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Rocky Rajasthan draws those with pioneering attitude

PHOTOGRAPH BY: OLIVER BUCHHEIT

BEDROOM AT HOTEL CASTELLO DI RESCHIO IN ITALY

CONTRIBUTORS

THIS MONTH, WE ASK OUR HAPPY WANDERERS FOR THEIR MOST MEMORABLE RESTAURANT FINDS



SUSAN SARANDON *The Globetrotter (p118)*

'My favourite restaurant is Le Comptoir du Relais in Paris; I love the soup, *le bouillon*, with vegetables, chestnuts and a touch of foie gras.' *Oscar-winning actor and activist Susan starred in 'Dead Man Walking' and is Fairmont Hotels & Resorts' new global brand ambassador*



BENEDIKT AND NENCIA BOLZA *Umbria (p86)*

'We love Essenziale in Piazza di Cestello when we're in Florence. There are wise heads on the enthusiastic young team's shoulders, and the seasonally sourced ingredients are delicious.' *Benedikt, an architect, and his painter wife Nencia live with their children on the Reschio Estate in Umbria, which is opening a hotel this summer*



WILL DAVIDSON *Photographer, Rajasthan (p106)*

'When I'm not working, I try to spend time surfing and camping in Baja California, Mexico. There's a place there called The Hangman that plates up the best tacos I've ever eaten.' *Australian fashion photographer Will started his career as an assistant to David Bailey and shoots for magazines including 'i-D' and 'Vogue Australia'*



REBECCA MISNER *Writer, French Polynesia (p96)*

'While skiing with my family in Oregon recently, I stumbled upon Wild Rose, a northern Thai restaurant in the super low-key, outdoorsy city of Bend. This place is up there with heavy hitters such as Portland's Pok Pok and NYC's Uncle Boons. We ate there three nights in a row.' *Rebecca is our West Coast USA editor*



ALISON LOEHNIS *In the Zone (p66)*

'One of my best discoveries was in the Aeolian archipelago, north of Sicily. We took a boat to the tiny island of Alicudi, jumped into the water and waded up to the port, where we found a beach hut serving the most incredible *spaghetti alle vongole*.' *American-born Alison is the president of Net-a-Porter and Mr Porter*

