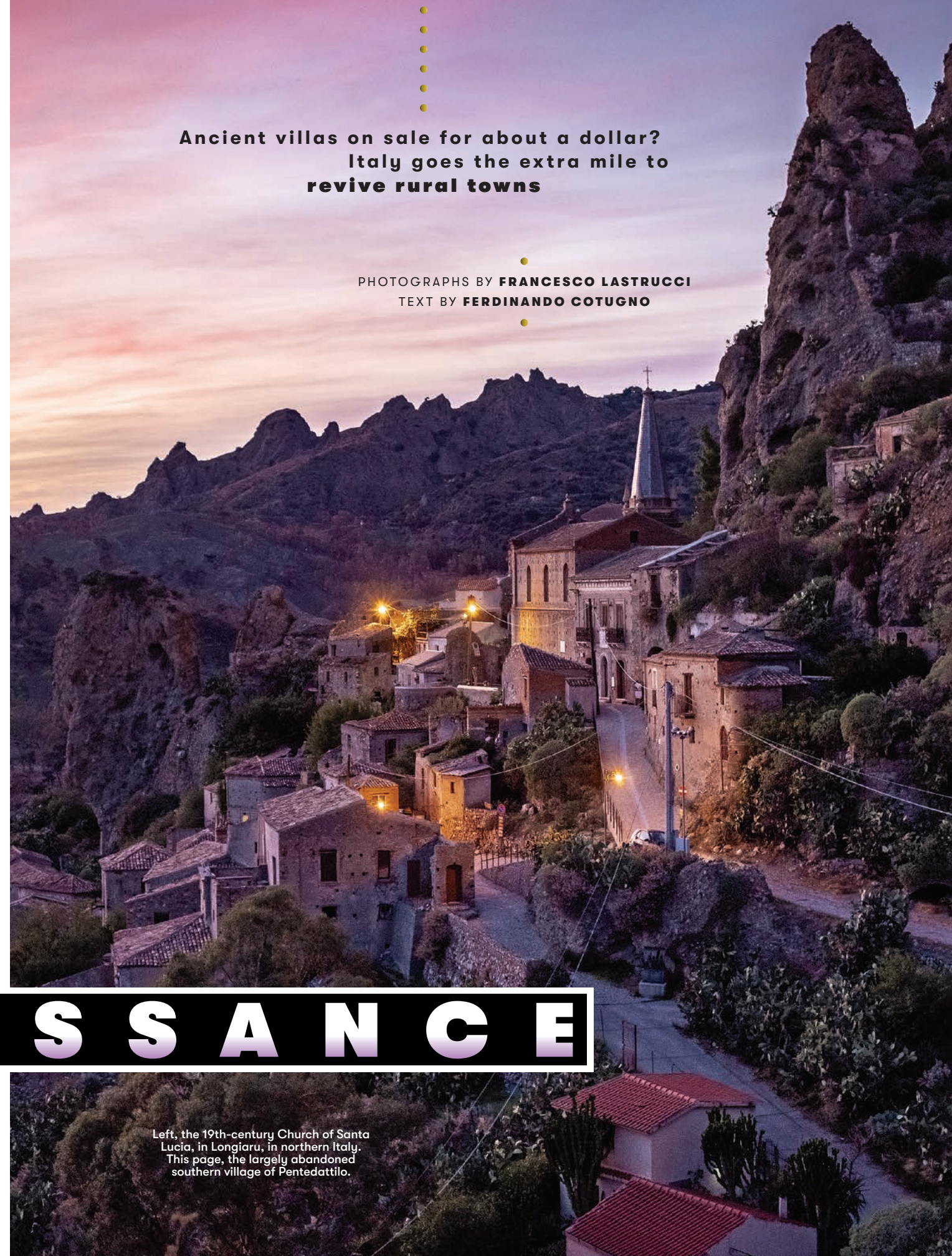




ITALIAN RENAISSANCE



Ancient villas on sale for about a dollar?
Italy goes the extra mile to
revive rural towns

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Left, the 19th-century Church of Santa Lucia, in Longiaru, in northern Italy. This page, the largely abandoned southern village of Pentedattilo.

The world tends to think of Italy

as the modern inheritor of ancient Rome, the national home of pizza, espresso and Leonardo da Vinci. But long before it was a unified nation, the boot-shaped peninsula was a loose collection of towns and villages, *borghi* in Italian, with wildly varied architecture, topography and cultural histories. In picturesque towns in the north, Italian is often the third language spoken after German and Ladin, a surviving Latin dialect with roots in the Roman conquest of the Alps. The central region of Abruzzo has a medieval village that made the Medici family a fortune in the wool trade (they raised their sheep there) and another with a church built on the ruins of a Roman-era Temple of Jupiter.

