

La dolce vita at one of the best villa hotels in Tuscany

Amid the natural splendour and striking properties of the Borgo Pignano country estate, **Stephen McGinty** discovers an Italy for all seasons that calls out for a return trip

Dawn on the little rooftop terrace of Borgo Pignano is a sight to behold. I'd woken early, slipped out of the warm bed in the top-floor suite in the estate's grand main house, and softly padded up a flight of stairs to the roof.

The sky was a bruised dark blue. To the east the sun was beginning to cast a golden light over the soft green hills. This was not the bleached yellow of late August, but the Tuscany of late spring, full of promise and majesty.

One hour's drive from both Florence and Pisa, Borgo Pignano is a little slice of heaven nestled in the soft rolling hills of a crossroads between two natural reserves, Berignone and Castelvecchio. The estate, once the property of Italian gentry, is now a luxury eco estate with a mix of cottages, new villas and elegant rooms in the main building, its honey-coloured stone draped with lilac wisteria.

Inside, rooms whisper relaxed good taste, their tapestry of warm, neutral walls mixed with doughy soft Knoll sofas, antique rugs and striking contemporary art. One building on the estate houses a collection of classic cars.

Shortly after arriving I set off in an electric buggy with the resort's general manager, Francesco Ascani, a courtesy he extends to any interested guests. Ascani is rightly proud of Borgo Pignano's eco efforts, with fruit and vegetables grown on the grounds. We stopped to taste a strawberry and peas, then wound through the trees to the forest enclosure where pigs contentedly snuffle before, eventually, arriving on a guest's breakfast plate as the most delicious sausages I've tasted.

Early next morning we took a taxi to the hilltop town of Volterra. The road straddles two valleys and affords visitors a spectacular view of the region's rich tapestry of fields and rolling hills. Yet it climbs steeply up to Volterra, which has been a strategic settlement since the Etruscan era. Wandering the cobbled streets, we headed down to the ruins of a Roman theatre before stopping for coffee and cannoli. Afterwards we paid a visit to a plasterworks craftsman happy to show off his wares.

Even Volterra can seem too much, though, and after a few hours we headed back to Borgo Pignano for some deep peace. Lunch was a broad bean salad with salted anchovies, followed by cacio pepe pasta with langoustines in the elegant restaurant overlooking the terraced lawns. The feel is of a country house where you are a guest, and afterwards I was treated to an indulgent lesson in pasta-making, leaving even me inspired to have a crack at culinary greatness. The estate also offers an array of activities from yoga to cookery courses, truffle hunting to guided walks.

The weather next morning was unfortunate. After a bright dawn, thick clouds settled overhead, but this didn't stop me taking a dip in Borgo Pignano's stunning infinity pool. Carved from



Clockwise from main: the infinity pool on the Borgo Pignano estate; the dining room in the estate's Maisonette II Pozzo; the exterior of Il Pozzo

rocks on a lower terrace, it offers views right across the valley. I had the pool to myself and there are few things finer than half an hour of a lazy breaststroke amid birdsong and a fresh breeze.

Borgo Pignano casts a bewitching spell that converts first-time visitors into regulars. Later, as I walked back to the main house and gazed around, a thought landed: if this was spring, how glorious would be the summer and autumn?

Stephen McGinty was a guest of Borgo Pignano (B&B doubles from £256; borgopignano.com). Fly from Edinburgh to Pisa (from £47 return (ryanair.com))

Airds Hotel, Port Appin

For a reassuringly long time, Airds has been one of the foremost hotels in the north and a legendary gourmet experience, with great attention to the details of a comfortable experience, led by Robert McKay and his great team. A civilised escape in a hectic world. Dinner is the culmination of a hard day on the croquet lawn. Tasting menu and à la carte. The Lismore ferry is just over a mile away.

Crinan Hotel, Crinan

The Ryan family's landmark hotel at the head of the Crinan Canal has some of the best sea views in the UK. This hotel has long housed one of the great seafood restaurants. Nick Ryan, sailor and consummate patron, died in 2018; the hotel continues under his wife, the notable artist Frances Macdonald. Pictures of these shorelines and those by son Ross are hung around you for sale.

George Hotel, Inveraray

On the main street of a historic town on Loch Fyne with attractions both here and nearby, this old inn (1770), in the capable and friendly hands of the Clark family since the 1860s, has fantastic atmosphere, especially in the bars. Rooms are in a Highland-style. Downstairs is an open fire and great grub — all Scottish towns should have a place like this hotel.

