

# The Old Lady on the Hill

A study in silence in the ancient Italian village of **Civita di Bagnoregio**

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It's when I realise that the sound of birdsong is coming from within the kitchen, as opposed to the garden outside, that I begin to worry I might have actually fallen into a fairy tale. Admittedly, it's a thought that has been forming from the moment I too-enthusiastically bounded, suitcase in hand, up the steep pathway to the medieval village of Civita di Bagnoregio. Blame the head rush that comes from legging it up a vertiginous slope at speed – or perhaps the lingering princess fantasy brought on by the preceding weekend of Royal Wedding mania – but I've been dizzy with wonder ever since.

Stepping into Civita, you see, is akin to swallowing the red pill or tumbling down the rabbit hole. Nicknamed “the town that is dying”, its mere existence defies all logic and those who enter risk becoming so intoxicated by its otherworldly charms that they may never leave. Located in the Italian province of Lazio, an hour and a half from Rome by train and within driving distance of Perugia, Civita nevertheless exists in something of a hinterland beyond the well-trodden tourist trails of Tuscany, both out of place and out of time. Over 2,500 years ago it was connected to the surrounding towns by road but over the centuries land erosion and a series of earthquakes caused its soft sides to collapse and cascade into the valley below. The result is a carved city that rears up out of the clouds and is accessible only by one crooked bridge, a Disney logo come to life. One morning our photographer Lesley gets up at dawn to catch the sunrise and finds herself swathed in a thick grey mist that swallows the town whole, its outlines slowly shimmering into being like an apparition.

We've been drawn here in search of the silence and solitude promised by the equally fantastical Corte della Maestà. Meaning “court of majesty”, this guesthouse is a mystery wrapped within the enigma of Civita and the eccentric creation of the Italian psychiatrist and writer Paolo Crepet and his wife Cristiana Melis. Backing on to a medieval church and formerly the residence of the local archbishop until 1699, the house later fell into disrepair and was rescued by Paolo when he first visited the town in the grip of a cold midwinter some 25 years ago. “There's a wind here that comes into your soul. I thought that if I love this place today, I will love it forever,” he tells me. It's a love affair that has lingered and seen the dilapidated residence transform into a grotto of relics, antiques and contemporary art pieces from all over the world.

To enter we drag our suitcases past disinterested stray cats and over the uneven cobbles of the town's pedestrianised alleyways towards a wall cascaded with ivy. Feeling like a character in *The Secret Garden*, I duck underneath the greenery and swing open the battered wooden door to reveal a low-ceilinged garden filled with fig and olive trees and topped by a tall picture window. Stepping into the kitchen, time instantly collapses. Formerly an ancient street, as evidenced by its soaring archways and vaulted ceilings, the room is a collision of objects from different eras and civilisations that tumble over each other in a visual cacophony. >>



The painting over the kitchen hob by the artist Piero Pizzi Cannella serendipitously matches one of two chandeliers, its cantilevered glass beads hanging down like the unravelling hem of a jazz singer's dress. A 300-year-old wooden beam marks the fireplace, French copper pots and pans hang haphazardly from the walls, and above one doorway sits an authentic Roman tombstone inscribed "to Barbara" and with a motley crew of taxidermied birds perched atop it. The space is anchored by a long farmhouse table that is festooned each morning with ripe-to-bursting fruit and pies homemade by Cristiana, who rustles up coffee and scrambled eggs for us while donning a headscarf and apron that she somehow manages to make more chic than Cinderella. During breakfast cats slink and meow in the front porch while Tito, a shaggy-haired canine, whines and slobbers all over the glass back door. "We have a garden of cats and a garden of dogs," Cristiana laughs. It's also here that she takes me by surprise by revealing the basket full of chirping baby cinciallegra birds she's rescued, feeding them via pipette every hour of our stay.

Throughout the four suites, each named after an imaginary character, curiosities, precious objects and pieces from the couple's art collection proliferate. The Writer honours Virginia Woolf and features the same wallpaper as her Bloomsbury study, as well as a bubblegum-pink bathtub and a piece of fresco dating back to the 16th century, wrinkled and papery to the touch. The Sleepwalker is dedicated to the opera composer Vincenzo Belli and I'm astonished to find that the headboard of the bed is a piece from a Roman stage set. In The Maestà, a two-storey suite and the newest addition to the property, a mirror from a French bakery hangs over the dining table and a vintage poster for an opera by Puccini, a close friend of Paolo's grandfather, sits at the top of the spiral staircase. I discover that the four-poster bed in my room, The Abbess, was originally made for a convent but was rejected for its overly saucy image of a dancer, and find myself surrounded by framed pictures of saints clustered by seashells and plastic flowers. The effect is similar to wandering among an immersive theatre set where each object is a clue to some half-hidden narrative, inviting the viewer to fill in the gaps with their own imagination.

Sitting down with Paolo at the kitchen table, he confirms that this was the intention. "Creating this place was like writing a movie. It should encourage your fantasy – the details are all materials for your next good dream." Appropriately enough for someone in the business of thinking, Paolo sees the true purpose of Corte della Maestà as restoring something of the time and space to reflect which has been stolen by modern life. "Often people use a vacation as an opportunity to refresh their body, but we forget that we also have a soul. This is a place where you can take care of your soul and face your knots," he explains. "The people who come here know that they are looking for something, even if they don't know exactly what that is. We have the right to do nothing and we are here to help people remember that. This is a place for losing time." >>







Inspired by his words, I spend my days in Civita doing exactly that – walking, thinking, constructing characters in my head, stroking the local cats and eating endless plates of pasta. I soon lose track of time, forgetting what day of the week it is or when we arrived as I explore the 3,000-year-old Etruscan grottes (caves) underneath the town and wander its main street past Renaissance-era palazzi crawling with pink roses. The sense of history is omnipresent – I spot Roman engravings in the paving stones and visit the site of the home of San Bonaventura, the patron saint of Bagnoregio who makes an appearance in Dante's Divine Comedy. At Chiesa San Donato, a medieval church built around 600 AD on the site of a former Etruscan and then Roman temple, peeling frescoes and the neon-lit relics of saints are concealed behind a peach-coloured façade. Cristiana describes the church as “an old woman covered in beautiful jewels” and I think about how this is an apt description for Civita as a whole – idiosyncratic and majestic, crumbling yet full of stories of a life well lived.

Although abandoned for many years, and with a permanent residence of only eight people, Civita has seen a sharp rise in tourism in recent times with upwards of 20,000 visitors known to tread its cobbles over a weekend in the peak summer season. With so much ancient history exposed and vulnerable, I can't help but worry that tourism will be the next catastrophe to erode Civita's spirit. Paolo is more philosophical, however. “It's life, you can't stop progress. I remember walking here alone and only one bar being open, but I can't only be romantic or nostalgic – this isn't a museum. I'm not so selfish as to say that all this is only for me – I have to share it. If someone spends time here they will go back home with a little bit of joy, beauty and ideas.”

Despite his generosity of spirit, for me the best time in Civita is undoubtedly the early morning or late evening when the hordes depart and I'm left alone with the mist, the toll of the church bell and my own thoughts. Before we break the spell by leaving I retreat to the sanctuary of my room and listen to the rain drumming on the windows, the wind howling and absolutely nothing else.

### THE LOWDOWN

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