

A Labour OF LOVE

When a Hungarian count bought 2,700 of Umbria countryside, dotted with dilapidated buildings, he started a project of a lifetime bringing them back to life. Now you can stay in or even buy them, says *TERESA LEVONIAN COLE*

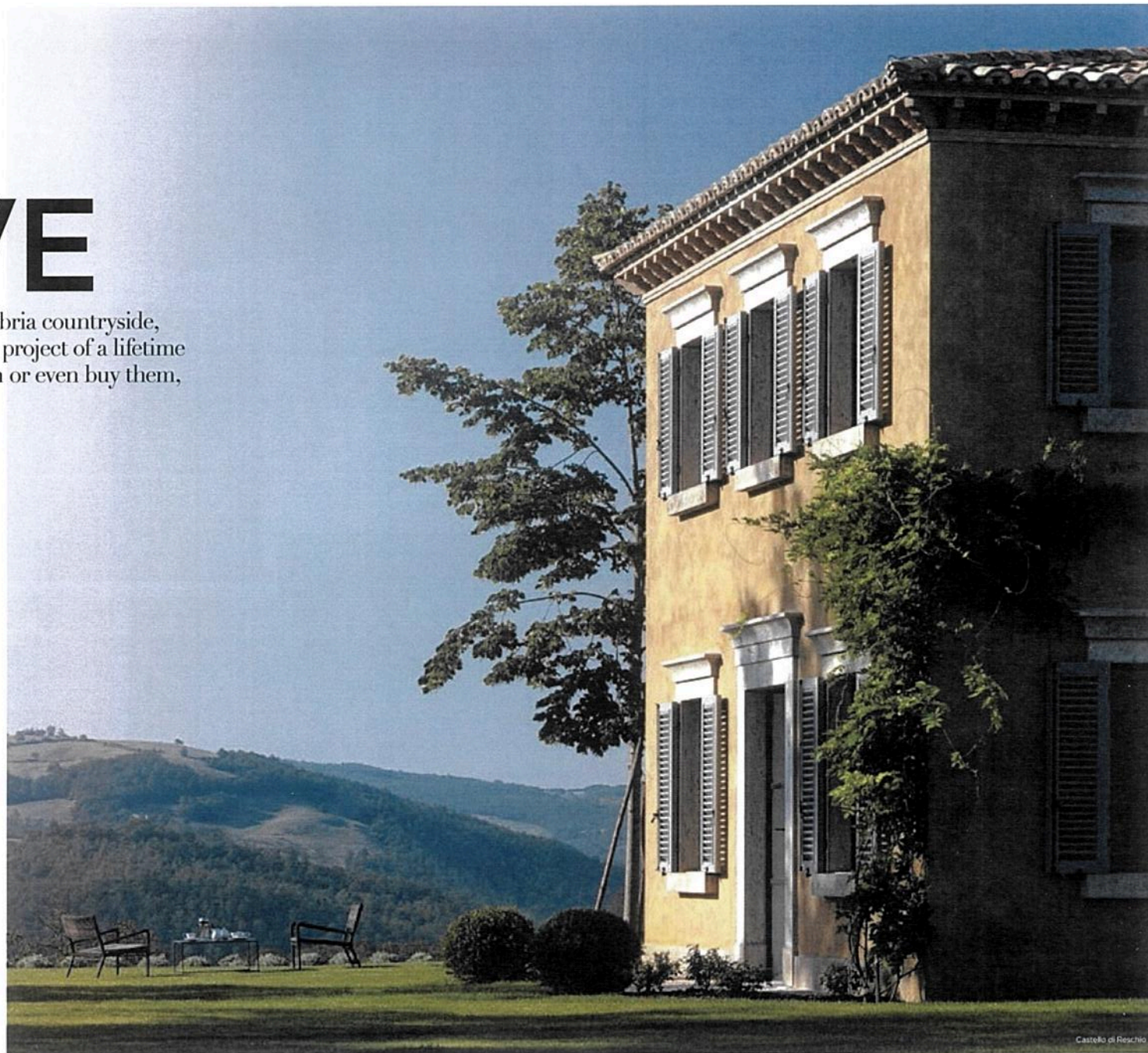
As directions go, 'Turn left at the ruin' is not terribly helpful. Not when you are on an estate the size of a small Republic, and picturesque ruins dot a remote landscape of lakes, cypresses, olive groves, and oak-carpeted hills – a scene such as you might see framed on a wall in the Uffizi. I turn left to find myself in a tobacco field – once an important cash crop in the region – and no small distance from my intended destination: the stables.

