

Architect breathes new life into Italian village

Home-making has taken on a whole new meaning for one man. Rather than creating the house of his dreams, Fulvio di Rosa has redeveloped an entire village

THE dubious delight of restoring an ancient property abroad has delivered a crushing blow to many enthusiasts, so imagine the stress levels associated with sympathetically rebuilding an entire 14th century village.

While many foreign property owners might rightfully conclude that the task is an almost impossible one, it is a project that local man Lee Cooper has rolled for the past two years.

He and acclaimed architect Fulvio di Rosa are nearing completion of an idyllic cluster of properties in Tuscany.

This month sees the culmination of 10 years of negotiation and two years' restoration work to breathe new life into Borgo di Vagli, which had lain deserted in a spectacular, and isolated, hilltop setting.

Lee, whose parents Mike and Jess live locally, has been pivotal to the project's success and moved to

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Fulvio di Rosa, architect

Cortona to be near it. He and his Italian wife, Cecilia, along with small daughters Carlotta and Camilla, adore Vagli.

The complexity of restoring ancient houses to strict Italian government standards was explained to me first-hand by Fulvio during a recent visit there.

Tuscany is rightfully proud of its impressive architectural and historical heritage and everything in the village from the roof to the colour of the paintwork had to be approved.

As an Italian, Fulvio perhaps had an advantage over foreign owners through his fluency and knowledge of the state's workings, but he admitted that the village's restoration had tested him to his limit at times. 'It took a decade actually to buy the village because I had to negotiate separately with all of the families who still owned the various properties, even though they had abandoned them.'

'I am not sure that I would ever want to take on something like that again,' he said, shaking his head.

He spent a decade designing in the contemporary splendour of Brasilia in South America but returned to Italy after deciding to help his parents restore their spacious Tuscan home - and was immediately hooked on that type of work.

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That means selecting each and every item, as well as working on the restora-



DREAM REALISED: This month sees the culmination of 12 years' work for Fulvio di Rosa, who has redesigned Borgo di Vagli. (56190)

tion of the fabric of the place. It is not just a case of finding authentic roof slates; it means ensuring that rugs, candles and even crockery are all just right.'

Borgo di Vagli is a clever combination of old and subtle new; each house has been carefully restored and incorporates such desirable extras as high-pressure showers, satellite television, CD players, superbly equipped kitchens and an open fire to complete the homely feel.

Authentic Italian antiques have been used throughout and each house is unique.

This month sees completion of the latest phase of restoration, with 31 guests expected during one fortnight.

Part of the village has been turned into a trattoria which serves delicious local cuisine cooked in a wood-fired oven and accompanied by wines from the region.

'I have loved the challenge of creating Vagli. For instance, the swimming pool could have been sited on the same level as the houses - it would have created a traditional "holiday" feel.'

'But I wanted to avoid that and retain a more genuine atmosphere. I decided to site the pool on the top terrace above the village. That meant constructing a track especially for trucks to be able to unload concrete there. I think it was worth it.'

Surveying the rolling Tuscan hills, with ancient Pieve Castle in the distance and nothing to interrupt the view from the pool, it was easy to understand his reasoning.

The 15 terraces contain ancient olive trees, wild roses, old oaks and drifts of spectacular wild flowers.

Vagli has already proved popular with Guernsey people looking to own a Tuscan home without any of the hassle of restoring or maintaining it. Timeshare ownership has been bought and locals have already enjoyed their

first stay in their second homes in Italy.

'The location played an important part in making me determined to see the project through,' said Fulvio.

Although it is secluded and totally peaceful Vagli is just 20 minutes from Cortona and an easy drive from other Tuscan delights.

Author Frances Mayes, who wrote the best-selling book *Under the Tuscan Sun*, has stayed here and said: 'There may be a more mystical view in Tuscany, but I don't know where.'

Fulvio is delighted with the reaction so far from people who have visited Vagli.

Surveying the meadows of olive trees and wild flowers, he concurred that it was an exceptionally peaceful spot - but most people had not seen it in the fraught days of tracking down craftsmen, tractor drivers, swimming pool installers and bulk water tank fillers.

Timeshare owners at Vagli will be blissfully unaware of just how much work has gone into creating this 'ageless' existence.



DIFFERENT WORLDS: Tuscany offers villages with narrow streets, superb restaurants and a relaxed lifestyle. (56138)