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For a Happy Few, the Hamptons With Castles

By ALESSANDRA STANLEY

TODI, Italy, Aug. 4 — Amid rolling hills, olive groves and sunflower fields, only the glint of aquamarine swimming pools hints that this ancient countryside, long ruled by princes and Popes, has new landlords.

Todi Journal All around the medieval city of Todi, wealthy Americans have lovingly restored 14th-century fortresses, abbeys and farmhouses, and added luxury bathrooms, swimming pools and tennis courts.

Theirs is a search for beauty, isolation and upper-class comfort. The province of Umbria, where Todi is located, is not just rivaling neighboring Tuscany as Italy's most alluring and expensive summer retreat. For America's Happy Few, Todi is becoming as fashionable as Martha's Vineyard or the Hamptons.

At least, that is what some long-time expatriates fear. "I don't want this place to be the East Hampton of Europe," said Barbara Rose, an art historian who began restoring her rustic stone farmhouse in the Todi countryside in 1972. She described herself as almost living under house arrest in the high season.

"I never go into Todi in the summer," she said. "I loathe tourism and



James Hill for The New York Times

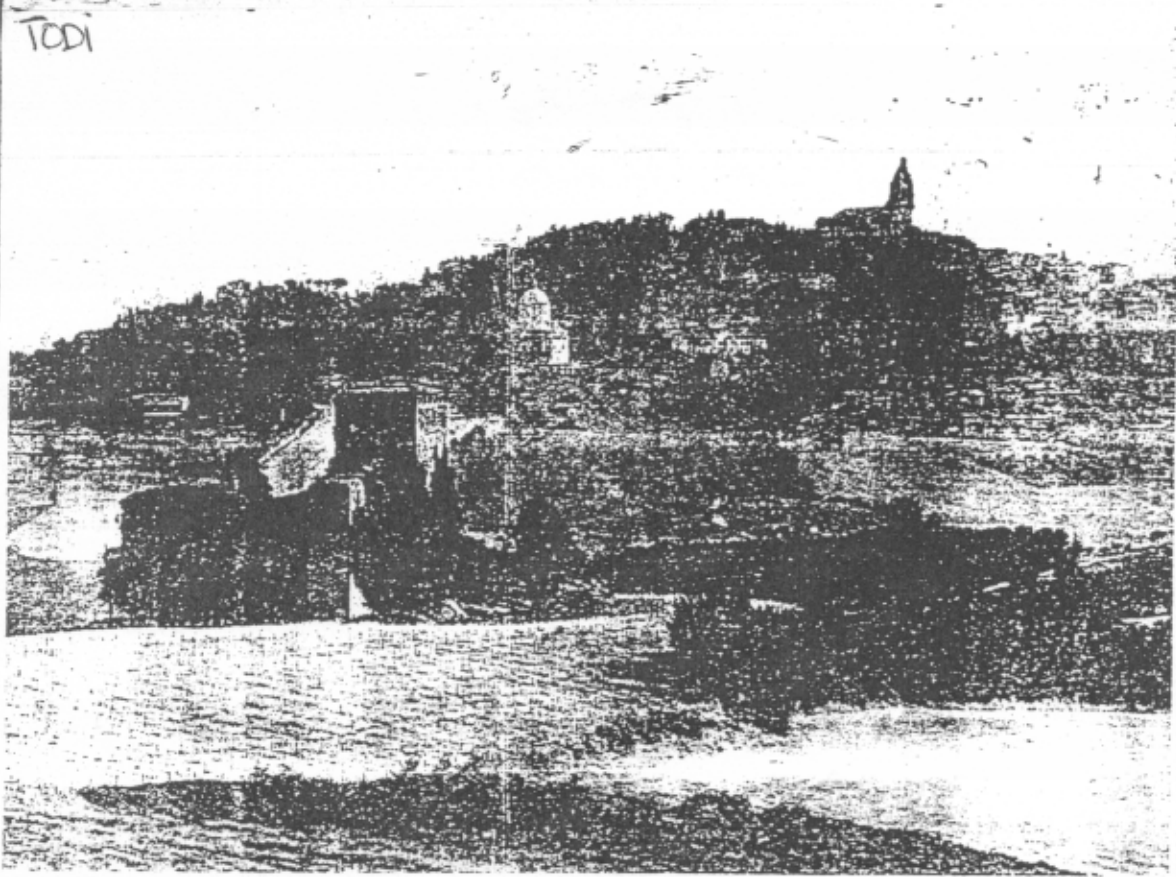
Janie C. Lee and David Warren, museum curators, are among the prominent Americans who make Todi, Italy, their home in summer.

all the nouveaux riches who think they can use their money to dip in and out of Renaissance World."

It is perhaps only fitting that a region whose Middle Ages were dominated by feuds between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines should now be marked by rifts within its new ruling class.

