

Condé Nast Traveller

APRIL 1998 £2.70

BULLETIN
Should pilots be
breathalysed?



HOT MOROCCO
New locations
new places to stay

**SYDNEY
GETS SEXY**
Inside Australia's
capital of style

**CHOOSE
THE RIGHT
HOLIDAY**
Traveller's special
tailor-made planner

**101
DALMATIANS**
Why Croatia's islands
knock spots off Greece

Anthony Minghella's undiscovered Italy **PLUS** Peter Carey, Olga Polizzi, Rory MacLean



SOLE



MAN

FILM DIRECTOR SEEKS SOLITUDE, AWAY FROM URBAN CLUTTER, TO GET DOWN TO SOME SCRIPTWRITING... RETREATING TO THE TUSCAN MONASTERY OF LA FRATERIA DI PADRE ELIGIO, ANTHONY MINGHELLA FOUND A PLACE OF SPACE, SIMPLICITY AND CELESTIAL CUISINE. HIS WAISTLINE WAS SOON FILLING OUT AS FAST AS HIS NOTEBOOK

Photographs by Marco Valdivia

RETREAT AND PILGRIMAGE, hiding or walking, these are soon to be the holidays of choice, I'm convinced of it. At any moment we're all going to be packing our rucksacks with chocolate and trudging the 236 miles of hills and desert from St-Jean-Pied-de-Port on the French side of the Pyrenees to the Spanish city of Santiago de Compostela. We'll do this with partners and friends (I've already roped in Michael Ondaatje). Or else we'll be holing up in monasteries on our own.

Irony, in a magazine for travellers, to be writing about a vacation in which I barely moved for nine days. And equally ironic, now I think about it, that having finished *The English Patient*, a film about a man marooned in a bed in a monastery, my present raft of projects all reflect the same two themes – one story about a man alone in Italy, another about a walk of 500 miles across the Blue Ridge Mountains at the end of the American Civil War, a third about a woman who stops talking.

As August approached last year, my writing life compressed into tiny spurts dignified by neither quality nor quantity. I resolved to go away and burrow. After due consultation I was directed to a place that shelters intriguingly

of a slot and disappeared. There was a button marked 'Help', which I duly pressed and embarked on a dialogue worthy of *Monty Python* – my part of it all in tortured, halting Italian.

'Put your ticket into the slot.'

'I put my ticket into the wrong slot.'

'Put your ticket into the slot.'

'Yes, but I put my ticket into the wrong slot, there's a slot above the right slot which is the wrong slot.'

'Put your ticket into the slot.'

When I had approached the barrier there wasn't another vehicle to be seen; within seconds there were a hundred, arriving magically to form the one thing the entire nation is bred to despise: a queue. As I wrestled with my faceless interrogator, his voice squawking from the machine, they commenced a murderous symphony of physical gestures, shouts and horns, which is the music of Italian motoring.

I had had no specific instructions about how to get to La Frateria di Padre Eligio and, in the best tradition of such expeditions, the light was failing as I ran out of landmarks on my map at Cetona, a small and unremarkable town just inside Tuscany which was enjoying some kind of festival as I potted through it, looking for

I ARRIVED WITH NO WAY OF MEASURING THE TIME; THERE WAS NO MUSIC

under several names: La Frateria di Padre Eligio, Il Convento di San Francesco or, rather more ominous, Mondo X. Its address, however, was unequivocal: 534040 Cetona, Italy.

The auguries were bad. It started with Rome's Fiumicino airport. What would Leonardo da Vinci – whose name the airport borrows – have made of some of its design features? Like many things Italian, a brilliant idea is scuppered by some unaccountable lapse in execution; beautiful cars which are inclined to rust; extremely beautiful cars which are not inclined to start. At Leonardo da Vinci, someone recently dreamed up ingenious airport trolleys which, when I was last there, would lock elegantly on to the escalators connecting the labyrinth of terminals to the parking buildings. These trolleys have stopped working: most of them now limp along on misshapen tyres and you can no longer take them on escalators, so there are currently no obvious ways to get your luggage to a car. Visitors wrestle for entry to the four-person disabled elevator, and begin their stay in Italy (in the unforgettable phrase of John Arlott) if not disgruntled, certainly not grunted.

Leaving the car park in my rented Lancia, I immediately got into another mess. I inserted my exit ticket a centimetre above the intended slot in the machine controlling the barrier, where it promptly slipped into a perfectly shaped mistake

clues. Perhaps it was celebrating not being in Umbria. Someone pointed down the road and suggested I find a left turn and, so armed, I drove on, found a left turn and wound my way up and up into the dark foreboding of a wooded hill, convinced I was lost. Suddenly I was confronted by two young men in dinner suits who asked me if I was me, which I was, and before I knew it I was relieved of my car, luggage and passport and was led, smiling, to my room and then to the restaurant. I was in a Ruth Rendell novel. Was it coincidence that I had given away my watch the previous day to a friend who coveted it? I had arrived with no way of measuring the time; there was no music, no television, no radio, no newspapers, no phone. I was in retreat.

