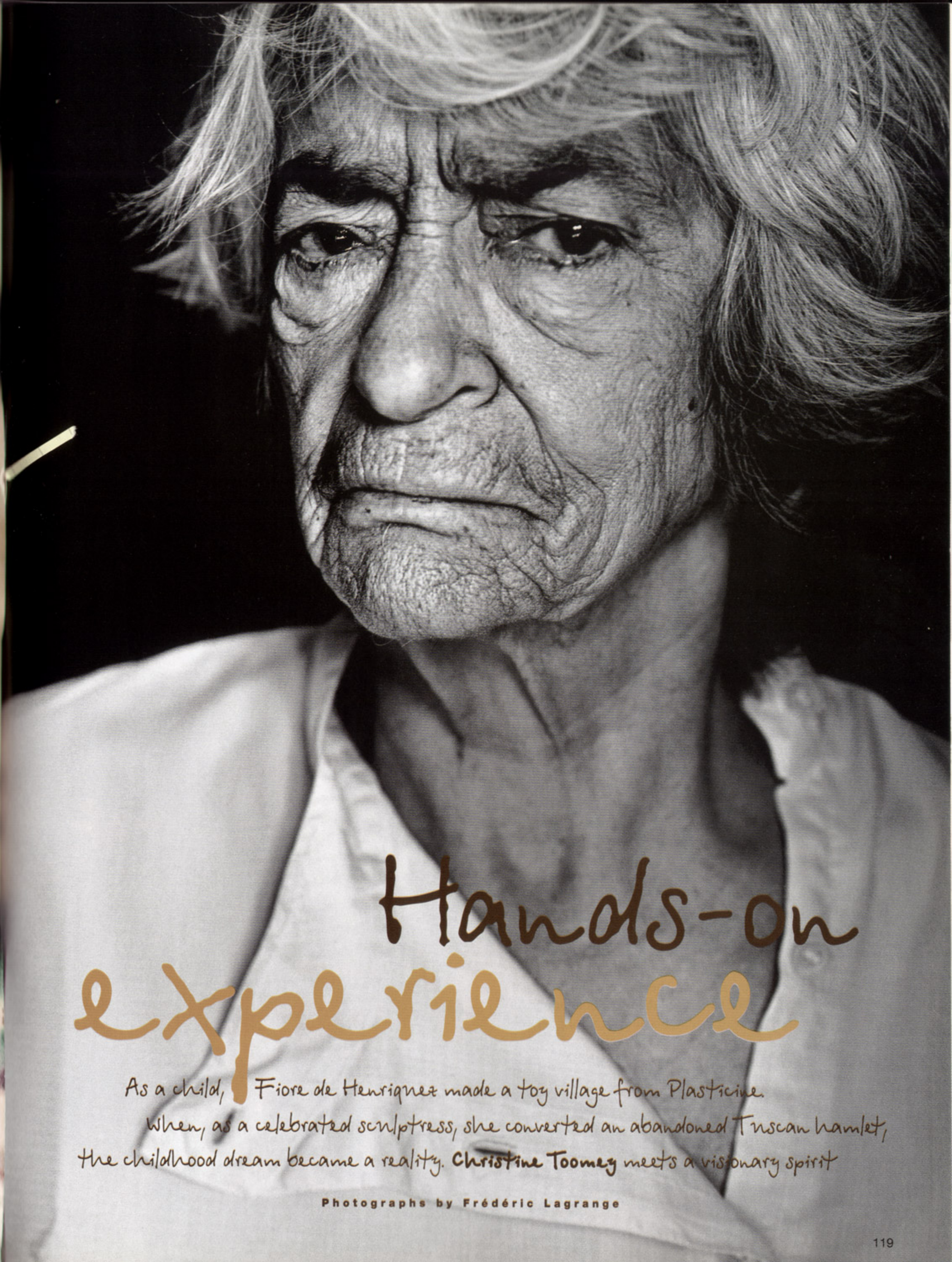


Sculptor Fiore de Henriquez and  
one of her trademark Toscano cigars



