



IT WAS A GRAND OBSESSION: RESTORING AN OLD STONE HOUSE IN ITALY.

# A DREAM IN RUINS

WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

**By Paola Totaro**



It began on the internet with the odd swipe and browse, a guilty pleasure that spiralled quickly into after-dark fantasy and addiction. When my husband found out, he couldn't help but join me.

Like most gateway drugs, property porn leads to the hard stuff and in November 2018, we boarded a cheap flight to Brindisi to see the object of our lust: a ruined *trullo*, one of those distinctive little stone houses with conical roofs unique to Puglia in Italy's south.

Once upon a time they'd been simple homes and shelters built by farmers needing refuge from the winter's cold with their animals or when tending vines and fruit trees in the burning summers. The *trullo* that became the object of my obsession dated back to the late 18th century and was in a state of collapse, with just two cones of the original four visible. Photogenic? Oh yes! Romantic? Without doubt. Watertight? No. Habitable? Um, no.

To be fair, it was more than a whim. Puglia is in my DNA: my paternal grandfather, a gentle character I loved very much, was born there and spoke about his roots with unforgettable nostalgia. Childhood summer holidays often included a trip to visit my Aunt Gabriella and Uncle Eugenio, who had lived in Puglia for years. Both connoisseurs and lovers of the region's culture and architecture and imbued with passion about its cuisine, they took us on road trips to explore the coastline, pointing out fairy-tale stone towers and fortifications, splendid Baroque churches, the mysterious 13th century Castel del Monte and myriad vast olive groves and orchards punctuated by the whitewashed *trulli* that embedded themselves like flower seeds in my imagination.

The Italian peninsula is shaped like a boot; Puglia is its heel. Surrounded by seas, the Mediterranean on one side and the Adriatic on the other, it was a

region vulnerable to foreign invaders throughout the ages. My uncle explained that the stone watch towers we would spot from the car as we whizzed from one little hill town to another were built all along the Puglia seashore, ordered in the 16th century by Charles V to protect his kingdom from invasion, and most were close enough to allow communication with each other. These short but intense road trips whetted my appetite like an aperitif and by the time we found our *trullo* all those decades later, the hunger to become part of the landscape was real.

With the ruin for sale on a local agent's site foremost in my mind, I decided we should spend a summer holiday pootling around Puglia and rent an already renovated *trullo* as our base. That first reconnaissance mission led us back to explore the coastline of my memories, the turquoise-green, flat waters of the Adriatic, those towers, remnants of the Crusades, the craggy, dark rocky beaches, deep red, red earth of the olive groves, past miles of dry-stone walls, bounteous fig trees and endless oleander hedges bursting with flowers. I'd refound the place that had long been in my dreams.

I know now that I'd lost my head and heart well before we met the agent to inspect our *trullo* in real life. But when we finally did see it, I watched as my husband also fell for its location, atop seven terraces delineated by stone walls, nestled on a hill amid figs and olive trees with the sea in the distance and views so expansive we could see Albania's coastline on a clear day, watch the sun rise at right and sun set at left. A small posse of dogs welcomed us as we walked the land and I noticed that an oak, my favourite tree, marked the property's main entrance.

Our plan was to invest our pension money in the project. We're too young to put our feet up, will probably never stop working – we are writers – and continue to crave adventure. Now any normal, thinking person would have advised us to invest the fruits of more than 30 years of full-time work as journalists into something sensible, perhaps a teeny studio flat in London. That way, we'd be assured of a continuing, modest income into decrepitude. But no, we jumped, eyes wide shut, and embarked on our romantic (and idealistic) plans to rebuild the old *trullo* and return it to life.

We rallied our pensions together and, after endless sleepless nights, actually bought the thing – the ruin plus 5ha with olives/fruit trees and exceptional views was 120,000 euros. I immediately christened the *trullo* our “pile of rocks” and threw myself headlong into managing a long-distance rebuild project from our base in London.



Trulli, madly: clockwise from left, the rebuild begins; coastal views;

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The long-term plan was to restore it and then rent it out in the lucrative European summer months, giving us a decent annual income as well as using it to host friends and family. The property was sold with approved architectural restoration plans and included the construction of a new “lamia”, a rectangular space with an internal vaulted roof built in stone to allow for a kitchen, an extra bedroom and bathroom as well as a small swimming pool. We were recommended a local builder who provided a fixed price quote for everything, including kitchen and bathroom fixtures and the pool. All in all, the whole project would cost about the equivalent of a 40sqm, one-bedroom flat in inner Sydney.

In the depths of the winter of 2018, work began. For 10 months, I worked WhatsApp with Mimmo Collucci, our builder, discussing decisions, checking progress, tweaking the design when the ruin revealed something the architects had not factored in, and monitoring milestones. It went smoothly and was inordinately exciting to receive weekly photographic updates. Every couple of months I took a cheap flight to Bari or Brindisi and did a day or overnight trip to see for myself how things were going.

