

By Glenn Rifkin
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Women entrepreneurs in Tuscany are scarce. This pastoral region of Italy, beloved by tourists, is alluring because of its uniquely beautiful landscape, its fine food and wine, and its stubborn adherence to tradition. It isn't renowned for its embrace of outsiders with fresh ideas about how things ought to be done. Which is why Isabella Moriccianni's story is worth hearing.

At 50, Isabella is the life force behind The Isabella Experience, a hospitality concept she honed at Cretiaole, an alluring inn situated just outside Pienza, which was her first foray into Italy's famed agriturismo movement more than 20 years ago. She has since built her enterprise into a thriving business with four properties and a new restaurant attracting guests from around the world. It's one thing to run a small bed and breakfast, it's quite another to create a unique hospitality concept that combines many diverse aspects of a Tuscan holiday and is so enticing it gets the attention of one of the world's top travel experts.

Her success, Isabella said, is based on her laser focus on her mission. "I'm not selling beds, I'm selling a concept, a way to spend a holiday in Tuscany," she explained. "If you come here, you have an experience, a week of special encounters. It changes your life."

Isabella, a self-styled "city girl" who was born and raised in Milan in Italy's industrial north in what she describes as "a family of entrepreneurs," came to Tuscany, specifically the glorious Renaissance village of Pienza, back in 1997 on a vacation trip during the Christmas holidays. With her brother's recommendation, she stayed at Cretiaole, a 14th-century farmhouse on the outskirts of Pienza that Luciano Moriccianni, a local farmer, had converted into an agriturismo, a combination inn and working farm.

The agriturismo movement in Italy formally began in 1985 when the Italian government initiated tax breaks for struggling farmers who could host travelers on their properties. Luciano had opened Cretiaole in the early 1990s to take advantage of the tax laws and add to the family income. Along with his wife, Liliana, and son Carlo, Luciano raised livestock, chickens, and produce, planted olive trees and vineyards, and built a nice side business attracting mostly Italian tourists to the working farm. On her visit, Isabella, a creative and ambitious young businesswoman who was the assistant to the executive director at Campari, met Carlo and the spark was immediate. They dated long distance for a while until Carlo convinced her to relocate to Pienza, where they married and began a family. Despite serious trepidation, Isabella joined the family business and quickly started suggesting



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The agriturismo movement in Italy and the rise of The Isabella Experience



Isabella Moriccianni got her start at Cretiaole (top), a 14th-century farmhouse converted into a combination inn and working farm.

changes. She envisioned transforming the inn into a vibrant, enticing tourist destination. "The family did not really know what I was doing," she recalled. "There was a lot of resistance."

Though Tuscany was the birthplace of the Renaissance, the rural areas remained conservative and traditional, which made Isabella's undertaking an ongoing challenge. Pienza, designed by the Renaissance humanist Silvius Piccolomini (who became Pope Pius II) is so beautiful, set against the backdrop of the breathtaking Val d'Orcia, that famed Italian director Franco Zeffirelli filmed part of his 1968 masterpiece, "Romeo and Juliet," in Pienza.

"Cretiaole was my gem," Isabella said. "It made me discover my passion for hospitality." From the start, she did everything, from cleaning rooms to acting as the concierge for guests. Luciano had focused only on Italian tourists but Isabella saw that as limiting. Fluent in four lan-

guages, including English, she wanted to attract Americans, Canadians, and other Europeans. She upgraded the accommodations and added a host of activities that made the guests feel like they were part of the family. She and Liliana began pasta-making classes in the idyllic courtyard, teaching how to create the local favorite, pici, by hand. They held group dinners under the stars featuring food and drink produced on the farm. She offered tastings of the olive oil and grappa from the farm, and she led guests on expeditions to nearby Etruscan ruins. She learned of the best restaurants in neighboring villages such as Montepuciano and Montalcino so she could offer recommendations. And she listened intently to what travelers wanted. The word of mouth began to attract more visitors, many of whom came back again and again.

My wife and I first visited Cretiaole in 2003 and promptly fell in love with the rustic accommodations, the bucolic setting, and the Moriccianni. We had heard about the wonders of Tuscany, but we had not expected this personal, hands-on experience that Isabella presented. Like others who visited, we enthusiastically sent friends and family to Pienza.

Cretiaole's popularity grew, eventually attracting the notice of Rick Steves, the popular travel writer and host of his own PBS travel show. A glowing recommendation from Steves caused interest to skyrocket. The resulting requests were more than Cretiaole could handle. At that point, Isabella's entrepreneurial roots kicked in and she began to buy other properties, branding her business as The Isabella Experience. She has added three more lodgings in the area, including her newest, La Moscadella, a former 16th-century monastery near Castelmuzio. One of the high-end properties rents for 8,500 euros (about \$9,500) per week.

"Isabella has created a kind of Tuscan cultural boot camp," said Steves, who publishes travel guides along with his television series. "Creating the best agriturismo experience is finding a balance between roughing it and the farmhouse B&B equivalent of 'glamping.' The accommodations may be rustic but the banquet of cultural experiences — hikes, art, cooking, connecting with her family — is first class. That's my kind of travel."

For Isabella, the key to success has been attracting the kind of travelers who revel in this kind of experience. "Booking.com doesn't bring the right people to us," she said. "I want people to come and have a cultural immersion with us. They find that the dolce vita is here."

Glenn Rifkin can be reached at grifkin@comcast.net. His latest book is "Future Forward," about the life and leadership lessons of Patrick McGovern.

