

OUTPOST OF HISTORY

A world away from the manicured pleasures of nearby Tuscany and Umbria, Tuscia's heritage embraces the wildness of the Etruscans as well as the richness of the Renaissance

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Tucked into the far northeast corner of Lazio, within striking distance of Umbria, the tiny town of Civita di Bagnoregio is known as *la città che muore* – the dying city. It sits atop a volcanic tufo stone hill in the midst of one of Italy's largest inland canyons. Eroded over the centuries by water and wind, the hill has narrowed to a slender pinnacle; the town's jumble of low buildings – houses, a small church on a neat square, a bishop's palace – cling to its peak in a dense cluster. The only way to reach it, whether you're one of the 900,000-odd day-trippers estimated to have visited in 2018 or a member of its permanent population (somewhere between eight and 15 people, depending on your source) is to walk across a narrow footbridge, high above the scrub-lined and wooded canyon. That journey of a few hundred metres is vertiginous; the final incline to the town gate is steep enough that the old and disabled may struggle to get there. In this way, Civita slips quite convincingly through a rent in history, transporting those who visit back to its origins more convincingly than almost any other small 15th-century town in Italy.

And yet within its old walls – and it's not much bigger than a Sydney square block – Civita harbours some very interesting part-time residents. There is the wunderkind fashion designer, credited with completely

reinventing a venerated Italian brand, who not long ago purchased a palazzino in the town. There is the president emerita of a top American university, a woman of profound erudition and sophistication. There are, or have been, set designers and historians and architects and film directors, and a flock of aristos who bought and sold the crumbling houses in the '70s. There was Marguerite Yourcenar, the Franco-Belgian author of *Memoirs of Hadrian* and the first woman to be elected to the Academie Française, who claimed her ideal living situation would be to divide her time between New York City and this tiny *borgo*.

And there is Paolo Crepet, the preeminent Italian psychiatrist-professor-writer-pundit – a man whose face and voice are familiar to his countrymen from their ubiquity on TV and radio talk programs and the covers of the 20-odd books he has authored. Twenty-five years ago, in the deep wet chill of midwinter, Crepet and his wife Cristiana Melis, a former fashion executive, went to Civita for a day. Despite the frigid rain and wind and darkness, Crepet found himself held fast by its mystery and beauty. "I thought, 'If I love it this way, I'll love it forever,'" is how he tells the story – seduced, despite its severity, by the allure of Civita's quietude and surreal out-of-time-ness. He kept going back.

Some years after that first visit, Crepet learned that the bishop's



palace next to the church was for sale. The price, he recalls, was too steep; he demurred. But he struggled to put the place out of his mind, and later yet, after reconsideration on all sides, Crepet and Melis found themselves in possession of that 16th-century palazzo, blessed with exceptional early-Renaissance bones and in need of a lot of TLC and a discerning eye.

Several years on, the adjacent seminary – an older building that was a more jumbled and organic collection of spaces, with a long, massive kitchen converted from what used to be one of the town’s small streets – came up for sale. The Crepet-Melises aren’t specific on when exactly the idea arose to create a small B&B there, but it seems to have been an organic enough decision. Corte della Maestà – the five-room hotel like no other in Italy, or the world, that is the final product of that inspiration – feels entirely genuine, and entirely in keeping with the beauty and authenticity of the town surrounding it.

This isn’t empty rhetoric. Civita – unlike, say, San Gimignano in Tuscany – has neither the canny gloss nor the overtly commercial mien of the innumerable hill towns that long since gave themselves over to tourism, notwithstanding the fact that its unique situation and history have made it Instagram fodder of the highest order. There are a handful of restaurants and a couple of cafes; one wine bar; a *tabacchiaio*; one modest *fruttivendolo* that I saw in my two days there; and a great many cats that may or may not be strays. No post office, no school – and no communal taxes, thanks to the institution of a tourism fee in 2013 (it was raised to €3 in 2017). On any given early afternoon in summer, its little lanes are thronged with visitors from as far away as Brazil and Colorado and China, furiously snapping and posting images of its anomalous and unique charms. But with the approach of sunset the rivers of humanity drain away, leaving a gratifying, echoing silence in their wake, broken only by the occasional footfall or breezes stirring the ivy and geraniums and hydrangeas that flourish in walled gardens just visible through iron gates. In July, a table at Alma Civita, the best of the town’s eateries, can be next to impossible to nab for lunch but is almost always gettable at supper time.

