



# A great escape

**T**wo days after Italy's surrender to the allies in September 1943, the writer Iris Origo and her daughter Benedetta, 3, walked from their Tuscan home up to the 11th-century Castelluccio, or "little castle", that stood on the edge of their estate.

As Iris recorded in her bestselling memoir, *War in Val d'Orcia*, they wanted "to say goodbye to the prisoners".

For six months, the castle had been home to 50 British POWs and their Italian escort, but with the temporary armistice, they were free to go. It was a moving yet anxious day. "They practise their Italian... and examine the places on the map where I tell them there are German troops, and those where there

might perhaps be an Allied landing," she wrote. "'We've got a 50:50 chance of escape, don't you think?'" says one of the men. Then, lifting Benedetta on to the table, they all sing to us: Roll out the Barrel, Land of Hope and Glory – and finally, when Benedetta has blown them a goodbye kiss, Auld Lang Syne. As we come out of the castle we see, slowly winding up the valley road, a lorry full of Germans."

Today, Benedetta, a svelte, energetic 73, is also saying farewell to part of the estate that has been her home for more than seven decades, and is now up for sale for €15m (£12.36m). "It's always been rather a magical place for me, because it's so definitely a medieval castle, with its turret and so many dark, secret places that, as children, we were rather scared to go," she tells me as we enter its imposing courtyard. "People





The Tuscan estate of the writer Iris Origo is pure Henry James. And its story, involving a daring flight from the Nazis, is a real page-turner, says **Claire Wrathall**

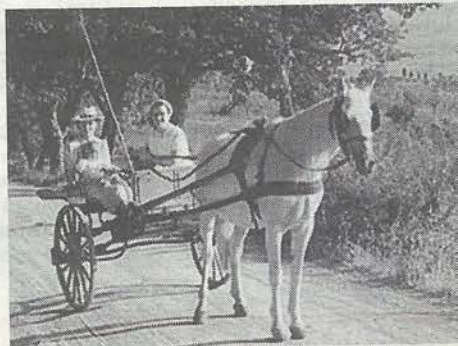
Tuscany Iris

have always talked about a secret passage dating back to Etruscan times," she continues. (There was once an Etruscan acropolis here.) "We've never found it, but, according to legend, there's treasure hidden somewhere." For the moment, though, only ancient pottery has been unearthed. It is now on display at the National Archeological Museum, in nearby Chiusi.

The Catholic saint and "Apostle of Italy", San Bernardino, is known to have preached at the Castelluccio, and it was once seized from its Siennese owners by Pope Clement VII, a member of Florence's all-powerful Medici family, after he was refused shelter in a storm — despite the fact that it was a hospital dedicated to the care of pilgrims and the poor.

Halfway between Florence and Rome, the Castelluccio is a burnt-ochre fortress set on the summit of a hill, surrounded by woods roamed by wild boar and porcupines.

Benedetta Origo, right, with her mother and nurse in 1941. **Top** La Foce. **Above right** Castelluccio





09.03.2014 / 31



It marks the highest point of the estate known as La Foce, “a huge property just south of Pienza, looking on one side over the whole of the Val d’Orcia, and on the other most of Umbria”, as Iris described it.

Raised in Long Island, New York, Ireland and latterly Florence, Iris was born into

the wealthy milieu of American Europhiles who populate the novels of Henry James and Edith Wharton (a family friend). In 1924, at the age of 21, she broke with convention by marrying Antonio Origo, the illegitimate son of an Italian *marchese*, with whom she bought the estate: a derelict

15th-century villa, 25 near-ruined farms and 3,500 acres. “A lunar landscape pale and inhuman... bare and colourless as elephants’ backs, as treeless as mountains of the moon... a land without mercy and without shade,” she called it.

Their friends thought they were mad, but Iris and Antonio worked tirelessly to restore the house and make the valley fertile, adding to the estate as and when neighbouring property came up for sale – they acquired the Castelluccio, along with almost 10 acres of grounds, in the early 1930s.