The estate in question is Castello di Reschio – 2,700 acres of rolling countryside located near Lake Trasimeno, where Hannibal once routed the forces of Rome. That I am here is thanks to Antonio Bolza – a Hungarian Count of Italian extraction – who, in 1984, fell in love with a derelict church and adjoining priest's house set on a ridge between two river valleys, and bought it to restore as a holiday home. Ten years later, he was living here with his family, having purchased the entire estate. It contained the ruins of some 50 buildings, ranging from farmhouses and cottages, to substantial palazzos and an 11th-century castle that once protected Umbria from the aspirations of neighbouring Tuscany.

The appeal of the land is obvious – as was the need for the estate to be sustainable. 'From the beginning, we decided to restore the ruins for like-minded people who enjoy the beauty and tranquillity of the place,' says Count Bolza. 'Each house comes with around three acres of land, like a small island within the estate.' It helped that both his wife and son, Count Benedikt – who now runs Reschio – are architects, who share his vision and respect for the genius loci. With each new project, old maps are consulted, and the footprint of the original building is preserved – as is the name it originally bore.

To date, 24 of the ruins have been sold and subsequently transformed by the Bolzas into bespoke homes that enjoy uninterrupted views of undeveloped countryside – six of these currently available as holiday rentals. But I am staying in the Casa delle Suore – an exception in that this property (most likely, as the name suggests, a former nunnery) was built 'on spec' as a turnkey project. In this sense, it is perhaps the purest expression of Benedikt's aesthetic – the rustic sandstone exterior, with its dove grey shutters and cascading lilac wisteria, belying the innovation that lies within.

There are clues, of course, even from the courtyard: two parallel walls of glass that link two adjacent buildings – and now enclose the dining room – disappear like pocket doors into thick walls, to reveal an airy through-view: across the



Castello di Reschio

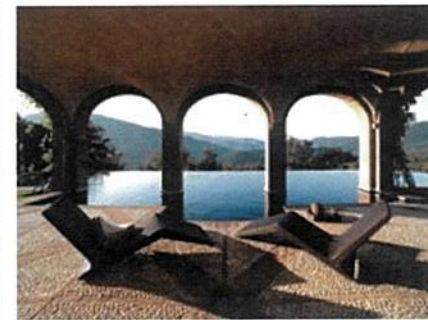
interior space, and out over a terrace to the three-sided infinity pool, which disappears like a shimmering diving board into the distance.

Step inside, and the ground floor is a warm sea of travertine, with limed oak beams overhead, brick-lined arches, areas of exposed stone wall and tall fireplaces for cosy winters. Contemporary paintings of cattle by Lindy Guinness adorn the walls of the sitting room, where cows once sheltered and, throughout, eclectic rugs and artwork, sourced from around the world, are interspersed with custom-made furniture and lighting designed by Count Benedikt. Original features – such as the lattice-bricked 20-foot-high window – have been preserved in the otherwise ultra-modern kitchen, to create a space infused with light. Underneath – visible through an ocular window in the polished cement floor – a beehive cellar has been excavated, ready to house the Super-Tuscan wines sold, *inter alia*, in the estate's Bottega.

Of the four ensuite bedrooms in the main, L-shaped building, three are located upstairs, up a staircase whose wall has been dressed with an abstract sculpture of metal cooper's hoops, found in the castle's cellars. Unusually, the triple-aspect master bedroom is reached through the dressing room and vast, theatrical bathroom. (The enfilade of rooms is a recurring theme: 'We don't do corridors!' jokes Benedikt's wife, Donna Nencia, herself an artist, whose murals adorn some of the villas). An inviting study – its floating shelves heavy with art books – completes the master suite. Located at what was once the original entrance to the living quarters (above the livestock), the study has its own private loggia at the top of a brick staircase which leads down to the garden – a nook which is at its most magical in the soft evening light. For family entertainment, a large, state-of-the-art TV room completes the upper level, while further guests can be accommodated in outhouses which have been converted into two further, self-contained bedrooms – designed with no less imaginative flair.

