

HOME

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OF THE
YEAR

A TASTE OF HEAVEN

The Umbrian holiday home that comes with its own abbey — even Pacino is lining up to rent it

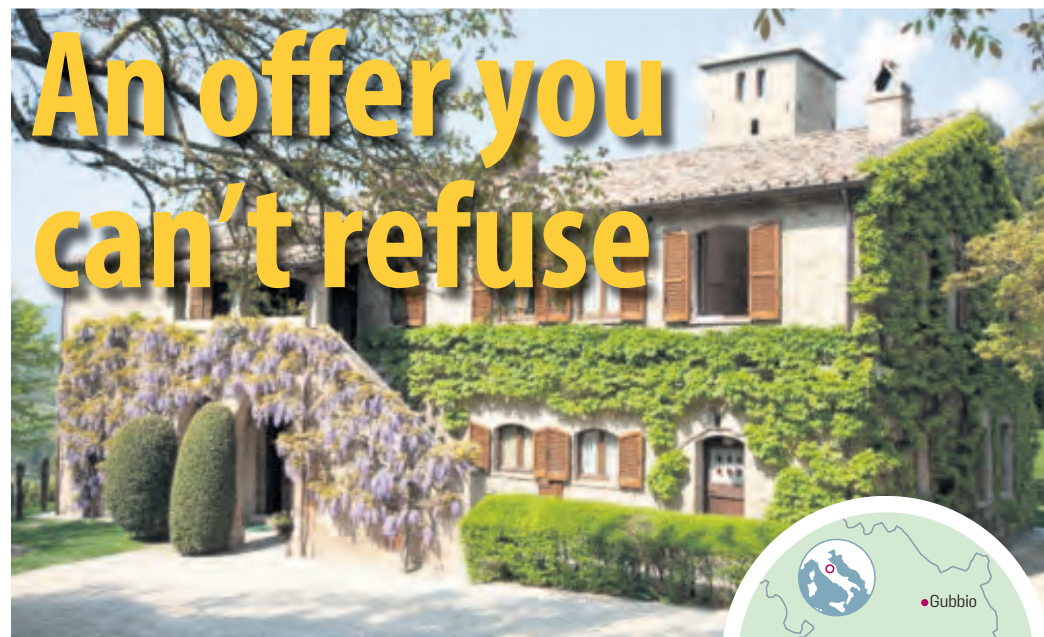
At £10,000-plus a week, it's not cheap, but this Umbrian rental might be hosting Al Pacino.

By **Alexandra Goss**

The sales patter for most Umbrian holiday homes is yawningly predictable. It routinely involves a beautifully restored, centuries-old farmhouse clad in a cloak of wisteria, set in an idyllic rural location surrounded by cypresses and vines. Inevitably, one can soak up the panoramic views of the rolling countryside from the sun-drenched terrace, or cool off in the crystal waters of an outdoor swimming pool.

Abbadia Celestina, set in a secluded valley close to Perugia and Assisi, has all this. But it might just be the only rental villa in the world to include the majestic ruins of an 11th-century abbey. Surrounded by more than 50 well-tended acres — 25 of which are private woods offering fertile hunting ground for truffles — there's also a six-hole golf course, a vineyard, all-weather tennis court, croquet lawns and, somewhat incongruously, a Japanese-inspired garden, with olive trees pruned into bonsai shapes, and two ponds, under the surface of which lurk hundreds of thousands of pounds' worth of prizewinning koi carp.

The estate is owned by Graham Smith-Bernal, a good-humoured bon viveur who made his fortune through the most unlikely of channels: court transcriptions. The Slough-born former stenographer sold his first transcription business, Smith-Bernal, in 1997, netting £5m after tax. His second company was LiveNote, which allows lawyers and judges to



Kelly O'Connell/Getty



annotate testimony in real time and was used to manage the evidence in the Saville Inquiry into Bloody Sunday, as well as by the defence team in the OJ Simpson trial in America. Smith-Bernal, 56, offloaded the software to Thomson Reuters for "north of \$70m" (£40m) in 2006.