Such are the disparate realities of life in a 600-year-old village connected to the rest of the world only by the internet and a narrow footbridge. It’s what makes a stay at Corte della Maestà one of the more original to be had in Italy. But it’s far from the only reason to book there, because anywhere in the world, this *residenza antica*, as Crepet and Melis

Opposite: **The hilltop town of Cività di Bagnoregio**, opposite. This page: **Corte della Maesta**



call it, would be remarkable for its interiors. Crepet hails from a line of enthusiastic and accomplished artists and collectors, and the warren of spaces in the former seminary that has been given over to Corte della Maestà is a palimpsest of epochs, styles, and personal proclivities and eccentricities. There are early 20th-century puppets and auction-worthy andirons; there is one headboard that’s a piece of 19th century set design, and another retrieved from an ancient monastery. Burlap-upholstered *brocante* here, framed drawings or illuminated manuscript pages there; curios, claw-footed tubs, framed deeds and wax seals, and piles of vintage ceramics and maiolica. In the cellar, its low-barrelled ceiling curving over a massive stone fireplace, a beautiful Forneris piano is there for the playing; if instead a film is the order of the evening, a projector and drop screen are ready. The adjacent Bishop’s Winery is where Crepet and Melis host wine tastings and intimate dinners. Everywhere at Corte della Maesta there is the imprimatur of aesthetes and hosts, as opposed to hoteliers, at work; this is its distinction.

Each of the five suites is unique, as in a home. The one called L’Abbessa – the abbess – is the most sighed over, and for good reason. It’s large, and its high-pitched and beamed ceilings, washed in lime and pale grey, are dappled with light all day long. The tall, canopied bed faces a stone fireplace; *Protect me when I dream*, read the delicately hand-finished shams at its head. In one book-lined corner, a dainty antique desk faces a tiny



window, surrounded by cloth- and leather-bound books. A freestanding iron bathtub is next to a glass door opening onto a private breakfast terrace. Across the way is La Sonnambula – the sleepwalker – a suite whose sitting room is hung with luscious textiles and whose bed features that early-19th century set design piece. Downstairs in the wabisabi front garden, a private entrance framed in ivy leads directly into La Scrittrice – the writer; with its floral wallpaper reproduced from a pattern in Virginia Woolf’s London house, its 16th-century fresco fragment and slick Ingo Maurer light fixtures, it perhaps best represents Crepet’s and Melis’s wide-ranging tastes.

The soul of Corte della Maestà, however, is the kitchen. The ancient paving stones, tall vaulted ceiling, and myriad copper pots stacked on benches and adorning tables, all radiate warmth, character and patina. In the mornings, Melis and her staff tend to breakfast – a host of fresh breads and pastries, cheese and local fruits (melons, berries, succulent pears), preserves they made themselves the previous autumn over the enormous range (Melis’s blood orange-cinnamon marmalade is mood-alteringly delicious). Guests sit in the sprawling walled garden just outside, enjoying the background soundtrack one of canyon thermals sighing up the hill and through the foliage and long grass, and the chorals of busy birds. Here and there, Crepet and Melis have strategically placed a single table and chair, or a daybed dressed in Indian textiles. This space, above all others in Civita (or so it seemed to me), transmutes time; shaped into the very edge of the town, long vistas across the canyon visible from its far wall, its silence and its beauty are virtually unchanged across four centuries.

Civita di Bagnoregio’s current face is largely 16th century, but its foundations are in fact Etruscan, laid some 2500 years ago by the pre-Roman tribe that dominated across Tuscany, western Umbria and northern Lazio. This part of north-eastern Lazio is today known as Tuscia, and like Civita, it is characterised by an alluring mix of ancient Etruscan sites and culture and 16th-17th century splendour – palaces, villas, castles and gardens of note. Much of this patrimony was created by the Farnese family, one of the most powerful in Renaissance Italy, whose princes, dukes and popes presided over northern Lazio’s reaches from the 15th to the 17th centuries (among its more illustrious members were Alessandro Farnese – aka Pope Paul III – who convoked the Council of Trent; another, later Alessandro, a Duke of Parma, was the naval commander who led the defeat of the Ottomans at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571). Many of Tuscia’s larger towns harbour a signal Farnese structure: at Bagnaia and Caprarola, there are palatial villas with exquisite gardens, dense with mythological allegory amid all the period symmetry (the Prince of Wales is known to be a fan). In Vignanello is Castello Ruspoli, which entered the family via the marriage of a daughter of Beatrice Farnese in 1531; the Princess Claudia Ruspoli still lives there today, overseeing the care of its famous parterre hedge gardens and grounds. In Ischia di Castro, to the west, is the Rocca, a stunning ducal palace designed by Antonio da Sangallo, currently being restored by the preeminent Roman art historian Stefano Aluffi-Pentini. It’s impossible in fact to talk about Tuscia and not pay homage to the Farneses, and their efforts to curate their environment around the concept – so vaunted



a part of Renaissance thinking – that aesthetics should be an essential aspect of domestic life.

