

Umbria Paradiso: Italy's gorgeous green heart

Deep in Italy's gorgeous green heart, Gemma O'Doherty discovered a romantic retreat in a fairytale setting where ancient ruins have been turned into stunning villas



By Gemma O'Doherty
Saturday January 22 2011

It's early morning in the Umbrian countryside and the valley below us is a blanket of mist. As the first rays of dawn break through the night sky, it slowly starts to lift and a picture of rustic perfection appears before our eyes.

Rewind 500 years and it can't have looked much different. From the terrace of our bedroom, we sip freshly brewed espresso and play spot the mod con in this Renaissance masterpiece, but apart from a shimmering infinity pool in our lavender-scented garden, the view from our villa is beautifully bereft of any trappings of these times.

There are no roads, no cars, no telegraph poles; just the occasional tinkle of a cow bell in the distance over a quilt of Mediterranean oak and sweet-chestnut trees, and lush hilltops crowned with medieval castles and crumbling ruins.

The day before, we took a leisurely drive from Bologna through the mountains of central Italy to Castello di Reschio, a private estate stretching over miles of pristine countryside overlooking [Tuscany](#).

It was here, 25 years ago, that an exiled Hungarian nobleman stumbled upon an untouched pocket of paradise. Count Antonio Bolza's ancestors left Italy in the 17th century to serve as bankers to the court of Vienna and help finance the war against the Turks from conquering western [Europe](#).

Almost a century later, the family moved to [Hungary](#) and lived on vast estates which they lost during the war. In 1949, they left as refugees and Count Antonio, who was just five at the time, was carried on his father's back across the border to Austria.

Left with virtually nothing but their lives, they started from scratch and returned to prosperity again.

Having built up a successful publishing career in [Britain](#) and Germany, in 1984, the count took his young family on a driving holiday to Umbria and found a dilapidated bell tower on an acre of land which would become their summer retreat.

Before long, he decided to re-establish his roots back in Italy and make Umbria his home.

But there was a matter of some derelict ruins near his new home to get sorted first. He dreaded the prospect of someone else snapping them up and altering his parcel of perfection, so he approached the owner of the estate, who lived in the local castle, and asked if he could buy them.

After several rejections, the landlord had a change of heart and offered him the entire estate: 50 tumbledown farmhouses, many of them more than 500 years old, an 11th-century fairytale castle and 2,700 acres of rolling countryside.

The count jumped at the chance, sold his business and put everything he owned into the estate. His plan was to restore these sleepy ruins for romantically minded buyers in search of their own Italian idyll.

Today, more than half of these old stone piles have been turned into stunning private homes under the meticulous eye of his son, Benedikt, a [London](#)-trained architect who lives in the castle with his wife Nencia, a Florentine princess, and their five young children.

Strict planning laws in Umbria, unlike [Ireland](#), protect not only the buildings but the entire countryside, forbidding any new developments in rural areas and guaranteeing the preservation of the ancient landscape. Each farmhouse is restored with meticulous attention to detail by experienced local artisans, who use reclaimed materials to preserve the original architectural character.

The finished product is breathtaking. Each property is designed from the ground up according to the wishes of the owner, with every conceivable comfort, from underfloor heating and state-of-the-art music systems to discreet heated swimming pools and terraced gardens that merge with the surrounding countryside.

But the real luxury of these pleasure palaces, which cost about €6.5 million each, is the privacy they afford. There's little chance of the neighbours dropping by as the nearest house is rarely closer than a 15-minute trek away. After dark you can peer deep into the dark, but you'll barely spot the twinkle of another light in the distance.

Many of the owners are ultra-rich foreigners who crave this sort of seclusion but can't grab more than a few weeks in their villas during the year.

Some opt to rent them out on short-term lets. And that's how we acquired the keys of San Paolo, a sublimely positioned three-storey property the stuff dream houses are made of.

Imbued with Italian flair, a labyrinth of light-filled rooms featuring exposed beams, terracotta tiles, stone fireplaces and wraparound views of the countryside lay before us as we stepped through the front door and explored every nook and cranny of this stunning mansion.

The property originally served as a parish house, and up a small staircase through the cellar we found a frescoed chapel which comes with its own cosy cottage, perfect for a pair of guests who want some quiet time alone.

Alternatively, they could ensconce themselves down in the pool house, which comes with its own double bedroom, kitchen and bar.