Until the 20th century, most Italians lived in such rural hamlets, which were often rich in history and natural beauty but short on economic opportunity and social services. When industrialization drove massive migration to the cities, thousands of *borghi* were left behind. Populations plummeted. Whole towns fell into disrepair or worse, further pummeled by floods, earthquakes, landslides and wildfires. Today, more than 5,000 *borghi* are considered at risk of depopulation, according to Anci, the National Association of Italian Municipalities, with some 2,000 on the brink of total abandonment—of becoming ghost towns.

In recent years, though, artists, agrarian dreamers and entrepreneurs have started driving a return to Italy's neglected rural villages. New eco-tourism ventures draw visitors and new transplants to remote locales. Crowdfunded cooperatives help newcomers open grocery stores, arts centers, co-working spaces, a pizzeria. In 61 towns across the country, local governments will even sell you a house for €1—you don't have to be Italian, but you often have to prove you have plans to restore it.

This highly publicized initiative has its charms, but the results so far have been surprisingly modest given contemporary enthusiasm for remodeling. The town of Gangi, in Sicily, is considered an exemplary success, yet only 13 such houses have sold since the program began in 2009, a rate of just one a year.

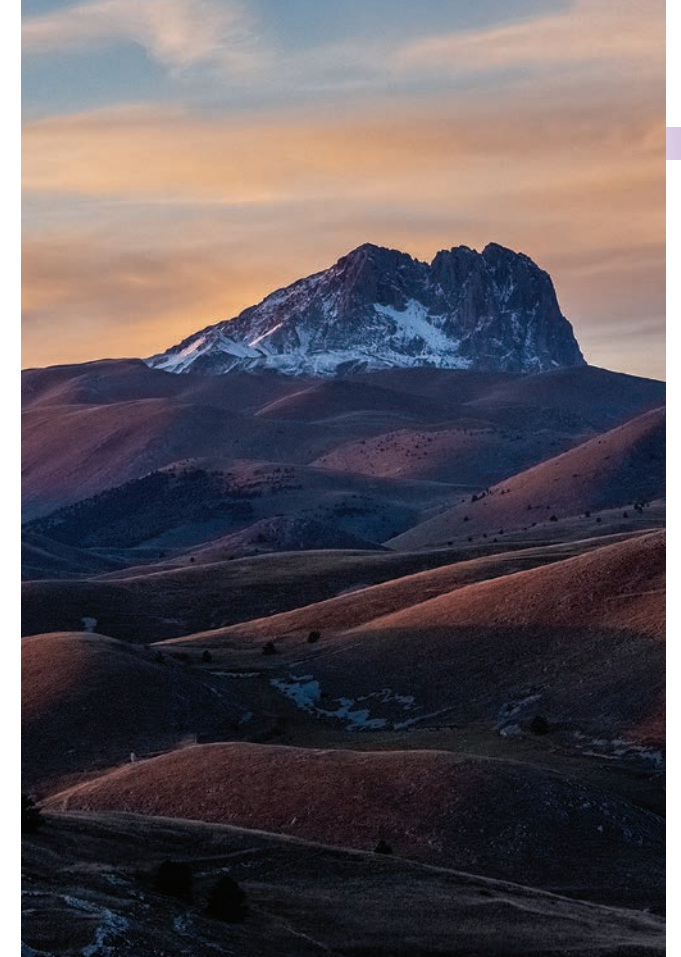
Still, a recent opinion poll found that the winds are shifting:

Two-thirds of people under 39 living in Italy's *borghi* say they hope to remain there, suggesting the reversal of a trend going back 70 or so years. Not long ago, the Calabrian village of Pentedattilo, originally a seventh-century B.C. Greek colony, saw the arrival of its first new resident in nearly 40 years: Makandjan Thunkara, a young refugee from Mali, who is working with the town's only other resident, Rossella Aquilanti, a former postwoman, to restore an abandoned farm.

They are rarely without the help of a rotating cast of young people who come to stay and work the land and look after the pigs and goats. "We make cheese and bread, we have a vegetable garden," Aquilanti says. "The only thing we have to buy is wine."



The Church of Santa Maria della Pietà, dating to the 16th century, in the Apennine Mountains.



Santo Stefano di Sessanio, Abruzzo • THE FORTIFIED MEDIEVAL VILLAGE

was once the Medici family's base for raising sheep whose wool, sold in Florence, helped to make the family rich. The wool trade remains an important local industry, but the town is equally famous for its lentils, which have been farmed here since A.D. 1000 and are known for their intense flavor, attributed to the altitude. Still, Santo Stefano has lost a large proportion of its population and today is home to only 60 permanent residents. Top right, Corno Grande, at 9,554 feet the highest peak in the Apennines. Right, dyed wool in the shop of Valeria Gallese, just off the town's main square.