They established an idealised farming community, for whom they set up a cottage hospital, a nursery and a school. There was even a social club, now an excellent trattoria run by Benedetta’s eldest daughter, Katya, and still called *Dopolavoro* (“after work”). It’s down the hill from the Castelluccio – about 10 minutes’ walk at the brisk pace Benedetta sets – and we lunch there on antipasti of local meats and cheeses, followed by *pici*, a rustic

→ hand-rolled spaghetti, with hearty boar ragu.

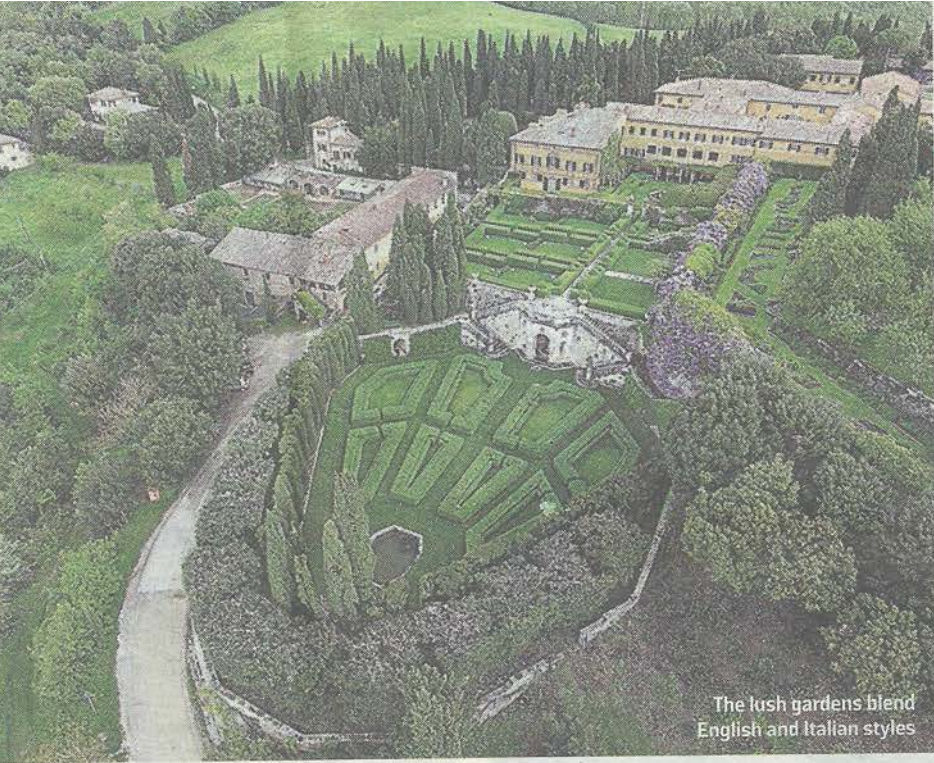
Today La Foce is best known for its annual music festival, *Incontri in Terra di Siena*, held each July. Benedetta and her son, Antonio Lysy, founded it in 1989. It is partly funded by Nicola Bulgari, a member of the family behind the jewellery and accessories brand. The luxuriant gardens where it is staged were designed by the British architect Cecil Pinsent, whom Iris met while he was working for the American art historian Bernard Berenson; Pinsent had designed a garden for him that was devoid of any colour but green.

He was freer with the planting at La Foce, which fuses wilder English borders of fragrant honeysuckle, roses, peonies and irises with formal Italian parterres, linked by flights of balustraded travertine steps and culminating in an arrowhead-shaped garden that has a classic view of the Tuscan landscape, right down to the cypress-lined “zigzag road”, or traditional *strada bianca*, that snakes up the opposite hillside.

