

Heaven in the hills



We explore a romantic 14th Century Tuscan hamlet which has been sensitively restored by architect Fulvio Di Rosa.

Left & below The cluster of honey-toned stone houses tell tales of an ancient past at the hamlet of Borgo di Vagli. Far left As it was. Many such hamlets were abandoned after the Second World War due to the general decline in agriculture. Borgo di Vagli was purchased by Fulvio in 1990 as a virtual ruin.

Romantic holidaymakers falling in love with living the Tuscan idyll is a timeless British fantasy. Attracting interest from visitors worldwide is the lovingly restored 14th Century hamlet, Borgo di Vagli, (meaning between the valleys), where buyers have the opportunity of owning a piece of Tuscan life thanks to a fractional ownership scheme. Situated near the medieval town of Cortona, nestling on a sun-drenched unspoilt landscape, a cluster of honey-tone stone houses tell tales of an ancient past set amongst 32 acres of olive grove gardens.

Borgo di Vagli is the inspired vision of Turin-born civil engineer and architect Fulvio Di Rosa, who purchased the derelict ruins at Borgo in

>>



FEATURE NATALIE FLAUM PHOTOS DAVID STILL



1990 and sought to sensitively restore the entire hamlet with a design philosophy that remains authentic to its medieval roots. "This project was totally driven by me in terms of planning, architecture and interiors. I wanted to do something that was true to the origins and to offer a real medieval experience to visitors," says Fulvio. "Vagli is homogeneous, you can't help but notice that it's one person's vision and one concept. When you restore and breathe life into a project of this stature, you are not only



If I hadn't restored Vagli, it would have become a door closed forever, a hamlet reduced to dust.'

embracing a culture, but you are restoring a part of everyday life – a continuation of new life and rebirth. If I hadn't restored Vagli, it would have become a door that was closed forever, a hamlet reduced to dust."



Far left Each apartment boasts its own wisteria or vine-covered pergola terrace to enjoy the warmth of the Tuscan sun and breathtaking views of the Niccone valley. Above left Original features, such as this old doorway, have been restored rather than replaced. Above Wherever possible, flowers and scented shrubs such as lavender have been planted around the hamlet. Left Furnishings are often rustic and simple, very much in keeping with the agricultural origins of the property.

Once home to farmers, woodsmen, and shepherds, the people of Vagli spent their lives diligently cultivating the surrounding land and were virtually self-sufficient. They would travel to the local market one a month to get nothing else but salt. "After World War II, due to a lack of prosperity in agriculture, many small Tuscan villages were abandoned," explains Fulvio. "The process of deterioration to these buildings was fast, mainly due to flood damage to the original wooden elements of the structures. This decay led to the creation of a number of derelict, yet beautiful dwellings – Vagli being among them."

Before the restoration, Fulvio spent ten years tracing and communicating with some 60 land and building owners who had previously called Borgo their home. "There was a genuine interest in the past and most families were fascinated to see how a bunch of derelict dwellings could be transformed into something else," adds Fulvio. One of the original land owners, Dina left Borgo in the early 1960s and has since returned to offer guests traditionally prepared Tuscan dishes cooked over a wood-burning stove served onsite >>

in the trattoria, previously a 600-year-old medieval guard tower. "Many of the people who work here at Borgo have lived here all their lives, including Dina and our two gardeners who love to tell Borgo di Vagli stories," says Fulvio. "Having the ability to make a project like this come alive again is one of the most beautiful aspects of my work."

"I am passionate about Tuscany, its beauty, culture, lifestyle, architecture and heritage and derive immense satisfaction working with skilled local craftspeople and original local materials," enthuses Fulvio. "I used dedicated engineers, plumbers, stonemasons, builders, contractors, some of whom have worked with me for the past 25 years, so we have grown together as an expert team."

Borgo is approached from a mile-long winding chalky road just after the lovely ruins at the 10th-Century Pierle castle. Fulvio was not



Above left Doreen the housekeeper is Scottish born and met her Italian husband Gianfranco in the hotel industry in the UK and both now live and work at Borgo di Vagli. "We love living here and enjoy welcoming guests back every year," she says. Above & left Two of the sitting rooms. Both are comfortably furnished with open fires and plenty of space.

Right Four views showing the fabric of the property. Wherever possible this has been left in its original state, subject only to sensitive restoration and improvements where necessary.

Fulvio describes his best and worst moments...

