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FIRST LOOK

Luxe design for a new age

An Italian fortress has been transformed into a first-class hotel after a sensitive restoration

Walls covered in 17th-century frescoes, secret passageways, a 900-year-old Norman tower uncovered in the basement... there's plenty to ogle at Castello di Ugento in Salento, Puglia's southernmost peninsula. But the detail that the current proprietor, ex-PepsiCo CEO Massimo d'Amore, is most pleased with is the symmetrical, double-U shaped extractor pipe in the ballroom. "I was obsessed with this – I spent so long trying to find a way for it not to look ugly," he beams, revealing that only one half is functional; the other was custom-made so as not to upset the aesthetic balance of what was formerly the castle's armoury.

D'Amore's fixation on prettifying the piping is indicative of the level of detail that has gone into realising his €15million (£13.2million) dream of restoring the run-down castle at which he spent his childhood summers. The fortress has belonged to the d'Amore family since 1643; as governors of the surrounding land they set about transforming its ancient structure into a Baroque palazzo. Twenty-two generations later, it was showing its age. The roof leaked, those frescoes were hidden behind layers of plaster and paint, its once-golden *pietra leccese* walls were crumbling and discoloured.

D'Amore, who inherited one-twelfth of the castle from his grandfather, set about buying the rest. It took 20 years and 18 different transactions – then came deciding what to do with it.

His partner Diana E Bianchi, a fellow Italian "exile" in New York, first visited the castle with him in 2010. "It was on the brink of becoming a ruin," she recalls as she leads us up a grand staircase, pointing out the blue-grey paintwork that was hidden under a thick layer of chalk for hundreds of years. We pause at the top to admire the contrast between the cornflower-blue sky and the walls of the inner courtyard, meticulously sandblasted back to their original honey hue. "We wanted to turn it back into a contemporary, happy place that's full of life and is used, not just looked at."

With its estimated 60 million olive trees, 500 miles of coastline and farming-friendly microclimate, Puglia produces 40 per cent of Italy's olive oil and vast quantities of its wheat and wine. Visitors fall in love with its delicious *cucina povera*: handmade *orecchiette* topped with turnip tops and *caciocotta*, indecently creamy



CLIMBING THE WALLS
Beautiful trees and vines are to be found within the castle walls

family, parables of love, spirituality and fortune play out in intricately detailed scenes from Greek and Roman mythology that leave visitors craning their necks in stupor.

The final part of the six-year journey opened this spring. Former staff quarters surrounding the courtyard, along with a portion of the *piano nobile*, have been transformed into nine luxury hotel suites which marry ancient architecture with contemporary design. Furniture by the likes of Cassina, Poltrona Frau and Minotti sits underneath star-vaulted ceilings alongside brightly reupholstered vintage pieces sourced by Bianchi. She champions Pugliese craftspeople, from the creamy handwoven linens and ceramics to the organic olive-oil bathroom toiletries.

Beds are vast and absurdly comfortable, and the combination of Bianchi's exacting eye for design and d'Amore's obsession with technology means no niggles have been overlooked.

A third kitchen is dedicated to the hotel restaurant, Il Tempo Nuevo. Brescia-raised, New York-trained chef Odette Fada updates Italian classics using herbs and vegetables grown in the castle's walled gardens and whatever she has bought at the market that day. At breakfast, courtyard tables are laden with fruits, breads, mounds of cheese and homemade pastries – all made in or as close to the castle as possible.

Dinner is served al fresco or in a vaulted dining room, whose glass floor displays the foundations of a Norman tower, uncovered in 2015. "We were very humbled to be the first witnesses in 700 years to have seen it – even the original d'Amore family probably had no idea it was there," says Bianchi. This historically significant find – there are few Norman remains this far south – halted work for eight months while it was fully excavated. It now presides over an atmospheric underground private dining room like something out of *Game of Thrones*.

The rest of Ugento is just as steeped in history and, like much of Puglia, remains decidedly down-at-heel. Bianchi and d'Amore hope that in giving new life to the town's much-loved *castello* they'll help spark a new chapter.

Like the majestic building itself, Salento's charms will be revealed to those willing to scratch below the surface.

Sarah Royce Greensill

How it rates

CASTELLO DI UGENTO PUGLIA

ROOMS FROM £288

9/10

Via Castello 13, 73059 Ugento (LE), Italy (0039 333 914 2242; telegraph.co.uk/tt-castellodiugento)

such an old and decrepit monument was hugely challenging," says Bianchi. Strict stipulations from the office of National Historical Monuments, which oversaw the restoration, meant that the castle's external architecture could not be touched. Technology had to be fitted around the ancient walls, using existing openings for ventilation and heating, which is powered by an energy-efficient system comprising 23 geothermal wells along the road to Ugento. False floors were installed in the kitchens and each piece of equipment was custom-built to fit the wonky walls of the former storerooms. The first students arrived in January 2017.

Meanwhile, work continued on the other elements of the castle's revival. A team of experts was brought in to restore the frescoes of the first-floor salons that now comprise the museum

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