

THE APENNINES, ITALY PRESERVATIONIST-CUM-HOTELIER DANIELE KIHLOGREN IS MAKING ITALY'S ABANDONED HILLTOP VILLAGES HOSPITABLE AGAIN – GUESTS CAN EVEN HOLE UP IN A CAVE

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RESTORATION PLAY

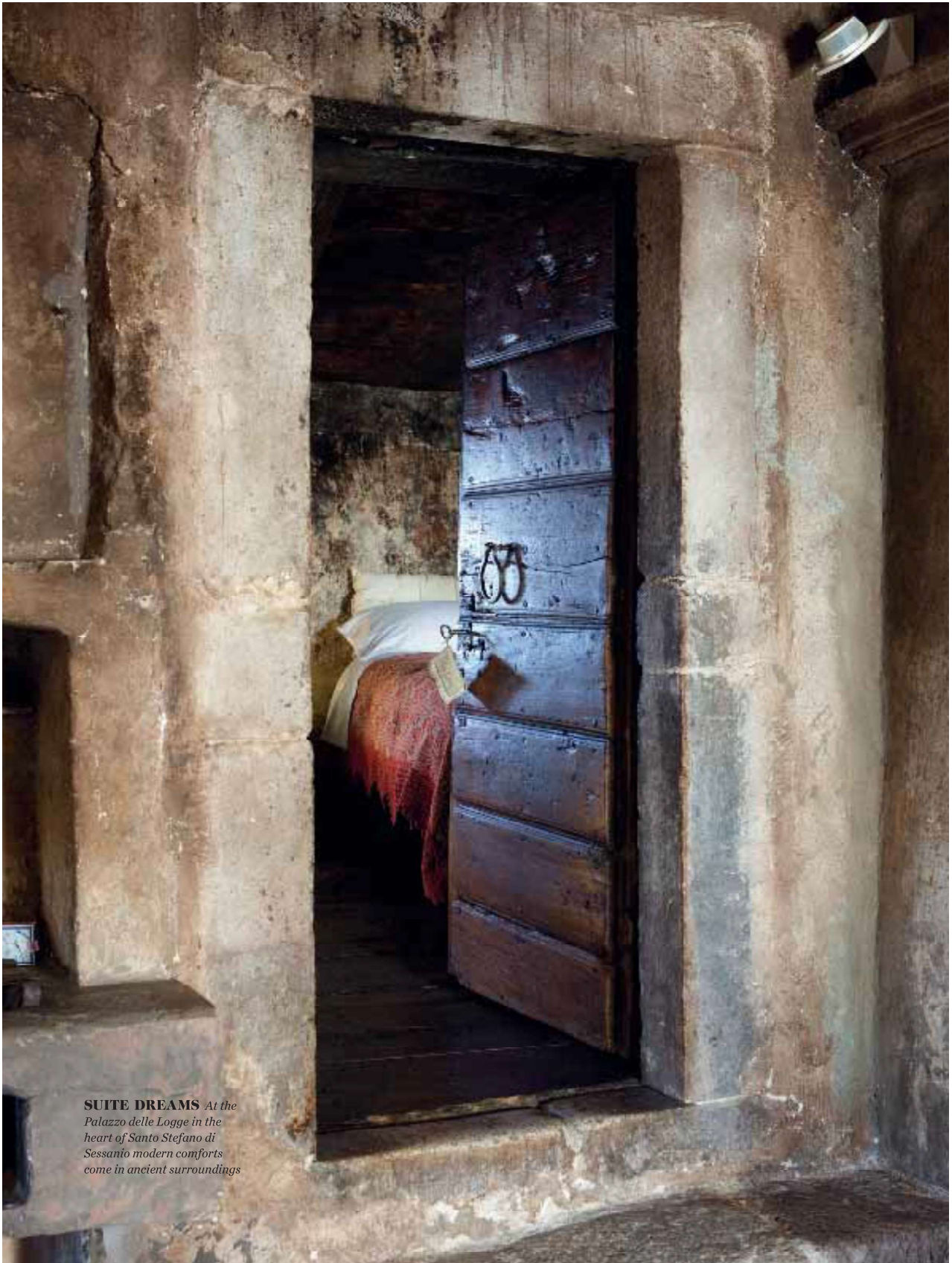
I've never stayed at a hotel like it. My room, or more accurately cave, is a suite of at least 120 square meters. The narrow hallway opens up into a small salon containing an old wooden table and a couple of chairs. There are no doors; tucked away in one corner is a nook to sleep in, another cranny hides a toilet and adjacent shower.

The cave's limestone walls are bare and a faint yellow, except for a charred patch that must once have been a fireplace. The floor is uneven, to say the least; one corner has subsided – for safety's sake it is fenced off so guests don't fall into it during the night. The cave is clean, fragrant and dry thanks to a first-rate ventilation system and heated floors. In its depths is a shrine to vanity: a large room with nothing but a white, minimalist Venus bathtub built into the floor. I submerge myself in the warm water, and after adding a good dose of concentrated bath oil, a wall of foam erupts. No music or plasma TV here, and this far inside the rock you discover, with some satisfaction, that there is no cellular reception either. Candles light up the walls of a room in which people have lived for millennia.

WHEN I EMERGE FROM MY CAVE the next morning, Matera's old town seems to be bathed in light. Sassi di Matera's two cave neighborhoods, Sasso Caveoso ▶

MAKESHIFT BAR *Daniele Kihlgren (right) joins one of his guests at the cave complex in Matera for a glass of wine on the communal terrace*





SUITE DREAMS *At the
Palazzo delle Logge in the
heart of Santo Stefano di
Sessano modern comforts
come in ancient surroundings*

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and Sasso Barisano, are on the edge of a steep ravine, the only street of significance zigzagging its way through them. Swallows, swooping crazily in cascades of joy this bright summer’s day, fly down from the bare limestone ledges straight across, out over the ravine, then soar over the caves, time and again.