"My best and worst moments were one day apart. My wife and I had invited a very good friend and best-selling author of 'Under the Tuscan Sun', Frances Mayes and her husband to have lunch with us at Borgo. I arranged for our resident chef Dina to prepare a superb Sunday lunch in the show apartment, which was 100% completely functioning with electricity, water and gas. It was bucketing with rain when I arrived with Frances and her husband and there was water everywhere. As the team continued to work knee deep in mud we discovered one of the original supporting three-storey walls had collapsed due to the amount of rainfall. My stomach turned over - it was a complete disaster as I stood amongst three floors worth of broken tiles, stones and debris with the ball cap underneath. Yet that Sunday, we enjoyed a beautiful lunch by the fireplace - the atmosphere was fantastic - despite the fact it was still pouring with rain outside!"

granted permission to alter the gradient to the steep track as this would have interfered with nature and strict regulations also prevented him from extending beyond the hamlet's original footprint. "I would have liked to have found a better solution to the road system, but as we are in a protected conservation area, we were compelled by regulations to use the existing track. We were unable to add anything in terms of building or change the road, which is an environmental issue. In places, the road is steep and we experienced a few problems in the beginning with anxious visitors, but most are happy to consider it as part of the rural experience."

To approach the sensitive restoration of the thick stone-walled houses, Fulvio's philosophy was to reflect on the past and consider nature and the environment. "All the houses have small windows and low ceilings for a very simple reason. The original occupants cut the small windows from colossal walls to keep out sunlight during the summer," he explains. "The low >>

ceilings were due to the fact that the occupants were shortish people whose main priority was to keep their houses warm in winter.”

As parts of the original roof are 600 years old, great care and attention to detail was required to preserve and support the original framework. “We had to be mindful of all the old beams and decided to leave the original structure as it was and do any improvements and restoration work from above,” explains Fulvio. “If we had dismantled the original roof structure we would never have been able to put it back together, and the authentic flavour would have been lost forever. I was totally against altering the nature of these buildings. You can do a project just as effectively without straying too far from the original design and all the details have helped me to construct and define a recognisable architectural landscape today.”

Other unique interior features include wooden beamed ceilings, Cotto (Thai) ceramic tiled floors and carved stone sinks. Fulvio took inspiration from one of the original stone sinks using local stone quarried in the area. As an alternative to tiles and to create an earthy, rustic feel, he kept to the same theme, introducing stone splash backs to all wet areas in the bathrooms. “I could have used marble or granite, but these materials are not indigenous to Borgo,” he adds. “The stone has been waxed to avoid absorbing water. All the stone surfaces are rewaxed twice a year for maintenance.”

Glass panels have been fixed to the bedroom walls providing additional light to the rooms and creating a favourable impression without interrupting the line of the roof structure. Each apartment has a symbolic piece of history displayed on the walls, either an original window shutter, or the remains of a door which serves as a memory or shadow of the past. Finishing touches include antique furniture bought at local markets, specially-made Tuscan cotton linens, copper cooking pots, handcrafted




Above & left All of the apartments have been tastefully furnished with antique furniture from local markets and Tuscan cotton linens. Modern features include flat-screen TVs, internet access and power showers with a concealed plumbing system. Below Guests can enjoy unlimited use of the heated 20-metre swimming pool which has breathtaking views of the stunning surrounding countryside. Far left A mountain fox has become a friendly visitor to Borgo.

cutlery and bespoke pottery. More modern features include flat-screen TVs, internet access and power showers which have a concealed plumbing system.

Borgo di Vagli is the only project in the area to offer part ownership. “With the rise in popularity of second homes, property prices have risen strongly over the past 20 years,” Fulvio explains. “Not only are there fewer properties of quality for sale in Tuscany, the prices now make entering into the market more difficult. I believe fractional ownership is a natural progression and a wonderful way to enjoy Tuscany without the normal financial and maintenance responsibilities that go along with home ownership. We have created a true and genuine authentic Tuscan adventure that attracts people from all over the world. Borgo appeals to an appreciative audience who will embrace and understand the culture here, where



the food you taste, people you meet and the nature that surrounds you creates such a special experience that guests become a little different afterwards. For me, this is the beauty of the project – Borgo is not just a vacation place, but somewhere that enriches your soul.” 

Information: Borgo di Vagli fractional ownership one-bedroomed residence €55,000 , two-bedroomed €92,500. For more information visit www.borgodivagli.com or tel: +39 (0) 575 619 650.

Travel from Stansted to Perugia, (40 minutes from Borgo di Vagli) Rome (2 hrs) Florence (1 hr 45) or Pisa (2 hrs).