The cultural clash in Todi is not between Umbrian farmers and American property owners. As in so many exclusive watering holes, it is mainly between the old guard who got there first and a new and flashier guard that is threatening to follow —

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Todi, a medieval town in Italy, has been colonized by wealthy Americans, who have restored 14th-century fortresses, abbeys and farmhouses.

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an Edith Wharton comedy of manners set, somewhat absurdly, in Umbrian farm country.

"We all like the Americans, they really care about preserving the houses and protecting the land," said Claudio Santi, a local farmer's son who is now one of Todi's more prosperous real-estate agents. "But we've noticed that the Americans seem to like us more than they like each other."

The list of notable Americans who make up Todi's close-knit old guard is long: the sculptor Beverly Pepper, and her husband Bill Pepper, a journalist and writer, were Todi's first American settlers in 1970; the abstract painter Al Held, the playwright Jay Presson Allen, the documentary film maker Helen Whitney, the museum curators Janie C. Lee and her husband, David Warren, these are just a few of Todi's more prominent summer residents. As Ms. Rose put it: "It's a selective group. We really are Happy Valley."

Not all Happy Valleys are alike. Roman film stars, bankers and business tycoons who had tapped into Tuscany in the booming 1980's began building weekend villas in Umbria. Then the corruption scandals known as Tangentopoli ("Bribesville") that brought down former Prime Minister Bettino Craxi, who is currently a fugitive in Tunisia, burst the Umbria real-estate bubble.

But rich Americans quickly filled the gap. In 1990, Steven J. Ross, the late chairman of Time Warner, jolted the social landscape by buying



Americans are finding beauty, and isolation, in medieval Todi, Italy.

Olneta, a 300-acre property that includes 12th-century ruins, an entire abandoned village and two churches. Mr. Ross, who planned to create a latter-day San Simeon, died in 1992 before the \$20 million renovation could begin.

Ever since, bankers and business tycoons have searched the countryside for their piece of paradise.

The Peppers, for example, recently sold Torre Olivolo, their 14th-century stone fortress with terraced vineyards, swimming pool and olive groves, to two businessmen, Peter Mullin, a management consultant, and Miles Rubin, a clothing manufacturer and Clinton donor whose wife, Nancy, is now the United States representative to the United Nations Human Rights Commission. (The Peppers are adding a simpler house onto Mrs. Pepper's art studio on a

lower hill of their property.)

To some, the change in ownership represents the end of an era. "These new people are the really rich, and that seems like a big change," said Edward Youkilis, a New York artist and restaurateur who bought his farmhouse in 1985, as he put it, "before the Todi thing happened."

Prime Minister Tony Blair is currently vacationing on an Italian prince's estate near San Gimignano in Tuscany. (Tuscany is so heavily populated by the British that it is known locally as Chiantishire). Americans in Todi make nervous jokes that Bill Clinton will soon be sunbathing in Umbria.

Mr. Pepper, however, is not worried about new neighbors upsetting the delicate status quo. "Todi is not going to change or be overrun," he said confidently. "Mullin and the Rubins are here because they love and appreciate the place as much as we do."

Rentals of luxury houses cost as much as in Tuscany — \$4,000 a week is considered a bargain. A large property can sell for as much as \$2 million.

"It's still possible to find a place," said Joseph Helman, an art dealer based in New York and Rome who is renting the Allens' restored 16th-century convent as he looks for a suitable Umbrian ruin of his own. "It's like New York: you can buy all the apartments you want in New York if you have the money."

Mr. Helman has an inside line: his son-in-law is Domenico Mischilli, an architect who has restored many farmhouses for American clients. Mr. Helman says Todi outclasses

any other resort. "I've had houses in Greece, Spain, France, Ansedonia and Porto Ercole," Mr. Helman said. "But Umbria is my favorite place. Southampton is closer to a beach, but it's a long walk to a Raphael."

Americans in Todi say they worry about overdevelopment, but such fears seem groundless. A new stringent zoning law makes it virtually impossible to build new houses and local authorities zealously check to make sure that old farmhouses are renovated in the time-honored Umbrian style.

Mostly, some of the old-timers seem worried that a new generation of jetsetters will bring catered lunches, cocktail parties and charity balls in tow.

"If you were in the Hamptons, there would be a party every night," said Janie C. Lee, a Texan and the curator of drawings at the Whitney Museum. "Here we each give one party and that's it for the summer."

She bought a place in Todi in 1972 to "get away from the socializing," Ms. Lee added, "Americans I know here are almost without exception people who come here to work, and to work alone."

Those who worry that their idyllic countryside will be trampled by American billionaires could actually be in for an entirely different kind of social upheaval.

"We just opened a branch in Hong Kong," Mr. Santi said proudly of his real-estate company, Tudor Immobiliare. "Asians love Umbria. They see it as an investment and a summer refuge for their wives."