



*In Restoring a Home in Italy, author Elizabeth Helman Minchilli documents the trials and tribulations of renovating a residence. She and her husband, architect Domenico Minchilli, turned a ruin near Todi into their own dream house.*





# THE ITALIAN JOB

*Renovating an Italian farmhouse sounds dreamy, but it takes guts, money and knowing the right people.*

BY ELIZABETH HELMAN MINCHILLI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMON MCBRIDE

CLOSE YOUR EYES. Imagine your ideal country house. Rolling hills and fields of sunflowers unfold below you as you sample the bountiful local produce and wine. Throw in some culture in the form of Renaissance art and Romanesque churches, and you aren't inhabiting a Merchant Ivory movie, you are in Umbria, the lesser-known, lesser-populated neighbor of Tuscany and the eternally seductive yardstick against which all country house locales are measured.

At the epicenter of country house charm is Todi, which first popped up on the international property radar about a decade ago. Academic researchers at the University of Kentucky declared the small medieval hill town worthy of inclusion on its list of "the world's most sustainable cities." Headlines from Los Angeles to Tokyo soon proclaimed Todi the most livable city in the world.

Part of the town's appeal lies in its location. Todi, about 70 miles north of Rome, is ideal for weekend retreats from the capital and is an easy drive after a transatlantic flight. Despite all the media attention, it remains a walled medieval town perched on a hill, with a stone-paved piazza, flanked by church and town hall, at its heart. While Todi is untouched in terms of its fabric, it has its cosmopolitan side. The annual Todi Festival hosts avant-garde music, dance and film productions. An antiques fair takes place every spring.

For many Italians in the know, of course, Todi had long since been "discovered." Americans, myself included, have been visiting the town since the 1970s. My first trip with my father, New York art dealer Joseph Helman, was to visit Beverly and Bill Pepper, who had bid at a local auction for their very own castle. Beverly, an internationally known sculptor, and Bill, a journalist, had decided to put down roots. Among their many houseguests who followed suit, restoring and moving into converted farmhouses, were art historian Barbara Rose, art dealer Janie C. Lee, artist Al Held, screenwriter Jay Presson Allen and her Broadway producer husband Lewis Allen, and former Yale

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## THE ITALIAN JOB

president Benno Schmidt and his then-wife, filmmaker Helen Whitney. So many of the Peppers' friends bought houses that for a while the area was known as Beverly's Hills.

The late Time Warner exec Steven Ross bought an entire village, which his remarried wife Courtney has yet to fix up. High-profile Italians such as Carlo Ripa di Meana, the European Community's environment commissioner, actress Ornella Muti and film directors Pupi Avati and Marco Risi have all found houses here.

The hills and valleys surrounding Todi are filled with restored houses. Americans tend to visit at holidays or during the summer. But a growing number of us faithfully come up from Rome each weekend and a few adventurous souls have even settled in year-round.

While the days when a crenellated castle could be had for a song are long past, there are still many properties available. My father had been searching unsuccessfully for a home for years. One day a local real estate agent led him to a magnificent abandoned *borgo*, or village. Even though it was only a



five-minute walk from our house, none of us had realized it was for sale.

Johannes Hermel, a real estate agent who focuses on Todi as well as on new hot spots Amelia and Orvieto, confirms that there are still a surprisingly large number of properties available. "There are three types of properties," Hermel notes. "The ideal property that everyone is looking for is an old house that is pretty much intact and needs only minimal work to move in. I have a long waiting list for that type of home. The second type is the complete ruin, which basically has to be rebuilt from scratch. The third, which is very easy to

find and comes on the market frequently, is an old house that was restored during the 1970s or '80s." Hermel has just agreed to help actor Ben Gazzara sell his restored farmhouse near Melezzole.

Perhaps due to the area's popularity with Americans, prices around Todi tend to be higher. A habitable old house will usually go for a minimum of 200,000 euros (\$175,000), while a true ruin of medium size will rarely cost less than 100,000 euros (\$87,000). Prices for restored



*Above: In a southern Italian farmhouse, massive stone arches offer protection from the midday sun. Top: The Minchillis' guest bedroom.*



houses fluctuate widely, and range from 250,000 to 300,000 euros (\$260,000) on up. If the property includes views of picturesque Todi, expect to pay a premium.