# Hands-on experience

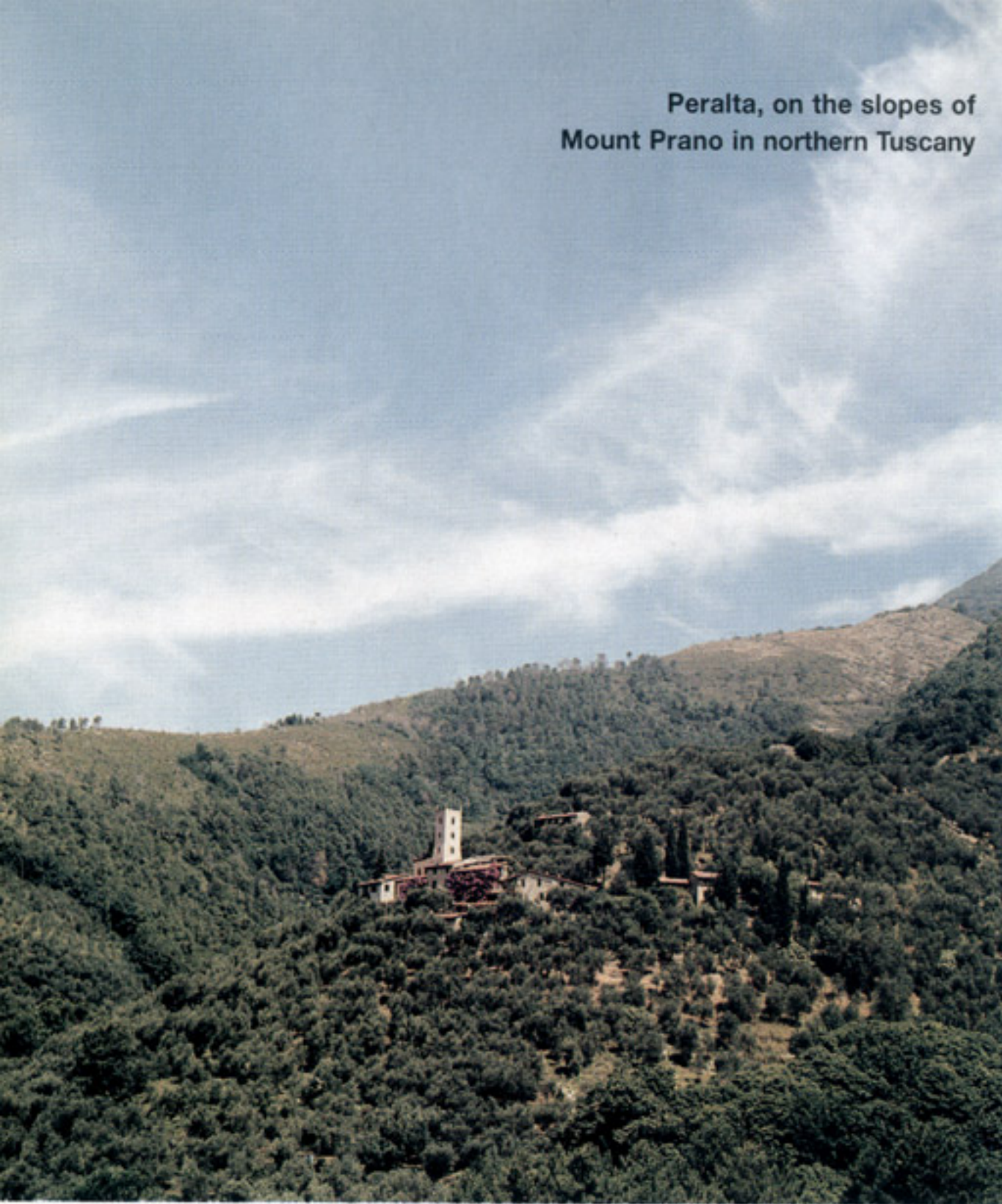
As a child, Fiore de Henriquez made a toy village from Plasticine.

