

LIFESTYLE

Top of the world

In an ancient Italian town perched on a rocky outcrop and accessible only on foot, PAOLO CREPET and CRISTIANA MELIS, the residents of an art-filled former palace, have created a guesthouse that is truly one of a kind

TEXT PAMELA GOODMAN | PHOTOGRAPHS DAVIDE LOVATTI

Paolo, Cristiana and puppies sit beneath the frescoed Renaissance alterpiece in the Borgo's salone, which was once a chapel

Flamboyant is the first word that comes to mind as I am met in Rome by Paolo Crepet, who is sporting a dashing outfit of lime-green cords, a purple jumper, white shoes and white-rimmed spectacles. The same word proves equally apt as we charge northwards, the speed of Paolo's language matching the speed of his car. The whirlwind of information is such that I struggle to keep up – the books, the lectures, the loves, the life, the passion, the art, the ambitions, the achievements – but I do ascertain that Paolo is something of a celebrity in Italy, not simply as a writer, psychiatrist and academic but as a TV personality, regularly appearing on daytime shows as an expert in criminology and sociology.

Cristiana Melis, whom Paolo describes as his 'long-term fiancée', whom I meet a short while later, is almost his exact opposite – gentle, unassuming, delicate and modest. Together, they make a captivating and unusual pair, not least in the extraordinary place they call home.

Simply put, Civita di Bagnoregio is an Italian masterpiece, rooted in the Etruscan civilisation but moulded by subsequent eras – specifically the golden age of the Renaissance, when wealthy Romans would retreat to the town to escape the heat and the malaria of the coastal plains. Perched on an outcrop of soft volcanic rock, Civita appears like a strange island rising eerily from the valley floor, connected only to reality by a long, narrow footbridge. The huddle of streets and buildings that cling precariously to the cliffsides look as if they might crumble to dust at any moment – not impossible given that, over the centuries, much of the town has been lost to earthquakes and landslides. 'La Città che Muore' – the Dying City – it began to be called, adds to its mysterious allure.

Paolo first visited the town in 1994, when he was living and working in Rome. As a Venetian by birth

[chk - online says born in Turin?], he was unfamiliar with this region of Lazio, just south of the border with Umbria, but its effect on him was instantaneous. Civita presented an irresistible opportunity for art, beauty, work and learning to come together in one inimitable place. In due course, the former Archbishop's Palace – a remnant of the area's historical association with the Papal States – was offered to him for sale and thus began 20 years of restoration. 'You know you're going to be in trouble with a project like this, but you have to do it,' he tells me. 'It's like falling in love.'

When Cristiana – who met Paolo when they were both working in Bologna – came on the scene in 2011, a new opportunity presented itself – the purchase of the adjoining corte (court) building, which the couple has restored together. They opened this property as a bed and breakfast in 2013, while keeping the palace (now referred to as the Borgo) as their home.

Bed and breakfast is far too mundane a way of describing Corte della Maestà, however. This is no run-of-the-mill place to stay, but a showcase of eccentric, creative brilliance. It is a perfect fit for the town, which over the years has lured the likes of directors Federico Fellini and Giuseppe Tornatore and, more recently, one of Italy's most high-profile fashionistas (who must remain nameless) to its picturesque confines. 'We wanted to create an experience,' says Paolo from the kitchen table, which groans beneath the weight of a lavish Italian breakfast, and this is just what he and Cristiana have achieved.

The experience starts, however, at the car park before the footbridge (no motorised vehicles, other than a Piaggio truck for transporting luggage and waste to and from the town, are allowed beyond this point). All visitors – day-trippers in the main – pay a €5 fee to walk the 300 metres to the medieval citadel. With around a million visitors a year, this clever ruse by the district mayor means there is a ▶



OPPOSITE Perched on a rocky outcrop, Civita di Bagnoregio is only accessible via a footbridge. ABOVE The sacred and the secular unite in the salone. RIGHT The entrance to the Borgo, once the archbishop's palace



LEFT Paolo works beneath a delicate Alexander Calder mobile in his cossetting, book-lined office. BELOW The study, which is adorned with collected pieces, such as these mannequins and bust, reflect Paolo's preference for 'a confusion of beauty'





LEFT Paolo and Cristiana entertain their neighbour Khiara Musco, one of Civita's eight full-time residents, on the Borgo's terrace



handy pot of funds for (relentless) conservation work and no communal taxes for locals.

