

At home

From the ground up: Part-time Naples couple found their Italian villa a full-time restoration job over two years

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VIVA VILLA: RENOVATION ITALIAN-STYLE

Ron and Lesley Simon and their new mascot stand in front of the freshly painted Villa Magnolia, which opened this month in Italy after two years of extensive work.



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Lesley and Ron Simon found their dream villa near Naples, Italy, by cruising the Internet in their North Naples, Florida, kitchen.

But the house that so mesmerized them in 2006 left them no time for dreaming over the next two years. The Simons are quick to admit: Sometimes getting what you want is the hardest thing that can happen to you.

The couple detailed their experiences and offered advice in dealing with the frustrations home building in new culture via a series of e-mail exchanges and one late night phone interview from the U.S.. Even as late as May, the couple didn't have a land line and even phone calls were iffy.

"I have to stand on the hillside with my cell phone to get good reception," Lesley Simon lamented.

This weekend, they're christening their first summer as the proprietors of Villa Magnolia, an elegant 18th-century villa-turned-guesthouse in the hills around Puglia. The Simons proudly say they worked to give it "eco-credentials," using recycled wood whenever possible for doors and windows and local materials and labor for all construction.

"The villa is 90 percent energy-efficient, having solar thermal panels for all the hot water and heating, photovoltaic for energy supply, plus surplus energy is sent back to the national grid," Lesley Simon wrote. She said she and her husband "are determined to show how it is possible to live in a healthy, comfortable environment without further polluting our planet."

The Simons still hope spend the cold winter months in this Naples. "It was a joint decision to spend six months in Italy and six months in Florida — the best of both worlds," she explained. "We want to come back for Thanksgiving."

Puglia is the last of Italy's sunny coastal regions to be discovered by tourists, called "Italy's best kept secret" by one travel writer and gushed over in 2007 by USA Today as having "the brightest seas, most diverse art and architecture, most mouth-watering peasant cuisine and kindest people in all of Italy."

The Simons wouldn't dispute that. They both had friends in Puglia, and British-born Lesley Simon, 54, lived and worked in the area for two decades. So when they decided to sell their second home from the UK and start an eco-centered guest house in the southern Italy hillsides, they admit they were romantics about it.

"It didn't seem to matter that the neglected villa was so old it didn't have running water (except through the roof) or electricity or sewage. It didn't have windows or doors, " Lesley Simon admitted. "It did have trees — growing out of the roof tiles."

Still, she said, she and her husband felt they could "envisage the dream" through all of the advice that bluntly suggested they would be better off tearing it down and building new. The home had not been a residence in the era of running water, Lesley Simon guessed; its last use was as a summer day house for a notary and her husband. The process of bringing in all utilities was going to be monumental for American-born Ron Simon, 65, a longtime contractor who had experience building in the U.S. and England.

"Here things are different — different materials, architecture, construction methods and worse, a different language," recalled Simon, who didn't speak Italian as his wife did. "All had to be overcome so that the project could proceed. The first thing I did was to cut down the trees that were growing out of the flat cement tile roofs."

"It was July and the sky was deep blue. The weather was fabulous. And I was restoring an Italian villa — something that you would read about and dream of doing."

He soon started describing his venture in other ways.

"Our first misstep was to sign up with a local builder who specialized in cookie-cutter houses — the bungalow that could be built anywhere and placed anywhere," he recalled in his e-mail correspondence. The couple wanted that builder to simply concentrate on the smaller structure of four rooms that was part stable, part farmer's hut.

Structural problems surfaced. The price estimate for which they'd hired the builder was out the window — like everything would be, literally, since the casings were rotted and had wormwood.

The builder attempted a "coronamento," a reinforced concrete ring around the house at the roof line holding the flat roof and walls together.

"Six thousand euros later it was done — and so was he," Simon said. "The top of the house was now exposed concrete, with no hope of bringing it back to where it was visually."

"I decided to put the project up for bids... I've done it all my professional building career in the states," Simon wrote. "I wanted someone local, established, dependable — you always hear about projects never completed because the builder was paid and then abandoned the project — and had some pride in his work."

