

Retreat to the Tuscan Hills



JIM DUNN

It is now more than 20 years since I first discovered the amazingly bold and creative Danish couple, Jeanette and Klaus Throttrup.

Then they had just bought and were working feverishly on the refurbishment of an ancient, dilapidated and abandoned Borgo, high in the hills, an hour's drive from divine Florence. It's a most stunning part of Italy with dense wooded hills giving way to the spectacular, silent Tuscan scenery and only the occasional remote home in view.

Then the Borgo was a simple structure of a few rooms, ruined outbuildings to work on, lots of land and those wonderful views. The couple's original intention was to use the house as a holiday retreat. Now, the estate is over 300 acres in size. Some holiday home! It's now a world-famous luxury meets nature retreat – my sort of place!

That was then. Ideas and lives change. The decision was soon made to abandon the idea of a holiday home and aim to create one of the more special luxury health retreats available, not only in Italy, but the world. A bold message statement indeed. And it looks like they have succeeded.

I avoid the description "six-star"; it's much overused by premises which don't quite match up but the www.borgosantopietro.com is certainly very near it.

I've returned a few times since those early days once BC, before Covid, for a rather super lunch with friends which seemed to go on, like all good Italian lunches, till early evening. Bliss! We were all staying at a castle, a couple of hours' drive away but that did not deter us from taking our time and enjoying superb food, service and a host of courses all freshly cooked with local produce from the estate. Now their chef Giovanni de Giorgio crafts highly personalised dishes in his Michelin-starred Meo Modo



restaurant, drawing on local produce either from their own farm or others nearby.

Even since that visit a great deal has happened at the Borgo. The development has been completed, it looks perfect and along the way I have watched this talented couple and their team win accolades from guests, the media and the hospitality industry.

There's now also a new restaurant, Orto in the vegetable garden, riding, walking, nature tours and an outrageously wonderful Spa. The part I love most of all is that I can wander 300 acres and say "hello" to 300 sheep, 20 pigs, 15 alpacas, 175 chickens, 70 rabbits, 11 acres of herb and vegetable garden, a food laboratory and if that wasn't enough to keep them busy Jeanette has launched a range of beauty products which are beginning to receive wide acclaim.

The Borgo, originally a 13th century retreat for passing monks travelling to San Galgano

dates back to 1129. It now has 22 individually-designed suites and private pool residences, most of which are semi-detached and all within a short walk through stunning gardens and an hour from the renaissance city of Florence should you feel the need for some retail or museum therapy. There's also an excellent and very popular shopping outlet, The Mall, on the road to Florence.

Florence is one of the great cities of Italy and is the capital of Tuscany, 230km northwest of Rome. It's certainly worth a visit in its own right; and from the Borgo you can spend an enchanting day exploring this World Heritage site, home to cultural giants Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Dante, Galileo and the renowned Medici family.

The city is surrounded by gently rolling hills covered with villas, farms, vineyards and orchards. Market day is on Wednesday when parking is a nightmare but well worth the ef-

fort and the Borgo concierge will give you directions to an ideal parking area in the city; they will even drive you there or you can "go Italian" and hire a Vespa scooter from the hotel.

Back at the Borgo, when those huge wrought iron gates at the entrance close behind you, you are in a world of dedication, comfort and peace, with good food and wine. Dinner on the terrace overlooking the valley as dusk falls is superb. We had seasonal vegetables drenched in local oil, cuttlefish, asparagus risotto, sea bass with fava beans and green peas all grown at the Borgo, their own cheese and wild berries.

The couple make an excellent working team. Klaus is the businessman with architecture and building as his trades and Jeanette is the creative behind the perfect rooms with everything and more that you will need, beautiful fabrics and furniture. They also make a point of



employing local people and artisans at all times.

Heading up the in-house team is Scot, Patrizia Chiari. She's from good Italian stock in the heart of Scotland. There has been a long tradition of immigration from Italy to Scotland and she's come home. She runs the operation with a firm, no nonsense but amiable hand.

If the sea beckons you and your eyes need a rest from those magnificent countryside views, the Borgo Santo Pietro now has a smashing yacht for hire. The Satori can sleep 10, is a world class five-star yacht which takes with it a Michelin-starred chef from the Borgo who will create your daily menus to your specification as you meander the coast of the Mediterranean.

From the Etruscans to the Romans to the Renaissance, Tuscany is possibly the greatest repository of art in the world, from extraordinary paintings and sculpture to frescoes and ar-

chitectural masterpieces.

You'll visit Tuscany for all sorts of reasons. Gourmets and wine buffs descend on the region to enjoy great food or a simple plate of home-made pasta under the shade of a tree overlooking a village square, a city piazza or at your own villa or borgo for a few weeks as night falls. Pasta tastes better in Italy! Walkers take to the hills and the mountain passes, cyclists the rolling hills or like me you may just want to "mooch" around the cities of art – Siena, Pisa, Arezzo, Cortona, San Gimignano and Lucca.

Jim Dunn's book, Very Private and Public Relations, is available now in paperback. It's a memoir of growing up gay in 1960s Scotland and his move to London to help create one of the most successful PR companies of its time in the leisure industry. The book tells of business, gay life, relationships and the emergence of the international travel scene