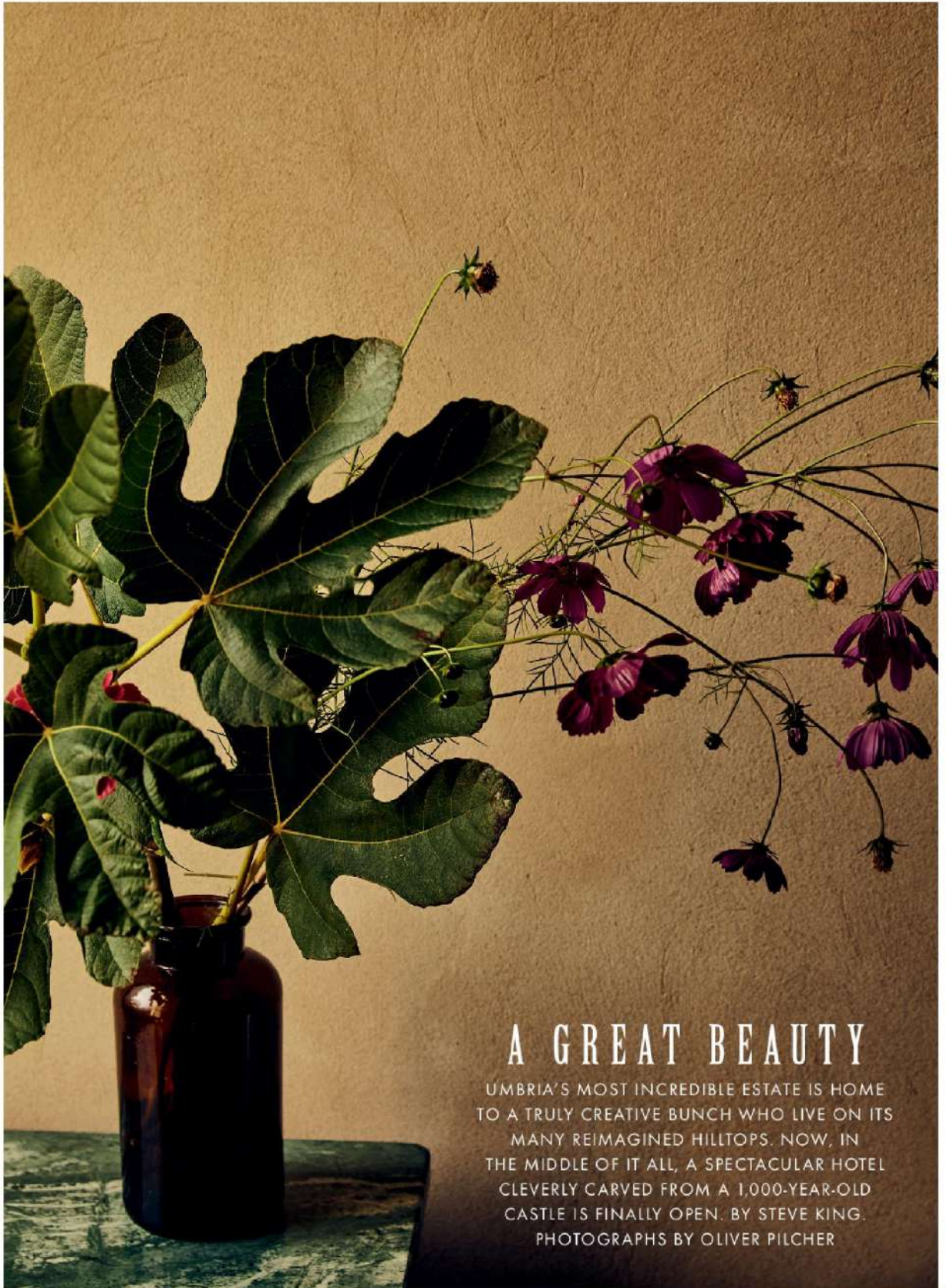


TOBY SKINNER *Writer, Fantasy Lifestyle (p30)*

'I struggle to think of a happier food experience than a *pintxos* crawl around San Sebastián's bars – especially the silvery anchovies with popping orange trout roe at retro Bar Txepetxa and absurdly tender red-wine veal cheeks at Borda Berri.' *Toby is one of our contributing editors*

PHOTOGRAPHS: WILL DAVIDSON; GUNNAR FREYR/ICELANDIC EXPLORER; BRITNEY GILL; OLIVER PILCHER; CELESTE SLOMAN/REDUX/EVINE; COURTESY OF TAKAY





A GREAT BEAUTY

UMBRIA'S MOST INCREDIBLE ESTATE IS HOME TO A TRULY CREATIVE BUNCH WHO LIVE ON ITS MANY REIMAGINED HILLTOPS. NOW, IN THE MIDDLE OF IT ALL, A SPECTACULAR HOTEL CLEVERLY CARVED FROM A 1,000-YEAR-OLD CASTLE IS FINALLY OPEN. BY STEVE KING. PHOTOGRAPHS BY OLIVER PILCHER





FOR ONCE I WOKE UP knowing immediately, and pretty much exactly, where I was. In a bedroom on the upper storey of a gorgeously converted farmhouse on the sprawling Reschio Estate, in the hills of Umbria, south of Florence, north of Perugia, not far from Cortona, smack-bang in the middle of Italy. I opened the curtains and gazed across 2,700 acres of exquisite Umbrian countryside. All Reschio, as far as the eye could see. Forests of oak and chestnut. Stands of poplars along the banks of a river. Wildflowers. Olive groves. Neatly trellised vines. Here and there, widely separated, old farm buildings, their walls as pale as buttermilk in the morning light. Aligned along a narrow hillside ridge, an avenue of cypresses, branches tapered towards the tip like wet paintbrushes. And at the highest point, dark against the brightening sky, Castello di Reschio itself, sheer and circular, more sternly forbidding than any castle that ever issued from the imagination of Walt Disney.

The property has seen its share of drama since it was built, almost 1,000 years ago. Yet things went awfully quiet by the middle of the 20th century. Its 50 farmhouses, stables and byres were gradually abandoned. By the early 1980s the land had returned to a semi-wild state and the once splendid castle had run perilously close to ruin.

Fortune's wheel began to turn again with the arrival, in 1984, of Count Antonio Bolza and his wife Countess Angelika. An Austro-Hungarian expatriate with Italian roots, Antonio was in the market for a family holiday house on a small patch of land

in a pleasant corner of Umbria. This he found at Reschio. One thing led to another and in 1994 he acquired the entire estate.

