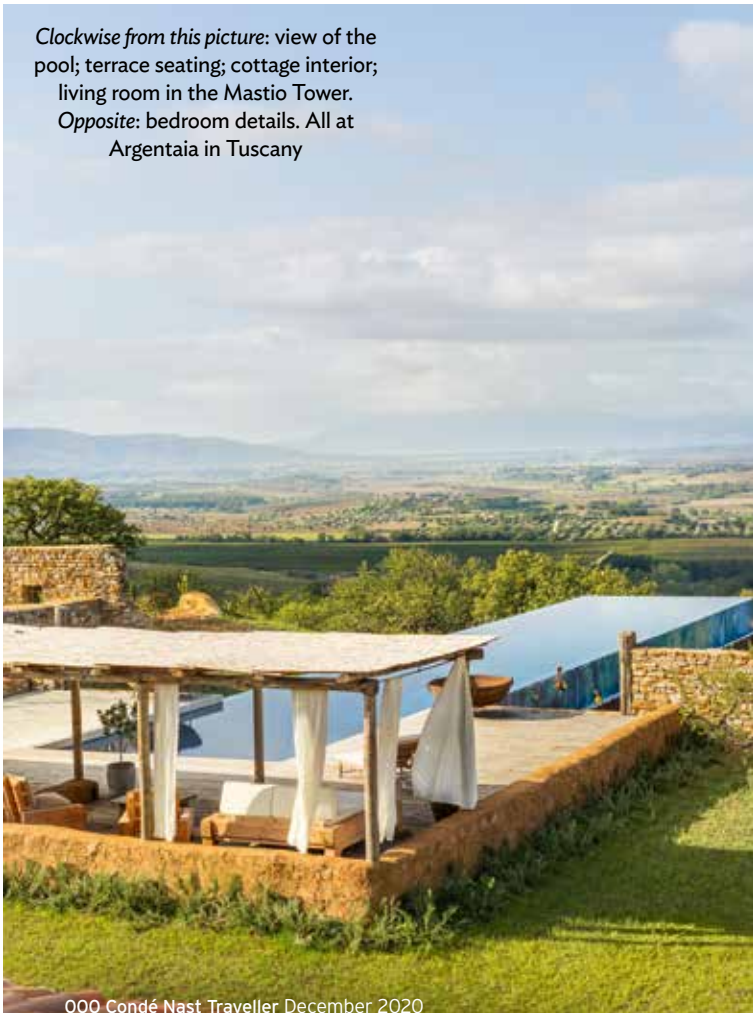




HOUSE CALL



Clockwise from this picture: view of the pool; terrace seating; cottage interior; living room in the Mastio Tower. Opposite: bedroom details. All at Argentaia in Tuscany



STONE TEMPLE PILOT

THE METICULOUS REVAMP OF AN 11TH-CENTURY TUSCAN CONVENT MIXES MEDIEVAL AND MODERN. TAKE IT OVER FOR A BACK-IN-TIME RETREAT OF YOUR OWN

BY LEE MARSHALL. PHOTOGRAPHS BY SERENA ELLER



THE MAREMMA, TUSCANY'S SOUTHERN coastal strip, has drama in its landscapes, in the wide-open swathes of sparsely wooded hill country, harbouring remote, reclaimed marshes where long-horned cattle graze with egrets sitting on their backs. There are tower-studded villages that were passed like rugby balls between ruling families in the Middle Ages. So when I'm told by the owner of Argentaia to look out for 'a gate straight out of *Game of Thrones*' it makes sense. If that feudal fantasy romp was restaged in Italy, the Maremma would be the location. It has mercury mines and Etruscan tombs. All that's missing are a few basking lizard-lions.

The result of a meticulous, not to say obsessive, nine-year restoration, the building is far from a film fake (that gate, for example, is too tastefully designed to feature in *GoT*). But there's a lovely frisson of historical role-playing in this vast, six-suite fiefdom near the town of Magliano. As Paolo Vico, a commodities trader whose pet project this has become, says: 'It is not about just renting a villa for a few nights – it's about time travel.'

At Argentaia, the portal for such voyages is not a wardrobe or a phone box but the main entrance. This passage from darkness into light sweeps past evocative artworks: four haunting burnt figures by Italian sculptor Matteo Lucca, a bronze horse's head by Mexican artist Gustavo Aceves. All of a sudden, you're in the (thankfully dry)

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belly of a water cistern discovered during renovations, then emerge blinking into the sun amid the lemon trees and pomegranates of a perfect medieval *hortus conclusus*, or walled garden.

