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Debbie's place under the Tuscan sun is Villa Reniella not far from the hill town of Montefollonico.



Under the Tuscan sun

AFTER AN ONEROUS FIVE-YEAR RESTORATION, AN INTERNATIONAL DESIGN STAR OPENS THE DOORS OF HER ANCIENT VILLA ON THE EDGE OF A TINY TUSCAN VILLAGE.

BY TAMARA SIMONEAU, PHOTOGRAPHY GEORGE ROSS,
MAX ROSENSTEIN & MARCUS WILSON SMITH

Clockwise from right: Debbie finds gelato a good antidote to the Tuscan heat; an outdoor room with a view; an infinity view of the countryside; Villa Reniella began life in the 13th century as a lookout tower.



Almost every wanderluster dreams of one day signing the title of a centuries-old, broken-down villa ripe for restoration in some blissfully forgotten corner of Europe. Savings accounts can rarely keep pace with imaginations run wild and daydreams of long, lazy summers spent tending olive groves and sharing vino alongside the locals. It's fodder for countless books and movies for a very good reason. Arguably, the most enduring in the genre was penned by Frances Mayes, who documented her own blissful sojourn in *Under the Tuscan Sun* and became a bestselling success story in the process.

Frances Mayes' sun-kissed tale tugged relentlessly at the heartstrings of Debbie Travis, a London-born TV star who has found her own international success fronting and producing dozens of home makeover television series and running her homewares empire. "Frances Mayes was the main inspiration towards my love of everything Italian," Debbie says. "I must have read her book a billion times, and sobbed through the movie of the same name on many a Sunday afternoon." Debbie and her TV director husband, Hans, began hopping across the pond from their home in Montreal, Canada, for holidays in Italy. They savoured the wine, sampled the food, and indulged their fantasy of one day owning a patch of terra Italia themselves.



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"At first, we were literally putting pins in a map," Debbie says of their quest. "We went to Sicily, Puglia, which is the heel of Italy, and to the north, but we kept getting drawn back to the beauty of Tuscany. We started by renting houses in all these areas with our family and friends. While there we would explore houses that were for sale. We saw old monasteries, convents, castles and farms. Some were too big, too small, or in the wrong location."

Ten years later, they found their sweet spot in the countryside near the medieval village of Montefollonico, a tiny Renaissance hill town 110 kilometres south of Florence. The streets are cobbled with centuries-old stone, and the villagers have been there for generations. "There is an 80-year-old in the village named Carlo, who moved here from Rome when he was eight," Debbie says. "He is known as the new boy. What I love most about the little village is the friendship and the simple way of life. The villagers look out for each other. Often at 6pm, you will see teenagers bringing their grannies to the cafe so they can play cards with their friends and have an aperitivo. It is a unity and there is so much we can all learn from village life in Europe."

With the location locked, Debbie and Hans turned their attention to finding a home. "Our property began life as a lookout tower that protected the village," Debbie explains. "It was built during the early part of the 13th century. I actually hated the house when I first saw it. My husband had been a few months before and loved



These pages: During the restoration of the villa, Debbie and Hans were mindful of keeping the original features of the farm buildings. These include the huge brick arches of what were originally the ground-level stables.





it. It was pouring with rain when I arrived and the place looked sad and derelict, but when the sun came out the view was astounding, breathtaking.”

It was that view, and their love for the area, that motivated the mammoth task ahead. “The tower was probably abandoned through the centuries and then around the 16th century became a very poor man’s farm,” Debbie says. “As is typical in the area, it was added onto with stones from the land around. You can see clearly how the farm grew and the main villa got larger. The animals were in the stables with huge brick arches on the ground floor — this is now the living room. The people lived upstairs on the next two floors because the heat of the animals kept them warm.”

“There are strict building laws in Tuscany and we are on the edge of a UNESCO Heritage site, so it’s super hard to make changes. You can build on the footprints of old buildings but you are not allowed to just put up any new buildings. We had pigsties and a barn that were tumbled down but this allowed us to have the three separate buildings we have now, which are divided up by paved and planted courtyards.”

The renovation took five years, countless flights to and fro, and a steely dedication to achieving what they’d set out to do. “It was difficult because my Italian language skills are terrible,” Debbie says. “Hans is now fluent, but he was not there much of the time and I had to rely on gestures. The workmen — all 80 of them — were superbly skilled tradespeople who really care about making you happy and getting thing just right.”



These pages: The renovation took five years and countless flights between Canada and Italy, but finally Debbie was able to bring her trademark decorating skills to the interiors for her very own home makeover.





With construction in full swing, Debbie began the next step of finding fixtures befitting their revived piece of history. "I visited all the trade shows in Italy and got the latest in modern lighting, bathroom fixtures and beautiful linens," she says. "The floors are all massive slabs of old stone that had originally been in a palazzo in southern Italy." Rustic antiques were sourced from local markets and each room has been expertly and thoughtfully put together. The farm is also thriving once more. "We have about 1500 olive trees that produce about 2000 litres of organic, extra-virgin olive oil, a vineyard that produces about 1500 bottles of wine that is really quite good and a lavender field, from which we produce soap made from our olive oil and lavender, as well as body and essential oils," Debbie, who now invites guests to enjoy the spoils of their hard work, says. "We felt so good when we were here, with the food, the air and the way of life, that I decided to share it with others, mostly like-minded women who need a break from family and work. The Tuscan Getaway weeks are all-inclusive so the guests can really relax and don't have to worry about supermarkets, making dinner, and homework etcetera."

It's five star all the way, even for the host, who now counts fellow famous expat, Frances Mayes, as a friend. "We love to have a little limoncello together, either in the main piazza or at one of our homes where we drink our own home-made limoncello," Debbie says. "I pinch myself every day."

For more information on a stay at Villa Reniella visit tuscangetaway.com or follow Debbie Travis on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. *AC*



This page: Now that works are complete, Debbie and Hans welcome guests to the villa and its outbuildings. The creative couple has created 14 suites in the main residence, remodelled barn and even a former pigsty.