The question was: what to do with all the dilapidated farm buildings and that hulking great fixer-upper of a castle? The answer was: restore, rebuild and redecorate them, one by one, slowly and with exceptional thoughtfulness and craftsmanship; and then sell them to private owners at a price that reflects the meticulousness of their reinvention and their equally meticulous ongoing day-to-day management by the Bolzas.

Conveniently for Antonio, his son Benedikt is a trained architect. Having completed his studies and launched his career in London, Benedikt returned to Italy in 1999 to join his father and get stuck into Reschio. He became legally responsible for it in 2006 and took over majority ownership in 2012.

Of the 50 original buildings, around half have been fully reimagined – not quite one a year since the process began – 10 of which are available for rent when their owners, an illustrious, international community, are not in residence. Each house is remarkable, but together the place is an extraordinary vision of rehabilitation. And now, in what may prove to be one of the most important developments in Reschio's history, the castle has been turned into a 36-room hotel that will open in June, making all of the estate available to a wider audience than ever before.

The thoroughgoing nature of Reschio's transformation – first with the houses, now with the castle hotel – not only tested

Above, view of Reschio Estate from the castle tower. Opposite, clockwise from top left: bedroom at Hotel Castello di Reschio; dish at Alle Scuderie; bedroom; Nencia Corsini. Previous pages, from left: bedroom for which owner Benedikt Bolza designed all the furniture; vase of cosmos and fig leaves

Benedikt's architectural skills but compelled him to cultivate other talents too. He has designed practically every fixture and stick of furniture in the houses, restaurant, his offices and the hotel, and has personally overseen their construction in his on-site workshop within the Tabaccaia di Reschio, a former Forties tobacco-processing factory, now the industrial-style creative hub of the estate. This sideline has become a serious business, under the brand name BB for Reschio. The look is characterised by straight lines and slender silhouettes – svelte as opposed to spindly. I was especially taken by the elegant, faintly whimsical Poggibonsi lamp. A Poggibonsi lamp resembles a large, brass-plated Oreo atop three tightly grouped legs. The cream between the biscuits is made of hand-painted paper and diffuses a mellow amber light. I remember walking into Reschio's spectacular restaurant, Alle Scuderie, on my first night. Beneath cathedral-high ceilings, among fern trees the size of coconut palms, the tables were dotted with Poggibonsi lamps. Dozens of softly glowing discs seemed to hover in space, row upon row of them, like a squadron of low-flying UFOs. Fear not, earthlings! We come in peace, bearing locally sourced seasonal delicacies and biodynamic wines.

Essential to the project is Benedikt's wife Nencia, a gifted artist and an impassioned custodian of the land – 'the queen of composting', by her own definition. 'My mad adviser,' Benedikt joked, before correcting himself a moment later: 'My *unconventional* adviser.' Donna Nencia Corsini, as she was when she first arrived at Reschio to do some *trompe l'oeil* work, comes from an ancient Florentine family. She had at that time recently returned home from New York, where she had lived for several years. She loved New York but missed Italian tomatoes and the smell of the earth. She knew, too, that she was ready to get married – but that she would rather not marry an Italian.

