wise managed to thrive, or at least get by, for centuries. These towns, most of which are in the historically impoverished south, had already lost tens of millions of inhabitants in the great waves of migration from the late 19th century to the mid-1970s; in the past 25 years they've lost another 15 per cent. Now, houses and schools sit empty and fields fallow; shops are unattended.

These rural places were once intricately tied to the countryside around them, their inhabitants working as farmers and merchants, craftsmen and shepherds. But when these towns die, it's not just the population that suffers: so too do the unique traditions and skills associated with each place, as well as the landscape that supported them. This phenomenon is not unique to Italy, of course: small towns across the developed world are left behind as technologies and economies change, rendering the industries and the know-how that once sustained them obsolete, forcing their people to relocate to urban centres.

What is particular to Italy, however, is the exquisite architectural character of its hill towns, as well as the quality of the handiwork and traditions that were born, cultivated and perfected in them. These towns and their craftsmanship are what we think of when we think of Italy – as fundamental to the country's identity as its important cities and grand artistic legacies. It isn't far-fetched to say that what's at risk of being lost with their obsolescence is nothing less than Italy's rural soul.

These towns may represent the essence of Italian history and the country's artisanal tradition but the government has done little to help preserve them, aside from declaring 2017 "The Year of the Villages" in the hope of boosting tourism. It has therefore fallen to locals – citizens and mayors – to try to change their fates, often through inventive methods that mingle humour with a deep sorrow and desperation. One picturesque medieval hamlet in Tuscany, Prataricciа, sold itself on eBay for $3.1 million several years ago. Another, Calsazio, tried to follow, offering itself for only $333,000, listing the item's condition as "used". In Calabria, the mayor of Sellia (population 530) signed a decree banning death and illness in his town, and recently opened an adventure park with a giant zip line he thought would lure visitors. Most recently, the mayor of Bormida in Liguria floated a provisional offer on his Facebook page: $2100 to anyone who moved there in order to keep it populated. (There was so much interest that he had to delete the post.)

And then there are towns such as Civita di Bagnoregio. Like so many of the others, it has been preserved by the very forces that doomed it: poverty and abandonment. Unlike the others, however, Civita was saved by having been "discovered" over the past 20 or so years by fashionable Romans and expats, who have turned its fine buildings into holiday homes, drawn by the romance of Civita's remarkable situation – and its proximity to Rome. The restoration of the entire town is eerily pristine; there's nary a yellowing leaf on the potted geraniums and colourful hydrangeas that grace the exterior of every perfectly renovated house.

Civita has also become a tourist destination for day trippers, who arrive by the busload and pay a small fee to enter. Sometimes up to 5000 people a day wander about the town, which at its seasonal height sleeps only about 100. The effect of all these people – selfie sticks moving through the air like antennae – gives the place the unfortunate air of a Disney set: a hyper-clean, historically accurate medieval town as realised on a Universal Studios back lot. There is nothing to mar the scene – no pizzerias or Starbucks or even cars. And just as one starts to wonder what kind of town has no school, banks or offices, dusk starts to fall, and the tourists and the heat of the day retreat. Things go quiet, the light glows pink and the "locals", many from Rome and the US, start to appear – there are drinks on terraces and quiet dinners in the side streets, conversations in private gardens among neighbours and friends who all love and care for this enchanted, imperilled piece of history.

Enchanted: from top, Civita di Bagnoregio; migrants in Riace; Sellia in Calabria

The farther one gets from major cities such as Florence or Rome, however, the more difficult it is to attract weekend tourists. Deep in Sicily, off a terrible road whose signs resignedly warn of potholes, lies the isolated town of Sutera, built at the base of a steep mountain. In 2013, at the behest of its mayor, the town opened its doors – and its empty houses – to survivors of the catastrophic shipwreck off the island of Lampedusa that killed more than 360 refugees. Sutera's population had dwindled from 5000 in 1970 to just 1500, and the mayor recognised the humanitarian and economic opportunity that the refugees – most of whom were from sub-Saharan Africa – could provide for his moribund town. To help them integrate into the community they were paired with local families and required to take Italian lessons, given to them by the town's citizens. (The European Union provides funding for food, clothing and housing, which can spur the creation of jobs for migrants and locals.)

Initially, there was some resistance, but that has disappeared with the energy these newcomers have brought to the area. Today, one can find young Nigerians taking their morning espresso alongside the old men, and local children kicking soccer balls in the street with their new playmates. And each summer the town