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HOMES

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The unique luxury farmhouse concept by Essentis is drawing homeowners to the Puglia region in Italy

THE PUGLIA MASSERIE

Singapore-based couple Giles Parry and Jenny Tan explains why it's a great idea to get a traditional Italian farmhouse home if you want to get away from the hectic and fast-paced living here

BY GIOVANNA DUNMALL PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF ESSENTIS

The homes in this development are designed to be luxuriously appointed and with traditional architectural elements



Plenty of outdoor spaces offer ideal spots for home entertaining

Located in the heel of Italy's picturesque boot, Puglia may lack the cachet or sophistication of well known regions, such as Tuscany or Umbria, but its star is firmly in the ascendant. It isn't hard to see why. It has mesmerising historic towns, endless stretches of centuries-old olive groves and jaw-droppingly beautiful coastline, good-value authentic restaurants and hotels, and a population that is welcoming and unjaded in a way the classic overrun Italian tourist cities of Florence, Venice and Rome can only dream of.

Dotted around this relatively unspoiled landscape are thousands of masserie, large traditional courtyard farmhouses that have existed since the 14th century. At first they were simple structures fortified against invaders but their forms evolved as the need for security dwindled.

Though many developers are renovating beautiful existing masserie and trulli (the distinctive stone houses with cone-shaped roofs) for Italians and foreigners to snap up, one company is doing things differently. Essentis

Francesco Carlucci estimates there are only 100 stonemasons left in the region who can work by hand in the traditional way.

builds the old courtyard farmhouses from scratch using the local stone and age-old building techniques, shapes and forms but adding a whole layer of extra finishes, mod-cons and technologies that bring these dwellings firmly into the contemporary and luxe categories.

This niche boutique masseria company, founded in 2007 and based in London and Puglia, prides itself on reviving the dying craft of stonemasonry. Francesco Carlucci, one of the company's founders, estimates there are only 100 stonemasons left in the region who can work by hand in the traditional way. As he points to the typical star- and barrel-shaped vaulted ceilings of a masseria his company currently has under construction in the region, he explains that each piece



The simplicity of the homes' designs help to keep the focus on the uniqueness of the architecture



Wide corridors serve to connect the rooms in the home seamlessly



The farmhouse home comes complete with its own olive crop



Homely and earthy colours set the scene for relaxation



The homeowners are encouraged to indulge in the traditional Italian way of life here

of pietra leccese (a soft, sand-coloured local limestone) and tufo (sandstone) is cut by hand and placed at a specific angle so that the ceilings can stay in place without the use of mortar.

It's remarkable and somewhat awe-inspiring and goes a long way towards explaining why Carlucci decided to set up an informal Stonemasons Academy that recruits and trains stonemasons from local villages. So far about 40 young apprentices have passed through the Academy and Essentis plans to keep training more.

Though Carlucci has a genuine and palpable love of the local stone and craft – he points to the alluring fossils in the stone as we walk about – he admits that giving back has also been an astute entrepreneurial move. “The Stonemasons

Academy is really the reason for our success,” he says at one point.

Just as the masserie evolved through history, Essentis is making ever more sophisticated structures. They still have the thick walls, occasional towers and vaulted ceilings of their centuries-old predecessors but the newest ones the company is building have indoor pools, elaborate landscaping and water features, integrated sustainable technologies such as geothermal and PV panels, premium finishes and are kitted out with furniture entirely made by hand by local carpenters. Carlucci likes to use the analogy of building a Ferrari. “But it's more than a Ferrari because it is going to be only for you,” he says with feeling. “And we'll never build another one that is identical.”

A vaulted ceiling is accented by large marble tiles



The symmetry in the home's design offers a visual grounding to the space



The kitchen space is equipped with state-of-art appliances



Parry's masseria, like most of the others Essentis builds, is in the southern Salento region of Puglia

Singapore-based stockbroker Giles Parry and his fund manager wife Jenny Tan were one of the first people to have a masseria built by Francesco and his team in 2008. The pair had been on holiday in the area and liked what they saw. "It's unlike anywhere else in Italy in terms of the surrounding countryside and the fact that the region is still very Italian and not over-run or spoilt by lots of foreign tourists," explains Parry. "It is also very good value for money."

Parry's masseria, like most of the others Essentis builds, is in the southern Salento region of Puglia and surrounded by olive trees that have been there for centuries and are in some cases and so gracefully twisted and bent that they seem to "have different characteristics and personalities". The renowned beaches, lakes and pine

forests of Alimini are a 10-minute drive away he says, and the towns of Otranto and Lecce (a prime example of southern Baroque) about half an hour in each direction. "Lecce gets better every single year we go down," he declares. "It's seriously buzzy."

Essentis also has plots for sale near Manduria on the opposite coast overlooking the Ionian sea, where the masseries have vineyards as well as olive groves and often a sea view. Remarkably, given how hard it can be to buy property abroad, no more than 18 months usually pass from when a client chooses a plot to when they move in says Carlucci. "This is almost a miracle for Italy," he laughs.

