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The wild woods of Tuscany

Oasyshotel, a new collection of lodges on a WWF reserve, is only 40 miles from Florence but offers deep immersion in forests where wolves still roam



Oliver Smith AN HOUR AGO



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The Divine Comedy charts Dante's journey through the afterlife — from the hellish dungeons of the *Inferno* where damned souls writhe, to the celestial heights of the *Paradiso*. It is a poem of metaphysical dimensions. Yet its most famous landscape is a wood:

“Midway through the journey of our life” — the poem opens — “I found myself within a forest dark / for the straightforward pathway had been lost.”

The poet wanders the vales and hills of this night-time forest — he is chased by a leopard, a lion and a she-wolf before being saved by Virgil, who guides his descent into the underworld. The figure of the lost wanderer is seen to represent Dante's real-life exile from his native Florence — the woods as an embodiment of sin. Perhaps the most famous opening lines in European literature, they arouse an ancestral fear of the dark, playing on a forest's spatial contortions, its conspiracy to conceal. They have been evoked in paintings, operas and video games. They summon childhood anxieties about what happens when the lights go out.

Seven centuries later, most tourists in Tuscany are drawn to the bright lights of Dante's hometown, and other cities he wrote about: Siena, Pisa, Lucca. Fewer spend time in the forests that likely inspired the poet's verses, but they are there still — a backdrop to sunlit piazzas and palaces, hugging the contours of the Apennines. In this homeland of the Renaissance — amid cities that reawakened European civilisation — you can find wild, uncivilised corners where wolves still roam.

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Some of Oasyhotel's 16 ec lodges, surrounded by the hills and meadows of a WWF-affiliated nature reserve

I'm seeing some of them as a guest at Oasyhotel — a cluster of lodges recently opened in the World Wide Fund for Nature-affiliated Oasi Dynamo Nature Reserve. On the map it is a short hop from Lucca or Florence, but the roads here are meandering. In place of Virgil, my guide is taxi driver Stefano: the car zigzags higher, ears go pop, groves of olive and cypress give way to the realm of hornbeam, alder and oak. Domes of churches below appear button-small in the rear window — then vanish. The final approach to Oasyhotel is a forest track that uncoils and twists like tagliatelle to reach an altitude of 1,100m. Most winters only tractors can push through the snowdrifts.

"These mountains were never really considered a destination for tourism," says Federico Galligani, general manager of Oasyhotel, who greets me at the top. "We're the first ones to do something like this. I think it's something special."

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Some 50 or so guests have the run of 1,000 hectares. The sharp elbows and timed tickets of the Uffizi feel far away

Federico previously worked at The Savoy in London and the St Regis in Rome — he took a pay cut to return to his native Tuscany and oversee an operation that imports subtle luxury to this remote reserve. Oasyhotel had a short trial opening last summer, then began its first full season this April. It feels not unlike a

safari camp: new construction is strictly limited here, so guests stay in 16 removable wooden lodges, temporarily anchored in mountain meadows. They are the first stage in a wider plan, to bring Oasyhotel accommodation to other WWF-affiliated reserves.

Here in Tuscany, you can kayak and paddle-board on a private lake, learn to make rustic cheeses in an adjoining farm, or be pummelled by a masseur in the wellness centre. The place has a social as well as an environmental ethos: at the bottom of the hill is its partner — [Dynamo Camp](#) — one of Europe's leading recreational therapy centres for sick children. There are two restaurants — Casa Luigi, located at the end of a bumpy lane on an alpine plateau, and Le Felci, set in a former stables closer to the lodges, serving mushrooms, greens and herbs foraged from the forest (the nettle spaghetti is especially delicious). Some 50 or so guests have the run of 1,000 hectares. The sharp elbows and timed tickets of the Uffizi feel far away.



Guests can paddle-board or kayak on the private lake...





...and dine at the Casa Luigi restaurant

There is lots to do. But time here is mostly spent in quiet contemplation of the forests — watching the tips of silver fir and black pine stirring in the midsummer breeze. Stand on tiptoes in certain spots, and the views stretch to the prison island of Gorgona in the Ligurian Sea, the peaks of Apuan Alps daggering the sky, and the pass over which Hannibal led his war-elephants to fight Rome. At dusk — after the last braids of sunset have departed the hills — a sylvan smell of wild mint wafts through open cabin windows. “Being here is deeply restorative,” says Federico. “For the guests, of course, but for the staff too.”



Among the guides is Giulia Ghinassi — she was made redundant from the Four Seasons in Florence during the pandemic, and after some soul-searching decided to return to college to study wildlife (she has a fox paw tattoo on her forearm). She first came to the Oasi Dynamo reserve for her research, striking out into the woods at 4am armed with a torch and microphone. Later she would listen back to amplified recordings: the scurrings of wild boar, the

wingbeat of an owl, a chorus undetectable to human ears which she describes as being “like a soundtrack to a horror movie”.

“Parts of rural Tuscany are very wild,” she says. “Some people get caught in the rhythms of a city. I’ve become absorbed in these woods.”





She takes me on a walk from my lodge. On the edge of the forest there are bursts of colour — red clover and ragged robin, the golden blaze of broom, blue wisps of viper's bugloss. Beneath the canopy, colour drains away. Beeches lean together to form gothic arches. Dead birch, snapped by the burden of winter snow, rot in the ravines. There are firs that whisper of wardrobes, fur coats and lampposts. And there are ancient oaks and chestnuts whose flailing limbs and knotted profiles recall the eighth canto of the *Inferno* where the damned are turned into trees, pecked at by winged monsters for eternity. Some staff are not ashamed to say they are afraid of the forest: one person working on reservations got lost on a bike ride here one winter's night, and, in Federico's words "didn't think she was ever coming back".