So what is a transcription tycoon to do with all that spare cash? Plough it into a holiday pad, naturally. Smith-Bernal and his wife, Marcela, who live in Esher, Surrey, came across Abbadia Celestina by chance more than a decade ago. It was owned by an Englishman, Guy



Norton, and his wife, who had bought it in 1969 as a crumbling, abandoned wreck.

Norton spent years restoring the grounds and the abbey, reinstating the top of the tower and adding an open-air stage that can accommodate 300, which today is surrounded by a tangle of fragrant wild



The accommodation at Abbadia Celestina is in a traditional Umbrian stone farmhouse, below.

The grounds, boasting a diving pool, pagoda and Japanese gardens, are more surprising. Above, Perugia

St Francis — and Kenneth Branagh — have both paid a visit to Abbadia Celestina

rosemary and thyme. He also overhauled the six-bedroom main house, leaving a legacy of more than 3,000 books, all neatly catalogued, as well as his Japanese garden.

The estate orbits round the abbey, which, by day, offers breathtaking vistas of verdant countryside from the top windows. By night, it is hauntingly spectacular. At dusk, the steep, winding pathway from the house to the abbey is ablaze with dozens of flaming torches. The small chapel

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The golf course, gardens and rustic interiors of the farmhouse. Right, the restored tower, all that remains of the 11th-century abbey

at the tower's base, which has stained-glass windows depicting the Virgin Mary and pews modelled on those in the Basilica of St Francis in Assisi, is illuminated by a soft bulb and flickering candles.

St Francis is known to have visited the abbey, which was built in 1064 on the site of a former Etruscan settlement, at least twice while travelling between Assisi and Gubbio; in 1983, the actor Kenneth Branagh stayed here to prepare for his role as the animal-loving paragon on the London stage.

During Norton's tenure, the British School of Archaeology spent four years excavating the Abbazia's ruins, uncovering Etruscan artefacts as well as a 1313 painting of the Madonna and Child, which now hangs in the National Gallery of Umbria in Perugia. On one of the tumbledown walls branching out from the tower, the headstone of one of the abbots bears the papal seal. The chapel was an addition by Smith-Bernal and Marcela, created out of an old storeroom. Although not consecrated, it is visited by a local English priest for private blessings and readings.

"The Abbazia is the site of so much history — under the Judas tree at one end you can see a burial site containing skeletons," Smith-Bernal says. "The redstone brick of the buttresses is completely different from the rest of the abbey. On one of them is carved the date 1640, as these were added after a severe earthquake brought down the top of the tower. We added a

strut to one wall of the abbey on the advice of a structural engineer — it is symbolic of the young supporting the old, which we are doing here."

Smith-Bernal is clearly enthralled by his unique second home, which he bought in the summer of 2003. "It was on the market for £2m and we got it for £1.8m — although we were able to pay that over a period of five years. People have offered us £20m for it, but it's not about the monetary value for us. We use it for family holidays and reunions, and also for client entertaining and teambuilding sessions for the staff."

Though he had planned to retire after cashing in his businesses, Smith-Bernal

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tired of long lunches and, in 2008, founded Opus 2 International. Its cloud-based court transcription software — dubbed Magnum — allows lawyers and judges to access legal documents from a secure online file. It was road-tested in the earth-shatteringly expensive *Berezovsky v Abramovich* trial in 2012 to great success, saving an estimated 5m sheets of paper.



"More than 100 people were using Magnum on that case, accessing the documents from Russia and New York," Smith-Bernal says. "The technology is being used on virtually every big trial in the UK, and we have just opened a New York office. Revenues have doubled in the past year to £7.5m."

Good thing, because he has spent at least £1.75m on the house and grounds and, even

though all the works were finished about three years ago, running a 50-acre estate doesn't come cheap. "We have five full-time staff. It costs £150,000 a year to maintain — gas and electricity alone cost £30,000. Renting it out is a way of subsidising the cost of keeping this place." Indeed, staying here requires deep pockets: the cost is £10,000- £20,000 a week, depending on the season.

