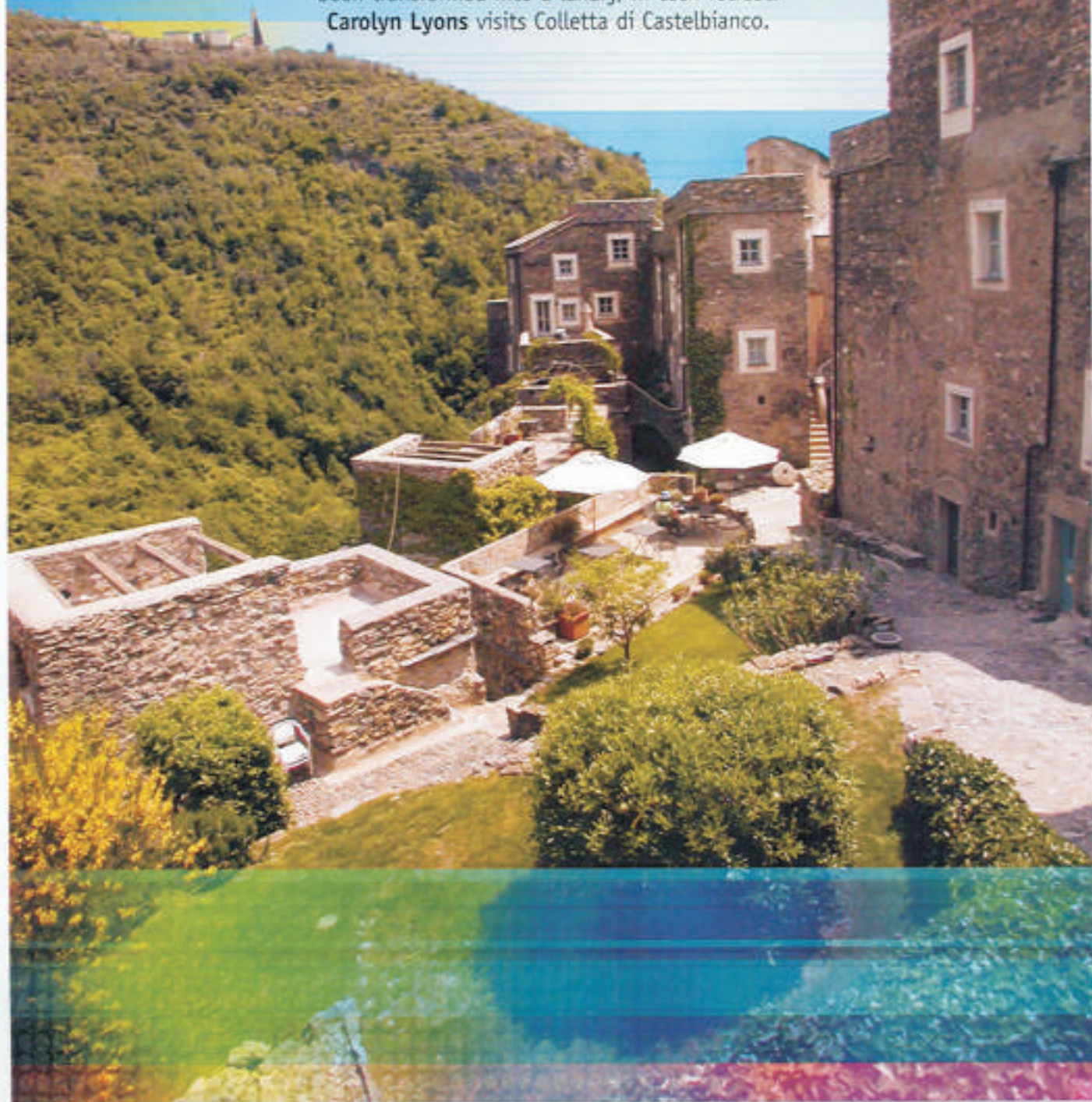


Broadband Borgo

A once-derelict and abandoned hilltop village has been transformed into a luxury, hi-tech retreat. Carolyn Lyons visits Colletta di Castelbianco.





Obtaining planning permission held up the project for a further five years, even though the architect chosen for the job, Giancarlo de Carlo, was a famous name. Born in Genoa in 1919, de Carlo saw himself as both as an architect and a town planner, refusing to recognise a

and email," Tony Cameron says. On the other hand, for someone like Peter Mirzoeff, a semi-retired psychotherapist and hypnotist from Buckinghamshire, Colletta's new technology "didn't make a great deal of difference. I haven't used it much yet, but I may well do in the future. It is part of the fittings to have a digital telephone system and it is all wired up. It is an advantage, but not the biggest draw for me."