Nearly 12 months into the build the four cones had been deconstructed and put back together



(with mortar, unlike the old days when they were simply dry stone). These created three cosy, grotto-like bedrooms while a smaller pile of rocks was lifted up and outward into a little bathroom. Mimmo discovered a pretty stone fireplace, rebuilt it and added a chimney; a local carpenter made wooden doors *in situ* to fit the odd, tiny spaces and oh, the pleasure they gave me! Windows were given glass, the lamia was built and a minuscule kitchen went in while outside, swathes of dry-stone wall, golden in the afternoon light, were pulled back from horizontal piles to vertical delineations.

Somehow, we had managed to retain the humble character of the original building, the exposed stone, odd niches and ledges, shapes and colours while weaving the 21st century inside its bones: plumbing, electricity, heating. I began to search for furniture, small, rustic pieces that could double up in use: stools for little tables, chests for storage, old



the pool; from the driveway; main cone interior; as it was



JUST SIX WEEKS BEFORE  
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ladders to hang clothing. I had a vision in my mind and adored treasure hunting to put it together.

**Then, one day late summer in that first,** wonderful year – just six weeks from our estimated completion date – disaster struck. Italian municipalities require the lodging of a series of staged permits when restoring and rebuilding a property. These effectively flag the opening of a work site and tick off each stage against the approved project as it's finished. In late August, I'd been to visit to show mum, who was on her annual trip to Italy, and at our meeting the builder seemed on edge, hinting that he was worried about the surveyor – responsible for the crucial, associated bureaucratic paperwork. The two of them sat across the table, the surveyor swaggering and confident everything was fine, the builder monosyllabic but unwilling to mouth his concerns. But

then as the weeks passed and all demands to see the paperwork were met with time-stalling, we started to do more detective work. To cut a long story short, our surveyor turned out to be a charlatan, a conman unable (or unwilling) to manage the paperwork and who had obfuscated, lied, pretended to cover his inadequacy for months. Our *trullo* was nearly finished – a new lamia and pool in place – but it did not have the construction permits needed. Legally, the architectural project had its approvals in place but without the staged building permits, this meant nothing. Our dream was close to realisation – but it was all illegal. Illegal. Our pension, the fruits of our labour, had been invested in bricks and mortar – but all of it was worth nothing and it was unsaleable.

As soon as the enormity of the disaster sank in, I called a halt to works and pulled the builders off the site to protect them: their livelihood, if we had been reported, would have been ruined. Worse still, criminal proceedings could have been instituted had someone reported our predicament.

As we mothballed the site with heavy hearts and sought recommendations for a specialist property lawyer we couldn't afford, I felt a mix of shame at our being too trusting and white-hot fury that one man's dishonesty could taint his local colleagues (my compatriots) and destroy our vision.

The next year for us was, as Queen Elizabeth once said, our *annus horribilis*. It turned into a hell of wakeful, panicked nights, increasing worry about our finances, the true terror that we'd pissed our pensions up against a lovely, dry-stone Puglian wall. Our youngest was doing her A-levels and as freelance writers, income is all swings and roundabouts: the project we hoped would stabilise our annual income and help us keep earning, adventuring and writing had turned into an unholy mess. Wonderfully, nobody said "I told you so", although I'm sure many friends and family thought it.

As the London-based Italian lawyer and a smart young surveyor in Italy began pulling together the portfolio of paperwork to resubmit our plans, we held our breath (and watched our rapidly diminishing bank account), trying desperately not to lose our enthusiasm and hope. Months passed and without regular visits, the site succumbed to weeds and the seasons, the pool turned green and our romantic bolthole felt like a stone albatross around our necks.

**Nearly two years have passed, Covid exploded** and we've just now managed to squeeze in a trip to our much-loved *Trullo Mare e Stelle* (Sea and Stars). The surveyor has worked closely with local municipality planners for more than 12 months and all the necessary paperwork has been lodged; he and our lawyer are confident that our project will be granted the necessary retrospective approvals. In the meantime, we were given the green light to finish works – happening in dribs and drabs – and we have worked our fingers to the bone the past two summers weeding, cleaning, keeping alive the ghost of our dreams. Our neighbours have become much-loved friends and we've even met a lady, now in her 80s, who spent joyous summer childhoods in the old *trullo* 70 years ago.

As I sit here in our little corner of Puglia, the sun has just risen behind the valley to the east, a breeze flecks the crests of the olive trees, stirring leaves that shimmer silver and gold in the light of the dawn. Sunshine breaches the *trullo* shutters throwing orange strips onto the floor and walls. A rooster's crow, a wasp's buzz. The beauty that first brought us here, to this hillside high above the Selva di Fasano – one of the few, large remaining remnants of woodland in the region – remains unchanged and I know in my heart that this crazy project we nicknamed our "pile of stones" will have a happy ending. ●

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