-dried tomatoes, almonds and fresh anchovies balance creativity with solid Italian regional flavour. There's also an excellent wine list, including a good by-the-glass selection. Allow at least €55 a head with wine – though there's a six-course taster menu at €42.
 ● For location, location, location, head to **Vinousus** (piazza del Duomo 15; 00 39 0763 341907; closed Mon; also closed Sun evening, Nov–Mar), a pretty wine bar and restaurant right beside the Duomo, with a panoramic terrace overlooking the rooftops of the centro storico and side views of the cathedral. Inside, worn floorboards play off against a *belle époque* frescoed ceiling and elegant table settings. The cuisine is competent, creative trattoria fare (tagliatelle in duck sauce, Orvieto-style salt cod), though the wine service could be better, given

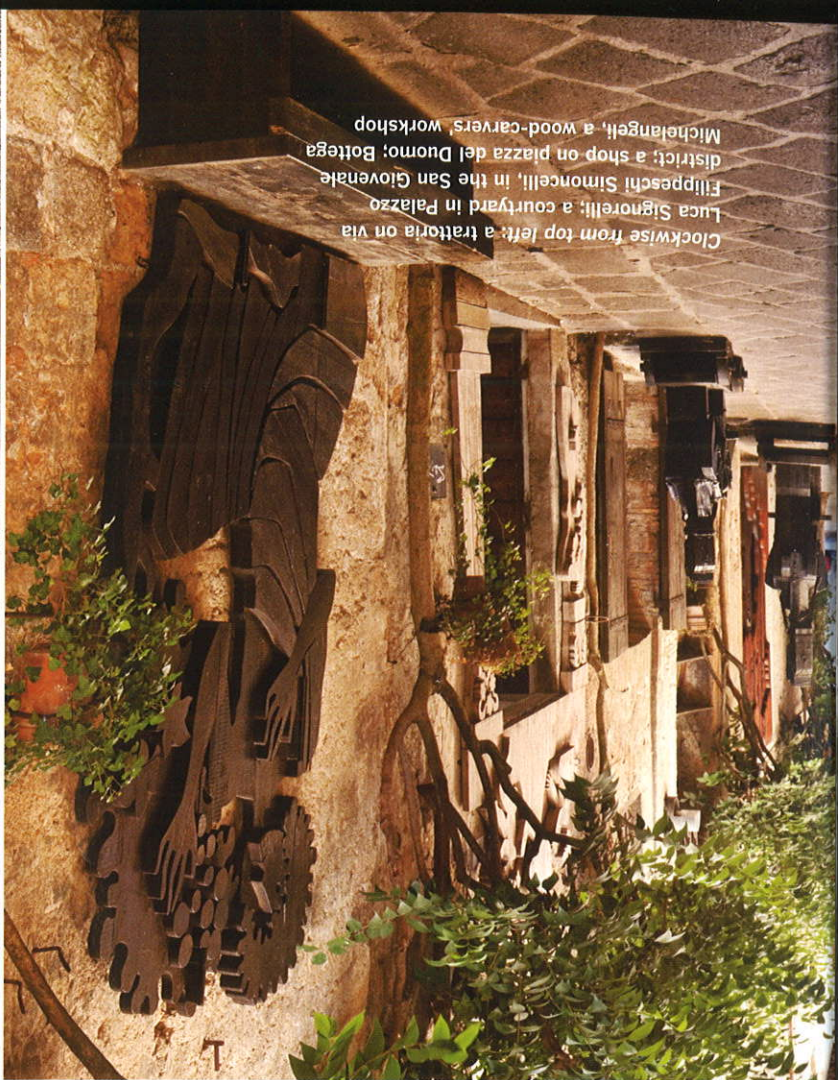
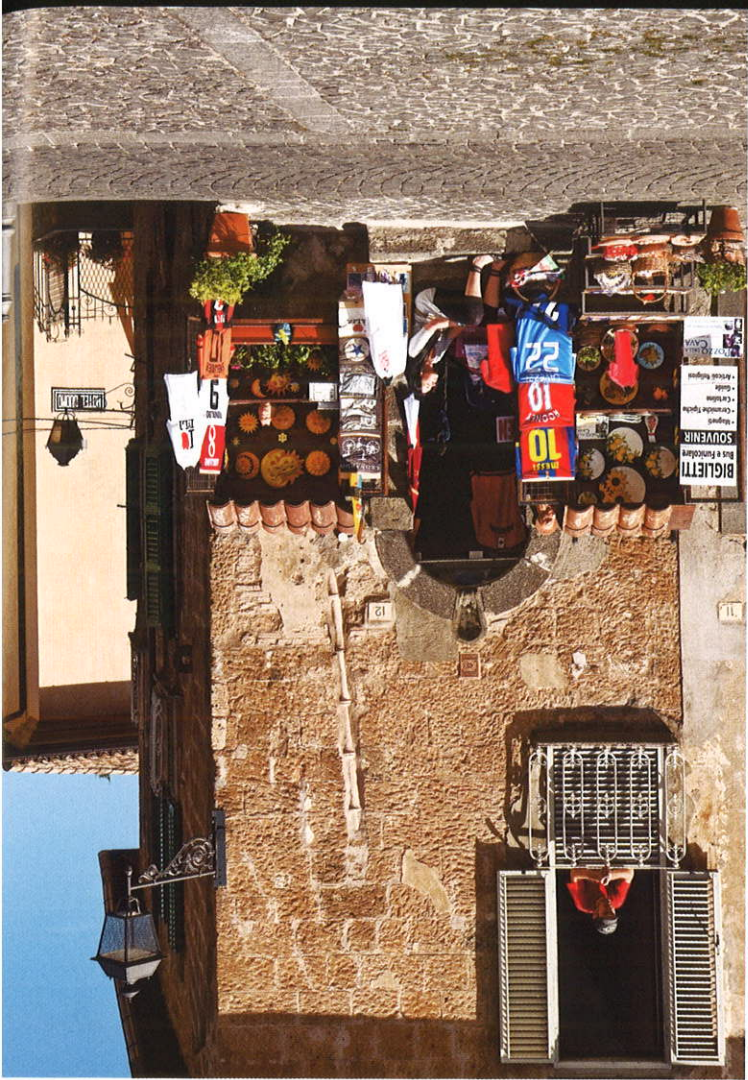


