

Client: Borgo Egnazia
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THE GLOBETROTTER / CELIA WALDEN / *In search of a winter wonderland*



SPLENDID ISOLATION

A luxury villa in Puglia provides a resplendent – and restorative – alternative to traditional winter-sun destinations

You know you're in Italy when even the birds are wolf whistling. They're a typically generous-minded bunch out here in Puglia, not much caring that I'm wrapped up like a mummy on my sunlounger, and not stripped down to a bikini roasting in the 28 degree temperatures you can expect in southern Italy over the summer months. A woman is a woman, *dopotutto*. And if you lived here at Borgo Egnazia, there'd be every reason for you to feel happy with your lot.

Because it's only a brisk (but bright) 10 degrees, we nearly didn't come. We nearly did the same desperate eight-plus-hour trek sunwards, only to spend a week both fighting jetlag and fearing the reverse jetlag to come. But after weeks of discussions born of frenzied world-weather googling ('It would be T-shirt but not sunbathing weather'; 'It's hot but patchy: tropical-storm season'), I had an epiphany: 'How about we ditch "winter sun" as a notion? I haven't sunbathed in over a decade, for God's sake.' And not forgetting that your daughter makes Casper look swarthy, your husband still subscribes to the 'puce will eventually go golden' tanning mythology, and anything over 18 degrees just forces me into an SPF slathering regimen that doesn't leave much time for anything else.

Time, here in Borgo Egnazia, is endless – largely because it doesn't exist. You can't put your finger on when the luxury five-star village was built (Borgo doesn't like to be called either a hotel or a resort). And although it turns out to be as recent as 2010, the 29 private villas and white weathered limestone *cassette* dotted around the central square, arches and wells could be anything



AN ADRIATIC ESCAPE

Clockwise from left: the view over the glorious jumble of rooftops at Borgo Egnazia; the exterior of Villa Bella – each villa has its own private pool; understated design in the rooms



12th century onwards. The hotel staff wear glorious monastic velvet robes in the colder months that might either date from the same period or this year's Alexander McQueen autumn/winter show, and there are no clocks on the walls or indeed weighing scales anywhere – not in any of the four swimming pools' changing rooms. Basically, no reality markers at all.

This, of course, is deliberate: Borgo is based around the Italian concept of *ritiro*: withdrawal. The first few months of the year are perfect *ritiro* time, so when April comes around, you've recharged and are ready to emerge in flamboyant 'ciao ciao broom broom' mode.

Not that stepping back has to mean either a concerted detox or introspective indolence – although if you want to spend a week or two pottering round the labyrinth of tiny streets, and pausing every so often to sink down at a strategically placed old café chair and table to read, this is the place to do it. But I found my *ritiro* involved a surprising amount of activity – and the kind I wouldn't normally get involved in. I learnt how to make *panzerotti* (tiny fried calzones) with Borgo's cookery course instructor, Luigi. I enjoyed wine- and olive-oil tastings, attempted to play golf at San Domenico golf club, which sits on the beautiful Adriatic

'Perhaps real winter luxury is about discovering new things'

coastline. I walked among the 1,000-year-old olive trees, with trunks as twisted and gnarled as aged heavyweight-boxers' faces, surrounding Borgo's 43,000 sq ft estate. I chose from a series of euphorically described and touchingly mistranslated holistic treatments available at the hotel's award-winning Vair Spa – where the rosemary-oil massage is 'a suggestive journey' and the Bedda facial promises 'renewed unconditional happiness' (alongside improved skin tone). I tried unsuccessfully to get Rosalia – the *massaia* (literally translated as local housewife) who came to our villa to cook us one of the most indulgent dinners I've ever tasted – to hand over her grandmother's lemon ricotta tart recipe. And I ate insane amounts of cheese.

Would I have done any of these things in the summer months? No – although because Borgo has an all-day kids' club available to guests, it's easy for parents to be as adventurous as they like. But there's something numbing about summer sun that can leave you feeling sluggish and slightly unfulfilled on that plane journey home. And perhaps real winter luxury is about discovering new things and making yourself feel alive again. My Borgo visit left me reset, ready to plunge back into life – and desparate to go back. ●

ESSENTIALS

Villa Bella in Borgo Egnazia, Puglia, from €339 (£285) per night B&B, based on six people sharing, excluding city tax. For Christmas 2019, prices are from €1,130 (£1,025) per night, on the same basis. For bookings, call 0039 080 225 5850 or visit borgoegnazia.com.