

TRAVEL + LEISURE



The **HOTELS** *Issue*

*The beauty of waking up
somewhere new, on the other
side of the earth*



Oasyhotel, an eco-resort set on a nature reserve in Italy's Pistoia Mountains.

Tuscany's Wild Side

Forget vineyards, cypress trees, and Renaissance towns—a new, environmentally conscious lodge offers a more rugged take on the much-loved region. **By Sarah Moss**

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Y SON FELIX and I slept with the windows open, so I was woken by birdsong. The sun was just coming over the mountain, the wooded hills were flooded with golden light, and the land was alive with insects and birds. While Felix continued to doze, I stepped onto the veranda, breathed in the scent of pine trees and herbs and flowers, and saluted the sun.

We were staying at Oasyhotel, an eco-resort at the Oasi Dynamo nature reserve, in Italy's Pistoia Mountains. We had driven from the Pisa airport, winding through Tuscan valleys where stucco farms and villages perched on the mountainsides.

Grandmothers sunned themselves behind geraniums on wrought-iron balconies. We reached a stone gateway and parked our car. A driver then took us five miles up a winding track to the top of a hill, where cooling winds stirred the trees. Crickets sang. It felt like the first time in months that we'd been unable to hear traffic.

Oasy is made up of 16 wooden lodges, as well as old stone farm buildings that have been converted into two restaurants, a bar, and a reception area. The lodges are simple and prefabricated—no permanent new structures are allowed in the nature reserve—but well designed and positioned to make the most of mountain views.

The resort sits on nearly 2,500 acres of land that was once the hunting estate of the owners of Società Metallurgica

MATTIA MARASCO/COURTESY OF OASYHOTEL



▲ Kayaking on the nature reserve's man-made lake.

Italiana, a bullet factory in the nearby village of Campo Tizzoro. It has been rewilded and conserved in collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund. The estate's park and gardens are also home to Dynamo Camp, an impressive recreational-therapy program for children with disabilities and critical illnesses that includes the first wheelchair-accessible adventure playground in Europe.

From its opening in 1911, the bullet factory was the valley's biggest employer. During World War II, the residents were spared the fate of many neighboring communities: the factory supplied ammunition to both the Allied and Axis powers, so it was in no one's interest to attack. After the factory was shut in 1985, Campo Tizzoro languished until being converted from an engine of war to an engine of social enterprise with the 2007 opening of Dynamo Camp.

We found many moments of peace at Oasy. Guests can explore the woods by bike or on foot on nearly 28 miles of trails. Over many hours of hiking and running, I met no one. I felt entirely safe out alone by day and night, able for once to attend fully to the woods and birds and animals without the constant backward glance of a woman in the wilderness.

Felix and I went walking with Giulia Ghinassi, the estate's naturalist, who showed us wolf tracks and the wallowing places of wild boars, named the birds in the trees, and answered our questions about the intricacies of this rich ecosystem. When we stopped to listen, I noticed that, although we think we want the woods to be quiet, a healthy environment is noisy, humming with life, an orchestra of buzzing, singing, chirping, calling, wind in the leaves, wings on the air, hooves on dry leaves, fur brushing twigs.

We went out again with Ghinassi at night, walking quietly, our flashlights shining between the trees. We stood below owls engaged in animated,

▶ One of Oasyhotel's 16 guest lodges.



▼ Wheels of *caciotta* cheese made on the property.



chuckling conversation, caught a fox out hunting, and were almost certain we saw a wildcat prowling the woods.

No one at Oasy can promise you a wolf sighting, but one afternoon when I was out running I saw one sitting on the horizon, eyeing the cows in a field. I took a yoga class under the beech trees beside the lake at sunset, watching swallows flash across the sky, hoping I could take some of the wonder into my practice at home. There are rare newts in the lake, and you can kayak there or, as we did on another day, have a picnic on the shore.

The food at Oasy is remarkable. The young chef, Barnaba Ciuti, takes guests foraging for herbs, flowers, and berries. There is a vegetable garden and an orchard. The farms on the reserve supply almost everything else, and the kitchen makes its own preserves, bread, and pastries using honey, fruit, butter, and eggs from the estate.

"Sometimes," Ciuti said, "it's hard to write the menu because I don't know exactly what will be ripe tomorrow."



I loved the simplicity of freshly picked herb salads dressed with salted ricotta and elderflower, bean soup in the tradition of Ciuti's grandmother's village, a dish of seared mushrooms with a mushroom reduction that needed nothing else, and delicately macerated strawberries and apricots.

Meanwhile Felix, who at 15 was experiencing a growth spurt, fueled his hikes with nightly plates of fresh pasta—a *spaghetti al pomodoro* that had him asking for the recipe; buttery cushions of ravioli—roast guinea fowl, cherrywood-smoked steak, and traditional desserts stylishly reimagined: a tiramisu éclair, a malt-and-honey mille-feuille.

My favorite activity was cheese making. In a small stone farmhouse, we met Romina, who produces 20 wheels of cheese a day to supply the restaurant and sell at the Oasy shop and the local market. She had



▲ The décor in the guest lodges is an updated take on rustic simplicity.

▼ Oasy's modern interpretation of a classic *panzanella* salad.



▲ Gentle hiking paths surround the hotel.

already heated the morning's milk and added the rennet; we arrived to cut the curds, scoop them into round forms, and knead them until the whey ran clear. Afterward we went out to meet the cows, a mountain breed that glanced up placidly as we admired the new calves. I listened to the calves sucking, the cows munching, flies living their insect lives—a soundscape people have known for millennia.

At a table set under the chestnut trees, we were served a traditional Tuscan lunch: salad from the garden, homemade bread, lavish plates of fresh ricotta deliciously combined with orchard honey, salted curds, and deeply flavored, slowly matured cheese. For Felix, mortadella, prosciutto, and chicken-liver pâté. As we ate, the cows ambled and Romina came out to take her ripe cheeses to market.

This is how food should be, I thought; I wish there was a way to make it local, simple, and delicious for everyone. When I put the idea to Ghinassi later, she replied, "There is. It's my vision, but people will have to be willing to change."

Oasy is more than a hotel—it's a map of how things could be different. The luxury it offers is not in materials like marble and gold, which have never been sustainable anyway, but in the way it honors the natural world. Like an old walled garden, Oasy has a fairy-tale quality. I'm trying not to mention Eden, but I can't quite help it. 🌿

oasyhotel.com; doubles from \$278.