In and among all the princely splendour are the traces of a much older, more occult culture. Tuscia’s hills and valleys – far less manicured than those Tuscan and Umbrian stretches to the north and east – are dotted with Etruscan tombs, ruins and holy sites (Tuscia is in fact a bastardisation of Etruria, the name given this region by the Romans after their conquest of it). High atop Monte Cimino is a *faggeta*, or dense woodland, where it’s said the 12 Etruscan tribes held off encroaching Roman conquerors in a gruelling last stand. Just outside the town of Bomarzo – home to yet another monumental 16th-century palace, built by Vicino Orsini (married, naturally, to a Farnese) – a remarkable discovery was made in the early ’90s: a sort of pyramid, with multiple stairs, pathways and channels, carved into a small volcanic mountain. Said to date from around 2700 BC, it is thought to have been a sacrificial altar of some sort. Equally thrilling is Bomarzo’s Sacred Garden – more colloquially known as the *parco dei mostri*, or park of the monsters – which Vicino Orsini commissioned to be created in a thick wooded valley below the town. Full of fantastical beasts and crooked, structures shaped from boulders of peperino stone, it captures the elemental strangeness and intense energy of the place.

A bit further south, where Tuscia’s mountainous centre smooths out into burnished-gold plains, is the small town of Vetralla; and a few miles outside its walls, set in lush groves of olives and stands of sea pines, is Tenuta di Paternostro. As a child, the *tenuta*’s owner, the Roman fashion and luxury marketing executive Olivia Mariotti, used to ride the horses her father bred there across its 31ha and among the 250 olive trees the family tended (today their oil bears the tongue-in-cheek name Olio di



Corte della Maesta, opposite, far left **and Tenuta di Paternostro; the latter's pool,** above, **dining,** below, **and interior,** left



Olivia). When she inherited one of the 19th-century farmhouses on the property, Mariotti enlisted the talents of her friends, Rome-based architects Carl Pickering and Claudio Lazzarini, to reinvigorate it, but without dispensing with its soul. The result is Mariotti's lovingly run, five-room inn, which can also be booked exclusively as a villa.

Paternostro has to be one of the more stylish conversions in these parts – a showcase of contemporary design and antiques, textiles and rugs from India and Iran and Kazakhstan, hand-stitched bedlinens and a few outrageously gorgeous sets of highly collectible porcelain tableware from a long-defunct factory that produced exclusively for the Borghese family. One of the hay barns has been converted into an open-air living room, furnished with kilims and throw cushions, vintage rattan furniture,

and a working jukebox loaded up with good R&B tunes. Various terraces and patios, shaded by olives or one of a handful of enormous old oak trees, provide a diversity of breakfast and lunch spots; mill wheels from a local frantoio, hundreds of years old, have been repurposed as dining tables. Mariotti's grows her own vegs and herbs in a kitchen garden behind the jukebox room, and what she doesn't comes from the surrounding local farms and cooperatives. The food at Paternostro is, in a word, sublime – refined without being elaborate, healthy, based only on the freshest possible ingredients and usually served family style, in ample portions. In the fields surrounding the house, Mariotti's thoroughbreds graze placidly, occasionally coming to the fence to nicker for a caress.

Places to stay that offer comparable style and food are very thin on the ground in the area, but even if they were legion, Mariotti's hospitality would distinguish itself for her unique programming. From world-class wellness experts and classical Persian musicians to energy healers who incorporate the horses into healing retreats, Tenuta di Paternostro allows Mariotti to explore her own interests while sharing them with her guests.

But of course, if they want to do nothing but loll under one of the oaks next to the pool with a good novel, no one at Paternostro would have a problem with that. Every evening, the staff bring out kilims and cushions and low tables and lanterns and arrange them in front of one of the haybarns, facing the sunset. House-made olive paté and crostini appear; carefully selected local natural wines are poured. There's something of the safari sundowner in Mariotti's styling of aperitivo hour, and in the serene burnish of the plain as it flows west towards the sea there are subtle shades of the Serengeti. Tuscany has something still wild, and something still mysterious. In a country that can feel manifestly discovered, what a thrill to find a place that isn't – yet. (W)