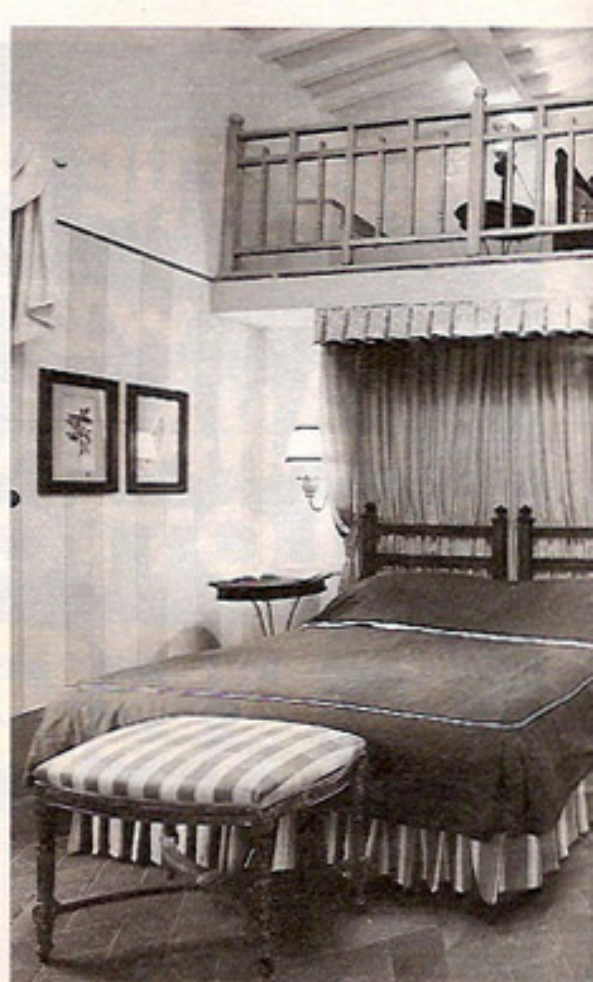




When a Scottish couple bought a dilapidated Italian villa they had the vision to see how it could be turned into a luxurious and welcoming hotel. Kirsten Mann finds out how they did it.



# A Tuscan trea



**C**LAPPING their eyes on a run-down 16th century villa in the Tuscan hills for the first time, Scots couple David and Catherine Gardner (left) instantly envisaged it as a luxurious country retreat for holidaymakers seeking la dolce vita.

Hidden away in a semi-abandoned hamlet in the Chianti Classico wine region of Italy, it was set amongst acres of olive groves and orchards. Palm trees grew and tortoises roamed in the walled garden of the sublime pale blue villa, once home to the noble Bordonis family.

The exterior may have conjured images of dreamy, romantic afternoons, but the interior was the stuff of horror fiction. Rotting window frames, crumbling walls and a caving roof revealed years of neglect. Spiders scuttled in and out of every crevice and dead mice littered the floors. And there literally were skeletons in the closets. Brick built compartments within the family chapel contained the bones of past inhabitants, while attics and cellars contained evidence of their favoured pastimes.

"There were hundreds of bottles of Chianti wine left over from the '60s," says David. "Unfortunately, it wasn't of the type which ages well, so it was undrinkable.

"The attic contained stuffed roosters and even a stuffed crocodile — supposedly

from a time when the Bordonis ancestors went game-hunting in Africa."

Unbelievably there was one resident.

"An old lady, the last of this particular line of the Bordonis, was living in one room of the villa with no running water and only a wood-burning stove for heat. An eccentric character in her 80s, she was struggling to cope in what were pretty dire conditions."

In 2003, after a year of negotiations, the old woman moved into a home for the elderly in Bologna, and renovations began.

It only opened in March last year, but already the 10-bedroom hotel has been listed as one of the top small hotels in the world by various glossy magazines in the US and UK.

David, originally from Bearsden, and Catherine, from Stirling, moved to Florence in 1995.

After graduating with a degree in economics and languages from Edinburgh University in 1988, David worked for an American tour operator escorting groups of tourists around Europe. This travelling, he says, provided him with enough insight into the hospitality industry to move into the business himself.

Within months of relocating to Florence, he'd renovated and opened a small restaurant — Baldovino — in the historic heart of the city.



# sure

With David taking care of the business side of the venture, Catherine, who had recently qualified as a lawyer, enrolled in a local language school to study Italian and worked in the kitchen as a chef.

Baldovino was soon extended to include a nearby clutch of buildings, which were transformed into a wine bar and bistro operating under the same name.

In 1999 David opened a second restaurant, Beccofino — credited with being Florence's first Conran-style restaurant.

Profits from these provided capital for the three-year renovation of Villa Bordonis. Its stunning renaissance was carried out with the help of two Italians — Andre Benaim and interior designer Riccardo Barthel.

"The Bordonis were down-at-heel nobles who used all sorts of tricks to make themselves appear wealthier than they really were," explains David. "The window frames were made of cheap wood with the grain of a more expensive wood painted on using brown paint. Wooden doors which had rotted had been covered with sheets of metal."

Rather than eliminate evidence of these cover-ups, the team embraced the Bordonis' ingenuity and attempted to emulate it within the new design.

"We used a series of illusions to conjure up a sense of luxury and capture the style



of the villa when we found it. A fireplace in the living room appears very grand yet it's made of cheap wood painted to look like stone, marble and gold. And we used bunches of twigs and broomstick bristles to represent silk tassels on antique cupboard doors and curtain tie-backs."

An old latticework chicken coop was saved from the bonfire, cleaned up and hung as a wall decoration. A rusting basket made of chicken wire was lined with sackcloth and turned into a chandelier. Many of the furnishings and materials were bought from an architectural salvage yard.

Each bathroom is different, but what they all have in common is their hand-painted antique floor tiles, worn from dozens of years in buildings in a town in the south of Italy then taken up one by one with a hammer and chisel.

"We paid tremendous attention to detail and almost drove ourselves crazy in order not to ruin the feel of the villa," remembers David. "We refused to have televisions sitting on the furniture, so we've put



modern mirror screen sets behind huge antique mirrors. You touch the remote control and CNN or BBC comes on behind the mirror."

Guests come to the hotel for relaxation and, of course, the food. The kitchen, on open view to diners, is the focal point of the hotel. While it incorporates the original wood-burning oven, the centre-piece is a stunning enamelled black cast-iron range with chrome detail, hand-made especially for the villa by French company Molteni ➤



◀ and described by David as the Rolls Royce of stoves.

The larder is stocked with foods from the hotel's gardens, which have also been painstakingly restored. Over 700 olive trees provide oil, and fruit trees, including orange, cherry, pear and plum, the main ingredients of marmalades and preserves. Fresh herbs and vegetables are taken from the kitchen garden.

The wine cellar has its own dark history.

Carved out of the bedrock beneath the dining room, with a vaulted ceiling made of brick, it was once the dungeon of a watchtower dating from the 12th century and used for holding prisoners. Through time the building evolved into a fortified farmhouse before finally, in more peaceful times, becoming an elegant villa.

David and Catherine have two daughters, Jemima (3) and Tabitha (20 months), and

the family split their time between the villa and their home among a cluster of farmhouses a short walk away.

"It's a wonderful life for the girls," says David. "We were out the other day collecting firewood with an old wheelbarrow. During the empty runs I'd put a rug in the barrow, then they'd jump in and I'd wheel them through the olives."

La dolce vita, indeed.