

Tuscan pleasure

A Kiwi and his Italian wife have created a country haven where guests are offered tailored excursions to the nearby towns. **By Ray McVinnie.**

THIRTEEN YEARS ago, Daniela di Cesare and Malcolm Ayres met as fellow foreigners in Brazil. After a brief acquaintance these two young travellers parted, neither imagining their chances of meeting again especially high. Each planned returning home to take up careers; Italian Daniela to practise architecture in Milan or nearer her family home in Naples, Malcolm to New Zealand, possibly to teach the art history he had studied at university.

As they travelled on, both had increasing difficulty forgetting each other and their time in Brazil. They arranged to meet again, and after several years of much hard work, saving, discussion and searching, this enterprising, imaginative couple now own and manage Podere Finerri, a series of beautifully designed self-contained and stylish apartments in the heart



Risen from the ruins: The Podere Finerri in Tuscany.



of Tuscany. Theirs is an outstanding accommodation business catering for every level, from individuals to weddings. Here they have also raised a family.

The enchanting Podere Finerri has risen from the ruins of an 18th-century farming complex. Previously a neglected wreck situated in the most sublime of settings, it was purchased with collapsing roofs and crumbling walls included.

Undeterred and bent on something more durable than most traditionally built local structures, Malcolm and Daniela excavated many metres of heavy Tuscan clay, then pumped in concrete to form foundations. Following strict heritage building codes, they shored up and repaired numerous honey-coloured brick walls and kept out the rain using modern waterproofing.

The basics finally done, they set about designing and furnishing six apartments and their own living quarters. Also on the agenda was an expansive garden created from scratch including a large vegetable and herb patch, olive grove, great drifts of roses and lavender, an encircling expanse of terrace, and a pool hanging high out in space above compelling 360° views of the Tuscan countryside. To be here as the light changes and recedes on a still evening after a superb dinner on the terrace is, for me, among the greatest of great pleasures.

For Daniela and Malcolm it was all a great leap of faith, with the coldest months of winter spent heatless, commuting to jobs that barely paid the ruinously high cost of materials and labour required.

Every spare hour was spent beaver away at what seemed an endless task and a hopelessly high-risk venture. After all, Tuscany was already bristling with accommodation, much of it rural – what could they offer that was different? Once they put their minds to it, quite a lot. Consequently they now tailor personalised tours to Sienna, Chianti, Montalcino, Pienza, Arezzo – all within 40 minutes' drive – or further afield to centres like Florence or Pisa. Interested in tasting peerless local food and wine, wandering among the architectural and historical richness of the area, attending seasonal festivals or viewing great segments of the world's most wondrous art? All these possibilities are within easy reach of Finerri.

As hosts, Daniela and Malcolm are consummate at matching guests with appropriate activities, regularly organising special excursions off crowded tourist trails. The choices are almost infinite, from a drive out to buy the

season's first fresh porcini to fossicking around at one of the local antique fairs. At, or very near, the podere you can experience harvesting and pressing of olives, go truffling, take a cooking class, go hot-air ballooning or horse riding, spot exotic birds, botanise, play golf, bathe at hot springs (massage and beauty treatments also available), or visit an Etruscan museum in nearby Asciano. In this lovely town you'll also find weekly open-air markets, art galleries, all essential services, shops selling the best of local produce and life as it has been lived for generations.

On more restful days at Finerri I enjoy lazing on the terrace near the pool, punctuated by walks into the dreamily beautiful countryside and al fresco meals eaten under the grapevine. At such moments I feel more than fortunate to experience this resurrected Finerri and the company of its far-seeing owners.

■ Podere Finerri, Tuscany, www.thelazyolive.com



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