To Mirzoeff, the loveliness of the place is what really sells Colletta. Luca Catalano agrees, "People enjoy the beauty of the valley. You don't see anything wrong around, which is rare now, in Italy and elsewhere." Tony Cameron is even more enthusiastic: "Our sun terraces look right down the valley and it is so peaceful and relaxing. It is unique and laid-back – no stress."

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Snug in the wooded Ligurian mountains, halfway between Nice and Genoa, Colletta di Castelbianco looks much like any other hilltop village in these parts. It is impossible to tell that in this small borgo every apartment and house is cabled with high-speed broadband internet and digital television – state of the art technology hidden within a mediaeval village.

Luca Catalano, the Managing Director of Realinvest, whose company represents Colletta says, "As far as we are aware, there are no other mediaeval villages wired and cabled with fast connection to the internet. Last year, we tried to find a similar place, but we couldn't."

Colletta's origins date back to the 13th century, but wars, plagues, earthquakes and the lack of agricultural work gradually depleted its population. By the middle of the last century, the village was deserted. It remained that way, Luca Catalano tells me, "until a group of investors had the vision to buy the village in 1993". They spent more than two years buying up the houses. It took a long time to trace all of the original owners, many of whom had not only left the village, but also Italy.

distinction between the two, and was involved in town planning for major Italian cities like Milan and Bologna in the 1970s. Says Luca Catalano, "Colletta was a very important, complex project. The idea behind our plan is the e-village idea. This was an advanced vision in 1996 because then we didn't use the internet the way we do now." One of the original investors had the idea of making Colletta a cyber village, but since the names of all the original investors are a secret, I can't tell you who it was.

Luca Catalano believes, "Colletta attracts a special sort of resident. Obviously, people have to like the idea of a restored mediaeval village and the concept of the sophisticated technology behind it. But I can't say for sure if that was the main selling point. We have artists, entrepreneurs, university professors. There are Italians, English, Irish, a couple from Australia and one from Norway and several from the US."

People like Tony Cameron and Steven Clarke from Preston who, together with their families, have just bought a penthouse apartment in Colletta. "We have a car leasing business and it is suitable for Colletta because it is all done on our website

Location, location, location is the estate agent's formula for what sells a property, and Colletta's investors chose their site with an eye to the village's physical, as well as digital, communications. Tony Cameron and Steven Clarke find it easy to fly from Manchester or Liverpool to Nice. They wanted to have "somewhere in Europe, and preferably Italy, that we could get to easily. We wanted to be within a couple of hours flying time and no more than six hours door to door. Colletta fitted perfectly. Once you know your way out of Nice airport and onto the motorway, it's about an hour". Peter Mirzoeff flies from Luton to Nice. All hire cars on arrival. Tony Cameron says, "It's cheap if you become a Hertz Gold Card member by hiring six times a year and get all the discounts."

CAR-FREE ZONE

Luca Catalano confirms that people usually fly either to Genoa or Nice, although Genoa is fractionally nearer. "We are in a very good location, only nine kilometres from the exit off the highway at Albenga. At Albenga, obviously, you have the sea as well." He adds, "Colletta is not for cars. You arrive and leave your car in the



parking area. This is the only new structure built in the village." The absence of cars is important to Tony Cameron: "When you take your children away, you always worry about the safety issues, and that is no problem in Colletta." He can't wait to take his two children aged 10 and 8; they haven't been yet because he only completed on July 4, which happened to be his birthday.

How about the swimming pool? I asked Luca Catalano, thinking that a swimming pool is not a usual mediaeval feature. "Oh no", he said. "The swimming pool was cut into a natural terrace in the land; it is not a new structure."

A two-bedroom apartment in Colletta, costs between €330,000 and €450,000, including a share of the swimming pool. "There are around 70 apartments. I say around, because some of the flats have been merged together and others have been split. Nearly all have been sold. There are only about ten remaining," Catalano tells me. In addition to the purchase

price, there is an annual service charge, which varies depending on the size of the apartment, from €700 to €3,000 a year.

Tony Cameron is hoping to cover his costs by renting out his new penthouse. Luca Catalano explains that "in order to make things easier we have created a letting system on the community's website. It is a complex system where you have floor plans and pictures of each flat available and a credit card payment scheme." Many owners rent out their apartments, so in Colletta there are always new people to meet.