It is above all the quality of finish and attention to detail – such as thick, nail-studded oak doors that fit snugly into jamb-less frames – that stand out amid this creative marriage of old and new, and which no doubt contribute towards his nomination by Architectural Digest as 'one of the top 100 architects currently working in architecture and design' (2010). 'We employ local artisans,' says Count Benedikt, whose workshop is beneath his offices in the old Tabaccaia – the old tobacco factory, which also houses an art gallery. 'Blacksmiths, stonemasons, joiners, mosaic-workers, gesso-painters... there are about 25 specialist craftsmen working for us.' Fabrics are also commissioned directly from Italian mills. 'Even though this means I have to buy lengths of 60 metres at a time,' says Benedikt.

Our nearest neighbour is the Palazzo, its tower just visible through the trees. This, too, was entirely rebuilt, using reclaimed bricks, beams, ceramic azulejos and terracotta roof tiles. With commanding views over the estate, it is perhaps the grandest property of all, complete with imposing cantilevered *caracole* staircase, the stonemason's chisel marks turned decorative element beneath each travertine tread.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The estate viewed from the grounds; Interior of the Casa delle Suore; Nic Fiddian Green's glorious horse head sculpture commands an extraordinary view; the stables; pool at Castello di Reschio; the estate boasts one of the finest Adalusian stud farms in Italy; Castello di Reschio interior



Despite the different requirements of each owner (one house even has its own integrated winery and vineyard), there is nevertheless a thread of aesthetic continuity. Each home is designed, as Count Benedikt says, according to 'what my clients would like to have, balanced with what I feel is right from a vernacular and local architectural aspect'. Light, height and space are the one constant, along with the use of pale organic materials. 'Perhaps one development I have introduced,' he adds, 'is the creation of an outdoor room, providing shade in the summer, but also equipped with a fireplace, bar and even a bread oven for all season outdoor living. I design by instinct and with what the site and old structure give me as clues. The process is a very simple and natural one.'

A visit to a work in progress, however, reveals that the process of rebuilding to make things look natural – 18 months' work, on average – is anything but simple. Designed to reflect the client's lifestyle and requirements, excavations are under way at San Martino to lower floors and increase ceiling heights. Foundations are being rebuilt, earthquake-proof 'scaffolding' inserted, under-floor heating engineered, walls re-erected, beams installed, and vast glass widows fitted. Not to mention water and electricity – and now hi-speed WiFi – which have to be piped and cabled to each property.

But the story does not end with the creation of the dream home. Key to Reschio's philosophy is ongoing maintenance, the assurance of security, and

a level of service at which nothing is impossible – from stocking the fridge and arranging art classes, to more bizarre requests, about which the discreet staff remain firmly stum. It is rumoured that the estate numbers celebrities among its (mainly British and American) homeowners – but privacy is part of Reschio's appeal. 'Guests might meet in the Osteria [the estate's restaurant],' says Count Antonio, 'but this is not a place where people come to socialise.' Those seeking nightlife and discothèques need not apply. Those who enjoy the cultural treasures of nearby Perugia, Siena and Assisi, or country pursuits such as wild boar hunts and riding, on the other hand, will be in seventh heaven.

Ah yes, the horses – those stables I was in search of... Count Antonio – together with celebrated trainer, Antonio Radicchi – has created one of the finest Andalusian stud farms in Italy, where he can indulge his passion for riding. The horses, too, are central to Reschio's ethos, and have inspired Nic Fiddian-Green, whose sculptures can be seen dotted around the estate, as if an open-air museum. Benedikt, in the meantime – and with the blessing of all the estate's home owners – is busy pursuing his own passion: transforming the ancient castle into a 36-room boutique hotel. Because Reschio is, above all, one family's labour of love. ■

La Casa delle Suore is for sale at €9m, fully equipped and furnished. Annual service charges approx. €70,000. Rentals from €17,000 per week for a 5-bedroom. reschio.com

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