When we arrived, Chef Marco had just zipped away on his moped having left a 'starter pack' for us in the fabulous kitchen. A feast of crusty bread, Parma ham, mozzarella, ripe cherry tomatoes, fresh pasta and his own homemade sauce, it could have fed us for the week, but we couldn't resist dinner in the estate's osteria, where exquisite regional dishes are served up in front of a blazing log fire.

On our first morning, we were desperate to explore the surrounding hills and took our hardy [Fiat](#) Panda up the winding country lanes that lead to Poggio, a tiny village perched on the side of a mountain where cats sleep in sun-filled courtyards and grandmothers hang pasta to dry over their front doors.

It was Sunday and Mass was just starting in the 13th-century church of St Francis, where the priest's friendly Dalmatian sat proudly beside his master throughout the service, occasionally descending on the congregation of a dozen for a sniff of its new members. The church's animal-loving patron would hardly have disapproved.

St Francis's nearby home town of Assisi made for another fascinating day out spent exploring the 13th-century frescoes of Giotto in the basilica where he is buried and rambling along the geranium-filled streets stopping for coffee and gelato on the way.

[Perugia](#), the capital of Umbria and one of Italy's best-preserved medieval hill towns, was an unexpected delight too. We drove in late one evening when it was just coming to life, with locals heading out on their nightly passeggiata along the broad avenues and bustling piazzas of the old town.

A student city with two universities, it's party central, with an endless line-up of exuberant events throughout the year, from jazz to a decadent chocolate festival.

But after the buzz of city life, we were keen to return to the sleepy solitude of our mountain refuge to laze by the pool, catch up on some reading and soak up the country air.

The real charm of Reschio is that you can do as little or as much as you want during your stay. The estate is peppered with lovely country walks and mountain-bike tracks. You can join a wild-boar shoot, drop a hook into one of the six lakes, or borrow one of Count Antonio's biddable Andalusian horses for an early morning hack through the fields.

The count developed an interest in Spanish pure bloods when his eldest daughter moved to Seville. He took his first riding lesson at the age of 55 and is a formidable horseman today with a passion for dressage.

Reschio is also home to a stud farm where he breeds and breaks youngsters, including the San Fratello horse, a native breed of Sicily whose numbers are dwindling.

I spent a memorable morning trekking with the Polish groom, Agata, a fine horsewoman who has made the estate her home. Later, we tucked into lunch of perfect wild-mushroom risotto followed by basil ravioli stuffed with burrata cheese, and a divine chocolate soufflé.

The following day, Marco invited us into his kitchen for a morning of pasta making, where we got to know our ravioli from our rigatoni. In less than a hour we had kneaded and shaped six different types and vowed never to buy pasta from a packet again.

The Bolza family have plans to transform the castle into a luxury boutique hotel with 30 suites, making it the centre piece of the estate once again. But for the moment they are keen to develop the rental market to ensure that these magnificent villas are lived in from one season to the next.

But in doing so, they are determined not to alter the atmosphere of Reschio and allow it to venture into the territory of a resort. Then again, rural Umbria does not attract the sort of tourist in search of a rowdy holiday. People come here to enjoy the pleasures of country living, explore the exquisite art and architecture of the region and indulge in gorgeous food and wine.

If that's the sort of break you have in mind, you might just feel as if you've landed in heaven when you step inside this Italian idyll.

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

The closest airport served from Dublin is Bologna or [Rome](#) with [Aer Lingus](#) (0818 365 000; aerlingus.com).

The estate is just over two hours from both. The nearest train stations are: Terontola di Cortona (25 minutes), Arezzo and Chiusi.

STAYING THERE

Weekly rentals at Castello di Reschio start from €1,575 pp in a villa for two. A week in the seven-bedroom San Paolo costs €1,623 pp based on 13 people sharing. All houses come with laundry facilities. Airport transfers, in-house cooking and maid service can be arranged.

In spring and autumn, rentals are slightly cheaper. For bookings contact 0039 075 844 362; reschio.com.

FIVE GREAT THINGS TO DO

Rise before dawn to a sharp espresso and watch the sun rise in Castello de Reschio, one of the most spectacular settings in Italy.

Take home some of the estate's extra-virgin olive oil, totally organic and strictly cold-pressed. You won't taste better.

Visit the beach-fringed shores of Lake Trasimeno, Italy's fourth largest lake. Indulge in chef Marco's superb home cooking at the cosy osteria.

Pay homage to St Francis in Assisi, Umbria's prettiest town

- *Gemma O'Doherty*

This article originally appeared in Weekend