

TRAVELLER'S TALE



A BOUNTIFUL JOURNEY

DAVID LANG'S TRAVELS LED TO AN UNEXPECTED TREE-CHANGE AND A NEW LIFE IN A COUNTRY HE'D NEVER VISITED.

ILLUSTRATION:
Danny Snell

Strangely enough, my wife Chrissie and I decided to move to Italy while travelling in South America. We were visiting a beautiful, old country house in central Mexico called Hacienda San Gabriel. At the time, Chrissie was working as an accountant and I was a teacher. She was sick of the boardroom battles and office politics, while I was up for a new challenge. We were both taken by the beauty and tranquillity of the old buildings in Mexico. One morning, as Chrissie sat in the middle of the courtyard, she turned to me and said: "Why don't we try and buy an old farmhouse in Italy, restore it, you can teach and I'll rent out a room to travellers – and we can call it Casa San Gabriel." And so we began.

At our next stop in Quito, Ecuador, we found an English language bookshop, bought a *Lonely Planet* guide to Italy – and started reading. Then we searched the net for properties, emailed real estate agents and soon discovered that Tuscany was well and truly out of our price range. Umbria was not far behind, while Le Marche seemed to be the up and coming region.

In the evenings, over drinks with fellow travellers, we started our market research, quizzing people about where they most wanted to go in the world. The overwhelming response was Italy. France seemed to polarise people. But those who hadn't been to Italy were desperate to go – and those who had been, wanted to return. There was obviously a magic about the place.

I'd never been to Italy, but I had a strong connection with Italians in the area where I grew up, Beeac near Colac in rural Victoria. Many Italians had rented land from my parents to grow onions. Some of their ancestors had been prisoners of war around our area during World War II – and their families returned afterwards to work and live. Chrissie had visited Italy once briefly as a 17-year-old.

It's fair to say we had a fairly romantic idea of life in Italy.

After finishing our travels and arriving back in England, we continued to research our idea while working and organising our wedding. Chrissie flew with her aunt to Le Marche, on the Adriatic sea in central Italy. Although Urbino was a university town where I could find work, there didn't yet seem to be enough tourism to guarantee a steady flow of tourists – although there was no shortage of ruins.

We then turned our attention to Umbria. The properties were more expensive, but this was pre-GFC. A nice Italian bank manager could still be convinced to loan money to two naïve young foreigners with the property used as security. With the help of a property finder, we were able to find something that matched our requirements: about one hectare of bush/scrub; separate houses with their own private space so we weren't living on top of each other; no telephone lines or road noise so our guests could really relax and unwind. Plus a nearby university town, Perugia, where I could find work teaching business and academic English.

And so here we are 10 years later. The pigsty is now a cosy studio apartment and many other changes have taken place. It hasn't always been easy, but we now have two beautiful daughters born up the road at Citta di Castello. Aged seven and nine, the girls attend the local primary school, speaking Italian all day at school and English at home with us in the evenings.

My rural background (my father is a sheep farmer) has stood me in good stead for life in the country, and we have the same blue sky days here in Umbria that I remember from western Victoria.

Our guests come from all over the world and we enjoy sharing our knowledge of what we think is one of the most beautiful parts of Italy. In turn, they love eating from our large vegetable patch. We shear our four alpacas and have the wool made into scarves for exclusive sale to guests. Our weekly pizza night using an old wood-fired oven is also extremely popular. We make our own olive oil and wine, and several other dubious liquors.

In short, we feel very lucky to live where we do. casasangabriel.com.