"What could go wrong? Well where should I start? Building began, then stopped the next day," he continued. A building inspection discovered that the workers hadn't been registered for insurance, the company didn't have an articulated health and safety plan — the list went on and on. All work stopped, and the builder was fined, which affected his attitude as well.

Weeks later, work resumed. There was now a foundation, steel and concrete, Simon remembers.

"Lots of activity and lots of people talking, even if I didn't know what they were saying." Simon said. Then he began to understand that conversation was not always a good thing in the Italian workplace.

"There are discussions on everything. It's not like I was used to in the states. I asked a laborer to cut a board where it was marked for the foundation and in the states it's a simple 'OK.' Here, given the same request in my best Italian, he then goes to another worker standing by the saw and they seem to be discussing the pros and cons of cutting, how sharp the saw is, which saw to use, should the cut be on the line... on and on."

In the meantime, Lesley Simon was eyeing the rest of the 35,000-square-foot property, which held 90 "ancient" olive trees in need of harvesting, some 100 almond trees and plenty of yardscape that would need to be cleared and cared for. She wanted an organic vegetable garden. Because the Simons wanted the entire project to be ecologically responsible, they received the description of "crazy Americans." Insulation in the walls? Solar panels for heating water?

"We felt as if we were stuck in a time warp," Lesley Simon admitted. There was painting to be done on every wall in every structure, generally during daylight because it took two months to get the electricity hooked up to the villa.

The Simons used a lime-based paint because of its environmental compatibility. Getting the right shades for an historic home was purely "trial and error," she said during a phone conversation this past week. "It would look really dark when it went on, and then it would lighten up considerably as it dried."

In total, the Simons estimate their project took two years of "planning, design, discussions, construction and restructuring, high stress levels and a budget that tripled."

They began to make friends, however, including an abandoned dog that moved in and became the family pet, Spikky. Spikky accompanied Ron Simon to all his own projects, such as restoring the backyard pool and putting in door jambs. Lesley Simon was able to plant zucchini, egg plants, three varieties of tomatoes, red and yellow peppers and melons.

The 2,690 square-foot villa has been totally restored, with high vaulted stone ceilings in two of the four bedrooms. Lesley Simon said she was careful to use aged interior finishes that respect the villa's history. Historical accuracy did not extend to the necessities, she added: There are modern ensuite bathrooms, along with hydro massage areas flooded with natural light from skylights. The beds are decidedly 21st-century: "They are comfortable," she emphasized.

The Simons restored a patio area to the rear of the villa, that opens onto a covered veranda, a restored wood-fired oven yields foccacia and pizza for an afternoon snack. Late last Monday, they had fired up the oven to bake a pizza and relax by the salt-water pool, which is a short walk through a column-lined "passegiata" with entwining vines.

Next to the villa is the stable, which has become the Simons' home. It is, ironically, close to a Naples, Florida, starter condo size: 1,399 square feet.

Still, the two couldn't be more proud of their work. Villa Magnolia, which opens this weekend for rentals of up to eight people, is already booked until August. And they're looking forward to being hosts and caterers through autumn. And, Lesley Simon added, they hope the clientele is broad-based:

" It would be great to have some friendly Americans come over."

Villa Magnolia

- Web site: www.villamagnoliaitaly.com
- Location: Carovigno Brindisi, Italy
- Rates: 180 to 125 euros (\$278 to \$387 U.S.), depending on the room and season
- Telephone: (01) 39 331 286 7243

Building abroad

Lesley and Ron Simon offer three critical pieces of advice about doing your own building in another country:

- Expect to at least double your budget. "Ours ended up being at least three times the original," recalled Lesley Simon. "There were a lot of surprises."
- Know the local regulations and be ready to be judged by them. Don't expect the builder to handle them, as Ron Simon learned when their construction site was shut down.
- Have at least one person friendly to your cause who speaks the language. For Ron Simon, it was Lesley, who was able to negotiate with furniture dealers, store owners and other businesses.