The temperature had been in the mid-90s when I left Rome, reminding me of my time filming in Cinecittà in August, where my rented apartment in the magnificent Palazzo Borghese was only available, I soon realised, because of its lack of air-conditioning. The humidity was so unbearable that I was reduced to getting up in the night to open the refrigerator door and plunge my head into its fleeting chill. Only an hour or two north, the climate was perfect, a light breeze cooling the room when I woke on my first morning at La Frateria.

The monastery itself dates from 1212. It is absurdly pretty with its two courtyards squaring





NO TELEVISION, NO RADIO, NO PAPERS, NO PHONE. I WAS IN RETREAT



Clockwise, from top left, the monastery's main entrance; the lobby; view from a guest room of the courtyard and main garden; bedroom with en-suite bathroom and 17th-century furniture

ONLY THE INCONGRUOUS BLISTER OF A HELIPAD HINTS THAT THIS IS

their wells, a row of ancient bells calling to work or sounding for lunch or meetings, oversized terracotta pots of scented orange and lemon trees lining the paths and scarlet flashes of geranium peppering the green, trimmed lawns. Then there was the armada of fluffy miniature poodles I was to call Bolognese – but can't believe is really their breed-name – who patrol the property like starlets in white fur coats, and bring an air of frivolity to the heavy peace by lounging improbably in holy receptacles or setting up a ferocious din if the thunder rolls in. Only the incongruous blister of a helipad landing circle in the very centre of the formal gardens hints that this is no longer a religious institution.

FOR THE PAST 20 YEARS the monastery has served as a kind of rehabilitation centre for young people. These 40 or so men and women are here of their own volition and will freely admit to the drug or alcohol crisis or personal difficulty which has led them to seek refuge in Mondo X, founded by the charismatic Padre Eligio. He restored this convent, and several others elsewhere in Italy, to provide a haven for those whose lives have fallen in on them and who need the restorative discipline of a community. They are not monks, although they live like monks; they are not serving out a sentence (their voluntary stay in Mondo X seemed to range from 18 days to 18 years); and they fill their days from sunrise to sunset with work. Some garden, some cook, some clean. There seems to be no hierarchy, little religion, but an enormously close atmosphere of

fellowship. Nobody raises their voice, nobody seems to stop. At any point in any day, if I wandered around the grounds, I would happen upon two or three of them tending to something: repairing a trellis, raking, scrubbing. They would greet me with a quiet 'Salve' and continue.

The restaurant, where the service is impeccable, seemed to have a waiter diner ratio of two or three to one, and at lunch, where I was frequently the only person eating, I would experience a quiet but constant eddy of attention – my napkin replaced, my wine decanted, my water refilled, my bread basket refreshed – with a minimum of fuss and an absolute absence of attitude. The first time I suggested that my bottle of Brunello might last me through dinner as well as lunch it was carefully removed and recorked, until my habits were anticipated and, after the ritual of preparing the bottle and rinsing my gigantic glass with a stain of wine, enough for a large mouthful would be offered to me and the bottle whisked away for further investigation in the evening.

Writing this, I am conscious of the possible inference that Mondo X might have more in common with Waco than a place to take a holiday, but nothing could be further from the truth. It is evident that the half-dozen guest rooms exist alongside the restaurant as a way of financing the community, but they are, nevertheless, comfortable and perfectly managed, and guests are free to use the place as a conventional hotel base for a touring holiday, as a retreat to work on the Inner Being or, as I did, simply to work.

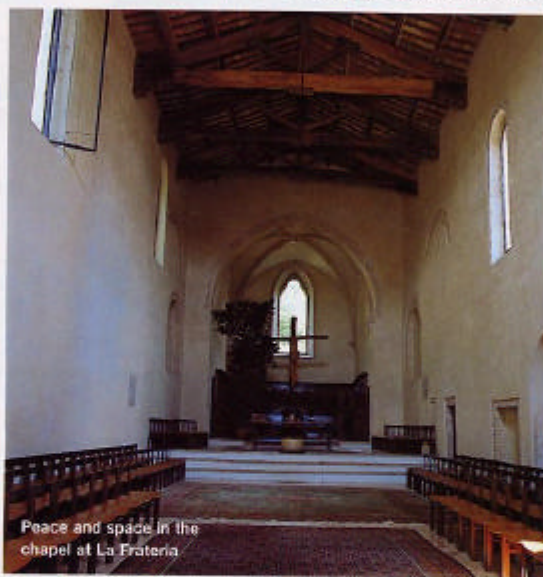
Continued in Traveller's Files, page 162



