

Where to stay

Reviews of the month in **Paris** **Seville** **Tuscany** **Argentina** **Wiltshire**

EDITED BY PETER BROWNE



KING OF THE HILL

The renaissance of an entire village in one of the most beautiful parts of the country is an Italian masterpiece, says **Michelle Jana Chan**

The Copper loom at Fonteverdi light, writer is Origo



'IT ALL BEGAN WITH the Origos 75 years ago,' says Italian-American lawyer Michael Cioffi, who has taken on the restoration of a near-entire village in the Val d'Orcia region. 'Since then people have been coming here. And now I too have this crazy, mad, passionate love affair with the place.' The Origos – Anglo-American writer Iris and

her aristocratic Italian husband Antonio – arrived in the poverty-ridden valley shortly after the end of World War I. They bought a run-down estate called La Foce and dedicated their lives to raising living standards in the area and trying to bring about social change.

The valley has had a remarkable and chequered history, rooted >

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► in the pioneering landscaping projects and sustainable rural development of the 14th and 15th centuries. That afforded the Val d'Orcia, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, an exceptional aesthetic, harmonising beauty and function, which was immortalised in Renaissance art: roses decorating vineyards and slender cypresses planted beside roads between olive groves, cornfields and hay meadows.

'Nowhere in Italy is there anything like this kind of natural beauty,' says Cioffi. Following his passion, he bought a few buildings in the hilltop village of Castiglioncello del Trinoro and converted them into three villas of two, three and six bedrooms, which are now rentable by the week. He also opened a wine bar open to the stars, overlooking the Orcia and the Amiata mountains.

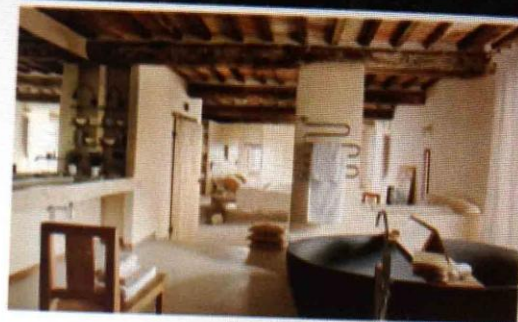
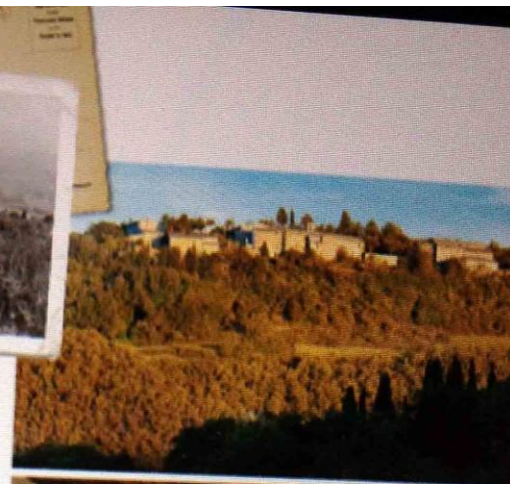
More locals offered their homes up to the American. He bought some, passed on others he thought were overpriced, and the project – called Monteverdi – continued to grow. Cioffi then opened a sumptuous seven-bedroom hotel with a light, elegant and diaphanous feel, and interiors of Tuscan flagstone and Carrara marble by highly desirable designer Ilaria Miani. There's also a traditional Tuscan restaurant run by former Locanda Locatelli chef Paolo Coluccio, who works with award-winning local produce, from extra-virgin olive

oil and cured *cinta senese* meats to Brunello wine.

Cioffi hopes his investment – which also includes a swimming pool, lavender garden and an on-site Etruscan archaeological dig – will breathe life back into the village. On one side of the pocket-sized piazza, he is building an art gallery (to display work by invited resident artists); opposite, he organises classical concerts at the Romanesque Sant' Andrea church, which he has also restored.

The audience will probably to be mostly tourists, as there are fewer than a dozen permanent residents in Castiglioncello del Trinoro. That does raise questions about the final authenticity of the place, but Cioffi insists the village will draw Italians, too. 'Almost every day, locals come here for lunch or a drink,' he says. 'Without Monteverdi there would have been only a few old people here. The village would have been abandoned.'

Today there is a strong sense of renewal in the Val d'Orcia. The wine estate Tenuta di Trinoro now has its own six-bedroom farmhouse available for hire. There



Clockwise from top left: Iris Origo with her daughter Bendetta and nanny; the village of Castiglioncello del Trinoro, where Monteverdi is based; a suite in Hotel Monteverdi

are two more restaurants of note: Perillà Osteria, by slick wine estate Podere Forte; and La Foce's excellent Dopolavoro. The villa La Bandita has also launched a sister hotel, La Bandita Townhouse, in Pienza (see below).

This summer there will be an additional reason to celebrate, as it's the 25th anniversary of the Incontri in Terra di Siena classical music festival (www.itslafoce.org), established in honour of Iris and Antonio Origo. Cioffi is one of its patrons, which means guests enjoy privileged access – the concierge can organise front-row seats.

MONTEVERDI, CASTIGLIONCELLO DEL TRINORO, SIENA PROVINCE, TUSCANY, ITALY (+39 057 826 8146; WWW.MONTEVERDITUSCANY.COM). DOUBLES FROM ABOUT £285

FOUR MORE TO THINK ABOUT...



LA FOCE

The Origos' historical estate can be hired in its entirety, or there are apartments, cottages and farmhouses in the celebrated, Cecil Pinsent-designed garden. A new restaurant, Dopolavoro, captures the spirit of the original – built in the 1930s for the estate's labourers – and uses homegrown fresh produce. +39 057 869101; Doubles from about £105



NUN ASSISI RELAIS & SPA MUSEUM

This 13th-century former convent has 18 bedrooms with religious frescoes, wood beams and stone arches alongside glass walls and LED reading lights. Chef Mirko Nocchetti serves up Umbrian cuisine; the Nun Spa Museum offers great treatments. +39 0758 155150; www.nunassisi.com. Doubles from about £240



PALAZZO MARGHERITA

Director Francis Ford Coppola's latest release is a 19th-century mansion in Bernalda, the town his grandfather emigrated from over 100 years ago. Jacques Grange's interiors mix antiques with photos of stars of Rome's Cinecittà studios; and each room has a library of Italian films. +39 083 554 9060; www.palazzomargherita.com. Doubles from about £310



LA BANDITA TOWNHOUSE

This new 12-room hotel in Pienza is the sister property of the minimalist villa La Bandita run by one-time music exec John Voigtman. It's a former nunnery with beamed ceilings, parquet floors and a medieval garden. Top-floor suites look out over the Val d'Orcia. +39 333 404 6704; www.labanditatownhouse.com. Doubles from about £170