

# FINANCIAL TIMES

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## Borgo dei Conti: a gothic Umbrian castle is reborn as a luxe resort

By Claire Wrathall

**What's the buzz?** Carlo Babini, whose family has owned the venerable Londra Palace in Venice since 1938, and also runs the superb Place Firenze in Florence, has overseen a complete transformation of their first rural property, Borgo dei Conti, in Umbria. What was a 60-room, four-star hotel, closed after the 2022 summer season and has reopened as a five-star self-styled resort — insofar as there's a small spa, 20m infinity pool, tennis court and mountain bikes — with 30 suites and 10 spacious rooms, each different. Half of them opened late last month, with the rest due to be ready next April.

**Location, location, location:** Converted from the former hilltop fastness of a family of counts (the conti in its name; a borgo is a hamlet), it is 25km, about 40 minutes by car, south-west of Perugia's San Francesco d'Assisi airport.



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**First impressions:** Faintly disquieting. Head west along the Strada Provinciale 340, and just before the turning to the village of Montepetriolo, you come to a heavily fortified gatehouse, complete with arrow slits and a portcullis, flanked by castellated walls. Turn through it, and a white road winds 800 metres uphill through a forest of mostly oak and beech. At the top, shaded by two towering cedars, looms a magnificent pastiche of a gothic castello: an austere four-storey facade of what appears to be grey pebble-dash beyond which rises a profusion of battlements and towers, one with a witch's-hat turret.

**What was here before?** There's been a castle on the site since the 13th century. Sometime in the 1870s, however, it was acquired by the Perugia-born Conte di Montepetriolo, also known as the artist Lemmo Rossi-Scotti (1848-1926), a celebrated painter of battle scenes.



Baulking at the privations of living in an actual castle, he commissioned a new one, completed in the early years of the 20th century. Almost nothing of the original remains intact, but some of the structure was repurposed, not least in building the terraces that rise behind it, planted with 600 now-mature olive trees. Still, the giant fireplaces, painted coffered ceilings, frescoes and reliefs of heraldic shields and coats of arms hark back convincingly to a pre-Renaissance age.

**Checking in:** The welcome was warm despite what the receptionist called apologetically the “bureaucratic process”. Aside from the usual passport and credit-card handover, I was passed an iPad on which to answer a succession of data-protection-related questions on, for example, whether I was happy for them to retain a record of my dietary requirements. (None, but thanks for asking.)



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Designed by the Milanese architects Spagnulo & Partners, its new interiors are understated and contemporary — muted colours, modern Italian furniture, herringbone oak parquet — with nods to tradition in the elaborate geometric arrangements of star-shaped, hexagonal and rhombic cotto clay floor tiles and terre crude bas reliefs of stylised flowers and foliage on the walls. The fabrics, too, have been carefully sourced, especially the jacquard on the bedheads, curtains and cushions in many of the rooms which was woven to order on historic looms by the venerable Perugian atelier Brozzetti. It features a motif of lions based on a tapestry in the medieval Church of Santa Maria Infraportas in Foligno.

**What about the food?** The chef, Emanuele Mazzella, comes from Ischia, but the menu he's created for the formal restaurant, Cedri, in the gothic-vaulted, foliage-filled former orangery, is rooted in traditional Umbrian cooking. If its core components are meaty (veal shank, suckling pig, duck; Umbria is landlocked, so the fish tends to be trout) and its flavours earthy (this is truffle country), the preparation and presentation is exquisitely refined, as befits a place where the four-course (plus multiple amuse-bouches and pre-desserts) set menu costs €125. Pricey but worth it, as is the €45 wine pairing. The engaging sommelier, Christine Carrié, has put together a fascinating list of Umbrian wines from makers such as Bettalunga, Collecappretta and Tenuta di Salviano. They may not yet have the profile of their more aggressively marketed Tuscan peers, but some are very good and a lot less expensive.





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There's also the unpretentious Osteria overlooking the swimming pool, which during the day also offers standard international hotel fare such as club sandwiches and Caesar salads. The standout dishes were the green tagliolini flavoured with wild fennel and the fish soup, and its pizzas are in a league of their own: fragrant with herbs and San Marzano tomatoes or loaded with salsiccia (sausage) from Norcia and friarielli, a kind of leafy broccoli from the Borgo's organic kitchen garden.

**What is there to do?** We made an early-evening excursion to the nearby and improbably picturesque village of Panicale, where there's an important fresco by Perugino of the Martyrdom of San Sebastian in the church that bears his name, and which overlooks Lake Trasimeno, Italy's fourth-largest body of water. But, perhaps because the near-40-degree heat added to the sense of contented torpor, we largely stayed put, venturing outside only to swim or explore the hotel's fragrant oleander- and rose-filled gardens. The 16ha estate is mostly wooded, laced with paths from which we spotted a lone roe deer and punctuated by glades containing low-tech retro gym apparatus such as balance beams.



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There's a pretty church at the top of the property and an open-air cinema that promises screenings of old Italian movies by the likes of Vittorio De Sica and Fellini.

At more temperate times of year, however, Borgo dei Conti would make a good base from which to explore Umbria's many Renaissance and Etruscan treasures. Assisi, Orvieto and less-visited Spello (where Pinturicchio's frescoes in the Baglioni Chapel of Santa Maria Maggiore are as compelling as those he painted in the better-known Piccolomini Library in Siena) are all within an hour's drive.

Alternatively, the glorious gardens of La Foce ([lafoce.com](http://lafoce.com), booking essential) in the Val d'Orcia, commissioned by the writer Iris Origo and designed by the underrated British architect Cecil Pinsent, are 48km away.

**Other guests:** It had been open less than a fortnight when we stayed, and the other guests were mostly Italian, a range of ages from families with infants to older couples with dogs. The next strongest market, says the hotel's personable, always on-hand general manager, Antonello Buono, is Australian. Otherwise, the accents and languages we heard suggested our fellow guests were American and from across northern Europe.

**The damage:** Double rooms cost from €730 per night, including a generous breakfast (I loved the sheep's-milk ricotta with honey from the hotel's 24 hives).

**Elevator pitch:** A serene Gormenghast remodelled in the style of B&B Italia.