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Where to Go in Italy's Small, Dying Towns

By Deborah Needleman Sept. 8, 2017

Staying a night or two (or longer) in an ancient, largely depopulated but glorious Italian hill town is not for everyone, but for those who like the idea of passing a couple of quiet days walking, reading, eating (really well) and drinking in the sublime surroundings, it can be bliss. If you can forgo a minibar, room service, a gym and much in the way of entertainment, read on for two excellent places to visit.



Dreamlike doors to the Corte della Maestà hotel in Civita di Bagnoregio.
Deborah Needleman

Civita di Bagnoregio

In Civita di Bagnoregio, one is essentially an overnight prisoner in an exquisite tiny town, because once you've walked up the long and steep footbridge to enter (no cars allowed), you're unlikely to trek back down until you're ready to leave. Fortunately, there are accommodations worthy of being trapped inside. The Italian psychiatrist, author and television personality Paolo Crepet runs a small hotel called Corte della Maesta (<http://www.cortedellamaesta.com/>) in the old bishop's house and former seminary, the rooms of which provide places for his prolific antique collections. (He fell in love with the town about 25 years ago,

when a depressed patient showed him the place that cheered her up.) His wife Cristiana is a charming, elfin woman who gives the inn its warmth, and its delicious pastries and tarts, which are served outdoors in their Edenic garden. They have a cozy sitting room in a cave and a pet hedgehog; in other words, this is a very personal place.

For dinner, the food at Alma Civita (<http://www.almacivita.it/>), run by locals who have moved back to the town, is as good and seasonal a meal as one could hope to eat anywhere. For lunch, L'Arco del Gusto (<http://www.arcodelgusto.it/>) makes pizza in one of the town's medieval communal ovens that the townspeople used to share.



Around the scattered hotel called Sextantio in Santo Stefano di Sessanio, clockwise from left: buildings near the main square, a view of agricultural fields from one of the rooms, the restaurant.

Clockwise from left: Deborah Needleman (2); Courtesy Sexantio.it.

Santo Stefano di Sessanio

Full of magic and pathos, Santo Stefano di Sessanio is a place of heartbreaking beauty both within the town and across its rich and varied natural surroundings. The buildings in this hamlet feel as organic as they do handmade, with few straight lines or right angles, as if they evolved over centuries like some kind of architectural fossil washed by the vicissitudes of time and the elements. Today, the devastating effects of the earthquake of 2009 are still visible, with makeshift wood scaffolding propping up arches and a metal skeleton where the old church tower stood before it crumbled — and yet the place's mystery and allure is still deeply powerful.

A scattered hotel, or albergo diffuso, called Sextantio (<http://santostefano.sextantio.it/en/>), created by the visionary philanthropist Daniele Kihlgren, with rooms in historic buildings dotted throughout the town, is designed in a style perhaps best described as "poor luxury." With great regard for the historical integrity of the buildings' original materials and construction techniques, age and patina are not hidden or renovated, but drawn out, and the simplicity of the way the rooms were used is highlighted. Windows are small, but afford magnificent views of farmland and mountains all the more cherishable for being like tiny kaleidoscopic jewels amid expanses of otherwise unadorned plaster walls.

The mattresses are handmade, the blankets handwoven, the benches handcarved and the ceramic cups and pitcher handbuilt, but the tubs and sink are minimalist modern by Philippe Starck, offering a rusticity that is appealing to those used to comfort. (The couple checking in before me had just come from a famous seaside resort and were aghast at the "basic" nature of the accommodations and lack of typical luxury amenities.) Sextantio has two really good restaurants serving medieval recipes (!), and a tea and handicraft shop with locally produced jams, honeys, soaps, as well as wicker baskets, pottery and glassware and wool and linen textiles made on their on-site antique loom. Often there are artisans at work in the shop, and courses (which can be arranged in English) in weaving, bread making, baking, and soap making are offered.

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The town itself is nestled into the national park Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga and surrounded by several kinds of landscape, from lush agricultural fields to the great plateau of Campo Imperatore, to majestic Appenine mountains offering everything from skiing and wolf trekking, to horseback riding and canoeing, to hiking and biking. There are also some lovely shops, galleries, restaurants and other B&Bs in Santo Stefano.

If there are movements devoted to slow food and slow flowers and slow living, why not add slow travel into the mix?

Deborah Needleman wrote the ["Who Will Save These Dying Italian Towns?"](#)