



The Italian job

Todi transformation

Elizabeth Minchilli and her husband Domenico found a well-appointed pile of rubble in Umbria and resolved to turn it into their very own sun-drenched palace. This is their triumphant story...



Opening spread The house was a ruin when Elizabeth and Domenico encountered it, but they sought to maintain the original external floor plan. One of the few additions was the covered terrace off the second-floor bedroom, with the two levels below used to create bathrooms off the living room and guest suite. They also built the overhanging brick structure above the entrance floor – this small space houses the shower and bathtub in the master bedroom

Above The sitting room, with its cream stone walls, exposed beams and simple white curtains

Left The pergola which opens off the kitchen is covered in Virginia Creeper, which turn a bright red in the autumn. This area, which is also shaded by an ancient Elm tree, is where the couple spend most of their time in the summer

Even though my husband, Domenico, and I both had experience in restoring homes in Italy – he designing them, me writing about them – my real education came through the odyssey of finding our own ‘pile of rubble’ and turning it into the home it is today.

Domenico had been working in Umbria for several years, restoring homes for clients. Each summer we’d rent a house in the area, getting to know both the people and the countryside around Todi. We knew we wanted our own place, but a restricted budget and the growing popularity of the area made finding the perfect place almost impossible.

We followed every lead. A carpenter led us to an isolated, crumbling tower which seemed perfect... until we discovered it was built over a pungent pig farm below! Another farmhouse slipped through our fingers at a public auction.

One day, looking rather forlorn, we were having a cappuccino at the local bar. The postman asked why we looked so sad, and we told him of our hopes of finding a ruin to restore. He smiled and said he knew just the place! We’d heard this before, many times, but diligently wrote down his instructions to what he called “the house of Tomasso”.

Although by now we knew the area like the back of our hands, we seemed to reach a dead end in a sunflower field. A farmer, who was spreading fertiliser, asked us if we needed help. Angelo was soon leading us puffing and panting – I was eight-and-a-half months pregnant with Sophie, our first child – up a steep hill.

We finally reached a plateau and were faced with a vine-covered stone farmhouse, seemingly untouched for decades. Turning our backs on this romantic heap of stones, we slowly took in the view. It was

breathtaking. Cultivated fields alternated with woods, with vineyards in between. There was even a crenellated castle on the next ridge, with a row of cypresses marching across the horizon. We knew this was it. We had found paradise.

It had taken us over two years to find a place, and then another year to convince Tomasso to sell. We were now raring to begin the ‘fun’ part, bringing our ruin back to life and creating a home for our growing family – by now our second child, Emma, was on the way.

At this point Domenico had restored over a dozen such houses in Umbria and Tuscany and I was a regular contributor to a variety of architecture and interior design magazines. We knew exactly what we wanted – and, almost as important, we knew the pitfalls to avoid. Perhaps because of this, our adventures in restoration progressed very smoothly – and amazingly quickly. A mere nine months passed between the first scrape of the backhoe and the first night spent under our new roof.

The house we found was, like many in the area, originally built for two families. Two outdoor staircases led to two separate apartments on the second floor. The ground floor was reserved for the animals. Hacking our way through the rampant vines which covered the entire ruin, we discovered yet another, semi-underground, level below the stables.

Over the years, the house had begun to be overtaken by the woods that surrounded it. Glimpses of the view out over the valley were tantalising, and we began to slowly thin the trees towards the front of the house. While we loved the feeling of protection they gave, we also wanted to watch the sun set over the hills. Yet we were determined to save two of the most splendid features of our house – an ancient walnut



Left View from the kitchen to the central dining room, which also acts as an entrance hall

Bottom left The kitchen, with its central island – the window above the sink looks onto a large vegetable garden at the back of the house



tree and an immense elm, which stood two yards over the roofline.

While the house still had most of its external walls when we first saw it, there wasn't much else to define it as a potential home. The roof was, to all intents and purposes, gone. This element had done its worst: supporting interior beams had rotted away, letting the floors and tiles crash to the ground. Door and windows had similarly disappeared.

Even deciding on a floor plan was a leap in the dark, since many of the spaces – including what was to be the ground-floor guest suite, the living room and our bedroom – were entirely inaccessible due to the dereliction of the building. Yet we forged ahead, ready to alter our plans as construction progressed.

The lack of a clear plan on the restoration project was often perplexing. As our contractor repeated, innumerable times, it would have been much easier to tear the place down and build from scratch! Yet we wanted to retain as much as possible of the old structure, even if it meant altering our plans if we came across a buttress that needed shoring up, or a doorway that needed to be closed. This is, of course, one of the scariest parts of restoring a home in Italy – it is hard to foresee the final budget with any real accuracy.

As foundations were dug, and walls rebuilt, we began to collect the elements which would lend our house a 'lived in' air. Domenico painstakingly visited his sources, collecting 14 sets of antique doors. Our contractor – poetically named Dante – managed to nab some old discarded paving stones from the main piazza in Todi, which we used to create steps. The stone mantelpieces in the kitchen and the living room came from an old man in the Marches, who salvaged them from abandoned farmhouses.