inside, worn floorboards play off against the cathedral.

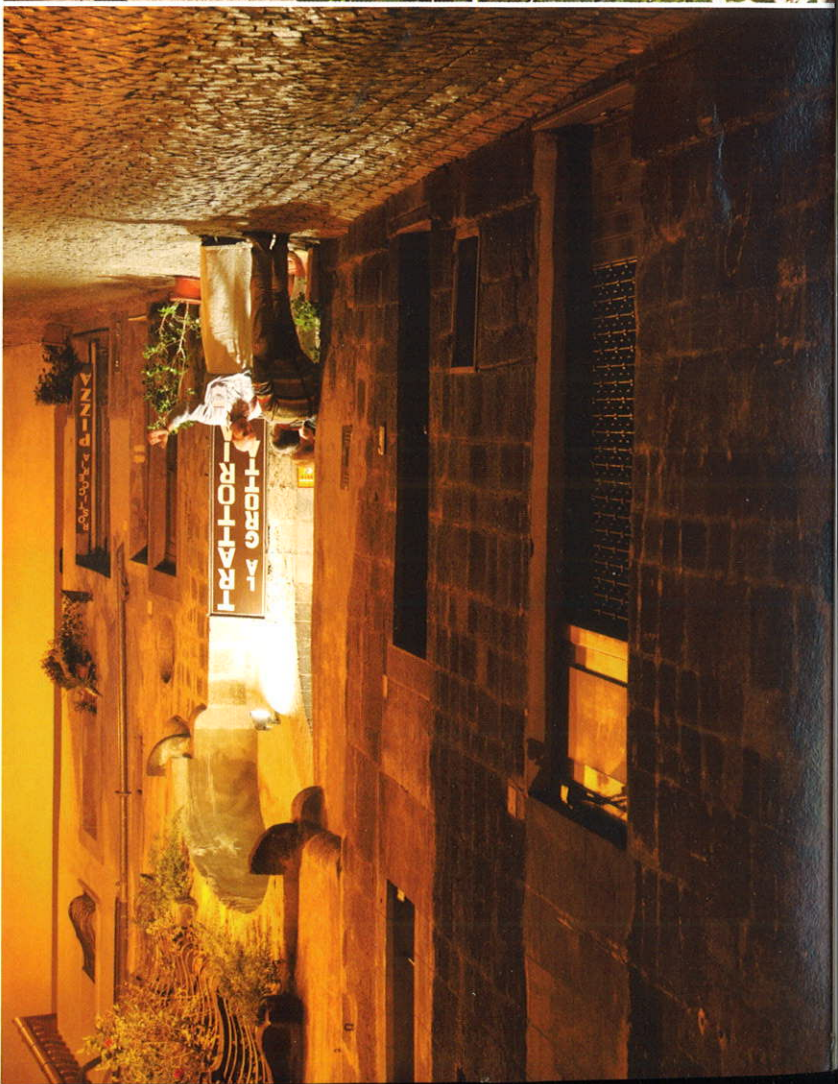


THE ROCK ON WHICH THE TOWN STANDS IS HONEYCOMBED WITH MORE THAN A THOUSAND CELLARS, GROTTOES, PASSAGEWAYS AND VERTICAL SHAFTS

Pozzo di San Patrizio, the well designed in 1527 by Antonio da Sangallo. *Opposite, above left, the Capella di San Brizio, one of the chapels in the Duomo, decorated with Luca Signorelli's Last Judgement frescos*



Clockwise from top left: a trattoria on via Michelangelo, a shop on piazza del Duomo; Bottega district; Filippo Simioncelli, in the San Giovanni Lupatoto; a courtyard in Palazzo Signorelli



► the name (asked what whites were available by the glass, the waiter proposed only 'Orvieto' – not exactly an original choice – and brought a glass without bothering to specify year or producer). You can expect to spend about €40 a head with wine.