How Lego House came to be — brick by brick

By Jerry Soverinsky
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BILLUND, Denmark — There's a chicken-and-egg-like conundrum facing visitors to Denmark: Is the reason the Danish are so happy is that they created Lego? Or did they create Lego because they're so happy? Either way, the impossible riddle plays itself out in real life here, birthplace and world headquarters of the iconic brick and home to Lego House, an out-of-this-world Lego experience center and the global ground zero for everything Lego.

The first thing you notice when approaching Billund by car — a roughly three-hour drive from Copenhagen — is that you're entering . . . well . . . Billund, not the town where the first Lego system was created in 1955 (the first Lego brick was created three years later, in 1958). Sure, there's a massive Legoland amusement park on the town's outskirts, but that's no relation to Lego House. (Legoland is operated by Merlin Entertainments, a UK company, which operates eight Legoland parks around the world.)

You head deeper into the town center, following your phone's GPS prompts closely, and just around the corner from a hardware store, boutique, and bakery, you find it: the Lego House, a majestic, Lego-like structure in its own right, impossibly integrated into Billund's town center.

"This is not Lego Town, it is Billund," says Trine Nissens, spokesperson for Lego House, responding to this writer's inquiry as to a dearth of Lego House signage in Billund. It's characteristic Lego humility, a welcome attribute where the core focus is on the visitor. And as you step inside the sleek structure, you're immediately bathed in a warm yet pristine aesthetic that adheres closely to Lego founder Ole Kirk Christiansen's edict: "Only the best is good enough."

That unofficial corporate mantra is on display from the moment you enter the Lego House, where the Tree of Creativity stretches — impossibly — 50-plus feet in the air. As the world's largest Lego model, the Tree is made up of more than 6.3 million standard Lego bricks, which took nearly 25,000 hours to build.

Four color-coded zones dispersed throughout Lego House allow for interactive play and construction, while LH's top floor features a Masterpiece Gallery, which includes a display of creations from Adult Fans of Lego (AFoL), a global community of accomplished Lego building enthusiasts.

The Red Zone is anchored by a



If you go . . .

Arrival

There are international airports in Billund (less than 10 minutes from Lego House) and Copenhagen (about a three-hour drive from Lego House), with ample international flights and connections from the United States to each.

Parking

Onsite parking at Lego House is ample — both street parking and a covered lot — and is charged by the hour.

Tourism information

Visit www.legohouse.com/en-gb for detailed English language information to help you plan your Lego House visit.

Lodging

You can book accommodations on the Lego House website (www.legohouse.com/en-gb/plan-your-visit/accommodation), with options for every budget — camping, hostels, B&Bs and hotels.

Lego House tickets

US visitors save 30 Danish Kroers (about \$2) when purchasing tickets in advance on the Lego House website (www.legohouse.com/en-gb/tickets). 2019 ticket prices are 229 DKK for both adults and children — about \$34 — while those 2 and under are admitted free.



Top: Lego House's top floor features a Masterpiece Gallery. **Above:** The Red Zone is anchored by a 2 million-piece waterfall.

huge, 2 million-piece waterfall, whose kaleidoscope of colors teases visitors into separate areas featuring traditional Lego bricks as well as its larger, toddler-friendly Duplo varieties. There's an endless supply of bricks here, while a Creative Lab area promotes creative free builds.

The Blue Zone incorporates coding strategies, as visitors help propel robots across the South Pole to save frozen mammoths. It's an interactive race to the finish, appropriate for all ages.

While appropriate for all ages, the Yellow Zone attracts younger builders, who can construct sea creatures and floral creations at various digital aquarium stations.

While Lego House naturally attracts children looking to ramp up their Lego building skills, it's by no means a kids-only center. Indeed, dur-

ing this writer's visit, it was the adults who tended to linger over build sessions, while their kids urged them to press on for additional exploration.

The lower level of Lego House is dedicated to a historical installation that traces the story of Lego, while a digital, interactive display allows visitors to find a virtual image of every Lego set ever created, preserving one's favorites as digital memories, for download with a free Lego app (see below).

Paying visitors to the Lego House receive a wristband that they can scan at any one of a dozen or so capture stations, which take photos of their creations and save copies of their stop motion videos, allowing them to access and download the videos after their visit, with the help of a free Lego app.

Visitors to Lego House — even those who don't purchase entry tickets to the experience zones — will find tasty Lego-centric food options. The Brickaccino cafe offers snacks, sandwiches, and drinks, while Le Gourmet features Nordic specialties in a French brasserie backdrop. The most popular option is the family restaurant Mini Chef, which neatly integrates the interactive Lego brick-building experience. How so? Customers build their own order with Lego bricks, following — what else? — traditional Lego-like visual instructions. No need to worry that you've messed things up. As you feed your build into a 3-D scanner, an LED readout confirms your order, ensuring you'll receive your meatballs and cola, for instance, rather than, say, shoelaces and a sofa.

The exterior of Lego House features 13 terraces shaped like giant Lego bricks, each with a distinct children's play area. The terraces are open to the public and, like the Lego House food options, are accessible even without a ticket.

There's an on-site gift shop that sells Lego House exclusive sets — the Lego House and Tree of Creativity — and in keeping with the humble Lego approach, one is hardly bombarded with standard gift shop tchotches or offerings. Indeed, during this writer's visit, adult Lego House shirts were relegated to size 4XL, with the other sizes on order for several months.

Yes, the Lego House is decidedly focused on its visitors, a singular architectural achievement that offers endless opportunities for creative exploration and expression.

Jerry Soverinsky can be reached at jerrysoverinsky@gmail.com.