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A CULTURAL LOVE AFFAIR

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Thousands are the stories of young Italians who left their country and came to Australia in search of a better life. But, we don't hear as much about the Australians who have chosen to reverse the process and end up living in Italy permanently or basing their income and business life around spending a considerable amount of time there. Their reasons for doing so are diverse – a quest for a certain lifestyle, good old fashioned love or the ability to spend a considerable part of the year introducing others to a country they have come to love.

The Simple Life

A strong connection with Italians during an Australian country childhood eventually led a Melbourne couple to find their dream Italian location. **By Danielle Gullaci.**

NESTLED IN THE SMALL Italian region of Umbria lies Casa San Gabriel – a picture-perfect property with breathtaking views. But, it was once a desolate and rundown agricultural estate that has taken a large amount of love and patience to transform into a cherished home and a haven for visitors.

When David and Chrissie Lang married eight years ago, it was their

dream to live the simple life. For most of us, that would mean finding a spot free of urban madness, but one from which we could access work, family, friends and some entertainment. For the Langs, it involved moving across the world and a search for the right property.

David's love affair with Italy grew out of what many would have regarded as a challenging time – the housing of Italian prisoners of war during World War II. David's father grew up on a sheep farm near the small country town of Beeac in Victoria's west. Towards the end of the war, several Italian prisoners worked and lived in the shearer's quarters. "My grandfather got along well with the Italians. They were good workers and good people," David says. The POWs were repatriated at the end of the war, but many subsequently returned with their families as migrants. David's family continued its connection with them. "I have known Italians from a young age. In our local town, it was difficult not to meet Italians related to these early migrants," he says.

David's ongoing passion for the Italian way of life, therefore, comes as

no surprise. When he and Chrissie met and married, they had a plan to make Italy their home. It included buying and restoring "a ruin" that would allow David to teach at a local language school while providing an ideal landscape to raise children. "But we probably got a bit carried away," admits David. They had undertaken a six month trip to South America and during that time their plans had evolved into running a small bed and breakfast in Italy. "Talking to fellow travellers, we found that those who had been to Italy loved it, while those who hadn't been wanted to go.

"Chrissie and I were confident that people would come if we found the right house in the right area, so we set our hearts on Umbria, the green heart of Italy."

Chrissie began visiting numerous properties in Umbria. Most needed enormous amounts of work. This was not just a lick of paint or a bit of modernising renovation. "But, on her first visit to Casa San Gabriel, she instinctively knew this was the perfect property," David says. "The views are stunning and it has a wonderful feel.





Clockwise from above: La Cantina; Fienile; pool and pergia; La Cantina sitting room.

As you gaze down the valley, there is beautiful Italian countryside as far as the eye can see, with Assisi glinting in the distance on Mt Subasio. We believe we have a unique location in terms of the stunning views, the absolute peace. But, we are still close to the towns so there is a feeling of isolation without being isolated." They bought the property and rolled their sleeves up.

It might all sound wonderfully romantic so far, but to achieve their goals, the Langs had a long, hard road ahead of them. Casa San Gabriel was once a large agricultural estate. When they purchased the property, it had not been lived in since the 1970s. That meant no water, gas, sewerage or telephone connection.

The collection of houses on the property all had walls and a roof, but that was about it. "We had to do all the internal restructuring, repaint all the walls and install utilities, doors, windows, floors, kitchens and bathrooms," says David.

"The big job over the past eight years has been the gardens. They were all scrub, but slowly over the years we have developed them. It is wonderful to watch a rose that you planted from rootstock, grow to climb over the roof.



"We have developed a lovely garden including a vegetable garden and a herb garden which all guests are encouraged to use. We also produce our own olive oil which we insist everyone samples."

David and Chrissie live in the farmhouse with their children Elisabetta, 6 and Lucia, 4, while the three outbuildings have been converted into luxury cottages. Each of the cottages have been restored in the local Umbrian fashion and have been given names that represent what they were once used for: La Stalla (the stable), La Cantina (the wine cellar) and Il Fienile (the barn). "Our criteria, along with the beautiful views and setting, was for separate cottages, so that all guests could have their own space and privacy, but still get together and chat if they wished."



Some of the original, existing "treasures" have been put to great use. A large bread oven is used for weekly pizza nights, with many of the locals often attending to offer their assistance. Due to the size of the oven, the couple believe it was once used to make bread for several

farmhouses in the area.

"The surrounding valley features a number of beautiful old stone farmhouses as well as olive groves, a vineyard and lots of rolling hills and woods. The position of the property means you can't hear any of the roads, which creates a feeling of tranquillity. We feel very lucky to live here," says David.

And, their children get to meet and play with children from all over the world.

"We are always here to help guests if they need advice or just to sit and chat over a glass of wine. The aim has always been to make sure people feel that they have a home while they are travelling."

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:
www.casasangabriel.com