"Prices can be deceptive," notes my husband, architect Domenico Minchilli, who has restored over 20 homes around Todi, including our own. "Once you factor in the construction costs of restoring the buildings and bringing them up to modern standards, the cost tends to even out, regardless of how ruined or how restored a building may appear."

Even though my husband and I both had extensive experience in restoring houses in Italy—he designing them, me writing about them—it still took us two years to find our own home in Todi. Domenico had been working in Umbria for several years, and each summer we would rent a house near Todi, getting to know both the people and the countryside. We knew we wanted our own home, but the growing popularity of the area made finding the perfect place seem near impossible. In the end, we were led to Pergolaccio, our home, by the local mailman.

Pergolaccio was little more than a pile of stones with a gorgeous view when we first saw it, but we knew that we were buying the possibility of a home, more than the building itself. In areas where zoning laws are the strictest—Umbria and Tuscany are two of the more prominent—the only way to build a new home is to restore a ruin. Even though there may be little more than four walls and a rotting roof, the owner is buying the "footprint" and the right to reconstruct what was once there. These tight building restrictions ensure that Todi will remain pretty much as it always has been, despite comparisons to the Hamptons.

"Once you find a property to restore, it is important that you find someone with experience you can trust to see you through the process," says Domenico. The first person you may come in contact with is the real estate agent, who in most cases will try to steer you in the direction of a local surveyor or contractor.

With the surge in foreigners buying property, a new profession has emerged—the expeditor. Riccardo Caracciolo is an American-Italian based in Todi whose parents, Shirley and Francois Caracciolo di Forino, bought a home there in the 1970s. Today, Caracciolo helps foreigners through the confusing maze of finding and restoring a property. "Most people are a bit overwhelmed by the process, so I can help with everything from signing the

deeds and opening a bank account to hiring contractors and overseeing construction," he says.

Finding the right contractor is crucial and not easy, even for a professional. "It's a busy time in the area, and most contractors are hard at work, so be prepared to wait," says Domenico. "The most important thing is to find someone whose work is dependable and who can stick to an agreed-upon schedule." Since most contracting firms are quite small (typically the owner, his brother and two or three full-time workers), the use of subcontractors is vital. "The contractor should contract out for the electrician, plumber and any additional workers. This ensures a clear line of responsibility which is absolutely necessary in a complicated restoration job," Domenico says.



*Interior designer Verde Visconti created an intriguing architectural space for a bathroom.*

Obtaining building permits can take anywhere from two to nine months, depending on what type of building you are restoring and where it is. Once the permits are in place, work can begin on the design phase. "A lot of people think that since you are working with an existing building, there isn't a lot of design involved," says Domenico. "On the contrary, getting a good working design that incorporates all the modern additions as well as retaining the feeling of the original house takes a minimum of two months, and often longer."

Then, of course, the basic design is often a work in progress. "Things can change radically once you begin," explains Domenico. "It can be due to structural changes necessitated by what you find as you start work. For instance, a seemingly solid stone wall can end up crumbling or needing a buttress. Or, once a wall is pulled down, an owner may decide that the resulting view is splendid, and



## THE ITALIAN JOB



*Above: A hayloft was converted into a living room.*

*Right: The quintessential Tuscan countryside unfolds near Siena.*

we'll add a window. That obviously makes ironclad estimates almost impossible, and is one aspect of restoring in Italy that is hard to explain to people, especially Americans." A ballpark figure is about 900 euros (\$780) per square meter.

While we were able to move into our home a mere nine months after construction began, we did so at our own risk. Backhoes were still moving earth around the yard, carpenters were installing cabinetry, and tiles were still being laid in more-or-less functioning bathrooms. A more realistic schedule is anywhere from 12 to 18 months.

Once the main construction work is done, the fun begins with the attention to the finishing details. "Although I've worked all over the world, from California to South America to Africa, the joy of working in Umbria, with its wealth of talented artisans, is immensely fulfilling," says Domenico. "Talented stonemasons, ironmongers, plasterers and carpenters still practice their crafts as their ancestors did for centuries. And I think it is this sense of craft, of the handmade, that imbues the homes that people restore here. And for all of Todi's worldly appeal, isn't that what we are all looking for?" □

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