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‘The only sign of life was the damp creeping up the walls’

When *Michael Moritz* and his wife spotted a tumbledown estate in Tuscany, they bought it – with dreams of transforming it into a country idyll

The worst day of the year may be the best on which to buy a property. So it was when, 20 years ago, my wife Harriet Heyman and I first set eyes on Borgo Pignano, a countryside property set in the Tuscan hills between Volterra and San Gimignano. It was an early December afternoon. The rain was coming down in blustery sheets. The battered wooden shutters of the villa were either closed or banging against the side of the house. Foliage filled a squalid, empty swimming pool. Inside, the only sign of life was the damp creeping up the walls. In the outbuildings, many roofs and floors had caved in or collapsed. It could not, we thought, look worse than this.

Today, Borgo Pignano is a boutique hotel with 15 rooms, 12 cottages and apartments, a pair of restaurants and three swimming pools. It sits in the centre of 750 acres of farmland tended in an organic, sustainable manner. Much to our delight, Borgo Pignano has also started to win

commendations and recognition from independent judges and a number of esteemed travel writers. But, lest you think this all came easily, it did not.

When we took our Tuscan plunge we had been going to Italy in summer for several years – including one punishing trip when both our sons were under the age of three and the holiday consisted of manoeuvring a double buggy down cobbled streets, getting pickpocketed in Florence, hunting for disposable nappies (some of the Italian variants leave something to be desired) and watching our boys do Jackson Pollock imitations with spaghetti. Little wonder that we thought a permanent place in Italy would make life easier, but it was a long time coming.

When we purchased Borgo Pignano we knew we had a long path ahead. The main property had been sliced in two: one half, relatively untouched in 150 years, had been a Swiss family's hunting lodge, while the other had been tarted up, sliced into tiny apartments and used to lure German package-tour operators. It took us more than three years to make the villa whole again, replace the roofs (every tile, beam and post), repair the foundations and install proper drainage. Only then did we start on the interiors, which meant new plumbing, heating, electrical systems, tiled floors, doors and windows.

Every now and again I need to look at photographs of the restoration – of muddy trenches, half-finished staircases and roofs open to the elements – to remind myself of how much work was done. There is not a square inch of the restored buildings that has not been subject to a hammer, saw, trowel or paintbrush. There is not a square inch of the property that has not been subject to a hammer, trowel, saw or paintbrush

During the works we became familiar with aspects of Borgo Pignano's history. Its oldest parts date to Etruscan times, and the small church was built in the 12th century and subsequently enhanced. By the mid-18th century Borgo Pignano was a hilltop hamlet occupied by a landowner whose lifestyle, as ledgers from the time prove, was underwritten by a dozen or so tenant farmers who scratched out a mean subsistence tilling his land. At its peak, before industrialisation emptied Italy's small villages, around 150 people lived in Borgo Pignano, which had a bakery, school and cemetery. We found empty shell casings in the caverns beneath the house, and these, along with pockmarks on the walls around the entry to the villa, are evidence of the fighting around Borgo Pignano as the Tuscan countryside was liberated in 1944.

Our restoration was full of the twists and turns familiar to anyone who has read Frances Mayes's *Under the Tuscan Sun*: unannounced feast days when nary a worker was to be seen; August, when activity ground to a halt; schedules that came and went; and misadventures such as the time a

wheelbarrow full of cement was accidentally spilt into our freshly filled infinity pool, which had to be drained, repaired and filled all over again.

Yet for the most part, despite the setbacks, building in Tuscany proved to be relatively straightforward, thanks largely to Simone Bartolini, a local architect and gentle soul who has yet to fly on an aircraft but who, while on the ground, kept us in the authorities' good graces.

We were introduced to Borgo Pignano by Italian acquaintances who dreamt of living in a communal setting while operating a hospitality business. After several years of trying to make this work, it became apparent that our agendas were different and we parted ways. It was then, about seven years ago, that we decided to make a go of Borgo Pignano ourselves, and our lessons in the hotel business began.

Our first couple of outings with general managers were flops. But in 2014, our fortunes looked up with the arrival of Luciano Lusardi, who, ever since, has presided over the operations of Borgo Pignano with the warmth and grace of a benevolent uncle and the fastidious attention to detail of a drill sergeant blessed with a sense of humour. Thanks to Luciano, and his decades of experience in both the luxury and mainstream hotel business, Borgo Pignano has turned from a happening into a boutique hotel and a healthy business. It is also thanks to him that I now understand the importance of hospitality acronyms such as ADR, RevPAR, F&B and FOH.

The lands around Borgo Pignano were just as ravaged by time as its buildings. They had been sprayed with chemicals and over-fertilised and it took seven years until, after dredging lakes and installing an elaborate water recycling system, we could plant crops and trees and raise them in an organic fashion. We've also tried to arrest the soil erosion that comes from over-tilling and have experimented successfully with the first swales – trenches dug along the contours of fields – used in Tuscany. Now our fields are planted with wheat (which we use to mill our own flour for bread and pasta), hundreds of olive trees (for our olive oil), and a young vineyard which, this year, gave us our first wines. A three-acre vegetable garden means we are never short of fresh vegetables and soft fruits.

Borgo Pignano has become our home away from home and, as the years pass, layers of furnishings and paintings have lent additional character to the rooms. When we visit, Harriet and I usually root ourselves in La Stallina, a one-bedroom cottage next to the bocce court, from which, on a clear day, the northern tip of Corsica – some 75 miles (120km) away – is visible. From there we try to fade into the background. I enjoy spending time with Enzo Maccioni, who grew up a few miles away and oversees our agricultural activities and who, when harvest approaches, sits in his pickup truck in the

still of night lying in wait for any wild boar foolish enough to want to destroy his crops. Harriet likes to visit Lisabetta Matteucci, who makes soaps and bath and body lotions from the herb gardens and sells our pastas, jams and honey. Enzo and Lisabetta are just two of the 70 or so staff employed by Borgo Pignano during peak season. Most live nearby.

My favourite sort of day begins with a dawn bike ride to San Gimignano for an espresso and pastry, or a foray to Volterra to paint before the town wakes up, or a swim in the lake. Harriet will often disappear for an early cross-country horse ride with Barbara Cautillio, the property's riding instructor, then lose herself sculpting for much of the day. There is always lunch on the terrace near the pizza oven or a dinner at the communal table in the old kitchen, around which half a dozen languages can be heard, where the conversations are interesting and steaks are grilled in the open fireplace.

For us the pleasures of Borgo Pignano are the little things: the sound of bocce balls clacking; watching the fishmonger unload the morning's catch from Elba; the chortles of a toddler jumping into the children's pool; picking black figs near La Stallina; visits to the beehives; the cooing of turtle doves; the swarms of butterflies around the lavender; the dampness at the foot of the swales in the mid-August heat; the cocktail-shaker rattling at the outside bar before dinner; the teary-eyed young woman displaying her brand new engagement ring; or, best of all, the rattle of the tractors trundling down a lane, announcing that it is dawn again in Tuscany.

Essentials

<https://www.borgopignano.com/en/>

◆ Borgo Pignano (0039 0588 35032; [borgopignano.com](https://www.borgopignano.com)) has rooms from €300 (about £275) per night in La Villa, including breakfast.

◆ Pignano is an hour and 15 minutes' drive from Florence, 40 minutes from Siena and one hour from Pisa.
