

**Across Italy, ancient villages are emptying out.
But new ideas are bringing hope for their revival**

RAISING THE DEAD

By Deborah Needleman

The first thing that must be said about the ancient town of Civita di Bagnoregio, just two hours' drive from Rome and Florence, is that it is beautiful. From a distance, it looks literally otherworldly: the town sits so high atop a perilously steep pinnacle of eroding volcanic rock that it seems as if it's perched upon clouds rather than tethered to the earth. Its very sediment is strafed with 2500 years of architectural history: Etruscan caves, ancient remains, medieval dwellings and Renaissance villas.

For centuries a stop on ancient trade routes, Civita di Bagnoregio was prosperous from Roman times until the Middle Ages. But after a devastating earthquake in 1695, most residents fled for lower ground, and so began the city's long decline. By the end of World War II, nearly all of its inhabitants had left in search of work in cities or abroad. For most of the past half-century, its population has hovered around 10 or so full-time residents.

Because the erosion of the hill is so severe (houses have been tumbling off its sides since the

1700s), Civita di Bagnoregio will eventually be reclaimed by the landscape. Residents and visitors alike must park at the base and ascend a steep footbridge to enter through a huge Gothic archway. Past the backless facade of a Renaissance house, with several windows open to the sky like a stage set, lies a small, dusty piazza with a church, a fine seventh-century medieval tower, a small bar and not much else. There's no pharmacy or school, no hospital, none of the necessities that somehow serve to make a place a place. There are a couple of inns, and a few restaurants. Civita is real without being actual, if that makes any sense.

For all the ancient Italian hill towns and villages that delight the traveller – the San Gimignano, Montepulciano and Fiesole – there are scores of others (many equally or more beautiful) where few venture and in which very few people reside today. According to a 2016 report, nearly 2500 rural villages in Italy are perilously depopulated, some semi-abandoned. A primary narrative of Italy in the 20th century has been what followed the collision of poverty, urbanisation, mass emigration and natural disaster, a confluence of events that has devastated many towns that had other-

Otherworldly: Civita di Bagnoregio at sunset