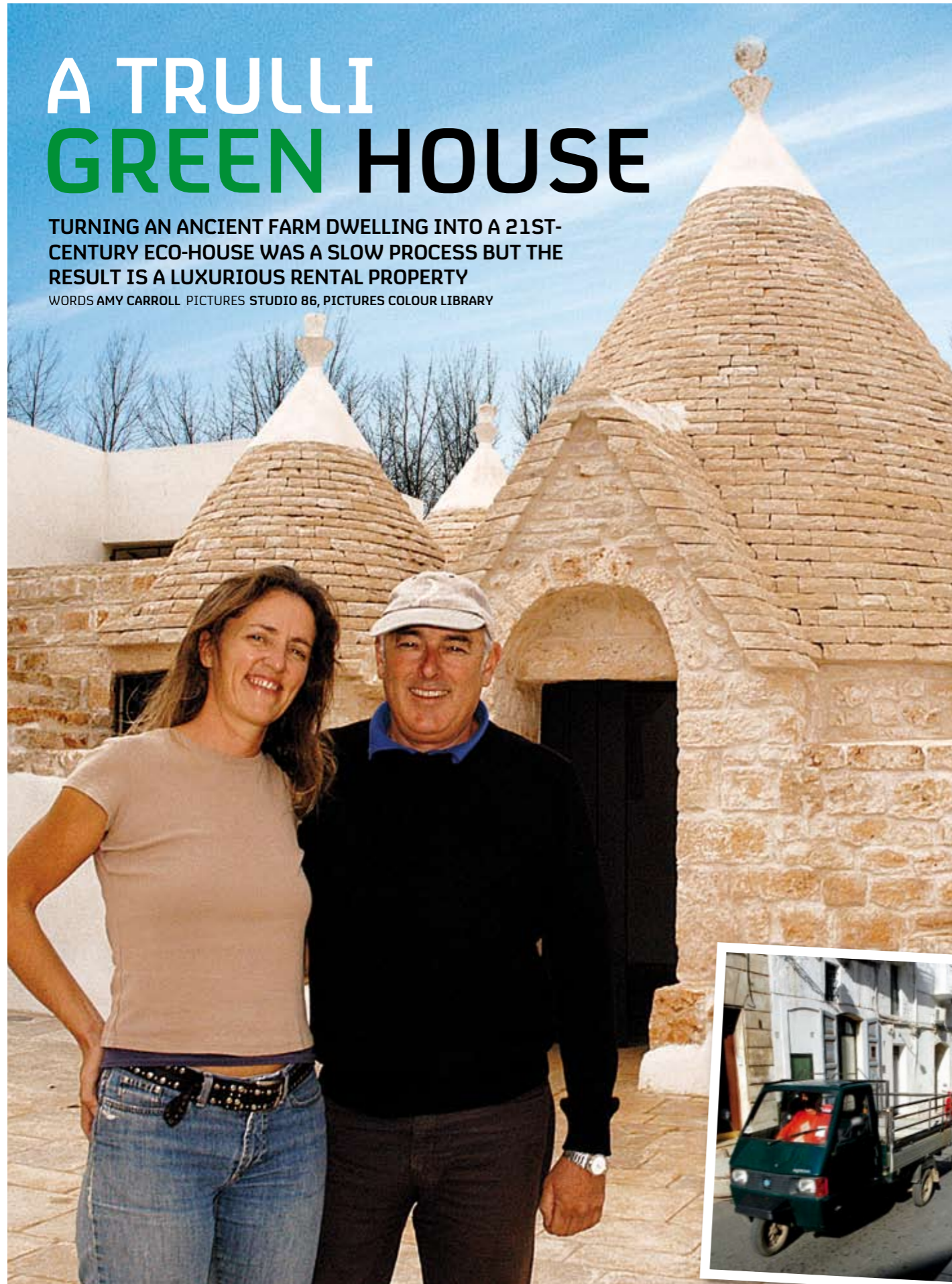


A TRULLI GREEN HOUSE

TURNING AN ANCIENT FARM DWELLING INTO A 21ST-CENTURY ECO-HOUSE WAS A SLOW PROCESS BUT THE RESULT IS A LUXURIOUS RENTAL PROPERTY

WORDS AMY CARROLL PICTURES STUDIO 86, PICTURES COLOUR LIBRARY



PUGLIA, ITALY

Case study

Clapped-out Fiat Cinquecentos and ramshackle farmhouses pepper the Itria Valley in south-east Italy. If you asked a local farmer, chugging around in his three-wheeler, if he worries about his carbon footprint, he'd most likely shrug his shoulders innocently.

But for Cathy Upton, 39, from Windsor, and Keith Villiers, 54, from Rickmansworth, setting up a luxury holiday-home business in Puglia had to be a green operation.

"We were stunned by the beautiful countryside and wanted to do what we could to protect and work with it," says Cathy. "Our trullo was a total wreck when we purchased it. And in the early days, when we came in our holidays, we camped out in the only room that had a fireplace we could use – with tomatoes and onions hanging from the rotten beams."

It was quite a change from what the couple were used to in the UK. Cathy was working as a management consultant and Keith was an IT contractor and buy-to-let landlord. When they started looking at property in Puglia, they used local estate agents they had found on the Internet, and when they stumbled on Trullo Solari

in November 2004, they instantly fell for its pretty dome-shaped roof and its setting, in the rolling, green hills outside Ceglie Messapica, half an hour from the coastal city of Brindisi.