When, as a celebrated sculptress, she converted an abandoned Tuscan hamlet, the childhood dream became a reality. **Christine Toomey** meets a visionary spirit

Photographs by Frédéric Lagrange



Peralta, on the slopes of Mount Prano in northern Tuscany



THE WINGS OF A BRONZE phoenix spread across the upper terrace of Peralta, a symbol of its rebirth. A statue of a weeping woman stands sentry at the entrance to a tiny chapel. Busts and portraits, some of unknown figures, some familiar – John F Kennedy, Augustus John, Margot Fonteyn, the Queen Mother – perch in the crannies of medieval stone walls surrounded by mimosa, sage and lemon trees. Even before guests arrive, this unique hilltop hamlet, converted over many years by an ageing sculptress into a complex of guest rooms, apartments and rustic houses for rent, is inhabited both by figures of her imagination and the many personalities who have sat for her over the years.

Fiore de Henriquez had a vision of how Peralta would look long before she first set eyes on this small settlement on the slopes of the Apuane mountains in northern Tuscany. As a child, she moulded a toy village from the Plasticine her elder brother used for model-making. In her imagination it was a sprawling home for the dozen or more children she would have one day; this did not seem far-fetched: her Russian-Turkish mother had 19 siblings. But Fiore, now 81, never did have children. When she became an artist of international acclaim her work took the place of a family. As she matured, she discovered that, because of a rare genetic condition, she was a hermaphrodite. She never married but she did realise her childhood dream of creating her own village, deriving from it the satisfaction she imagined might be had from wedlock. Listening to how she achieved this turns a visit into a voyage into the past. You need determination and steady nerves, however, to become a guest.

Peralta is perched precariously on the lower slopes of the 1,065-metre-high Mount Prano, below a small national park that is home to wild boar, golden eagles, peregrine falcons and goshawks, and the approach road (the hamlet is just



Images from Peralta: the sculptress Fiore de Henriquez today, top left, and in 1951 in the black-and-white photograph, above. Fiore's sculptures, including a bust of John F Kennedy, left, are displayed around the hamlet; her studio is open to guests. Fresh local produce, including lemons and bottled lemon juice and apricots, is used by the cook who comes to Peralta daily. The church is in the nearby town of Camaiore





The living room of Casa Nuova, one of Peralta's self-catering houses. Opposite, a three-wheel van collects guests' luggage from the car park

under an hour by car from Pisa) is a challenge for some drivers. Roughly 3km from the nearest village of Pieve di Camaiore, the road winds up the mountain through woods until it turns into a switch-back of tight hairpin bends before a narrow stretch of road with a sheer drop to one side. It ends abruptly in a gravel car park where guests at Peralta leave their vehicles, with some relief, and their luggage, which is collected later by a three-wheel van. A short stroll through fig and olive trees takes you to Peralta's terrace and a small bar where a stiff drink can be ordered to steady the nerves. Guests are also greeted with spectacular views across the valley of Camaiore to the Versilian Riviera and, in the distance, the craggy coastline of the Cinque Terre.

In the evening, people can be heard swapping stories of how they managed the drive up that day, in the way that skiers compare exploits on the piste. Occasionally there are those who, unable to face the drive more than once, refuse to check in after negotiating the road to Peralta. But for Fiore the difficult road is a test of whether guests are interested enough in what she has created. 'It is my protection against the hordes,' she booms, a striking figure in Cossack-style tunic, knee-high boots, cigar in one hand and glass of whisky in the other. 'Without it we would be overrun.'

My daughter and I stayed at Peralta to break the long drive home from a visit to her grandparents near Rome last summer. Fiore, who lives and works there for most of the year, had invited us into what she calls her *cittadella* – a stunning studio with huge windows and floor-to-ceiling shelves lined with clay maquettes and bronze portraits. Within a short time she had invited my daughter to take a sculpting lesson with her on her next visit to London, where she has a studio off Sloane Square.