Peter Mirzoeff has bought a two-bedroom apartment. He bought "when the vast majority of Colletta had been built, but my particular building was in a major state of disrepair. It was derelict." This gave him more flexibility than most buyers in choosing which space could be the bedroom and which the kitchen. "It was quite fun, but it's a little bit tricky when you're living abroad and have got building work

going on. Every day, there is something to decide on and you just can't do it."

Tony Cameron and Steven Clarke faced similar problems when they converted two apartments into one penthouse. "We were obviously guided by Mario, who is the builder out there, and by Luca and Tanja." Tanja Haug is Luca's wife, who has her own interior design business. Tony says, "She helped out because Mario speaks very little English and Tanja was fantastic at helping us get the design right. Without Luca and Tanja, we would have struggled."

DOWNSIZING

Colletta is tiny. "It's about the size of Picenza," says Peter Mirzoeff, "so you can walk from one side to the other in about two minutes." It must have been a logistical nightmare trying to shoehorn everything in, including giving nearly all the apartments a garden or terrace. Peter Mirzoeff says, "The properties are actually all very small. Some people have





overlook others. I have to say that, although people may have an initial fear about privacy, this problem disappears because eventually the concept of community prevails."

Peter Mirzoeff endorses this: "The way Colletta is structured, there isn't much privacy. You are generally overlooked from all sides. It makes the place more individual and is part of its charm. One of my terraces is right where people walk by, but the other is fairly private. I'm getting used to it." For him, it is a definite plus, since the alternatives he had considered were to live in a town in Italy where "perhaps one wouldn't integrate as much as one would like; or living in a more rural isolated situation where you might not get to know many people."

Apart from the swimming pool and a little *piazzetta*, there is very little public space in Colletta. Massimo, the village caretaker, and

narrow and the houses small, which created many problems during its redevelopment because, as Luca Catalano explains: "We couldn't use much heavy machinery and we had to search the whole of Italy to find enough skilled stonemasons to work on the ancient walls."

But the end result is a tastefully restored mediaeval village that would otherwise have crumbled away to dust. The windows are light blue while the doors are various colours, all industrially lacquered and specifically designed for Colletta, which makes it look like Putzmeister. Colletta's architect, Giancarlo de Carlo, strongly believed that its design must be shaped both by the people for whom it is intended and by its surroundings.

I think I would find life in Colletta too claustrophobic. You don't get much space for your money. But you do avoid many of the difficulties of buying in Italy. You don't have to

COLLETTA'S ARCHITECT BELIEVED THAT ITS DESIGN MUST BE SHAPED BOTH BY THE PEOPLE FOR WHOM IT IS INTENDED AND BY ITS SURROUNDINGS.

» bought two or three and put them together." He likes the fact that "no two apartments are the same. They are all individual and quirky. Every centimetre counts in these places." Tiny Cameron and Steven Clarke have also found space a problem. "Furnishing is tricky because a lot of the passages are narrow and you can't buy anything too big. Much of our stuff had to come flat-packed and be assembled in the rooms. But at least the two of us have similar tastes and, more important, so do our wives."

CLOSE PROXIMITY

Privacy is a modern luxury and I was worried that Colletta's higgledy-piggledy houses would mean there was none. This is not a problem for the Clarke and Cameron families because "being a penthouse there is nobody who overlooks us from above". Luca Catalano doesn't see it as one either: "Colletta is a community. If you want a large garden with very much privacy you are better off somewhere else. Everyone here has their own private entrance, but some apartments

his wife, Laura, run a bar/osteria, the *Telecaffè*, as a private business. Their son Davide was the first baby born in Colletta for many generations. The *Telecaffè* is open for coffee and aperitifs as well as lunch and dinner, serving local specialities such as chicken con *gusti di Colletta* and even *zuppa alla Richard!* They also host many different cultural events ranging from art exhibitions and concerts to gastronomic events such as their olive oil festival.

Built in grey stone on the slope of a wooded valley 500 metres above sea level, Colletta reminds me more of north Wales than Italy. The streets are

speaking Italian; Luca's English is excellent. You don't have any of the problems – finding a builder, an electrician, getting planning permission – of converting a ruin yourself. It has all been done. You don't need to find a caretaker, as Massimo is on hand; and you don't have to find an agent to let your flat. Everything is taken care of for you.

Peter Mirzoeff has made new friends in Colletta from all parts of the world: "I think they all have a common love of the place. I think the community spirit in terms of socialising has been fantastic." www.colletta.it