We pass under Civita's stone entrance archway and wend our way through cobbled streets to the main piazza. Overlooked by the dusky pink façade of the church of San Donato, it is the scene of the twice-yearly Palio della Tonna – the town's famous eccentric donkey race. Beyond the piazza, through a discreet entrance overwhelmed with ivy, Corte della Maestà is revealed – and with it comes a bounding welcome from Hortensia and Olivia, Cristiana's Labrador puppies.

First impressions deliver a riot of art and artefacts – the old and the new, the sacred and the secular, the sober and the bizarre. 'I don't believe in collections,' says Paolo, who hails from a family of artists – much of their work hangs on the walls. 'I prefer to have a confusion of beauty.' Together, he and Cristiana regularly scour Italy and further afield for art and antiques. 'Art is far more than a hobby,' says Cristiana of Paolo, adding (as she taps a finger to her temple) that she sometimes thinks he needs to see a doctor.

Of the two old buildings, the Corte, which houses four guest rooms (there is a fifth at a separate address nearby), is marginally more restrained. Certainly, La Badessa, the principal room, is glorious, an ornate iron four-poster taking centre stage with a free-standing bath alongside, a quiet alcove of books and an open fireplace for the winter months. La Intrusa, named after a story by the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, has an exquisite painted panelled ceiling, a wood-burning stove and walls hung with oils. La Sonnam-bula references theatrical set design with its elaborate carved and painted headboard. And La Scrittice, reached via a flight of stone steps outside, juxtaposes black and pink floral wallpaper, reproduced from Virginia Woolf's London home, with a preserved piece of a 16th-century fresco.

Through the magnificent kitchen, the heart and soul of both the Borgo and Corte della Maestà, I am led to the Bishop's Garden, the largest of its kind in tiny Civita and a private space for Paolo, Cristiana and the dogs. Guests, however, are regularly invited for a drink among the roses or under bowers of apricot, cherry and fig – the fruit of which Cristiana often turns into a tart for tea or breakfast.

The garden links the Corte with the Borgo and it is here that the religious heritage of the building collides with the couple's passion for collecting. A frescoed Renaissance ▷



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT An eye-catching spiral staircase in Corte della Maestà; Paolo and his handyman, Osvaldo Sandrini, mend a broken birdcage; Paolo and Cristiana are fans of local ceramist Sara Arcangeli, seen here at work in her shop, Melograno Bianco, which doubles as her studio



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE RIGHT The Corte della Maestà's principal bedroom, La Badessa, features a free-standing bathtub alongside an alcove of books; its ornate four-poster bed, dressed with crisp white linen, takes centre stage; one of the best restaurants in town is the family-run Alma Civita, which is presided over by chef Maurizio Rocchi and his mother Marie-Teresa; visitors enter Civita through a stone archway; the tangerine staircase, lined with portraits, leads down to a labyrinth of underground rooms hewn straight out of the tuff.





altarpiece in the former chapel is the backdrop to their salone and religious iconography abounds in statues, paintings and motifs. And then there are the tribal masks, the mannequins, the books and butterflies in jars, the mirrors, the taxidermy, the birdcages (some inhabited by living songbirds) and a never-ending feast of portraits, many of which line a tangerine-coloured staircase that descends to a labyrinth of cavernous underground rooms gouged straight into the tuff.

I search in vain for a common thread but can find no grand plan. Only, perhaps, a sense of grand passion, which seems fitting enough given that Paolo's most recent books and lecture series concentrate on the subjects of courage, freedom and passion.

When he leaves early for an academic appointment in Milan, it is like the whirlwind has subsided. So, too, with Civita at the end of the day, when the tourists have retreated back across the bridge and an otherworldliness descends on the town. A few trattorias stay open for lingering visitors, but by 10pm the silence is profound. Nowadays, aside from weekenders and holiday-home owners, Civita di Bagnoregio has only eight full-time residents – not forgetting, of course, two and a half millennia's worth of ghosts, countless cats and a pair of rather fine pedigree Labradors □

Corte della Maestà: cortedellamaesta.com

ABOVE Colour and pattern bring energy to this room in the Borgo, where Paolo enjoys reading.

BELOW The kitchen is shared with guests staying at Corte della Maestà. The couple describe their housekeeper, Anna Porchilla (in red), as 'our angel'. OPPOSITE One of five guest rooms, La Intrusa has a painted panelled ceiling