I’m in Basilicata, southern Italy, to meet Daniele Kihlgren, the entrepreneur whose hotels are revitalizing Italy’s abandoned villages. The Italian countryside has been emptied of people – and not only in the south. Mountainous regions in Central Italy and inland in the north have also seen massive population shifts. There are 46 villages with fewer than 100 inhabitants, almost all of them in Piedmont and Lombardy in the north. There has been an exodus overseas, and to industrial cities such as Turin and Milan.

Kihlgren wants to preserve what is left of this culture, both its architecture and way of life, from traditional recipes to crops and agricultural techniques. The Sextantio project started almost 10 years ago, when he began to buy and renovate old houses either to sell or use for his hotels. The remarkable Sextantio Albergo Diffuso Le Grotte Della Civita – *albergo diffuso* means “scattered hotel” – with its 18 rooms spread across Matera’s old town is one of them.

“It’s important to remember that many tourists come to Italy to see more than the Trevi Fountain in Rome. They want to discover this Italian way of life that is disappearing. Villages where there are no tourists at all, and where the few locals take in guests with overwhelming hospitality,” Kihlgren says.

Matera, however, is not a village but rather a city of 60,000 in a largely forgotten region at the top of Italy’s instep, between the toe and the heel. This area was once completely cut off from the rest of the country. During the 1930s of Mussolini and fascism, intellectuals and critics of the regime were sent into internal exile in these isolated villages. No prisons were required: the villages were remote enough, and many – such as Aliano, to which the writer Carlo Levi was banished – were unconnected by road. Levi wrote of his years here

RELIGIOUS ICON *The church of Santo Stefano di Sessanio*



DAILY BREAD *Il Cantinone, Sextantio’s breakfast room-cum-bar in Santo Stefano, serves coffee in the morning and aperitivo in the evening*



THE APENNINES

ONE MAN AND HIS BULLDOG

Kihlgren takes his faithful companion, Carmelo, for a walk in the hills surrounding Santo Stefano



in the acclaimed *Christ Stopped in Eboli*. The title comes from an old saying, that civilization and Christianity stopped short of here – leaving the inhabitants to fend for themselves.

UP UNTIL THE MID-1950S, the Sassi di Matera had tens of thousands of inhabitants. Entire families lived in the caves: parents with children, grandparents and animals, each family in one room. The animals helped keep the caves warm. During one election campaign, the Christian Democrats' Alcide De Gaspari and the Communists' Palmiro Togliatti called. Both agreed that it was shameful that people should live in such conditions in their country.

The cave dwellers were relocated, forcibly, to other parts of Matera. The *sassi* ("stones") fell into disrepair, but at the end of the 1980s people started

to move back. A new generation wanted to return to their roots and began to renovate the old caves. It wasn't long before the first hotel, restaurant and bar arrived.

Sassi di Matera has been a Unesco World Heritage site since 1983. In recent years it has attracted many Americans who want to see where Mel Gibson shot his controversial film *The Passion of the Christ*. Visitors flock during the summer, drawn by a town unlike any other, with houses so close together that they appear to have been built on top of each other. Primitive murals depicting saints and the Madonna and child bear witness to monks living in some of the caves, which have also served as small churches.

The hotel's numerous caverns each cover about 200 square meters and have cost a lot to restore. "I don't have one euro left," says Kihlgen, who has ▶



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‘YOU CAN BUY A VILLAGE HERE FOR THE SAME PRICE AS A HOUSE IN TUSCANY. BUT THEN AGAIN WE’RE TALKING ABOUT RUINS THAT NOBODY COULD LIVE IN’

not been allowed to buy the caves; after 25 years, the rights will return to the city council. “We are not sure we will get all our money back.”

However, the caves of Matera are just one part of Kihlgren’s ambitious project to save Italy’s rural heritage for future generations.

Santo Stefano di Sessanio, a medieval hamlet of 130 inhabitants in the hills of Abruzzi, is where it all began. The Sextantio project is named for the village founded by the Romans near today’s Santo Stefano.

WE SET OFF FROM the town of Barisciano, a 90 minute drive along the freeway from Rome. The road starts to climb dramatically, and the villages become smaller and less frequent. We pass the tree line, and at an altitude of 1,200 meters a barren, autumnal landscape opens up before us. Santo Stefano appears in the distance: a ridge of houses rising from the steep plateau. As we get closer, simple limestone houses and miniature Renaissance palaces with open loggias hove into view.

When Kihlgren first stumbled across the village in 2004, it was all but abandoned. A century ago 2,000 people lived here. Most of the population moved out in the 1950s to look for work in Rome, or emigrated to Canada or Belgium to work in the coalmines. There were plenty of houses for sale, and they didn’t cost much.

In neighboring villages that were completely abandoned, the houses cost even less. Kihlgren bought property in 10 villages, not just in Abruzzi but further south in the adjoining region of Molise. Kihlgren says buying so much property is not as impressive as it sounds. “You can buy a village here for the same price as a house in Tuscany. I am paying about €20 [\$30] a square meter, but then again, we’re talking about ruins that nobody could live in.”

Renovation and reconstruction take a great deal of time and money. Especially when you’re trying to get as close to the original as possible by recycling old building materials wherever possible. In Santa Stefano, Abruzzi’s characteristic white limestone predominates. For the interiors, Kihlgren scoured nearby villages for furniture from



THE REAL DEAL Rosella Madonna (right) and Ana Bartha’s *piatti poveri* (‘peasant food’) keeps the guests happy at La Locanda Sotto Gli Archi (below). Their breakfast muffins (inset) go down well, too