The main house is resolutely traditional — a converted monastic farm building of biscuit-coloured stone and dark, wooden shutters. Though each of the six bedrooms has its own bathroom, the interiors are far from grand: a cosy and comfortable mismatch of plump sofas, bright Persian rugs and simple iron bedsteads, mixed in with unostentatious oak furniture and Spanish and Italian antiques. The walls are white and stone, with arches, vaulted wooden ceilings and scrubbed terracotta tiles; the linen curtains were made by local craftsmen from the nearby town of Gubbio.

One of the more flamboyant touches is a rare 1858 Steinway square grand piano in the upstairs sitting room, which itself has a striking high ceiling and wrought-iron minstrels' gallery. There's a games room with polished billiards table, and dotted about the property are a number of original paintings by the Umbrian artist Norberto, known for his depictions of monks, and works by the Bolivian artist Fernando Montes — a nod to Marcela's homeland. There's also an impressively wellstocked, climate-controlled wine cellar — as in a shop, the bottles, mainly reds, are neatly organised by region.

The grandeur is reserved for the outdoors. Smith-Bernal put in the snailshaped swimming pool, which is 3.5 metres deep and has a high diving board, and invested heavily in the six-green golf course to the west of the house. With challenging dogleg holes and based on a Star of David layout, with one large common fairway in the middle and all the greens ranged around the edge, golfers can play multiple greens from each tee. There is also a hot tub and floodlit court for playing bocce, the Italian version of boules.



Down a hydrangea-lined stairway on the far side of the abbey, adorned with a replica of the Abbey Road NW8 sign, is the Japanese garden. Smith-Bernal added the vast pagoda, which can seat 12 and has a large Buddha statue at its centre. In the midst of the bonsai is a spacious pond, which is home to 50 koi carp and 30 different varieties of water lily and lotus flower. Nearby is a smaller pond where eight prizewinning carp are kept, the surface of the water laid with a mesh of plastic balls to keep the delicate champions warm in winter. Smith-Bernal's is the largest and most important collection of koi in Europe, and worth hundreds of thousands of pounds — though he did suffer a recent disaster.

"I had an 'expert' come, and he advised me to change the nutrient level in the water — but it killed 15 of the fish," Smith-Bernal laments. "One died in my arms." Luckily, the enormous, brightly coloured fish that survived the slaughter are



now the picture of health.

The estate is managed by Smith-Bernal's sister, Helen, and her husband, Fabrizio, who live in a cottage on site with their two sons. Helen is also the chef, on hand at all hours to prepare a dizzying array of delicious Italian dishes, from delicate handmade ravioli to colourful organic salads, and steaks cooked to perfection on the vast fire in the sitting room. The estate grows vegetables and fruit, including kiwis and sharon fruit (persimmons), with other ingredients sourced locally.

Fabrizio is a sommelier and can take guests through the delights of the wine cellar and local vineyards, while he and Helen can also arrange trips to the surrounding area, or trufflehunting and wild-boar safaris in the woods. Smith-Bernal even has a Pershing 56 power yacht moored nearby — charting it for the day costs £2,000, excluding fuel. All food and activities are charged on top of the rental fees.

Though not heavily advertised, the estate already has a loyal band of renters, some of whom book to stay year after year. Smith-Bernal and Marcela, who have three children, also used the estate to host their daughter's wedding in 2012. They show me pictures of the glamorous bride and groom greeting guests as they sip champagne in the shade of the abbey, and dance the night away in a marquee rigged on one of the lawns.

Abbadia Celestina's fame is spreading, however, and Smith-Bernal hopes it will soon host a particularly A-list guest. "Al Pacino could be coming in the near future," he grins. "He wants to research this part of Italy and discover his roots. This place is perfect because it's so private."

Whether it is the promise of the sublime abbey, the golf course or the champion fish that sells it to the Godfather star, we will have to wait and see.

● abbadiacelestina.com