



Let me show you to your en-suite cave, sir

An unusual hotel has opened in the Italian town of Sassi. Its aim is to maintain the integrity of the past. **Adrian Mourby** reports

In 1948 there were 20,000 people living in the Sassi, medieval caves below the Italian city of Matera. Their poverty and squalor were unimaginable by modern Western standards. Open sewers flowed down from the city. People lived alongside their animals for warmth. When Carlo Levi's book, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, exposed this humanitarian scandal, the Sassi were emptied.

Hundreds of caves and 155 churches burrowed into the rock were abandoned. Now, 18 of those caves and one of the churches have been converted into a hotel. But not just any kind of hotel. The Sassi di Matera is a radical experiment in maintaining the integrity of the past "without turning the hotel into a peasant theme park".

The person who uses that phrase is Daniele Kihlgren, one of the partners in this enterprise. When I arrive, lugging my suitcase up lumpy medieval paving that turns any rolling bag into a Sisyphusian torture, he is in deep discussion with Margarethe Berg, the German art student who started the Sassi experiment.

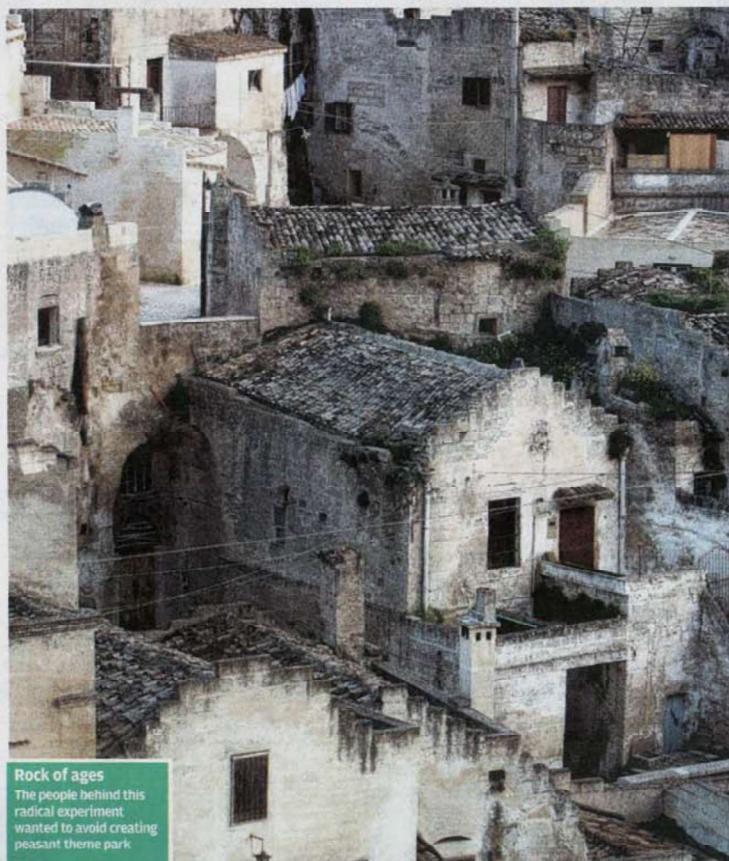
I'm promised a proper discussion with both of them, but for the moment all I want to do is get clean. The south of Italy is unseasonably hot during my visit in the summer. My taxi driver talked of nothing else. I'm shown my room and given two large, clanking rusty keys on a string that open what looks like an old barn door into the cliff face.

As the door opens, lights spring on. It's one of the few concessions to modern hotel life that Margarethe has allowed. It also stops the visitor from falling down the single very deep step into their room. Ahead of me is a honey-coloured cave dug out of the rock. Its floor is uneven (an ancient agglomeration of solid rock, tiles and old paving). There is a large modern bed raised a metre up on metal trusses (the traditional way in the Sassi to make sure your domestic animals stayed underneath rather than flopping on the quilt).

Fitted into the wall is what might pass for a desk made from recycled timber. There are no pictures, no mirrors, no comfy chairs, no mini-bar, wardrobe, flat-screen TV, phone or Wi-Fi connection. Yet, despite the absence of just about everything that I equate with hotel comfort, this feels like home.

The glow generated by the concealed lighting is very welcoming, and there is a splendid free-standing white stone bath at the far end of my cave into which hot water pours at the flick of a chromium tap. I can endure a lot of medieval privation if there's a hot foaming bath in the mix. Funnily, the bath is the one thing that Margarethe doesn't want to talk about when we speak later. I get the feeling that it sullies her ambition to create *arte povera*, as they call it in Italy. Well sully away, I think, as I'm left to wash off the strains and stains of my day.

It's difficult to explain to anyone who has not been to this UNESCO-listed city that there are two Materas. One looks like many other Italian towns. It has its baroque



Rock of ages
The people behind this radical experiment wanted to avoid creating peasant theme park.



churches, its piazzas and vias named after Giuseppe Garibaldi and King Vittorio Emanuele II, its Mussolini-styled banks and its old convent turned into a town hall. Then, suddenly, the earth gapes and from various vantage points you gaze down into what looks like a landslide into hell. The hillside is full of cave houses with maybe just a doorway or a window built in stone.

Later, over a bottle of Aglianico del Vulture, a reliable local red, Kihlgren inveighs against Italian architecture. "Too much design!" he announces. "We have so much that is from the

popes, Caesars and princes that the Italian people are not interested in vernacular architecture. In Italy there are over 2,000 abandoned villages. We may lose the chance to save them."

It is a staggering figure, the legacy of 19th- and 20th-century emigration both to big cities and abroad, but Kihlgren has pioneered a new way of approaching the problem. In the Apennine village of Santo Stefano di Sessanio, he created an *albergo diffuso*, a hotel whose rooms were scattered around the village with one house acting as reception. It wasn't an original idea. Sir Clough Williams-Ellis did something similar with Portmeirion in Snowdonia in the 1920s. Kihlgren's originality lay in trying to revive the village economy by using local carpenters and weavers to create its

'I'm given two rusty keys to open what looks like a barn door'

furniture, towels and linen. "It's not a great idea," he admits modestly. "But I like it."

Santo Stefano di Sessanio was a success. The German press were ecstatic about Kihlgren's *Ästhetische Radikalität* (though when you're looking for somewhere just to sit down and read a book, "radical ascetic" might be a more appropriate description). The publicity – national and international – brought Kihlgren the possibility of reviving more of Italy's abandoned villages. It also brought him Margarethe Berg, who was at the time clearing generations of rubble, moss and human detritus out of 18 caves in Matera.

"When she first brought me here I thought it was like the prison in *Midnight Express*!" Kihlgren laughs. "In Matera we wanted to show that the caves were used as dwellings. We could have made mistakes, filled the places with contemporary design, but this would take your attention away from the dwelling. So we decided to use old materials and simple shapes fused with the wall of the caves. The final result is decent, I believe, and representative of the true identity of Sassi di Matera."

I agree. Too much furniture would have spoiled the unique shape of each cave and this place truly is unique. That said, I wouldn't have minded a comfy sofa in reception – but I don't tell my hosts.

COMPACT FACTS

HOW TO GET THERE
Adrian Mourby stayed at Le Grotte della Cività nei Sassi di Matera as a guest of Bailey Robinson (01488 689700; baileyrobinson.com), which offers two-night packages from £650 per person, based on two sharing, including return flights, transfers and B&B accommodation. The hotel will reopen for the new season on 15 March.



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