

By [KATE BOLICK](#)

Cortona, Italy

Frances Mayes takes a heart-first approach to real estate—and has done well by it. In 1990, she fell in love with a tumbledown villa just outside this sleepy hill town about 70 miles southeast of Florence, and the questionable purchase and backbreaking restoration resulted in "Under the Tuscan Sun," a best seller in 1996 and later a successful film with Diane Lane.

Mayes's 'Mountain House'

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Al Hurley

In 2003, picking wild blackberries on a hill, Ms. Mayes and her husband spied through the brambles a dilapidated stone cottage and fell headlong all over again. Another renovation, another book. "What a lonesome beauty," she writes of the home in the final installment of her Tuscan trilogy, "Every Day in Tuscany," which has sold 83,000 copies since its publication in April.

It's not that the author needed another summer home, a mere 15-minute drive from the first (she lives the rest of the year in Hillsborough, N.C.). That one, called Bramasole ("yearning for the sun"), had proved a reliable muse, inspiring not only the trilogy but two lavishly illustrated coffee-table books and a furniture line for Drexel Heritage. During high tourist season, upwards of 200 onlookers a week flock to the villa. Ms. Mayes says she enjoys meeting the pilgrims but finds it a bit disconcerting on a Tuesday morning, drinking coffee in her nightgown, to look out the window and see a busload.

What she calls "the mountain house," however, could hardly be more remote. Built in the early 13th century by hermits who followed St. Francis of Assisi, Fonte delle Foglie—The Font of Leaves—is a humble structure set high on a peak overlooking the vast and rolling countryside. When the Mayeses found the house, it had been vacant for half a century; it was dark as a tomb, and nearly as airless. The stone roof was surprisingly intact, save for a few bald patches and a couple of holes. But one side was collapsed and the doors choked with vines and weeds. The ground floor was divided into four cramped mangers, for animals, and the top floor into four high-ceilinged rooms with two fireplaces but littered with plaster and debris.

This time around, armed with more than a decade's worth of knowledge—of the grim realities of DIY, as well as the complexities of Italian history—Ms. Mayes opted to not take on the renovation herself, but instead hire an expert. This was the man she refers to as her "Italian brother," the preservationist architect Fulvio Di Rosa.

The two met after one of Mr. Di Rosa's restoration projects had delighted Ms. Mayes. Since the 1980s, he's been buying abandoned borghi—tiny medieval villages scattered throughout the Tuscan mountains, built with stone walls so thick they give silence new meaning—and meticulously bringing them back to life. That zeal for authenticity appealed to Ms. Mayes's passion for history. "When we are together we just talk and talk—and talk," she says.

Properties in the area generally sell for about \$7,000 to \$12,000 per square meter (a little less than 11 square feet). The Mayeses paid \$140,000 total for theirs, plus three years and hundreds of untallied receipts for the restoration (high-level projects usually run about \$3,000 to \$3,600 per square meter). That's not counting the old carved stone fireplaces, blacksmith-made stair rails, hand-painted cabinets, 17th-century doors, and the bocce court and bungalow they've added since. Such touches, right down to the Busatti bed linens, make the cottage feel gorgeously rustic—as luxurious as a boutique hotel, yet devoid of artifice, much like the hermit's retreat that it was.

"Of course, owning two houses in the same town is utterly bizarre," says Ms. Mayes. The couple divide their time equally between the two, even though she's constantly leaving her red cardigan at the wrong one.

To reach the mountain house, one bumps along a long, rocky dirt road, swerving to avoid potholes, parks at roof level, and descends a winding path leading to a wide, sloping lawn carved from the surrounding forest.

The restored main house and an outbuilding contain four bedrooms between them. The new bungalow is built into a slope (something only recently permitted by law) and includes a fifth bedroom suite that doubles as a workplace for this pair of writers. (Husband Edward Kleinschmidt Mayes is a poet who has published widely.)

The grounds skillfully layer wild woods and manicured landscaping, harmonizing with the mix of old and new buildings. The hills fan out below, all the way to a glimpse of Lake Trasimeno shimmering in the far distance. It feels like there's nobody on earth but the Mayeses and whichever friends they invite over for long Sundays of swimming and playing bocce—or, this summer, sampling the recipes for "The Tuscan Sun Cookbook," which Ms. Mayes will publish next year.

An Italian Retreat

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Borgo di Vagli

Borgo di Vagli property in Cortona Italy

On a recent tour, Mr. Di Rosa stopped to crouch and point to a 500-year-old crack in a floorboard, or to mirror his hand along a plaster wall's contours, its surface intentionally left slightly wavy

instead of straightened into the harsh lines of modernity. His design philosophy can be summed up as "simplicity is luxury." He goes to great lengths to locate the same materials used by the original carpenters and masons—chestnut beams, terra cotta tiles—and hews as closely as possible to the original construction methods. "The more you learn of the history," he says, "the more you come to understand why the builders made the decisions they made."

This sentiment rings true for Ms. Mayes. Life at the mountain house lets her slip more completely into the country's rhythms. "In America I usually feel up against time—looking at my watch, booking appointments weeks in advance," she says. "Here time is more of a river to float on, than a current to swim against."