Pentedattilo, Calabria • **FOUNDED BY GREEKS** in the seventh century B.C., the town is famous for a 17th-century blood feud between aristocrats. In the 1960s, poverty and devastating flooding led to abandonment, but the arrival of Rossella Aquilanti, a former postwoman, sparked a modest revival. Left, a vacant house, with Mount Etna in the background. Above, volunteers harvest almonds on Aquilanti's farm. Below left, Makandjan Thunkara; he and Aquilanti are the town's only permanent residents. Below right, prickly pears ripening in October.





ostana, Piedmont • **NOT FAR FROM THE FRENCH BORDER**, in the western Alps, Ostana lost waves of residents to industrial jobs in nearby Turin in the 1950s and '60s. Recently, it has lured new residents with a civic cooperative that built a co-working space and a children's library and organizes artists' residencies. Below, Roberto Miretto, a former truck driver who arrived in Ostana by chance while making a delivery. "It was love at first sight," he says. "I knew I wanted to live here for the rest of my life." Today he runs an agriturismo, a combined restaurant, bed-and-breakfast and farmhouse where he breeds cashmere goats.



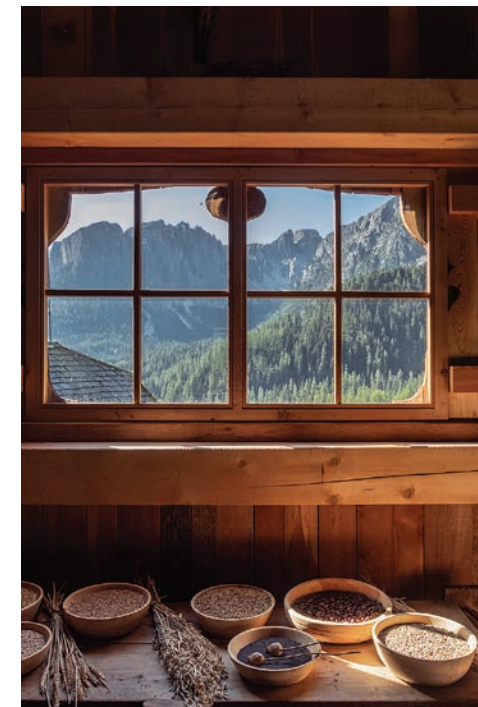


Fontecchio, Abruzzo • **AFTER A MAJOR EARTHQUAKE IN 2009**, half of the town's homes were condemned as unsafe. Today, though, Fontecchio is buzzing with construction and activity, and has become a hub for international artists. Above, workers restore a medieval palace. Below left, a fresco adorns the exterior of a damaged house; below right, a cracked ceiling in the home of Valeria Pica, a Naples-born art historian who relocated to restore her ancestral property. Right, a 14th-century fountain, long a social gathering place, in the Piazza del Popolo.





Longiaru, Trentino-Alto Adige • **NESTLED IN THE DOLOMITES**, the village has retained a small but steady community of Ladin heritage. In the past, residents farmed wheat and barley but now rely on dairy production and sustainable tourism, which is closely regulated. “Tourism is good,” says Christoph Alfreider, a mountain guide, “but it cannot become a monoculture, otherwise it would kill the land we live on.” A young resident named Neomi Clara considered moving away—“a fleeting thought,” she says now.



BYLINES

Photographer **Francesco Lastrucci's** last assignment for *Smithsonian* took him to Naples' best pizzerias.

Ferdinando Cotugno, a Milan-based journalist, writes for *GQ*, *Vanity Fair*, *Domani* and *L'Espresso*.



Vaccarizzo di Montalto, Calabria • **“THROUGH THE YEARS** we lost everything,” Roberta Caruso says of her long impoverished hometown. “Even the post office shut down.” But in 2019, architects and entrepreneurs affiliated with MIT launched a program to revive the village, renovating buildings, blazing hiking trails and opening an artisanal food shop. Above, a carpenter restores old movie theater seats. Below, a city-dweller, home for the weekend, gives his father a haircut. Right, the 13th-century Church of San Rocco.





Gangi, Sicily • **BUILT ON THE SLOPING CREST** of Mount Marone, 50 miles southeast of Palermo, the town was settled in the Roman era, if not before. In 2014, it was one of the first in Italy to sell abandoned houses for €1, a program that here, at least, has been relatively successful. Left, the view from a piazza near Corso Fedele Vitale, overlooking a neighborhood where most of the discounted homes were located. Above, children play soccer on the terrace of the Duomo di San Nicola di Bari. Below, 19th-century frescoes inside the Church of San Cataldo. ♦

