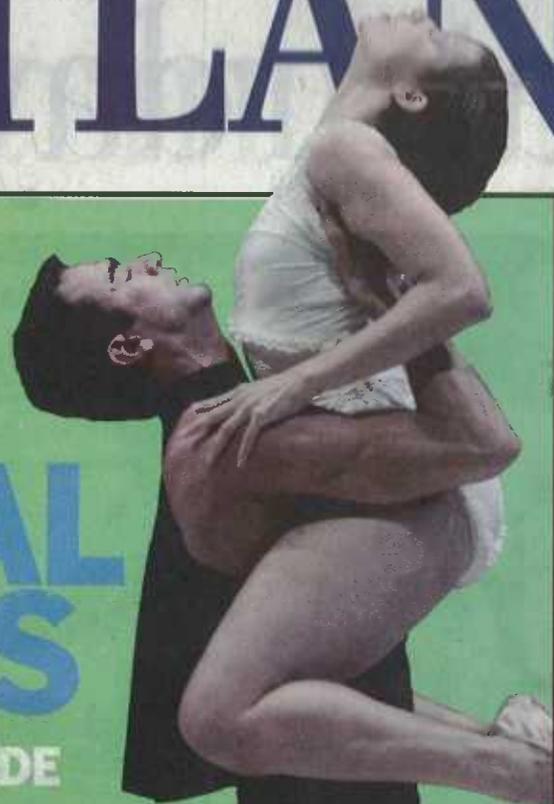




SCOTLAND *on* SUNDAY

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Fashion's favourite
teen comes of age

A converted convent in Tuscany is the place to enjoy a little Italian luxury

WORDS ASHLEY DAVIES

WINDING our way through hilly Tuscan towns with the warm night breeze delivering gentle scents of wood smoke and citronella to our grateful nostrils, it's easy to forget that less than three hours ago we could see our own breath in Edinburgh's soggy spring air.

Two hours after leaving Pisa – the route being a combination of smaller roads and the gallantly named and smooth-as-you-like superstrada – we reach our destination, Castel Monastero, a converted convent in the Ombrone Valley, 15 minutes outside the medieval city of Siena. It's late and it's dark and the stars are bright. Huge pots of lush lavender line the 11th-century courtyard and we make time for a glass or two of an irresistible local chianti before sleeping like innocents.

The following morning I realise we haven't closed one of the heavy wooden window shutters properly, as a thin, vertical beam of light pierces the gentle darkness of the room. It's not even 6am and already the blinding sunshine is insisting we treat ourselves to the view outside. And what a view it is. From the bedroom (and even the enormous bath) we see vineyards and curvaceous green hills, cypress trees and a man walking a crochety old beagle.

The view from the other side of the room is a piazza that for hundreds of years was the centre of this hamlet's life. Dozens of sweetly noisy swallows swoop and dive to and from their nests in the awnings, where their hungry babies await breakfast. In the centre of the piazza is an ancient well, at the top of which is the emblem – a mountain composed of a pyramid of circles with a Masonic-looking star at the top – of the powerful Chigi family that used to own all of this.

The history of this place is extraordinary, and too Italian for words. The main building on the piazza was used as a convent from 860 until the 1100s. The whole area was then bought by the Chigi, who built up the village, bought all the nearby land and kept the local farmers on – initially as slaves and then on an agreement that meant those who worked the land had to hand over half of their produce to their feudal



Piazza and quiet

overlords. The buildings also served as a fortress at one time. The Chigi were almost as powerful as the Medici in this area, two of them even becoming popes.

Ironically, this desire to retain influence within the omnipotent church contributed to their eventual undoing; priests, of course, may not officially continue the family line, and the last Chigi count, who was more interested in being a patron of art and artists and was not the marrying kind, died childless in 1973. The family's impressive art collection is now owned by a large Siennese bank, housed in its vaults and only to be viewed occasionally by the privileged few.

Beside our room is the convent's original church, which is still used for mass on Sundays and for the occasional wedding. A small courtyard beside it was probably once the nuns' cemetery. The working cemetery, on the outskirts of the hamlet, also provides some insight into this area; alongside the photographs on headstones of stern-looking matriarchs, the dates of birth and death indicate that a lot of people around here have lived well into their



HERE'S THE RUB Castel Monastero (main), in Tuscany; one of the local vineyards (above)

90s. This says a lot for the healthy Tuscan lifestyle.

And those are the people who probably don't even use Castel Monastero's extraordinary spa, which is just huge and provides all manner of start-of-the-art and holistic weight-loss and detoxification therapies, including a special hot pool containing water with a salt content ten times that of the Dead Sea. Physician to the stars, Dr Mosaraf

Ali, consults here once a month, and a lot of celebrities – from Morgan Freeman to George Soros – come from all over the world for regular spoiling.

When the Eleganzia hotel group bought the village in 2008, it converted the 13 original buildings into luxury rooms – suites, really – and guests can choose whether they want to be close to the piazza, the vineyard or the spa. One suite provides direct access to the spa, for when discretion is paramount.

The three swimming pools are beautiful too, particularly the infinity pool, which spills over into a smaller, more private one. There is also a large jacuzzi, saunas and steam rooms, and, beside the vineyard, a tennis court.

While Castel Monastero specialises in relaxation and well-being, it is also the place to come if you fancy being taught how to cook by Gordon Ramsay, who has an elegant restaurant here – open from May to September. The menu focuses on local, seasonal produce with a true Tuscan flavour, as does the main restaurant, which is in a large cellar that is stocked, unsurprisingly, with some quite exquisite wines.

The restaurant opens on to one of the gardens, where we watch the soft evening turn into another wonderfully starry night, the candlelight twinkling all around us. The food is pricey, but the view is priceless.

There is plenty of good walking to be done – or you can hire the hotel's scooters – and on one such walk we discover the picturebook-pretty Castello di Montalto, which dates back to 1000 and boasts a courtyard that would inspire any artist.

The castle is now split up into self-catering apartments – making this area somewhat more accessible – and most of them have private balconies overlooking a ridiculously beautiful valley. The owner, a former academic, hosts weekly talks for guests on the history of the place, and there's also a pool and tennis court, while olive oil is produced on the castle's land.

Tuscany should come with a health warning: it is addictive. Everything people say about the light, the laid-back way of life and the joy of consuming products grown specifically from this land – it's all true. ■

FACT FILE

- Italian specialists Classic Collection (0800 294 9318, www.classic-collection.co.uk) offers three nights at the Castel Monastero from £906 per person this September. The price is based on two adults sharing a superior room on a bed & breakfast basis and includes return flights from Edinburgh to Pisa and car hire for three days. Stay in October or November to enjoy four nights for the price of three.
- Castel Monastero (www.castelmonastero.com).
- Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) flies direct from Edinburgh to Pisa.
- Castello di Montalto (www.montalto.it).