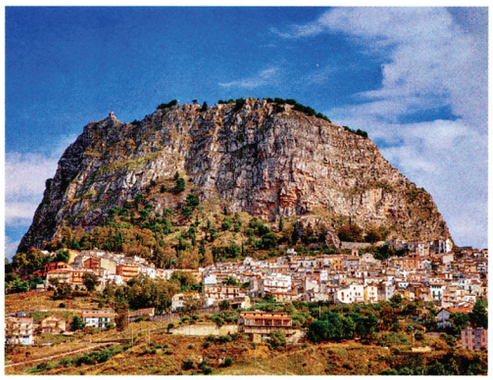
hosts a day-long festival featuring the traditional food, music and dance of the immigrants.

One of the first towns to invite migrants into its walls was Riace in Calabria, whose mayor Domenico Lucano was named one of *Fortune*'s "World's 50 Greatest Leaders" last year. By 1998, when it took in a group of Kurdish refugees, Riace's population had fallen to around 800 from 2500 after World War II. Today, its population is 1500, with migrants from more than 20 countries. Some of these are apprentice artisans, learning old skills such as embroidery, glass mosaic and pottery that were themselves dying out, and so helping keep Italian culture alive. Lucano told the BBC: "The multiculturalism, the variety of skills and personal stories which people have brought to Riace have revolutionised what was becoming a ghost town." Other towns have taken Riace's lead, too: acts of humanity that have become acts of self-preservation as well.

Unlike urban centres, hill towns were built to be connected to the countryside, which provided each its particular *raison d'être*, from subsistence to commerce. Even physically, the towns appear like natural outcroppings, terraced along the sides of hills, as if sprouting from the earth.

In the region of Abruzzo, surrounded by the high peaks of the Apennines, the stunning fortified medieval hilltop village of Santo Stefano di Sessanio sits atop a ridge overlooking a dramatic and lush plateau. Once a bustling centre of agriculture and wool production, it began to shrink when the Italian wool industry went into decline, crippled by competition from abroad. By the 1990s it had only about 100 full-time residents. The ancient hill town is just two hours from Rome and surrounded by countryside that resembles the Austrian hills of *The Sound of Music*: fields of wildflowers backed by snowcapped mountains. It is a sublime place for hiking or cycling in summer, and skiing or snowshoeing in winter. And yet Abruzzo, long considered poor and backward, has never been particularly loved by Italians and is consequently not much considered or known.

Santo Stefano di Sessanio came as a shock, a revelation really, to Daniele Kihlgren, the renegade scion of an Italian concrete fortune, when he came upon it while on a motorcycle ride in the late 1990s. Although semi-abandoned, its medieval character and architecture were completely intact – unruined, ironically, by concrete, the material Kihlgren is the first to acknowledge has disgraced so much of Italy. How, he wondered, might places of such distinct and exquisite beauty be revitalised without wrecking their historic identity? And how might their local traditions, from food to domestic handicrafts, be organically preserved? "We can't compete with China in mass production, and we can't compete in technology," Kihlgren says, "but we have what no one else in the world has," which is the beauty of these villages and the cultural history of its people, the stuff he calls Italy's minor patrimony. "And if we don't ruin it, it can be what saves southern Italy."



New blood: from top, Sutera, Sicily; a room in Sextantio; Santo Stefano di Sessanio

Kihlgren began buying up many of the empty buildings, perhaps a quarter of the town, and proceeded to create one of the most novel forms of hospitality anywhere, an *albergo diffuso* (scattered hotel) called Sextantio. The "rooms" of the hotel are in ancient buildings all over town, and are served by one central reception area, allowing guests to be immersed in the community. Just as important, it is invisible, respecting the historic shape of the town and its architectural integrity.

Kihlgren also recognised Santo Stefano as part of a delicate ecosystem in which the town, the people, its cultural production and the countryside are inextricable from one another; as one falters or languishes, so too do the others. He realised that if he wanted traditional Abruzzo loom-woven wool blankets for his 60 beds, that meant he needed artisans to weave them, which required yarn to be spun, which implied sheep, which need shepherds, and farmland, and farmers. And so it proceeds from the building materials used, to the construction techniques employed, to the ingredients and recipes served in the hotel's restaurant down to the ceramic dishes they're served on. This cycle, which connects land to people, is what keeps Santo Stefano from becoming a chic version of Colonial Williamsburg, a living history museum town in Virginia, US.

It is also what has helped revive it. Thanks largely to Sextantio, there are now new jobs, thousands of tourists annually, nearly two dozen new B&Bs and several restaurants, galleries and shops. But Kihlgren has sunk his fortune into this project – as well as into other villages that he has bought, either outright or partially, with the intention of resurrecting them using the same model. While his is primarily a cultural project, he is keenly aware that unless it can make money and be replicated, it is just a folly in his grand quest to resuscitate southern Italy. And indeed, there have been many difficulties and setbacks – from his own high standards to the devastating earthquake that rocked the region in 2009. This past July marked the first month since the project's inception in which he made a profit.

Still, Kihlgren remains optimistic – and how can anyone who loves Italy not pray for his success? "If I, someone with no business skills at all, can make this work," he says, "then there is hope – hope that the values contained in these small historical places can be the engine to revitalise them." ●