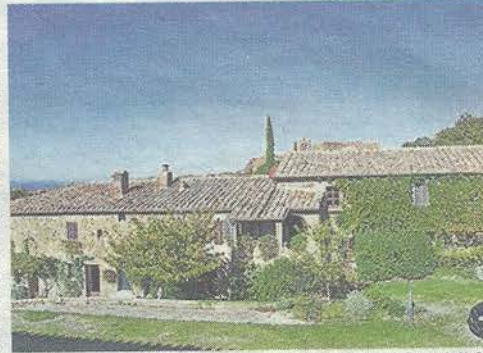
Pinsent also turned his eye towards the 3,250 sq metre Castelluccio, creating a series of spacious rooms and four apartments on its first and second floors. (The third has still to be restored.) He designed a new altar for the chapel, where Benedetta’s sister was christened in July 1943, and extended it, also overseeing the restoration of its Renaissance frescoes and the later, faux-primitive ones of ancient Etruscan life on the ceiling of one of the principal bedrooms. “They are intentionally funny, I think,” Benedetta says, “because the people in them look so incredibly sheepish and silly.”

The secluded walled garden, full of lavender, rosemary and broom, was also designed by Pinsent. It’s set between a handsome wrought-iron gate and the three houses known as the Belvedere (two with three bedrooms and one with two, all included in the sale). Here you’ll find a large lawn, a small swimming pool and a stand of yews, planted to provide shade and guide





The lush gardens blend English and Italian styles



Juergen Hohmuth / Zeitort.de, Tuscany Inside Out

in her pram in order to feed those in hiding. And, though she is hazy about some of the events her mother wrote about, she recalls listening to Iris's reminiscences. "My mother used to tell my sister and me stories while she lay in the bath," she says. "She liked to soak."

Hence the fabulous 1930s bathroom in the main villa at La Foce, which Pinsent designed for her, with an elaborately lit dressing table and a built-in banquette for her daughters to sit on. The house is not included in the sale, but is available to rent.

The Origos' greatest act of daring was the escape they organised when La Foce was seized, ransacked and shelled by German forces in June 1944. During the siege, they led a column of 60 people — including 28 children and four babies — along mined roads, sometimes under attack from the air, until they reached safety in Montepulciano, which stands on a narrow ridge six miles north of the Castelluccio.

"We have left everything that we possess, but never in my life have I felt so rich and so thankful as looking down on all the children as they lie asleep," Iris wrote.

La Foce survived, too, and in time the Origos returned to restore it again. Today, Benedetta, who still lives in an apartment in the estate's main villa, continues to oversee its farms, which produce cereals and olive oil; nine of its buildings are let as holiday homes. She hopes that whoever buys this slice of Italian history will continue the traditions not just of restoration and romance, but of putting on cultural events.

"Wishful thinking, perhaps," she says, "but one never knows."

the eye towards the view across the valley to Monte Amiata, the highest volcano in mainland Italy.

A heady, palpably romantic atmosphere pervades La Foce still, fed by the stories of those connected with it. Pinsent's contribution to La Foce was truly a labour of love, for Iris admitted she had been in love with him, and he with her, though "not at the same time", so they were never, as she put it, "technically lovers".

Ultimately, though, it is Iris's influence that makes the place so captivating, fuelled by the story of her

experiences during the Nazi occupation that immediately followed the Italian surrender and the "liberation" of the British POWs. Within a month, the Castelluccio had been requisitioned again, to house 150 German troops. Meanwhile, she and Antonio risked everything to provide refuge for dozens of orphans and evacuees, and hid a succession of partisans, Jews and escaped allied prisoners.

Benedetta can remember the evening walks into the surrounding woods, when she and her mother would take food concealed

**Benedetta can remember the evening walks into the woods, when they would take food concealed in her pram to escaped POWs**

✦ *Castelluccio, on the La Foce estate, is for sale for €15m through Knight Frank; 00 39 055 295486, knightfrank.com*

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