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MARCH
2010

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TUSCAN TREATS

Pamela Goodman and Liz Elliot sample two sybaritic hotels near Siena: one small, and welcoming as any home; the other, occupying an entire medieval village, complete with Gordon Ramsay restaurant

BORGO SANTO PIETRO

Valle Serena: the name itself is enough to make you want to go, but serene though it certainly is, this part of Italy isn't what you'd think of as classic Tuscany. The image of rolling vineyards, avenues of cypresses and endless, picturesque hilltop villages doesn't really apply here; this area, just 30 minutes southwest of Siena, is rugged, arable and heavily wooded, with proper hills rather than gentle undulations, and rivers that flow even after a long, hot summer.

It was here, near the Cistercian abbey of San Galgano, that a London-based Danish couple, Claus and Jeanette Thottrup, lost their hearts to a dilapidated thirteenth-century estate, a one-time retreat

This area is rugged, arable and heavily wooded, with rivers that flow even after a long, hot summer

for pilgrims en route between northern Europe and Rome. Stories of lengthy restorations are not uncommon in this part of the world, and Tuscany has perhaps more than its fair share of houses that have been saved from the brink of dereliction. But this one is rather special - mainly because what could have been a private house, sealed behind closed doors, is in fact a small hotel with all the decorative input and comforts of a truly beautiful home.

Jeanette is one of those people with an enviable

The well-tended gardens at Borgo Santo Pietro (below) complement the comfortable interiors, which have all the decorative input of a beautiful private home. Each of the bedrooms oozes sumptuous theatricality (right), with vast beds, rich silks and velvets, and antique pieces collected locally or in Paris flea markets

eye for texture and colour, so much so that the seven rooms of Borgo Santo Pietro - there are three more in a garden wing - ooze a sense of sumptuous theatricality. Vast, elaborate beds blend with rich silks and velvets; antique pieces, collected locally or in the flea markets of Paris, grace each room - bathrooms included - and hand-painted murals adorn the walls. Many of the rooms have open fires, and Santo Pietro, the principal suite, has a fully furnished terrace like an alfresco drawing room.

The gardens have been equally well tended, brought to life in the English style, complete with orchard, wild-flower meadow, and cut-flower, vegetable and herb gardens. For the active, there are boules and tennis; for the sedentary there are a one-room spa and a small swimming pool with a big view; and for traditionalists there's a huge, made-to-measure glasshouse based on those at Kew.

And finally, a word about the food. Borgo Santo Pietro may be small, but it packs a huge punch in the kitchen. Much of the produce, particularly in summer, comes from the garden; then there's fish from the Italian coast, and lamb and pecorino from a nearby farm. In autumn, local wild boar, mushrooms and truffles feature on the menu - this is Tuscan cuisine and Tuscany at its finest. **PG** Pamela Goodman stayed as a guest of Borgo Santo Pietro (00-39-577 75 1222; www.borgosantopietro.com). Double rooms range in price from about €340 to €1,760 per night, B&B





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, Siennese 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