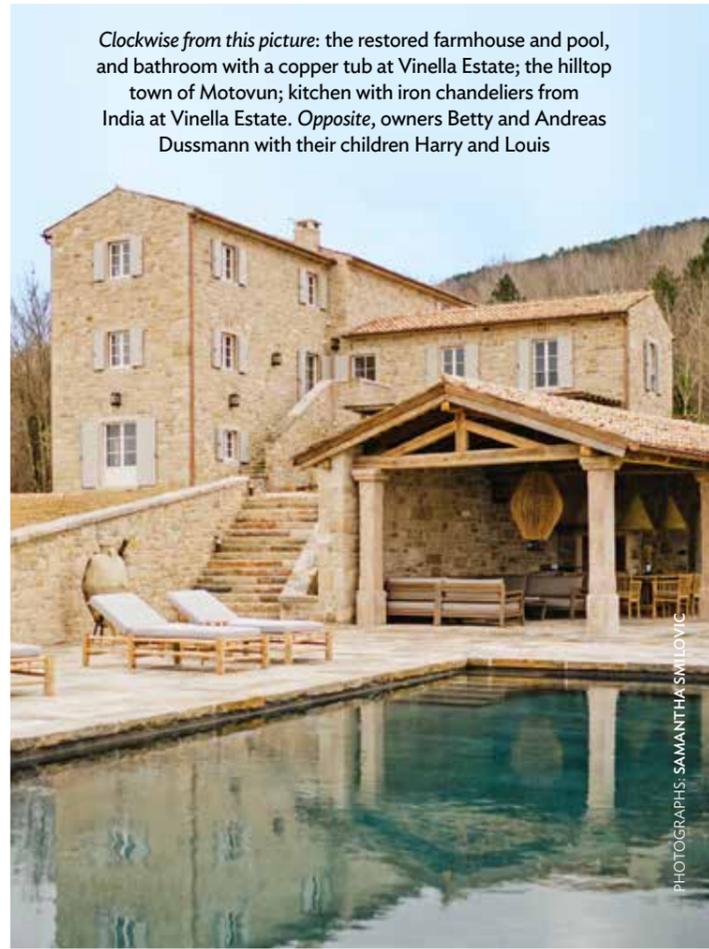


# HOUSE CALL



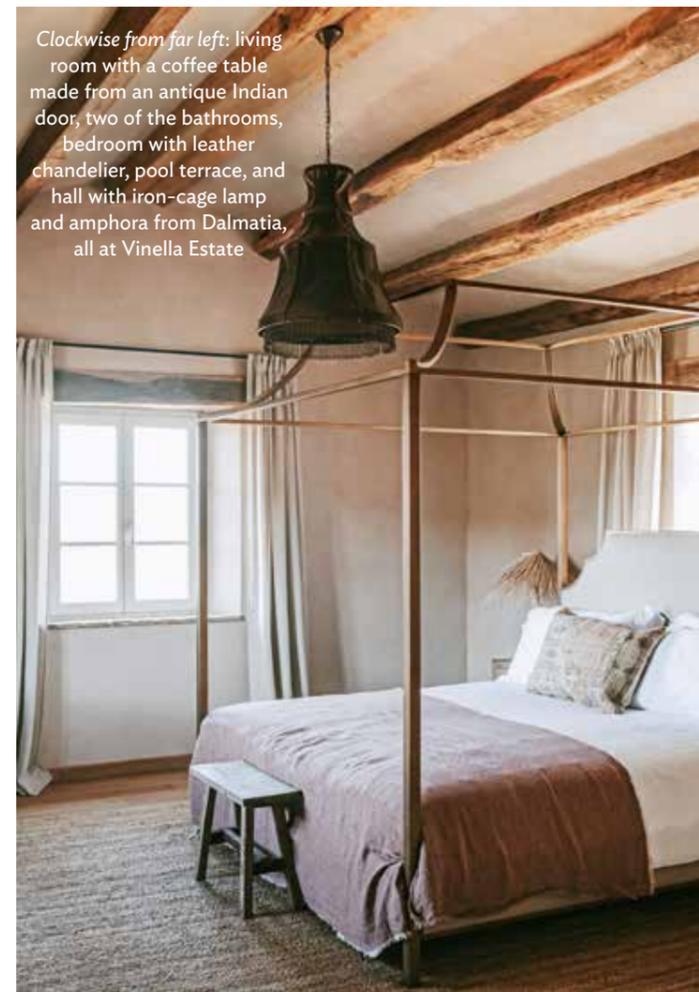
# STEPPING STONES

A FORGOTTEN HAMLET ON CROATIA'S RUGGED ISTRIA PENINSULA HAS BEEN PUT BACK ON THE MAP WITH A REINVENTED FARMHOUSE THAT CAN BE TAKEN OVER FOR YOUR OWN ADVENTURES. BY ANJA MUTIĆ



*Clockwise from this picture: the restored farmhouse and pool, and bathroom with a copper tub at Vinella Estate; the hilltop town of Motovun; kitchen with iron chandeliers from India at Vinella Estate. Opposite, owners Betty and Andreas Dussmann with their children Harry and Louis*

PHOTOGRAPHS: SAMANTHA SMILOVIC



Clockwise from far left: living room with a coffee table made from an antique Indian door; two of the bathrooms, bedroom with leather chandelier; pool terrace, and hall with iron-cage lamp and amphora from Dalmatia, all at Vinella Estate

IN THE JAGGED HINTERLAND OF ISTRIA, hilltop villages rear up like rocky atolls amid the greens of oak, acacia and pine forest. From the one I'm on right now, I can look across to the town of Motovun opposite. At sunrise its medieval roofs seem to float like a cloud city on the dawn mist filling the valley. In the early evenings, as the breeze on my own hilltop picks up, bamboo lamps and festoon lighting swing to and fro, and the chase of shadows begins on the lime-painted walls of the Vinella Estate.