As the two of them talked, Fiore began the extraordinary story of how Peralta had come into existence. She was born in Trieste, the daughter of an officer with the Hapsburg army. Her ambition to be an

artist was so strong that she ran away from home when she was 19 and walked 100km to Venice where she threatened to shoot a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts if he refused to take her as his student. He complied and she graduated as World War II gathered pace. She fled to the Dolomites and ran errands for the partisans. When the war ended she travelled south to Positano and then Salerno where she won a competition to sculpt a statue of a local dignitary for the



*For Fiore the difficult access road to Peralta is a test of whether guests are interested enough. 'It is my protection against the hordes'*

town square. Incensed that a woman had beaten them, her male competitors blew the statue up the day after its unveiling, despite an overnight vigil by women in the town who supported her. 'I was still young enough to be upset,' says Fiore, who shortly afterwards fled Italy and moved to Britain. 'I grew much tougher after that.'

In Britain, her renown as a sculptress quickly brought her into contact with Henry Moore and Francis Bacon, as well as Augustus John, who invited her to his studio in Fordingbridge to make a portrait of him. In her enthusiasm she took out a bank loan, bought a vintage Bentley and

filled it with clay for her commission. In 1953, a group of artists signed a petition that she be granted citizenship 'to benefit the culture of England'. In the years that followed she travelled extensively, spending much of her time in the US where, in 1963, she was commissioned by a college to make a portrait of the then president, John F Kennedy.

Kennedy sat twice for Fiore in the weeks before he died. On the day of his assassination, Fiore had switched on the television to watch him in action and work on his portrait. When he was shot she destroyed her work. The White House sent a man they believed looked like JFK so that Fiore could start again, and Jackie Kennedy lent Fiore a home video of her husband so the work could be finished. It took her over a year. 'I knew so much about him: the pleat in his mouth, every line around his eyes, all the comedy he had to play. In the end I think he really wanted to rush towards death. You could see all that in his face, even though he covered it with carefree elegance.'

In the mid-1960s Fiore returned to Italy with the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz. She had promised to introduce him to a foundry she knew in Pietrasanta, the small town near Camaiore from which Michelangelo set off to search for veins of 'white gold' – white Carrara marble – in inaccessible corners of the Apuane mountains. It was while Fiore was staying with Lipchitz at a villa in Pieve di Camaiore that she first spotted the

ruins of a tumble-down settlement on the hillside above. Disguising herself as a man, as in those days the local policeman would not accompany a lone woman to the site, Fiore trekked up to investigate and found only one house in the hamlet inhabited by a farming couple and their drunken son.

In the months that followed, Fiore realised this was her chance to create the village she had imagined in her childhood. After paying for the farmer to relocate, she spent months trawling through local records to trace the owners of the other ruined houses, some as far afield as the US and Australia. Slowly she negotiated the





A corner of Fiore's living room. Opposite, the artist at work in her Peralta studio



*Angustus John invited her to make a portrait of him. In her enthusiasm she took out a bank loan, bought a vintage Bentley and filled it with clay for her commission*

purchase of the entire hamlet, financing each purchase with a series of lecture tours in the UK, the US and Japan. She approached its reconstruction as if it was a giant sculpture, evolving slowly and remaining as true to its original medieval design and layout as was possible.

Peralta is far removed from the grand villas of nearby Lucca or further afield Florence and Siena. Fiore's vision was that it remain in keeping with its surroundings – the harsher, mountainous landscape of this part of Tuscany. 'It had to be simple, like a peasant – a good peasant, but a peasant nonetheless,' says Fiore, who prefers this wilder terrain to the gentler hills and vineyards further south. 'This place owes more to the pirates who plagued the coastline,' she says. 'It has nothing of the snobbishness or pretensions of the rest of Tuscany.' Such asceticism extended to the plants Fiore reintroduced around Peralta. In medieval times, she argues, only herbs for cooking, vines, chestnut and olive trees would have been grown here.

