

Torri Superiore: Restoring a Medieval Italian Village

Northeast of Monaco in the foothills of the Italian Maritime Alps, where the nearby affluent tourist playgrounds of Nice, Cannes, and San Remo seem a world away, you'll find the peace and comradeship of a close-knit ecovillage, Torri Superiore.

In 1989, a small group of Italian environmentalists began to buy up and renovate the medieval ruin of the village of Torri Superiore, a complex stone structure built in the 14th century on the hillside above the Bevara River. To defend the village from enemy attack, its medieval founders built Torri Superiore as one large architectural labyrinth, with all individual homes and business spaces connected by stairs and arches. The village was continuously inhabited until after the Second World War, when residents slowly began migrating to the industrial cities of Turin and Milan, or even just down to Torri di Ventimiglia, the newer village on the valley floor. Since 1989, Torri Superiore's new community inhabitants have restored 160 rooms, and turned this former ruin into one of Europe's most beautiful ecovillages.

I am staying here as a guest instructor for the community's Ecovillage Training Course, and to enjoy a short holiday. Happily, I notice that these ecovillage students have access to both Diana Leafe Christian's book, *Creating a Life Together*, and to my own recently published *Findhorn Book of Community Living*. Torri Superiore members also offer courses in Permaculture Design, Meeting Facilitation and Consensus, and even Italian Cooking.

From my comfortable bedroom in the guest house, I overlook the steep terraces of the Bevara Valley. Terracing this hillside may have once been an example of small-scale sustainable agriculture, although overpopulation, wars, and soil erosion have seriously degraded this resource. Torri Superiore members are restoring the poor grey soil of this ancient landscape through permaculture design and good ecovillage planning, and have planted a wide

variety of crops on these terraces, including vegetables, grapevines, olives, plums, and apples.

Thirty members own the property through a nonprofit organization, Associ-



Our international correspondent, Dr. Bill Metcalf of Griffith University, Australia, has studied contemporary and historic communal groups worldwide since the 1970s. Past president of the International Communal Studies Association, a Fellow of the Findhorn Foundation, and author of From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality (University of New South Wales, 1993), his newest book is The Findhorn Book of Community Living (Findhorn Press, 2004).

azione Culturale Torri Superiore. Each member contributes 155 Euros (\$185) annually for its operation and upkeep. While most of the association's members visit regularly and help with the work, only 11 adults and five children live here permanently. Together they work hard to restore their seemingly endless stone walls, farm their narrow terraces, and operate their charming guest house and Ecovillage Training Centre. We guests and members eat all our meals together on a wide terrace overlooking the river and valley. Each resident pays 200 Euros (\$240) per month for food and utilities, while guest house residents pay a daily fee. Five of the members who live here receive low salaries to prepare meals and manage the guest house, assisted by volunteers.

Several members pool their income and expenses, while others are financially independent from one another. Each member must contribute labour to the community.

Only a few of the terraces I can see from my guest house window actually belong to the ecovillage. Italy's ancient, bafflingly complex pattern of land ownership means that parcels as small as a few square meters must be negotiated for with often hard-to-locate absentee owners. Today, Torri Superiore still owns only a few hectares of land; however, it's not one contiguous piece. Rather, various portions of their property are scattered over many different small terraces, some a half-hour's walk from the village. One community member tells me that his dream is to have even half a hectare (one acre) of fertile garden land rather than these many small patches of relatively poor soil.

The association members meet every spring and autumn to develop major plans and allocate responsibilities; the resident members meet weekly to discuss interpersonal issues and plan daily tasks. While minor decisions are delegated to individual project managers, all major decisions are made by consensus. Torri

Superiore members tell me that because they are a small group in which everyone knows each other very well, people rarely block a proposal.

While there's plenty of work to do here, income-producing work is hard to come by. Torri Superiore's popular guest house is their major source of cash. Nine resident members work on site and two earn a living offsite: one as a teacher in the nearby village and another as manager of a local winery.

To become a member of Torri Superiore Ecovillage, one needs to visit several times and work with the members, live on-site during a minimum six-month probationary period, and be accepted by every current member. New people do not pay a joining fee, although they would probably need an outside source of income, and must either rent living quarters from or buy into the Torri Superiore complex or live in the nearby village.

Community members encourage those who express an interest in joining to be very clear about their reasons, and try to ensure that each new member will contribute to the collective energy rather than drain energy, of particular concern given that community members live in the same building and share all meals.

Most current members are in couple relationships, although the intense communal life here means that single members probably don't feel as socially isolated as can happen in less close-knit intentional communities.

After a long dinner on their *terrazzo*, over our third glass of local red wine, my old friend Lucilla Borio tells me more. "Our common

vision is to prove that it is possible to live communally and to have a really good life even though we work hard and are doing something that looks impossible on paper. We are trying to materialise a dream. We respect each other deeply and respect nature and want to do all we can to save the planet and create an ideal society."

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“No matter where we go or what we do, we cannot escape ourselves,” she adds. “When one lives in community it will all come out. Community living is not always a party; sometimes it’s damned tough!”

Another member, Massimo Candela, says that while community members feel overworked, their biggest problem is to combine communal living in an ecovillage with the strict legal requirements of running a tourist business with its expected high health and other standards. “In some ways we are more of a tourist venture than an ecovillage, but I would like us to be more of a training centre.” Lucilla adds that while a shortage of money and good land is always a problem for Torri Superiore, more important than money and land is for members to feel appreciated for the good work they’re doing in restoring this environment and serving as a model of sustainable community living.

For some years, Torri Superiore was the European headquarters of the Global Ecovillage Network in Europe (GEN-Europe), and it still fulfils an important

networking function between intentional communities around the globe. Members see themselves as not just living in a small ecovillage within this beautiful valley but also as part of a worldwide movement to promote ecologically sustainable communities.

“Some parts of my personal dream I am unable to transform into reality,” says Massimo, referring to the hard work of restoring the community’s land and buildings. “In the beginning, I concentrated more on the spiritual path but I have lost that, little by little. I am now trying to find a way to again work on my inner path through the land and the gardens.”

Lucilla’s dream is to complete the restoration work of creating adequate seminar spaces and plenty of comfortable accommodations for students and visitors. “Then I want to release the ‘stone energy’ that we sometimes carry inside us from working with such a massive, heavy structure—and the enormous weight of 700 years of history. I feel that the stones really do absorb much of our energy.”

Why does she stay here? “I love waking up here in the morning, hearing cicadas and birds, and going to bed listening to the frogs. The smells and sounds of this place are magical. I can picture myself as an old lady making jams and soap here at Torri Superiore.”

I leave to walk along a narrow stone pathway, past centuries-old ruins, to swim in a beautiful natural pool in the Bevara River, and watch the sun set behind the Granmondo mountains. It doesn’t get much better than this!

Torri Superiore is not a utopia, but it is an exciting ecovillage. Here good people are doing their very best to live in harmony with nature and their neighbours, while serving as a global model of recycling and restoration, and social and agricultural sustainability

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