The Kilberry Inn, near Tarbert

The small Knapdale roadside inn has good gastropub food, as a Bib Gourmand from the Michelin inspectors attests. Simple rooms. There's a beautiful drive out on B8024 off the Tarbert-Lochgilphead coast road. David Wilson out front, Clare Johnson in the kitchen. The very reasonable hotel deal includes dinner. There are secluded beaches nearby.

Portavadie Marina, Portavadie

A sheltered marina that's popped up at the mouth of Loch Fyne opposite Tarbert with a steel and glass restaurant. There are rooms here and also in a separate lodge and cottages. The leisure centre has Scotland's largest infinity pool. All with a yachty theme.

Taken from Scotland the Best by Pete Irvine (£15.99, HarperCollins)

5 of the best

Hotels in Argyll
Peter Irvine



Cottages in Gairrannan Blackhouse Village, Lewis, and John MacKay. Below: The Road Dance is in cinemas now

Hollywood on location down the wild west coast of Lewis

John MacKay, the STV news anchor, on why the island is the setting for the film adaptation of his novel *The Road Dance*

The *Road Dance* was mostly shot at Gairrannan Blackhouse Village, which is now a museum and holiday cottages, but is where my granny was born and raised. It's where we would go every summer from Glasgow. It was a strange time because my family called Gairrannan home. "Where are you going on holiday?" they would ask, and the reply would be, "We're going home." So I have a deep connection to Gairrannan: my family history is traced back here 250 years or more. For me, this is a touchstone, it's a wonderful place.

Coming to Lewis as a child, I loved the contrast. I enjoyed the city, but to come up here was so different, not just the place but the people as well. The outlook, the culture, everything. I looked forward to it. When I think back to summers here I have this notion that the sun was shining all the time.

People still lived in these blackhouses and old women would stop you and say, "Oh, how's your mother?" They would give you sweets, cups of tea, always really nice, but you were trying to get down to the shore. On Sundays it was dead unless you went to church, but I had that in Glasgow too. I couldn't watch TV on a Sunday, or play football. I was raised in the city with a Hebridean background. Pals would ask, "How can you not come out to play?" But it wasn't a big deal. Even now you will find a lot of people value that — just a clear day when nothing's happening.

We would visit older people, my parents' relatives who had experienced the First World War, and some who had been to the US and elsewhere. Although it's an isolated community its people are spread all over the world. It was a fascinating exposure to people and place.

One of my favourite places on Lewis is Dalmore, just around the coast from Gairrannan. It's a big, open sandy bay with breakers rolling in. You can spend the whole day there. Just around from there is Dalbeg, which is a beautiful wee shore. We spent a lot of time on the beaches, particularly on the west coast. Valtos beach at Uig is magical, as are Luskenyrtre and Seilebost down on Harris. The sea was always cold, I'll tell you that. I'm a very poor swimmer because I was taught to swim in the Atlantic. It wasn't proper lessons, it was just throw you in and see how you get on. We would collect crabs and mussels, bringing them home in buckets to boil them up, and that was your supper. I wasn't a great fan of seafood.

I always take friends to Gairrannan Blackhouses and they are so impressed by the houses and the beautiful setting. It's very different from anywhere else. You can walk along the coast here from across the moor to Carloway lighthouse.

The Callanish Stones are really special. When you tell people they are older than Stonehenge they are amazed. And if you get there when the sun is going down in the gloaming, people find it quite spiritual. For entertainment, a visit to McNeill's bar, with my cousin Tosh playing guitar, a few beers and the fire going — that's always a good night.

During the making of the film, the American producers and writers were amazed by the sunsets on Lewis. The sun sets right onto the Atlantic and the light changes constantly as the sun goes down. It's soft and so colourful. I've been seeing it all my life and it still staggers me.

I never appreciated how unique and special Lewis was until I was an adult. I don't think there was anywhere else I could have set my novels. *The Road Dance* is based on a true story, so it had to be written there.

Then, because I enjoyed writing about the island so much, I set my next two books there. I'm rooted in Lewis, but I didn't grow up there. Lewis people, from my experience, are hospitable, honest, resilient and trustworthy, with a really good attitude to life.

John MacKay was talking to Ailsa Sheldon



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