

A Fraction of Tuscany

At Borgo di Vagli, that idyllic rustic home in the countryside is a very real and a very possible prospect

By Alessia Sara Domanico

A villa in Tuscany is one of those wish list fixtures that many of us fantasize about, but rarely commit to actualizing. The culmination of travel, leisure, history, culture and gastronomy, a sojourn to the Tuscan countryside has become an addictive vacation habit for countless individuals from different nations and backgrounds.

The region's charms have become the stuff of legend, producing innumerable books on the subject and even films. One the most well-known Tuscan-set movies today is the adaptation of Frances Mayes' New York Times best-seller 'Under the Tuscan Sun.' In the movie, we see Diane Lane portray the American author who leaves everything behind, persevering through trials and tribulations to restore a 200-year-old farmhouse nearby the Etruscan town of Cortona. But Mayes didn't restore that now famous abandoned villa on her own; she had the invaluable help of a man named Fulvio Di Rosa, a restoration architect who has spent over 20 years exclusively sourcing, designing and restoring antique properties. Di Rosa's philosophy is about finding the 'right ruin' in an ideal location and promoting its original details and purpose throughout the renovation.

One shining example of Di Rosa's work is the hamlet of Borgo di Vagli. Nestled away in the scenic hills around Cortona, this series of 14th century medieval homes was once inhabited by artisans, carpenters, farmers and shepherds before being almost entirely abandoned during World War II. The clustered formation of the homes suggests that Borgo di Vagli was a very social setting where the members of the small community closely interacted. Today, its tradition as a social environment has been fostered by its new residents. Starting in the year 2000, Di Rosa

embarked on transforming this deserted area into Italy's first fractional ownership venture. From stone exteriors to old wooden beams and handmade nails, he sought to preserve as much of the original features as possible during the restoration process. "It was not — keep the outside and erase the inside — it was more — keep the inside, reuse it and incorporate the new within the parameters and the challenges of the existing," explains Toronto-based heritage architect Carlos Ventin who acquired a fractional ownership stake here several years ago.

Being no stranger to restoration himself (his firm has restored many legislative and public buildings in the Greater Toronto Area, which include Toronto's Queen's Park and City Hall), Ventin was drawn to the unique and unspoiled concept. "I was very surprised at the restoration being carried out by an engineer and the fact that it was not just restoring stones and mortar but that it was a whole approach of landscape, views [and the] ambience of an entire village," he describes of his initial interest in the project. The idea of fractional ownership is also an attractive one for today's market, offering people the right to land and property in Tuscany without the astronomical price tag often associated with real estate in the area.

A luxury getaway, with an authentic appeal and communal feel to it, "...staying there you feel like a part of the Borgo family," affirms Ventin. "When you

arrive you are greeted like an old friend come to visit, where everyone comes out to say hello and remembers your name. When you enter your assigned unit, everything is waiting [for you] and if you've placed that all important pre-order, a bottle of white is chilling in the fridge and a loaf of fresh baked bread is ready for carving on the wooden cutting board," he elaborates.

While the individual villas enjoy their own fully-equipped kitchens, there's an on-site trattoria that has become a firm favourite among residents, helmed by chef Dina — one of Borgo's original residents. Her family was one of the last remaining in Borgo, forced to leave over 30 years ago to find work elsewhere. Now thanks to the efforts of Di Rosa to breathe life back into this forgotten hamlet, Dina's back where she belongs, serving up hearty and savoury dishes — Monday night (pizza night) being her most popular. And while the respective villas are for all intents and purposes private residences, residents do have a dedicated front desk staff at their disposal to handle local planning and bridge any foreign language barriers by arranging for anything from bike rentals to wine tours and even boar hunting. At the end of our tour at the property we come across a lovely pool to cool off in and soak up some sun in the afternoon. All we need now is a glass of red wine from a local cellar for a good old-fashioned 'chin chin' in a piece of Tuscan paradise.



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