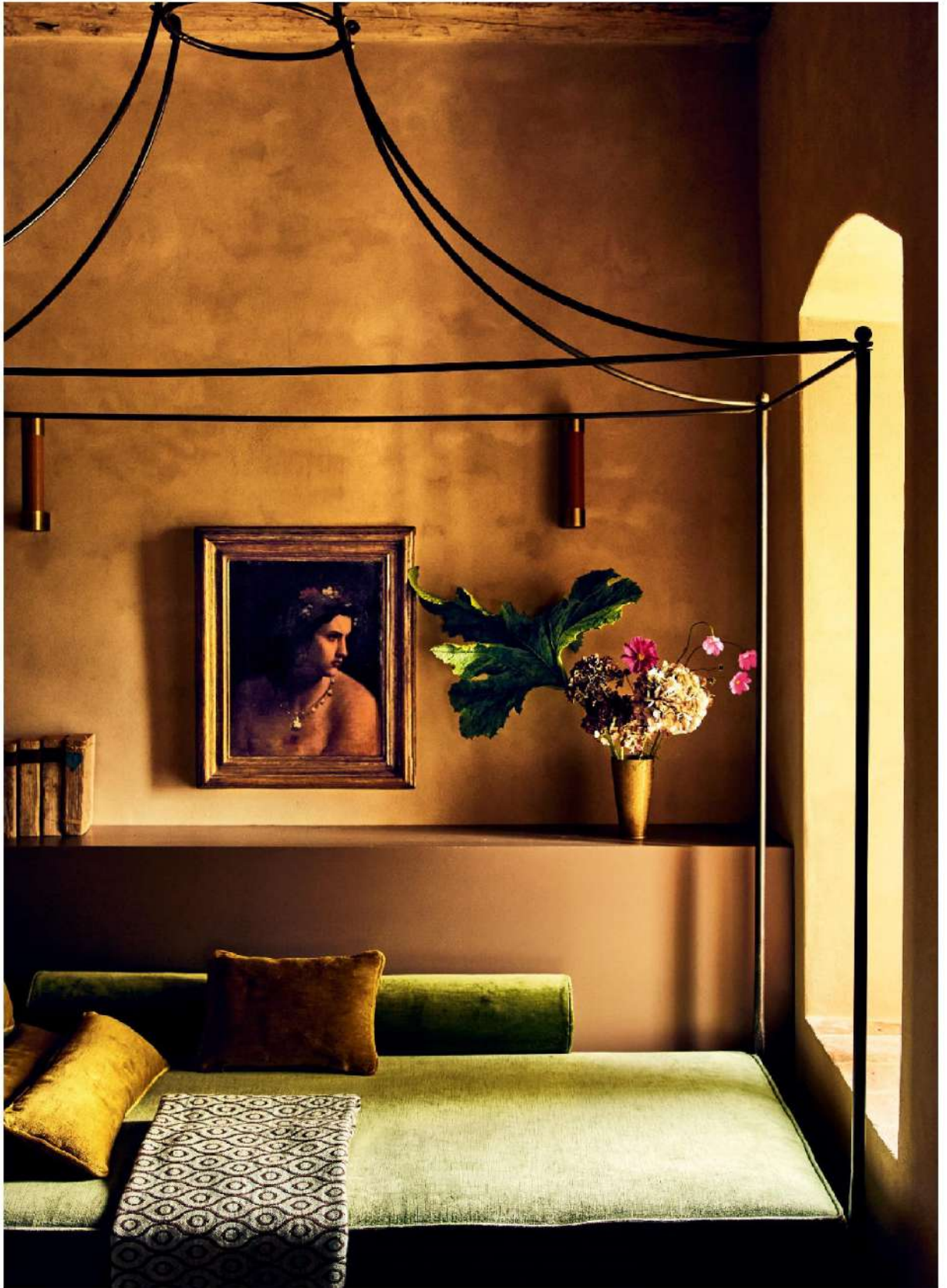
She and her German-born, English-educated, tomato-sharing, basically Austro-Hungarian and only distantly Italian husband make a striking couple. Benedikt might have been a stunt double for the *Brideshead Revisited*-era Jeremy Irons, right down to the elbow-patched jacket and scarlet kerchief raffishly knotted at the throat; Nencia looks like the 21st-century version of a Renaissance princess – as indeed she is. But while Benedikt accessorises with tweeds and silks, Nencia does so with feathers. She is well known for her fondness for parrots, and for one parrot in particular, Squeaky, who, during his lifetime, was rarely separated from his mistress for more than a few moments at a time. Though capable of flight, Squeaky preferred to see the world from a stationary position on top of Nencia's head; and from this comfortable nest of braids he seldom strayed.

Benedikt and Nencia spent the first 10 years of their marriage in the castle. Their five children, now aged between 11 and 18, were partly home-schooled on the estate. 'We were keen for them to learn English,' Benedikt explained, 'and, most importantly, drama and art. They say it was the best time of their lives. We were lucky to find fun people to help us teach them, and to be able to include other children from the neighbourhood. We had great theatrical performances in the courtyard.' And so they will again, I have no doubt, in the company of their guests and their children's children, in years to come.

