The tiny hilltop village of Castiglioncello del Trinorno (population 25) lies deep in the heart of rural Tuscany, a 13th-century hamlet of medieval stone houses whose high shuttered windows reveal nothing of their inhabitants, past or present. To get there, you drive up a dusty, narrow road, the Via di Mezzo, which starts in the town of Sarteano and winds up the hill to a little piazza shaded by ancient trees, and buttressed by a tiny Romanesque church. The view from the top is like something out of a Renaissance painting. The Val d’Orcia, a vast world heritage site protected by UNESCO, spreads out before you, a lush pastoral landscape with the smudged blue-greens of the distant mountains behind. The detail is in the neatly drawn lines of the vineyards and the olive groves, and the looping driveways bounded by Cypress trees that stand to attention like sentries, casting long shadows in the late-afternoon sun.

Today, Castiglioncello del Trinorno is no ordinary Tuscan village. When he stumbled across it a decade ago during a tramping holiday...
in Tuscany, Cincinnati lawyer Michael Cioffi found a semi-deserted, rundown hamlet whose aging inhabitants had left their hilltop homes for the more convenient living offered in the township below. Inspired by the unparalleled views of this corner of Tuscany, and the rich history of the region, Cioffi bought a couple of the houses, and commissioned celebrated Roman restorer and builder Giorgio Miani to restore them, providing a base for his family and friends when they holidayed in Italy. Over the years, as his passion for the village project grew, more properties were purchased, a café/wine bar and an infinity pool were added, and the grounds around the restored villas were landscaped with an artistic mix of ornamental and potager gardens, lavender hedges, and pocket-sized lawns with vine-covered arbors. In 2012, Monteverdi officially opened for business.

It is a special place. To define where it fits in the lexicon of the travel business is complicated, because it’s a one-off, a retreat. When you arrive, it’s easy to think you’ve taken a wrong turn, because in restoring the houses, which are dotted among others still owned by the remaining villagers, Cioffi and his team have meticulously preserved the original character of the place. It still looks like a medieval hamlet.

Two years after it opened, Monteverdi is still a work in progress— you get the feeling it may be for some years to come because the family is enjoying the project so much. The accommodation portfolio has grown to three luxury villas offering two-, three- and six-bedroom options, and now includes the Hotel Monteverdi, a boutique eight-bedroom hotel, which is the result of an artful combination of three 14th-century buildings. A farm-to-table restaurant, dedicated to seasonal, locally sourced Tuscan cuisine, opened last year to complement the Caffe Monteverdi, where breakfasts and light meals are available all day. There are plans to develop the little piazza, and create a bar and vinioteca, and the church, long since deconsecrated, will eventually be fully restored and used as a venue for concerts. Tuscany’s only sponsored archaeological dig, by archaeologists from the University of Siena, is just up the hill from the swimming pool, where the remains of Etruscan buildings were discovered in the early days of the project.

A committed patron of the arts, Cioffi has also opened an art gallery, which shows works by invited resident artists, and during the summer...
season Monteverdi hosts a full arts programme that includes music festivals, concerts and performing artists’ workshops, as well as a culinary school run by executive chef Giancarla Bodini.

As a base from which to explore Tuscany, or to rest up for a couple of days, the place is perfect. We arrived in late afternoon, and the peaceful atmosphere, the beauty of the surroundings, and the charming hospitality of the concierge and the staff worked their magic immediately. We were in the hotel’s delightful Garden Suite, but we could have been miles from anywhere: it was silent but for the sound of birdsong. Our suite, with its white stone walls and low timber-beamed ceilings, was decorated in classic Tuscan style, with bespoke “rustic-chic” furnishings, from the four-poster bed, to the wrought-iron chains in front of the open fireplace. Recognising guests need to remain connected to the world even when on holiday in such a charming spot, a handsome desk in the entrance annex offered a wifi-connected workspace, and a large rustic wall cabinet hid a flat-screen television and stereo.

The bathroom was more contemporary in style, with Carrara marble floors, a large waterfall shower, and a huge granite sink with elegant tapwear. The vanity was stocked with organic La Saponaria toiletries, locally made in nearby Pesaro. All Monteverdi rooms feature exquisite bed and bathware: luxurious 1000 thread-count linen sheets from C&C Milano, and soft towels and bathrobes, all hand finished with a signature scarlet trim.

With nothing else to do before dinner but indulge ourselves, we wandered along the road to the Caffe Monteverdi, and ordered a couple of glasses of the local prosecco and some bruschetta with sun-ripened tomatoes drizzled in olive oil, and sat at a table on the terrace overlooking the valley. As evening came, we moved up to deck chairs beside the infinity pool, where we had a ringside view of the sunset over Val d’Orcia. Other guests joined us, and as it on cue, the sun slipped gracefully down behind the Tuscan hills, lingering long enough in the sky to turn on an astonishing light show of pinks and oranges, violets and indigos. Birds dipped and wheeled before us in the updrafts from the valley below, and we watched in silence, transfixed, until finally we were cloaked in soft blackness.

“This arrived in late afternoon, and the peaceful atmosphere, the beauty of the surroundings, and the charming hospitality of the concierge and the staff worked their magic immediately.”
Monteverdi just happens to be conveniently located between Rome (180km) and Florence (120km), and is easily accessible from both of those great cities by car or train. If you are driving there (Conde Nast Traveler cheerfully warns, “You will get lost.”), there are some wonderful day trips to consider: Tuscany is rich with history, and some of its most famous hill towns are nearby. Just 16km away is the ancient Etruscan settlement of Montepulciano, which, with its fortified castle, lovely cathedral and churches, is arguably the prettiest town in the district. The views from the ramparts are spectacular. One of Italy's finest and most prestigious wines, Brunello di Montalcino, is made from Sangiovese grapes grown on the slopes around Montalcino, which is just 53km from Monteverdi, and a highly recommended spot for lunch. And you can’t be in the area, so to speak, and not visit Siena, home of the celebrated Palio di Siena, the horse race that takes place on the Piazza del Campo. The Duomo of Siena, the city's Gothic cathedral, is also spectacular.

OUT AND ABOUT

Clockwise from above: Hilltop views over the valley; the interiors were the work of Italian designer Ilaria Miani; a potager garden behind the hotel.

Contact monteverdituscany.com

Air New Zealand offers direct flights from Auckland to London, Hong Kong and Shanghai, with onward connections to Rome and Milan. Connections are available from across the domestic network.