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Torre di Moravola

An Exquisite Hidden Retreat in Umbria

Shin Takei

High above Montone in Perugia on top of a hill sits Torre di Moravola, a 12th Century medieval watch tower restored and renovated into a sophisticated hidden retreat overlooking the Carpini Valley in Umbria, Italy. Outbuildings, gardens, terraces and a 25-meter infinity pool are aligned on an axis with the tower to maximize the dramatic 360-degree view over secluded valleys, unchanged for centuries, giving the sensation of being totally removed from the modern world.

Abandoned for more than fifty years, the Tower was discovered in 2001 in ruins. There was no water or power in the tower.

The architect and current owner Christopher Chong began as a technician under Kenzo Tange, then under scholarship, went to work with Adolfo Natalini in Florence, before joining the Bartlett School of Architecture in London. After graduating, he worked with Armstrong Chipperfield Associates, Sir James Stirling on the Temasek project and Lord Norman Foster on the Hong Kong, Chek Lap Kok Airport. The main challenge was to lighten up the dark building into a series of light filled flowing spaces suitable for a contemporary retreat while maintaining the character and history of the structure. Chong designed the new layout incorporating the existing axis of the ruins in relation to the mountains and added outbuildings, gardens and solar heated infinity swimming pool. Chong and his wife Seonaid Mackenzie (also a designer) did a lot of the actual construction themselves with the help of local residents who were eager to resurrect the tower. The painstaking amount of love that went into the labor shows throughout and is a remarkable architectural masterpiece.



The main challenge was to maintain the original character and history of the structure while attempting to transform a deep and dark rambling building into a series of light filled, flowing spaces suitable for a contemporary retreat. Natural light was brought into the heart of the building through top lit passages. To bring in the necessary utilities such as power and water - just to start construction - was a challenge. They even hired the services of the local witch "la Strega" who was a beautiful 16-year-old girl with the gift of divining water. She led them to the position to drill at the location where two veins of water crossed in the rocks below. Water was found at a depth of 90m. The heating system design was optimized for use with solar panels. Their energy is used to provide hot water for the under floor heating system. Provision has also been made for photovoltaic panels in the future.



Torre di Moravola opened in April 2008. There are seven suites whereby five are designed as "tower suites" arranged in an open plan design over two levels. On the ground level, there are sunken stone baths, showers and toilets, and direct private access to the exterior terraces. The upper level affords complete privacy and breathtaking views over the surrounding valleys. The Main Tower Suite is a large dramatic space reached by a private glass staircase at the highest point of the tower. The thickness of the ancient stone walls and the passive cooling generated by the stack effect in the tower's two atria keep the interiors cool. Moravola is high on a mountainside so when the valley below sizzles in the summer heat, there is always a refreshing cool breeze. The stone floors are heated by under-floor solar generated energy in the cooler months. From outside to inside, the emphasis is on the natural world reflected in the water, stone, wood, and choice of linens and fabrics.



There are many activities available to guests who want to explore the environs. Moravola is located in a nature reserve renowned for its variety of wildlife. Exotic Hoopoe birds, Bee-eaters and Honey buzzards are often seen, and hares, deer and wild boars roam in the forests. Trekking paths lead around the surrounding hills and valleys past neighboring watch towers, or a 2-hour walk through woods towards the village of Montone where you can have lunch or dinner and be driven back. They can arrange wild asparagus hunts in the spring, and mushroom, porcini and truffle foraging with experienced locals. The olive harvesting begins in October when guests are invited to experience the cold pressing for the bright green oil.

Guests can also participate in harvesting red grapes and see how the locals press their own where later in the year, they salt and hang their prosciutto and salamis. There are cycling trails and bicycles can be rented, or horse riding can be enjoyed. The major cities of Perugia and Arezzo are nearby as are the many medieval hill towns and villages of Gubbio, Assisi, Anghiari, Sansepolcro and Montefalco. This is the land of Piero della Francesca and Perugino, Opera Orvieto, Umbria Jazz, the Montone Film Festival and numerous local costumed and seasonal fiestas. And, don't forget you're in Italy, you can find unusual trattorias and restaurants to combine with the local fiestas.

If you arrive by helicopter, there is a landing area at the base of the tower. For the adventurous, you can follow a trail of fortified towers from a microlite flight over feudal valleys.

While at Moravola, have a body wrap of Umbrian Clay then a heavenly herbal massage. Go shopping for hand-woven linen from Tela Umbra and Busatti in Città di Castello, and hand painted ceramics from Derufa. Go visit Lungarotti Vineyards for their rich Sagrantino wines of Montefalco.

The resident chef prepares the finest Cucina Italia from local sourced organic farms and gardens, and is a treat in itself. It's as if you are staying at a bed-and-breakfast. You can take your extended family or close friends for a very private getaway.

moravola.com