In one of its many previous lives, the earliest of which have yet to be investigated by archaeologists, Argentaia was home to a closed order of nuns. When Vico found it, the space was in a piteous state. Over the years, the 11th-century convent had been transformed into a working farm, which in turn became abandoned. Concrete rubble was everywhere, and electricity pylons sliced through the estate. Getting those 10 pylons moved was just one of the challenges facing the owner of what was, back then, little more than a ruin with a view.

A fair few of the obstacles Vico ran into were of his own making. He set draconian rules for the reconstruction that went far beyond what was requested by the local architectural-heritage department. Studying texts about Roman and archaic building techniques, he determined to create a modern take on an ancient Tuscan fortified farm. 'If a place is born out of the ground it stands on, and dies on that same ground, it never becomes an eyesore,' says Vico.

He harvested more than a million cubic feet of stone from the rocky land around the convent – anything left over was then pulverised into gravel for Argentaia's roads and paths. Carpenters repurposed timeworn planks, which were joined to make doors, tables and other items using nails made specially by blacksmiths from the area. Thirty stonemasons selected, knapped and fitted every single one of the rocks used in the outer walls, garden terraces, houses, spa and large, jutting swimming pool that has the

strange quality, when you're in it, of cancelling out the surrounding landscape and merging with the distant sea.

Vico tells me he has little interest in materials or techniques that aren't at least 300 years old. 'The Romans reached an incredible level of expertise in building with stone... since then we've only gone backwards.' He made an exception for a job lot of iron window grates from the Tuscan prison island of Pianosa, which probably date back little more than a century. But they ticked his other requirement, which was that visitors should feel as if 'there is no single piece of this place that doesn't have a history'. Along the way, Vico went through four architects and ended up directing the works himself in close collaboration with the head foreman, like a 14th-century master builder. But there are plenty of contemporary inserts, including a gleaming, stainless-steel kitchen and an underground cinema room with daybed viewing perches. There's even table football – though Vico had it specially made and edged with seasoned larch wood.

What Argentaia has most of all is a great, cartwheel-spinning sense of space. Ceilings are lofty, fireplaces seem made for roasting oxen and bathrooms are huge. My bedroom, in the Torre del Mare – one of four suites housed in towers with star-gazing platforms on their roofs – occupied the whole of the ground floor. Outside are views over to the Monte Argentario peninsula, summer home to

a moccasin-shod yacht set, above a shimmering sea. In the middle distance, the friendly hilltown of Magliano – which has the kind of in-the-know trattorias that need to be booked at least a week in advance – drapes lazily over a wooded ridge; closer to hand are slopes of olives and vines, the nearest of which are the estate's own (Argentaia's wines include a big, elegant red, Orto delle Monache, made from 70-year-old Sangiovese grapes).

Argentaia is perhaps one of the most superior friends-and-family refuges in the Maremma. Worth noting is that only breakfast is laid on, but other food can be prepared by locally based, guest-appearance talents who might include Valeria Piccini and her son Andrea Menichetti, chef-owners of the region's smartest farm-to-table restaurant, Michelin-winning Caino in Montemerano. But for lunch Vico took me to a simple trattoria called Mamma Mia, attached to a service station below the walls of Magliano, where you can watch lorries fill up while feasting on homemade pappardelle pasta with *funghi porcini* and pine nuts. A young woman who had just emerged from a four-by-four with her friends called over to say hello. A few minutes later, so did a ruddy-faced hunter in full camouflage gear. Both of them, it turned out, were connected in some way with Vico's project, as are many other people and families around the village.

For while Argentaia is a fantastical, almost improbable place to stay, it's also grounded in the truest sense of the word – built for and of the land it rests on, a striking architectural statement and an accepted part of the community here in the Maremma, Italy's wildest but proudest region. 📍

Argentaia is available to rent from £12,250 per night (sleeps up to 18; minimum stay of six nights). argentaia.com

ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPH: VALENTINA SOMMARIVA

Opposite, clockwise from top left: steps leading to the pool; living room; Paolo Vico with his family; secret passage filled with drawings; stone fireplace in the Mastio Tower; bedroom detail; garden terrace seating; bedroom steps; rolling hills of the Maremma. All at Argentaia in Tuscany