Texture was very important to us, and so we used hand-made terracotta tiles throughout the ground floor. Rather than wax them to a shiny finish, as is the norm, we opted to leave them in their rough, matte state. Upstairs, on the bedroom level we made the brave choice of using wood for the floors. Wood is rarely used in Italian country homes – it's simply not traditional. We were lucky enough to have a friend, Paolo, who had cut down several cypress trees a decade before. The wood, beautifully seasoned by now, was cut into uneven lengths and widths and installed by Paolo. Its pine fragrance was an added bonus we hadn't planned on – eight years later, the wood still fills the house with its perfume.

One of the most important design decisions was, in fact, something of an experiment. Domenico had always wanted to incorporate colour pigment directly into the final coat of plaster, rather than simply painting the walls. He sensed that this would give an added layer of texture to the rooms, making the colours appear part of the substance of the walls. The contractor, who had never attempted this before, was hesitant to try. Yet soon Dante was grinding terracotta and mixing it into batches of plaster with raw pigments that Domenico had brought up from Rome.

The result was splendid. Each room is slightly different, but all are in warm earth tones which seem to glow on their own and give the house the cosy feeling everyone remarks upon.

Since cooking is a large part of my life, I knew from the very



The large open hearth was designed using an antique lintel together with old paving stones from the piazza in nearby Todi



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Top right View over the vegetable garden, towards the house and out over the valley – the pergola supports a mini vineyard where table grapes are grown

Right The small guest room upstairs was coloured a cheery yellow by mixing the pigments directly into the plaster

Bottom right The swimming pool is located on the old *ala* (threshing floor). The pool is of reinforced concrete and painted dark grey to mimic a natural pond or water tank



beginning that the kitchen would be the most important room in our home. Deciding where to place it was the first decision to make. The original kitchen had been on the upper floor, which would have been impractical. We chose to knock down a wall between two small stables and create one large space, which would serve as an eating area and working kitchen.

When we first started working on plans for the kitchen, my wish list was quite long. Happily, the large space enabled us to include almost all of the things I had ever dreamed of in a kitchen. The working area of the kitchen focuses on a central island – this oak-topped piece of furniture manages to incorporate a book shelf, a spice rack as well as two deep rolling drawers for pots. What can't fit in the drawers is suspended from a hanging rack above.

For all its modern conveniences though, my favourite part of the kitchen is the large open hearth. Although it looks as if it had been there since time began, it was actually designed by Domenico using an antique lintel together with old paving stones from the piazza in Todi. Throughout the winter months we never let the fire go out. I place pots of stew to simmer for hours over the embers, meat slowly twirls on an electric spit and there is usually a bowl full of dough left to rise in the corner. Needless to say, the large armchair flanking the flames is in great demand as everyone's favourite spot. ●





Get the look IN YOUR HOME

Italians do it better, as Elizabeth and Domenico Minchilli prove in their rustic Umbrian abode. Why not try it for yourself? Give your own place a taste of Italian style with these simple suggestions



Words by Lorraine Crighton-Smith



1. This gorgeous linen plant pot, **£14.50**, by **Cabane**, would look fabulous in an Italian-inspired casa. Call **0870 242 6719**.

2. Unrefined tiles give the Minchilli's homely kitchen its characteristic charms. To get the look in your own home try the Cotswold tile range from **Homebase**, priced **£4.95** for a pack of around 25 tiles. Call **0845 077 8888**.

3. Make the most of your outdoor space in the run-up to summer with a funky sun lounger. The Indah from **Habitat** costs **£315** (add **£85** for the ecru cushion). Call **0845 601 0740**.

4. Cosy-up by the fire in the Picasso chair from **Sofa Workshop**. Priced at **£769**, it's shown here in Waterford Natural fabric. Call **01443 238 699**.

5. Soft lighting help give the Minchilli's home its ambience. This table lamp, **£29.99**, is just like the ones they have in their bedroom. Available from **Texstyle World**, call **0845 230 9885**.





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6. A collection inspired by the rugged coastline around Portofino in the spring, these bowls, from the (you guessed it!) Portofino range, are priced from **£3**, by **Casa Domani**. Call **020 8200 5100**.

7. Fine bed linen will give any bedroom a sense of quality. A double duvet cover costs **£75**, an Oxford pillowcase costs **£16** and a cuffed pillowcase is priced **£11**, all from **Viyella's** Mayfield range. Call **01204 491 818**.



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8. The heart of an Italian home is the kitchen – and no Italian kitchen would be complete without an authentic Parmesan mill. This stainless steel mill is essential for Mediterranean cuisine and costs **£17.95** from **Cucina Direct**. For more information call **0870 420 4300**.

9. Give your bathroom Euro chic with a set of continental-style taps. This traditional La Rochelle three-hole basin mixer tap costs **£295**, from **Fired Earth** and will give your basin a new lease of life. Call **01295 814 4300** for stockists.

10. Even if your home is far from a vine-covered stone farmhouse, you can still create a rural-style kitchen. The Evesham collection from **Wickes** has a strong Italian country style and is priced from **£116** for a 600mm base unit. Call **0800 106 068**.



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