Apart from the unique design and setting, Parry says the fact that the company looks after the property when



The cosy interiors of the master bedroom



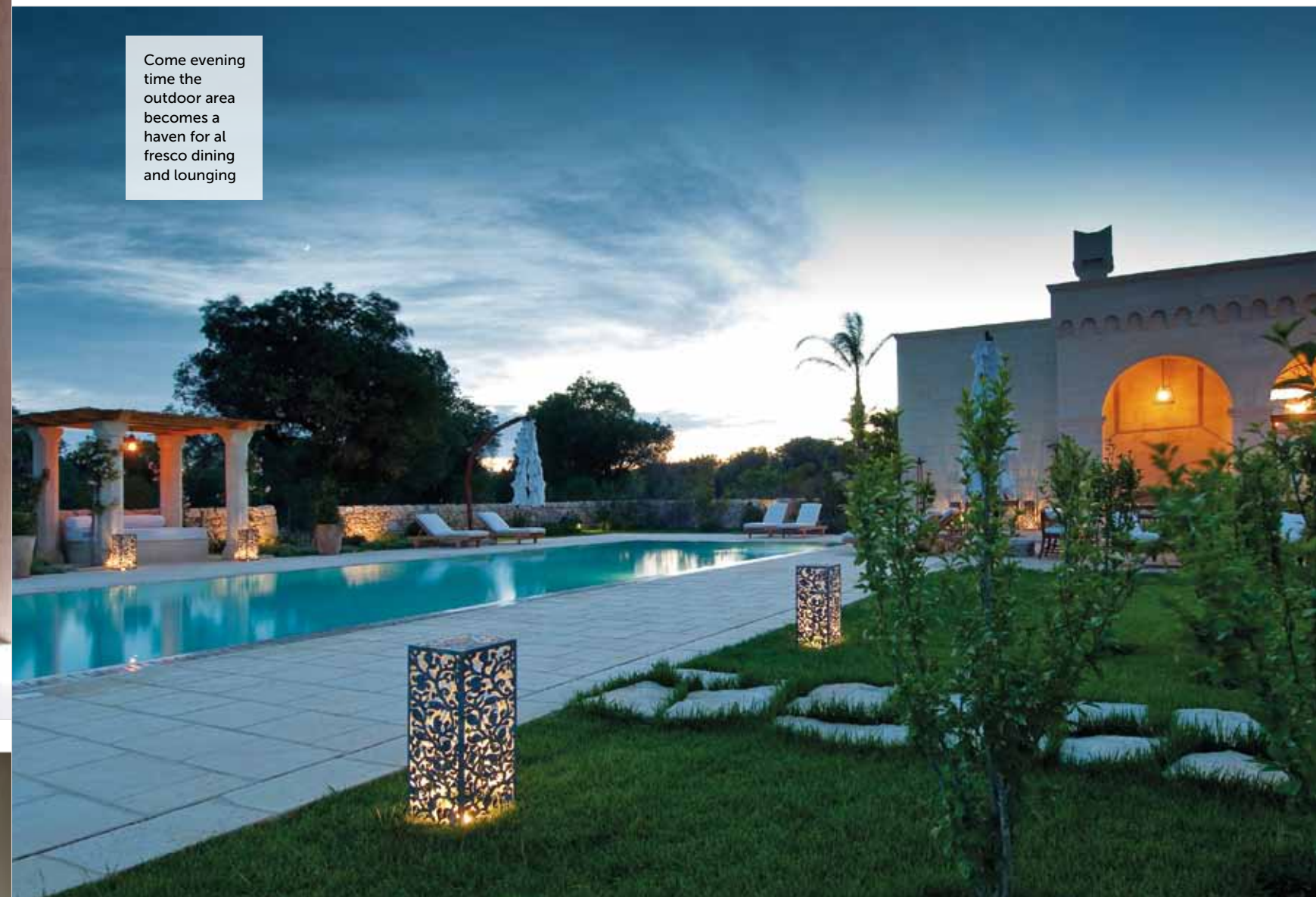
A sink carved out of natural marble in the master bathroom



Most rooms in the home overlook scenic views of the lush greenery



Large windows allow plenty of natural light to fill the home in the day



Come evening time the outdoor area becomes a haven for al fresco dining and lounging

he and his family are away was “a crucial and decisive factor” in buying through them. In fact, for a management fee of €1,500 - €3,000 euros a month, Essentis will maintain the grounds and buildings, tend to fruit orchards and vegetable gardens, harvest the olives (clients get a percentage of the olive oil made from them), clean the pools and check on the property. “Clients spending millions would never ever build a property like this if they don’t have that service,” says Carlucci.

Parry says he wouldn’t have known where to start if he were buying in Italy on his own. “The big advantage with Essentis is that they do everything for you, and advise on the legal process and all that stuff.” In general however, he recommends spending some time in the area first, and making sure that any contract clearly states that, “land ownership rights are yours and can’t be meddled with later on”. And be

prepared to pay in cash. “It is quite hard to get a bank loan down there,” he says.

Though Parry doesn’t rent his property out, some of Essentis’ clients do and rates start at €5,000 per week for the smaller masserie in high season and go up to €12,500 a week for the larger ones. Carlucci has noticed a trend for clients to rent out their homes for three or four weeks a year, just enough to cover their running costs. Some rent for up to 28 weeks a year however, and make a tidy return. “If they can rent their masseria out 15 weeks a year they make back about 7.5 per cent net of what the house cost,” estimates Carlucci.

For now, Parry and his wife are content to keep their holiday home a private getaway for when they need to get away from the hustle and bustle in Singapore. “The scenery here is near perfect, and helps you forget all the worries one usually has when living in a city.” he says. **H**

THE BRIEF

Location:
Puglia, Italy
Property: 5 acres
Built-up area:
3,230 sq ft
Residents: 2
Developer:
Essentis Properties
Time Taken:
12 months