I grew up amid the streets of Zagreb, Croatia's capital – and live there now, after many years abroad – but have always been drawn to Istria, the north-western peninsula that dangles into the

Dussmann, who first came here in 2001 and loved the countryside so much that he moved to the old town of Motovun for 10 years with his Ethiopian-born girlfriend Betty, now his wife. He turned ruins into elegant villas and watched as the local food scene grew in confidence, fuelled by a fresh wave of restaurants, winemakers and olive-oil producers. 'There's an Umbrian-style rusticity to it,' says Andreas. 'You still have a traditional sense of hospitality, of opening doors to strangers. Compared to the coast, there's more natural drama – particularly along the Mirna river valley. And I find the people who make their way here tend to be more interesting and independent than those who stick to the seaside towns.'

## THE INTERIOR HAS ALWAYS BEEN CONSIDERED A POOR RELATION TO THE COAST BUT IT

Adriatic just below Trieste. The rest of the country tend to regard *Istrijani* as people who are doing their own thing, more open-minded perhaps, a little more forward-thinking. This is a region that holds many personal memories, and legends that still have the power to fascinate. When I was a child, we visited our cousins by the sea in Rovinj, a harbour citadel once ruled by Venice, and my brother tells stories about summers spent at music camp in artistically minded Grožnjan, another of those hilltop villages.

The interior has always been considered a poor relation to the coast but it has a deeper appeal, not only for the sheer spectacle of its rock-and-forest patina, but also for its mystic ley lines and ancient stone circles – I know one near Bale that catches your voice in a strange, eerie way – and the leave-it-all-behind dropouts who have crafted alternative ways of living deep in the trees. This hinterland has had a similar pull on Munich-born Andreas

The couple eventually moved back to Munich for their oldest son to start school – Henry is now six, his brother Louis four – but the family still spend summers in Istria, staying at their waterfront palazzo in Rovinj and here on the hillside. The Vinella Estate came about after a trip in 2018, when Andreas found an abandoned hamlet between Motovun and the village of Kaldir which turned out to be one of the largest private plots in Istria – nearly 15 acres of overgrown terrain around a derelict farmhouse. During and after World War II, many Italian families living in the region moved out, leaving behind country estates and villages that still stand empty and forlorn – little ghost towns with hollow-eyed, crumbling buildings. When it comes to land ownership, Istria is like an intricate puzzle, with many families co-owning tiny parcels. To find clear-titled acreage is quite a stroke of luck and even then, there's a lot of unpicking. It took Andreas

many months and negotiations with six different owners before he could buy the estate.

Over the next two years, he worked on the land and restored the farmhouse. An access road was cut in, and an architect from Pula brought in to navigate Croatia's strict conservation laws, along with a trusted team of stonemasons and carpenters. 'My main builder has a real passion for finding old materials,' Andreas tells me. 'He travelled all around Croatia to find wooden battens to match the exposed oak beams, as well as cotto and antique roof tiles.' The pool terrace took nearly four months to construct, and involved painstakingly cutting the stone and fitting it all in

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by hand. Energy comes from solar panels and a heat pump, the pool is chemical free and the vineyard, olives and orchards – planted out according to historic plans of the estate – are organic.

The interiors are inspired by the aesthetics of wabi sabi. 'We've always loved the concept of simplicity and imperfection,' Andreas says. 'And it seems to suit this space, among the often chaotic hillside villages.' The couple set about sourcing global pieces via design shops in Holland and Belgium: a carved wooden artwork from Sumba, fringed palm-leaf macramé made by female artisans in Bangladesh and iron chandeliers from India, which spent months on a container ship during lockdown. Cubist-like wall rugs were bought from a Belgian designer based in the Marrakech medina. After a year of social distancing and no travel outside Croatia, it feels like a conversation with the rest of the world. Sprigs of dried flowers and grass from the fields are laid in unexpected

spots. There's a restrained harmony, an austere balance to the raw space. The most personal object is a simple Orthodox metal cross, a gift from Betty's family in Addis Ababa.

'The sense of remoteness is liberating,' she says to me. 'Even in August the only sounds are the bees and birds, church bells on Sundays. And there's a good energy here – if you believe in that kind of thing. Three ley lines converge in Motovun, which is very rare.' Sunshine and birdsong draw me out to the garden, where butterflies flicker above star jasmine, shrubby germander and wisteria. A favourite walk is through the olive grove to the small chapel the couple discovered after cutting back the woodland

(a stone was found inscribed with the date of 1614, the only clue to the farmhouse's origins); their two children prefer to track down signs of the rabbits, wild boar and deer that pass through.

The family stayed here at Easter with Andreas's father, scouting nearby wineries for bottles of potent Teran and the morning market at Novigrad for fish. A 15-minute drive away is Konoba Vrh, for prosciutto, *fuzi* (hand-rolled pasta) filled with wild asparagus, and flurries of truffle shavings. Other times are spent cooking in the open kitchen beside the pool, picking herbs from the garden, looking over to Motovun from the day bed. There's space enough for everyone and their thoughts – this house on a hill seems to offer reprieve from a challenging year. 📍

*Vinella Estate sleeps up to 12 and can be booked through Scott Williams from about £4,740 per week. [scottwilliams.co.uk](http://scottwilliams.co.uk)*

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