Fiore's original intention was to reconstruct Peralta as a place where friends and

other artists could come and stay. For many years they did. But as the cost of maintaining the village soared she was forced to convert more and more of it for the use of paying guests. First she let only a few rooms, but eventually she converted most of the small settlement into a combination of rooms, apartments and houses for rent. To make her guests more comfortable she introduced luxuries such as modern bathrooms and fitted kitchens equipped with dishwashers. Along with such sophistication came more delicate and decorative plants. 'I was completely opposed to flowers such as bougainvillea, roses and mimosa in the beginning, but then I realised my guests would appreciate their colour and fragrance.'

In one house named Pipistrelli, which is let as four separate rooms and a small apartment with a secluded terrace, central heating has been installed – at about 305 metres above sea level it gets cold and damp in early spring and late autumn. Each of the five other houses and apartments has a very distinct character, some influenced by the countries in which

Fiore has spent most time. La Foresteria, draped in purple bougainvillea in the summer, has a distinctly Japanese feel. Silk-screen prints line the walls of the sitting room, which opens onto a small terrace with spectacular views. The kitchen, which adjoins a dining room with a hand-stencilled, wooden-beamed ceiling, is painted the colour of blood-red lacquer.

La Casa Nuova, directly adjacent to Fiore's studio, has a much more personal feel to it, with sketches and paintings by friends – some well-known artists – on the walls of the double bedroom. The sitting room downstairs has a large open fireplace and a spacious, secluded, wisteria-covered loggia in the corner of which stands a striking bronze sculpture entitled *The Growth of Life*, a cast of one commissioned by IM Pei for the Kips Bay Plaza in New York.

None of the accommodation is luxurious, and anyone expecting great comfort or convenience should look elsewhere. 'I don't want it to be a hotel. I want it to be a place of real character,' says Fiore. The true appeal of Peralta is that of a lost world, a perfect retreat from well-trodden

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## ONCE UPON A TIME

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black swans from the white. There are also 19th-century glasshouses, a swimming pool, tennis courts and flower gardens. Not all the guestrooms are in the main house itself, but the garden pavilions have been sympathetically designed to reflect vernacular styles, with old wood beams and herringbone brickwork. Ours had a private hedged garden and was all Oriental *toile de Jouy*, and Second Empire-style furniture. (Nul point for the bathroom, though.)

But its chief glory is its two-Michelin-starred restaurant. And despite some surprisingly modest-sounding components on the pricey menu – risotto of pearl barley and chives, a bouillon of pea pods, slivers of deep-fried eel – the dishes when taken as a whole are unqualified successes. From the *amuses-bouche* of lobster and tomato salad to the miniature *tartes aux fruits*, jellies and, unexpectedly, fudge (but what fudge!), it was a meal I won't forget. The fragrant pan-fried *girolles*, the lightly smoked sea bass in a delicate saffron sauce with leeks so minuscule they might have been intended for Parc Mini-Châteaux. Too much of a good thing? Not if you skip lunch. **T**

## HOW TO GET THERE

**Buzz** (0870 240 7070; [www.buzzaway.com](http://www.buzzaway.com)) flies daily from London Stansted to Tours from £95 in August. **Hertz** (0870 599 6699; [www.hertz.co.uk](http://www.hertz.co.uk)) has an office at Tours airport. Car hire from €27 (about £15) per day

## WHERE TO STAY

**Château de Marçay**, Chinon (00 33 2 47 93 03 47; fax: 47 93 45 33; [www.chateaudemarçay.com](http://www.chateaudemarçay.com)). Doubles from about £100. Dinner from about £25 per person

**Les Hautes Roches**, 86 quai de la Loire, Rochecorbon (00 33 2 47 52 88 88; fax: 47 52 81 30; [www.leshautesroches.com](http://www.leshautesroches.com)). Doubles from about £70. Dinner from about £30 per person

**Château de Noizay**, route de Chançay, Noizay (00 33 2 47 52 11 01; fax: 47 52 04 64; [www.chateaudenoizay.com](http://www.chateaudenoizay.com)). Doubles from about £70. Dinner from about £25 per person

**Domaine des Hauts de Loire**, Route de Herbault, Onzain (00 33 2 54 20 72 57; fax: 54 20 77 32; [www.domainehautsloire.com](http://www.domainehautsloire.com)). Doubles from about £65. Dinner from about £45 per person.