Trulli (plural of trullo), which have become a symbol of Puglia, were originally agricultural buildings, sometimes lived in and sometimes used to shelter harvested crops from the sun. "Because many of the locals regard them as tatty ruins and fail to see their potential worth, it's still possible to get them, and a sizeable plot of land, for a reasonable price. You just have to look outside the obvious places like Ostuni and Cisternino.

Keith says, "You have to be careful that no one else can lay a claim on the land or building though, and you should get a document signed, to say so. Legally, if your neighbour is an agricultural worker, they have first dibs. Even if you've bought the land, they could still demand it from you and you would have to give it up. That's regardless of any work you've done on it."

Many people who buy trulli and renovate them use local builders because they're specialists at rebuilding the cone-shaped roofs.

Left Cathy and Keith are always on hand to welcome guests to Trullo Solari **Inset** three-wheeler vans are great both for the narrow streets and country lanes **Above** the back of the trullo has eight-metre patio doors, leading to the pool and terrace

OUR PLACE KEITH AND CATHY

Who Keith Villiers and Cathy Upton.

What Four-bed, four-bathroom detached trullo with lamie extensions, swimming pool and olive grove.

Where On the outskirts of Ceglie, Puglia, Italy.

How much They paid €100,000 (£78,660) in 2004.

Added value Cathy and Keith have added eco-friendly underfloor heating and a swimming pool and terrace.

Current value Estimated to be worth €750,000 (£589,800).





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The couple were told the restoration would take two years but it took three. "And if we hadn't moved out here, we're sure it would have taken until now to finish," adds Cathy. "We bought it with the intention of running it as a business, so we couldn't sit back and rely on the locals. We've discovered that many of them have a completely different concept of time and an apparent inability to multitask!"

One of the challenges facing the couple, and the architect, was to make the property as environmentally friendly as possible, and to tap into one of the most reliable sources of power in the area – the sun. Puglia gets an average of 300 days of sunshine a year, and the couple wanted to make the most of this.

It's also a very cold region in the winter, and it often snows, so they needed to create a living area that would offer the best of both worlds: warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Keith explains, "When we first started sourcing materials and looking for other examples of solar-powered houses, we found very little evidence! Luckily, our plumber understood just what we wanted, even though we ended up importing some parts from the UK. We use the solar power for the water and underfloor heating and we have a wood-burning stove that feeds into it as well. The gas boiler only kicks in if there isn't enough energy from the solar power."

Ensuring that the living space complemented the eco-friendly plan was made easier by working with the existing structure, Cathy explains. "The original farmers who used the trulli were quite likely to have been considerably smaller than us, and so over the years, different owners have changed the shape of the building,



adding square extensions, called *lamie*, to it – with higher ceilings. This gave us the potential for comfortable, airy living areas, and we opened up the back of the house with an eight-metre double-glazed patio door, running right across the back of the open-plan living and dining room. The outlook across the pool is beautiful. It's totally secluded and green wherever you look. The property has the perfect mix of modern, hi-spec finishes and traditional charm."

After succeeding with the solar-energy plan, insulating the property and installing a gas condensing boiler, the couple turned to the water. Cathy says, "We didn't want to pollute it with all the washing products our visitors would use. We chose Ecover cleaning products and provide organic body care products and home-made soap. I'm hoping to develop our own organic products."

Because the trullo has such thick stone walls and high ceilings, air conditioning wasn't necessary. Cathy and Keith maintain the surrounding land organically – so, no pesticides or herbicides, and they water the garden with rainwater that they collect during the winter. Cathy says, "We found that if we didn't stray too far from the original design and purpose of the building, and used natural resources, we didn't have to do too much to make it 'green'."

In addition, to encourage visiting guests to offset their carbon footprint, the couple invite them to buy and plant an olive or fruit tree. Cathy says, "A return flight from London to Brindisi creates 0.6 tonnes of carbon dioxide per person, so we recommend planting one tree per flight. We take guests to the nursery and provide the land for the tree to grow at a cost of approximately ten euros. We then take responsibility for the planting, watering and pruning. So far, we've planted ten trees, and hope to keep

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planting! We also use a compost bin, provide cotton shopping bags for guests and we have recycling bins for plastic and glass. "We wanted to be able to combine creature comforts with being as environmentally friendly as possible, though it does depend on us to make it easy for guests to be eco-friendly – they're on holiday after all. We could have just installed low-energy light bulbs but for us, it wasn't enough."

Once the trullo was fully restored and ready to receive guests, the couple moved into a second property they had bought, about 15 minutes' drive away, on the outskirts of Cisternino. "We're renovating it but it's habitable. We now want it to be as cosy, and green, as possible," says Cathy. Were they disappointed not to live in Trullo Solari though, after all their efforts?

"No," says Cathy, "it was always going to be a business. And I enjoyed setting up the website and rental side of things. We wanted to offer something that goes beyond the norm, and Trullo Solari certainly does that. We've used only the best-quality materials and have a hi-spec finish throughout, and we aim to make our guests as comfortable as possible. We make sure the cupboards aren't empty on arrival and we recommend local restaurants, leaving translated menus to tempt them. And while we're busy developing our business, we know that we're doing all we can to ensure the beautiful environment that allows us to sustain a comfortable life out here isn't threatened or polluted." ☀

For more information

If you're interested in staying at Trullo Solari, call Cathy Upton on 07973 942508 or 0039 339 487 6017 or visit www.trullosolari.com.

Left Cathy translates the local trattoria's menu for a guest; the front of the trullo retains its original charm Above the quiet lanes are ideal for cycling; the kitchen is fully equipped for cooking up a storm Below up on the roof – the trullo has plenty of suntraps; the house has lots of hidey-holes and character features



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