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Castello Banfi II Borgo, Montalcino, Italy

Tuscan retreats

ITALY - By Lee Marshall

The Tuscan country-hotel scene has come on apace since 1960, when the Michelin guide to Italy listed not a single establishment in the Chianti area. But even after the boom in rural accommodation in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the choice was still limited, by and large, to basic agriturismo farm holiday places or rather stuffy country-house hotels. The past few years have seen the arrival of a handful of stylish luxury spa resorts, and some welcome mid-range options where guests benefit from a hands-on, personal approach.

CASTELLO BANFI II BORGO

At the centre of Montalcino's biggest wine estate - created by a major US wine merchant in the late 1970s - stands a handsome castle of medieval origins. Just outside its walls, a pretty hamlet (or borgo) of former estate workers' houses has been turned into a 14-room hotel. At first glance, there's something a little too staged and perfect about Il Borgo's version of a Tuscan village. But such play-acting can be a pleasure, and Il Borgo does it with a great deal of panache. The restored village houses, facing each other across a steep lane, contain a couple of suites each, and there's another one (great for honeymooners) in the former primary school. Local interior designer Federico Forquet has gone for a chintzy but warm version of classic, antique, Tuscan-country-house style, using earthy hues and floral textile patterns. The bathrooms (many with tubs as well as large rain showers) are mostly spacious, and are stocked with products made from the estate's Sangiovese grapes. The outdoor pool may be on the small side, but there are spectacular views from it across the lower Val d'Orcia to Monte Amiata. The estate's traditional but by no means unrefined Tuscan restaurant, La Taverna, is also open in the evenings - when you're less likely to meet the minibus parties that tend to fill the place at lunchtime. The castle itself is part of the hotel, with a guests-only reading room, a cocktail lounge and a very Tuscan formal cloister garden, with seats under a pretty pergola. And despite the limited number of rooms, the concierge service and facilities - including a small fitness room - are of five-star-hotel standard.

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Castello Banfi II Borgo: 00 39 0577 877700;
www.castellobanfilborgo.com. Doubles from €340