All the above are members of Relais & Châteaux (00 800 2000 0002)

## ALTERNATIVE CHATEAU CONNECTIONS

**Grandes Etapes Françaises** ([www.grandes-etapes-françaises.com](http://www.grandes-etapes-françaises.com)) represents four châteaux hotels: the palatial 18th-century Château d'Artigny at Montbazoin; Domaine de Beauvois, which has a 15th-century tower, at Luynes; Le Choiseul, which has Italianate formal gardens on the river near Amboise; and Le Prieuré, outside Angers.

Through château-B&B initiative **Bienvenue au Château** ([www.bienvenue-au-chateau.com](http://www.bienvenue-au-chateau.com)), you can stay on private estates in the Loire.



## Hands-on experience

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Tuscany. Many guests use Peralta as a touring base: Lucca is just over half-an-hour away by car; Florence and the Cinque Terre are both around an hour-and-a-half distant; Genoa, Bologna and Siena two hours. But the beauty of this place is its tranquillity and seclusion.

Mountain walks wind away in every direction. Serious hikers can head up past Peralta's small swimming pool and the remains of a 12th-century watchtower towards the nature reserve, and eventually over the crest of Mount Prano to the deep ravines and rocky outcrops of the Garfagnana, where spaghetti Westerns were once filmed. A more gentle one-hour stroll around the side of the mountain leads to the next village of Toricigliano. Downhill in one direction is the ancient town of Camaiore with its rich tradition of religious festivals. In the other is the small village of Pieve, which has one of the oldest paleoChristian churches of Versilia.

Breakfast is served at a long oak table in a room above Peralta's bar. Friendly staff, a mixture of Italian, Antipodean, Czech and American – Peralta's long-serving handyman, Ron, is from New York – can advise on excursions for the day. Evening meals are also served every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, consisting of local specialities such as *ossobuco*, *pasta alle vongole*, *involtini di vitello* and *acciuaghe fresche* prepared by Laura, a cook from Toricigliano. Apart from cooking, Laura's other main task is to challenge Fiore daily at cards. After mornings spent sculpting and afternoons playing cards, Fiore, if she is not too tired, welcomes guests into her studio to share a drink before supper.

'I like people to come in and out,' she says. 'This place has to be alive, otherwise it would be like a tomb.' In the long run, Fiore and her English friend Dinah Voisin, who has managed Peralta for the last four years, hope it will be used more and more as a retreat for visiting artists. A number of writers' workshops and artists' courses are already planned for later this year. Drawing deeply on one of her favourite Toscana cigars, Fiore eases herself back in her chair, puffs out slowly. 'Peralta gives me complete pleasure. It is like my family.' **T**



## Getting to Peralta

**Ryanair** (0870 156 9569; [www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) flies daily from London Stansted to Pisa from £200 in August. **British Airways** (0845 773 3377; [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) flies daily from Gatwick to Pisa from £320 in August. **Hertz** ([www.hertz.co.uk](http://www.hertz.co.uk)) car hire has an office at Pisa airport

## Staying in the hamlet

**Peralta**, Pieve di Camaiore, 55041 Camaiore, Italy (tel/fax: 00 39 0584 951230; e-mail: [peraltusc@aol.com](mailto:peraltusc@aol.com)). Doubles €60–€108 (about £40–£70). Gemelli, a studio sleeping two, costs about £150–£430 per week, self-catering. Casa Luigi, a house sleeping eight, costs about £410–£1,350 per week self-catering