SOLE MAN

Continued from page 118

I'd come to the monastery to write. My screenplay of Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* needed radical revision. Her novel, set largely in Italy, follows the fortune of its eponymous American protagonist through a journey into purgatory, as he exchanges his own identity for that of the man he has murdered. Changing my own identity from film director to writer has involved increasingly extreme strategies. The contemplative rhythms of La Frateria worked perfectly, so dislocated was it from the other, public life of telephones, meetings and distractions. Conversation at the convent was also strictly limited to Italian which, for me, meant reducing discourse to the level of the most banal pleasantries. Somehow my metabolism also shut down as I took to my room, emerging only at mealtimes and for a swift circle around the grounds. I felt as though I was spending most of my time sleeping, and had surrendered myself to a trance in which, despite my own inertia, I was vicariously busy. I inhabited Tom Ripley taking an oar to Dickie Greenleaf's head; I felt my heavy body dragged down the stone steps of the Palazzo Borghese as Ripley disposes of Freddie Miles's corpse; I was Marge Sherwood abandoned in Mongibello. And more than that, I was submerged in Patricia Highsmith's world, in which the protagonists eat alone in



Peace and space in the chapel at La Frateria

logic was determined by the presence of a massive internal buttress and whose lintels were sufficiently low to ensure a daily and numbingly painful knock to the head), but mostly I write about the food. It's hard to say enough about the food in this place. The restaurant is as good as any I've ever encountered. Each time I sat down, vowing to resist the rosary of courses, protesting for a salad or the simplest of pastas, I would succumb to one tiny, perfect dish after another. Their names lacing my pages are a kind of poem to the monastery and its kitchen: *affettato del convento*; *terrina di fegato al miele e fichi*; *crema di cipolla in tortella*; *timballino d'orzo con olio extravergine*; *sfogliatetta di fichi*; *pisarei alla Piacentina*.

I have sometimes amused myself with a variation on *Desert Island Discs* that involves food – *Desert Island Dishes* – except that

this game requires recalling the eight meals I would most like to revisit. I think of Zen NW3 in Hampstead for the crispy fried duck; La Rosetta in Rome for its slivers of raw, marinated fish; the Lark Creek Inn in Marin, California, for its Sunday brunch; The Ivy in Covent Garden, London, for the comfort and the comfort-food menu; Matsuhisa in Los Angeles for sushi and black cod; Latte di Luna in Pienza for the thick coils of *picci* spaghetti and suckling pig – but if there was only one table allowed me, it would be on the terrace of La Frateria's restaurant. I could happily eat there for the rest of my life. Nothing is elaborate or grand or heavy, the menu changes daily, and there appears

THE NAMES OF ONE PERFECT DISH AFTER ANOTHER BEGAN TO LACE MY

restaurants and brood, solipsistic and becalmed in their dark waters, where table manners maketh the man and a poor choice of meal can condemn an unsuspecting guest to a vicious fate.

For hours I would study the walnut trees whose profusion of branches pushed at the windows of my room or, when moved by the intense and violent summer storms, scratched and slapped against the glass. After a soaking they would settle to the gymnastics of the team of squirrels who each morning would spring across their heavy leaves to stare at men while the mist rose away from the valley and filled my panoramic view with the glories of the Tuscan hills. I had breakfast on the terrace, always at the same hour, from an olivewood tray turned at the Frateria and filled with the garden's bounty – figs and jams – wonderful grana and pecorino cheeses, bread fresh from the medieval oven, and coffee like liquorice. A knock alerted me to its readiness, its provider invariably gone by the time I'd appeared.

My screenplay is punctuated with parenthetical entries recording my impressions of the monastery, snatches of conversation, a description of my spartanly pleasant room (whose

to be an infinite number of ways that its simple ingredients – vegetables, olive oil, garlic, herbs, rice, pastas, cheeses, fruit – can be rearranged in fresh, tantalising combinations. Most pleasures in life are best shared, of course, and it was at dinner that I most longed for company and would have dragged strangers in from the street to share my cauliflower timbale, or my corn soufflé or creamed onion in a tortella of weightless pastry, or to confirm that my *risotto al rosso di Montalcino*, the rice richly pinked by the Brunello, was the food of the gods.

'Ripley was going to have something luscious and expensive to eat, whatever the Grand Hotel's speciality was, breast of pheasant or petto di pollo, and perhaps cannelloni to begin with, creamy sauce over delicate pasta, and a good Valpolicella to sip while he dreamed about his future and planned where he went from there.'

Patricia Highsmith would have approved of La Frateria. Re-reading her novels there, I calculated that Martini was her favourite word. Her characters are forever ordering grappa and espresso, or standing at bars with a macchiato, their days defined by the tables