

THE  TIMES

L U X X

Vintage glamour

Retro shades
Hollywood hair
Summer style



Here's looking at you

From boutique hotels to private boat trips — the summer travel LUXX list

Luxury cruises, Italian castles and this summer's best new places to stay. By Lisa Grainger



Castello di Ugento in the south of Puglia is being opened as a nine-bedroom boutique hotel

The Italian labour of love

When the Roman-born Diana Bianchi fell in love with the romantically named Massimo d'Amore, she had no idea that he came with a castle attached.

Castello di Ugento in Puglia had been in his family for 22 generations, since 1645, but, like many grand properties divided among families over generations, it had fallen into ruin. Soon Massimo's dream of buying the entire property and restoring it became Diana's too, and at the end of this month, after years spent buying out 18 relatives and spending millions restoring and modernising the castle, the couple will at last open what they call "our mad project" as a nine-bedroom boutique hotel.

Within its ancient walls - with Norman foundations and ceilings adorned with baroque frescoes - they have created a thoroughly 21st-century hotel. It is heated with geothermal energy, wired with fibreoptics and fitted out not only with furniture from leading Italian designers such as Ceccotti and Minotti ("ancient bones with a new heart", as they put it), but also by the finest local providers.

Their chef, Odette Fada, made her name as one of the best Italian chefs in America, running San Domenico restaurant in New York and the Rex il Ristorante in Los Angeles. In a wing of the castle she runs the Culinary Institute of America's first Italian outpost, teaching

fourth-year students from America's finest culinary university about Italian food, while overseeing the Castello's gourmet restaurant.

Dinners, which take place in the chef's high-tech kitchen, in the courtyard, or on the roof terrace, are normally six-course feasts that may start with a mini squid burger and end with a spoon of garden herb-infused gelato.

Set on a hill in the charmingly rundown town of Ugento, above Italy's "heel" in the south of Puglia, the castle is within easy reach of Ionian sandy beaches and the stony cliffs and caves of the Adriatic coast, as well as culturally rich towns such as Gallipoli and Lecce, with their baroque stone cathedrals and handsome squares. Because Massimo grew up in the castle and knows some of the area's oldest families, he can arrange personalised excursions, from cultural day trips with the extraordinarily knowledgeable twentysomething Lucrezia Lopez y Royo di Taurisano to boat trips with local fishermen and lunches in private palazzos.

The couple have also renovated an old farmhouse near by for guests who want simpler accommodation, with a tennis court, a plunge pool and sensational rustic Puglian food. (It's worth dropping in just to taste a burrata-stuffed potato and parmesan scone.)

Castello di Ugento, doubles from €200 (£176) B&B;

castellodiugento.com