Nevertheless, mundane reality had a way of intruding on the fairy-tale aspect of castle life during that early period. Chronically



From top left: Donna Nencia in her private garden; oil painting in a Hotel Castello di Reschio bedroom; bowl of citrus at the hotel











leaky roofs meant there were always buckets and umbrellas all over the place. As it happened, I did not have to try hard to imagine what that must have been like. My visit to the castle, in the final stages before its opening, coincided with wet weather, which obliged us, as we made our way around its inner courtyard, to walk not on the ground, which was awash, but on low walls and ornamental stone borders. Comedy descended into farce as we inspected the newly created swimming pool and its immaculate cluster of cabanas – which, this summer, will be the setting for a Slim Aarons-style fantasia of gleaming, suntanned bodies at play – through a veil of lashing rain. For me, on that afternoon, there would be none of the riding, fishing, clay-pigeon shooting, tennis, truffle-hunting or other outdoorsy activities that hotel guests will enjoy.

Benedikt's apologies were as profuse as they were unnecessary. His sunniness of spirit was irrepressible – and it was that as much as the splendour of the place itself which convinced me what a marvellous destination this will be. You can have all the cash and style and intentions in the world and still make a mess of a hotel. But if you have those things together with kindness, patience and good humour, well, then you are in business.

From the outside, the castle looks as symmetrical as a grain silo. From the inside, it is a very different story. The rooms are arranged around a central courtyard, their irregular shapes dictated by those of the original building. There are tall, skinny ones that rise up to the ramparts; there are low-ceilinged ones that extend sideways; there are still others that curve or zigzag; there is one that contains an old olive press so lovely it has

simply been left in place and become part of the furniture. The windows are, by the standards of 11th-century castles, large; and the views, from any room, in any direction, are ravishing.

The BB for Reschio aesthetic is again in evidence in the hotel, though given a more irreverent spin than I noticed in any of the houses I saw. The crisp, angular lines are here softened alongside lots of luscious velvet and scratchy linen, often in shades of green, pink or yellow; smooth metal pieces stand on rough stone, warm terracotta or grainy timber.

On my last evening Benedikt and I drove to the estate office to pick Nencia up from choir practice. The choir is open to anyone who works at Reschio. Kitchen staff, stable hands, management, the owners themselves and their children. Everyone. Benedikt would have been rehearsing with them too had he not been showing me around. We were a few minutes early and, not wanting to interrupt, waited outside in the car park, peering through a window. The faces of the singers, Nencia among them, rose and fell as they looked up from their sheet music to the conductor and down again. They were singing 'Sweet Dreams' by the Eurhythmics – not what I had expected to hear but it lent itself well to a choral arrangement. When the song ended, Benedikt and I clapped from the other side of the window, but our applause went unnoticed as the singers turned to each other to laugh, resume conversations, gather their things.

I was oddly moved by this simple scene. I admired the shared purpose and discipline, congenial but not frivolous. I suspect this sort of solidarity is something the Bolzas have worked hard to cultivate over the years, in many different ways. Throughout my time at Reschio I frequently detected their pride – perfectly justifiable – in what they have created. But I never saw any sign, not so much as a hint, of arrogance or paternalism. My guess is they are not, in the end, concerned with showing off their good fortune and good taste – they want to share them. As a way to run a business, and, really, to live – doing interesting things in a beautiful place and taking pleasure in the happiness this brings to others – it seemed wholly admirable.

The Bolzas' commitment to Reschio has deepened over the past 30 years. The castle hotel is just the latest expression of that commitment. And while 30 years is an eternity by the standards of modern property developers and career hoteliers – which the Bolzas in any case are not – it is the merest blink of an eye in the estate's 1,000-year history. Pondering this, I remembered something Benedikt's father, Count Antonio, had said one afternoon when we were in the dressage arena, among the magnificent Andalusian horses he breeds and trains, and which are, in their own right, one of Reschio's most attractive features. I had complimented him on his execution of a delicate manoeuvre. He waved away the compliment and instead praised his mount, a majestic old campaigner called Serenissimo with an elaborately plaited grey mane. Yet he was clearly delighted, his eyes bright, his smile wide. 'Anyone can do a fast canter,' he said. 'Few can do a slow one.'

GETTING HERE

Hotel Castello di Reschio has doubles from about £490. Rental houses on the Reschio Estate start from about £8,345. reschio.com. British Airways flies from London to Florence. ba.com

Above, dishes at Alle Scuderie. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Benedikt's sketch books; furniture he designed for Hotel Castello di Reschio; a horse at the Reschio Estate's stables; office in the old tobacco building. Previous pages, from left: swimming in the estate's lake; Tabaccaia di Reschio; Count Antonio Bolza (centre) and trainers on the Andalusian horses he breeds; bed linen and bath tub at the hotel