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ITALIAN MASTERS

Behind the walls of Claire and Fraser Simpson's farmhouse
in Puglia lies a haven of classic design and modern style

WORDS FAITH BRADBURY | PHOTOGRAPHS MARK BOLTON

EXTERIOR

Typical of any Italian fortified farmhouse (or masseria), the living quarters and courtyard are protected by high walls.

Bespoke masseria.

Landscape Properties,
07825 717758,
dreamhomesinpuglia.com.

Deauville chairs, from
£353 each, Lloyd Loom
at Vincent Sheppard,
00323 646 1114,
vincent-sheppard.com.

KITCHEN

The rustic kitchen is used mostly in the colder months; from April to late October, Claire and Fraser cook and eat beside the pool.

Similar pendant shade, Black Ceiling Pendant, £150, Graham and Green, 0845 130 6622, grahamandgreen.co.uk.



SITTING AREA

Claire has used large-scale, defined shapes and a symmetrical layout to make this tall, narrow space feel comfortable and composed.

Saville two-seater sofas, £1,350 each, Oka, 0844 815 7380, okadirect.com

Francesco lamps, price on application, Fancy Home Collection, info@fancyhome

collection.com, fancyhome

collection.com **Interior design consultancy**, Claire Simpson,

0039 334 506 7397,

masseriainpuglia.com





MAIN BEDROOM

Full-length curtains take the place of traditional shutters to give the bedroom a softer, more relaxed feel.

Free-standing bath.
£2,800, Sunbury Antiques,
01932 230946,
kemptonantiques.com.

Eden four-poster bed.
€1,864, Luz Interiors,
0032 2 334 1545,
luz-interiors.com.

Italy has always been Claire and Fraser Simpson's first choice for a holiday. In fact, they love the country so much that they married in Florence four years ago. Having lived and worked in London for many years, the pair felt they had reached saturation point and decided that a return to Italy was in order.

While browsing for holiday properties, Claire spotted an advert for a company that builds modern *masserie* (traditional fortified farmhouses) in Puglia. They had no knowledge of the area, but a friend recommended it and

the idea of a holiday soon changed shape in Claire's mind to become something altogether more permanent. "We flew to Puglia, met with the developer and, on seeing our first *masseria*, instantly fell in love with the architecture.

"Within forty-eight hours, we had chosen a beautiful olive grove with four-hundred-year-old trees spread out across five acres on which to construct our very own build," says Claire.

Masserie are vast, walled dwellings that surround a courtyard but original examples are hard to find and costly to renovate. Claire,

GUEST BEDROOM

Claire could not resist using blue linen accessories to give this room a vibrant splash of Mediterranean spirit.

Throw in vintage hand-dyed linen, from £35m. **Old Rose print indigo bolster**, £80. **Old Rose print indigo rectangular cushion**, £75, all Beyond France, 01285 641867, beyondfrance.co.uk.





POOL

Claire had the large-scale planters made to accommodate the mature lemon trees she wanted.

Bespoke planters

Woodesign, 0039 836 586125, wddarredi.com.

who is an interior designer, was attracted to these new-build *masserie* because they are scaled down to suit modern lifestyles and budgets, and there is a bespoke element so that clients can adapt plans to suit their needs.

One aspect they were keen to change was the fact that every room opened out on to the courtyard. "That's a fabulous way to live in the summer, but not so much in the winter. Flow of space was our priority," says Claire. "We wanted some connecting corridors so we could move from one room to another, especially as we wanted to live here all year round and didn't want to walk outside to reach a different room."

The compromise is a covered cloister linking the living space to the bedrooms. "It feels a little strange going outside in your nightdress when

you want to go to bed, but when you've lived here for a while, it becomes completely natural."

The central part of the house is a cavernous long space with a high vaulted ceiling that incorporates a kitchen and dining area, seating area and study. "As much as I like open-plan living, I'm a fan of creating sectioned-off areas," says Claire. To achieve this, she has used four huge, identical lamps and two high-backed sofas to divide the space.

During the ten months in which their *masseria* was built, Claire and Fraser, who works in the City, made six trips back to Puglia to source or approve the materials. "As an interior designer, I regard this project as my finest to date, given the challenges we had to face: the architecture; the scale and materials of the building;



the climatic changes; and the language and cultural differences, which really put our abilities to the test," says Claire.

Surrounded by so many hard raw materials Claire was anxious about the *masseria* feeling cold in winter, but she need not have been. "It's incredibly cosy. We have underfloor heating and the fireplace is enormous." The hard materials also dictated Claire's colour scheme for the rooms. "All I had to do was to pick out the colours you find in the stone: olive greens, greys, taupe and off-white."

Despite the fact that the *masseria* is a new build, you would never know, as the *pietra*

leccese stone is ageing well. But are the owners equally settled? "It has brought us out of our comfort zone," says Claire, who is struggling with not only a new language, but also with the dialects that change from one village to the next in this remote corner of Puglia.

The birth of their first child, Chloe, in early June means life in this very rural community with virtually no ex-pats nearby is going to change. "The *masseria* is very child-friendly, with no stairs to worry about and plenty of outdoor space, but whether the Italian way of life with children fulfils us remains to be seen," says Claire. "That will be the next challenge." ■



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