● If it's a traditional trattoria you're after, head for the unchanging, ever-reliable **Trattoria dell'Orso** (via della Misericordia 18/20; 00 39 0763 341642; closed Mon and Tues). From the rustic decor to the traditional dishes – *bruschetta* and salami starters; tagliatelle with wild-boar sauce; rabbit stewed with red peppers – all is reassuringly Umbrian. Allow €25 a head with a carafe of house wine.

● To buy wine you can either visit the individual wineries down in the valley or save time by stocking up at an enoteca up in town. **Enoteca La Loggia** (corso Cavour 129; 00 39 0763 341657; open Mon–Sat 9am–1pm, 4.30pm–8pm) has an excellent selection.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Orvieto's main **tourist office** is in piazza del Duomo, but there are also branches by the train station and at the upper exit of the funicular in piazza Cahen (see also the Umbria tourism website www.regioneumbria.eu). If you're planning to see four or five of the main sights and museums with an entrance fee, it's worth investing in a **Carta Unica Orvieto** (www.cartaunica.it), which for €18 (€15 concessions) gives free access to nine sights (including the Duomo, the Pozzo di San Patrizio, Orvieto Underground, the Torre del Moro and the rewarding Museo Claudio Faina archaeological collection), plus a free return trip from the station to piazza del Duomo via the funicular and the electric minibus that connects with it.

GETTING TO ORVIETO

The best way to get to Orvieto is via Rome or Perugia. **Alitalia** (www.alitalia.com), **British Airways** (www.ba.com) and **EasyJet** (www.easyjet.com) fly to Rome's Fiumicino airport from a range of UK airports; Ciampino, south of the city, is served by **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com). Ryanair also flies from Stansted to Perugia.

Journey time: Flights from London to Rome or Perugia take about two-and-a-half hours. Both Rome airports are 90 minutes' drive from Orvieto, traffic permitting; the drive from Perugia, via Todi, takes about 70 minutes. The fast train from Rome gets to Orvieto in 45 minutes (www.trenitalia.com).

WEATHER TO GO

Spring is a great time to visit Orvieto, with average daytime temperatures of around 25°C and very little rain.



the 1,200 or so documented man-made caves that burrow down into the rock, it takes in quarries, olive-oil mills, tanneries, pottery kilns, bakeries and even dovecotes, their regular chequerboard niches reminding us where the word 'pigeonhole' comes from (the birds were eaten, not fancied; they flew out through holes in the side of Orvieto's rocky base to feed, and came back in the evening plump and ready for cooking). It's a constant 15°C down here – delightfully cool in summer, pleasantly warm in winter.

BUT THE MAIN REASON why the people of Orvieto burrowed down into the rock was to find water. On top of this porous platform, whatever water falls from the sky is soon lost. The springs that gush out at the base, where the tufa meets a layer of impermeable clay, were fine in times of peace; but when besieged inside their near-impregnable fortress-city, the townspeople needed a reliable water supply. Underground rainwater cisterns fed by part-natural, part-manmade conduits were one answer; but the only fail-safe method was to dig down through the rock to reach the water table. This was done most impressively in 1527, when Pope Clement VII, who had taken refuge in Orvieto from the Sack of Rome, commissioned architect Antonio da Sangallo to build a well that would supply the whole city. Ten years in the making, the result was the Pozzo di San Patrizio (St Patrick's Well), perhaps Orvieto's most essential sight after the Duomo.

Sixty-two metres deep and 13 wide, the well is a remarkable feat of engineering. Two independent, overlapping spirals twist down to the bottom: a large-scale Renaissance DNA molecule. Their steps are gently shelving, allowing them to be negotiated easily by the donkeys that were used to bring water up. It feels like you've walked into an Escher print as you descend past the 72 arched windows that give onto the central shaft. The Roman couple in front of me were in less metaphorical mode: 'Five euros,' the man complained to his wife, 'just to go up and down all these steps!'

Tourist Orvieto is confined to a single souvenir strip, via del Duomo: and the hard sell here is cotton wool compared to Florence, Rome or Venice. It's worth getting lost in the backstreets beyond (you can get your bearings, appreciate the layout of the town and peep into some of its secret gardens by climbing to the top of the Torre del Moro).

San Giovenale, at the western edge of Orvieto's rock platform, is Orvieto's most villagey district: a dense tangle of low houses connected by narrow lanes and stairways, rising to the ancient church of the same name, which received the first of many makeovers in 1004. In summer, locals turn the square outside into an open-air living room. So it's *buona sera* all round, and then one of those views that you came to Italy for. From the walls, the fertile Paglia valley, its fields combed into neat vineyards set off by yellow patches of sunflowers, stretches away to the north, bordered by the chiaroscuro ridges of the eroded hills between Alleronia and Fabro. Come at sunset with a bottle of summery Orvieto Classico and a wedge of tangy pecorino cheese. Yes, *la dolce vita* can be this simple.