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Since the second world war, forest cover has more than doubled in Italy. Nothing is safe from the centuries-long campaign of creeping root and branch

Conversation turns to another midnight wanderer of Tuscan woods. In June 2021, the 21-month-old [Nicola Tanturli](#) woke one night, and escaped from his family home in the hills north of Florence. Search parties combed the surroundings fearing the worst — until a reporter heard a small voice saying “mamma” in a wooded

ravine. Nicola had survived two nights alone in the wild and sustained only a few scratches. The church bells rang in jubilation. His story travelled across the world, perhaps in part because it resembled the oldest Italian story about two little boys lost in the landscape. As newspapers excitedly pointed out, it was “an area populated by wolves”.

The lions and leopards that chased Dante have been extinct in Italy for thousands of years. But there are about 15 wolves present in the Oasi Dynamo reserve — plus a new litter of cubs. The wolves are like the wind — you can't see them, but you might hear them, and you see the marks they leave. Sometimes it is a carcass. At other times the pack's presence is announced in the thudding hooves of panicked deer. Giulia has howled at them through a loudspeaker, and heard a cry return from far across the forests. “It was thrilling,” she says. “And it also gave me the chills.”

It is a sound becoming a little more common in Italy. In the 1970s there were as few as 70 Apennine wolves, a distinct subspecies of the grey wolf. Today there are an estimated 3,300. This is partly down to the efforts of conservationists, but their rise has also coincided with a changing landscape. Since the second world war, forest cover has more than doubled in Italy, as upland farming has declined and parts of the countryside have depopulated.



Some 15 wolves — and a new litter of cubs — are currently living in the Oasi Dynamo © Alamy

Dotted about Oasi Dynamo are ruined farmhouses: some are being converted into holiday stays, others are left to crumble. There are also hunters' huts: it

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was used as a hunting reserve until 2006. And there is also abandoned infrastructure from times when the area was a centre for ammunition production: for much of the 20th century a secret armaments industry was concealed in the surrounding valleys, safe from enemy bombs. Nothing, it seems, is safe from the centuries-long campaign of creeping root and branch.

Giulia points to a muddy path bearing the tracks of many animals: boar, roe deer, fox. Lurking at the back of this carnival of prints is the unmistakable four-toed paw of the wolf. As their numbers have grown, Apennine wolves have spread into France, Switzerland and even Catalunya. Italian wolves once raised a dynasty whose empire spanned Europe. Now, it seems, they have set out on their own kind of conquest.

Two centuries after Dante's poetry mapped hell and heaven, moon and stars, a 24-year-old medical school dropout in Florence purposefully set out to disprove the cosmos depicted in the *Divine Comedy*. Galileo Galilei later became the first great scientist to point a telescope at the night sky — observing the moons of Jupiter and the phases of Venus, learning that the sun did not in fact orbit the Earth. His telescopes are still kept in the Museo Galileo in Florence, but it is hard to see too many stars amid the light pollution of the city these days. Some of the darkness both Galileo and Dante knew clings on intact in the cool heights of the Apennines.



The lodges are made of natural materials to blend in with their surroundings



The interiors provide a high level of comfort ... © Nicole Neri



... as well as large windows to allow light to flood in

"Tuscany is the original home of stargazing," says Samuele Marconi. "We have Galileo to thank for this." A banker by day, by night Samuele is a volunteer at the *Osservatorio Astronomico della Montagna Pistoiese* — an observatory across the valley from Oasyhotel. On my last night in the reserve I join one of his stargazing sessions beside the lake. Bats flit about the sweep of the Great Bear as the reflections of Hercules quiver in the waters. We study the seas of the moon through an electric telescope. The workshop begins with whispered observations — as if we might frighten the stars away by talking too loudly —



and ends in silent reverence of the summer constellations.

"In this time of war especially, it's important to look into the sky and understand where we all live," says Samuele. "We are on a planet which is less than a tiny speck of dust in the universe. But it is fantastic, cherished, full of life."

Afterwards, on the way back to my cabin, I take a spontaneous detour back into the woods. Under the trees the darkness is tar-black, the leaf litter fretted with only the faintest moonshadows. I stop a while by a wayside shrine capped by a sculpted pine cone — a marker to guide Easter pilgrims through these woods. There are anonymous scurrings and scuttlings all around. The forest is full of life.

Some scholars have considered Dante's dark wood in a more positive light: not a place of inherent sin, but a parable for the journey of human existence, with forks in the path, dead ends and a danger of entanglements, but within which we can find friends and saviours — like the Roman poet — to show us the way. Today, Italy's expanding forests are themselves a saviour: capable of storing an additional 290mn tonnes of CO₂ compared to a decade ago. Far from a gateway to the realm of the dead, they are breathing life into a faltering planet, as many of their fellow forests fall.

It gets cold. As I leave, a speculative sweep of my torch catches a tawny owl in a tree. The night-time wood is not somewhere to linger too long, but it is a good place to pause and ponder, midway on the journey.

Details

Oliver Smith was a guest of Oasyhotel (oasyhotel.com), which is open until 31 October this year. Double lodges have one double bed and can have one extra single bed, family lodges have four large bunk beds; both cost from €560 per lodge per night including breakfast, minibar, e-bikes and watersports

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