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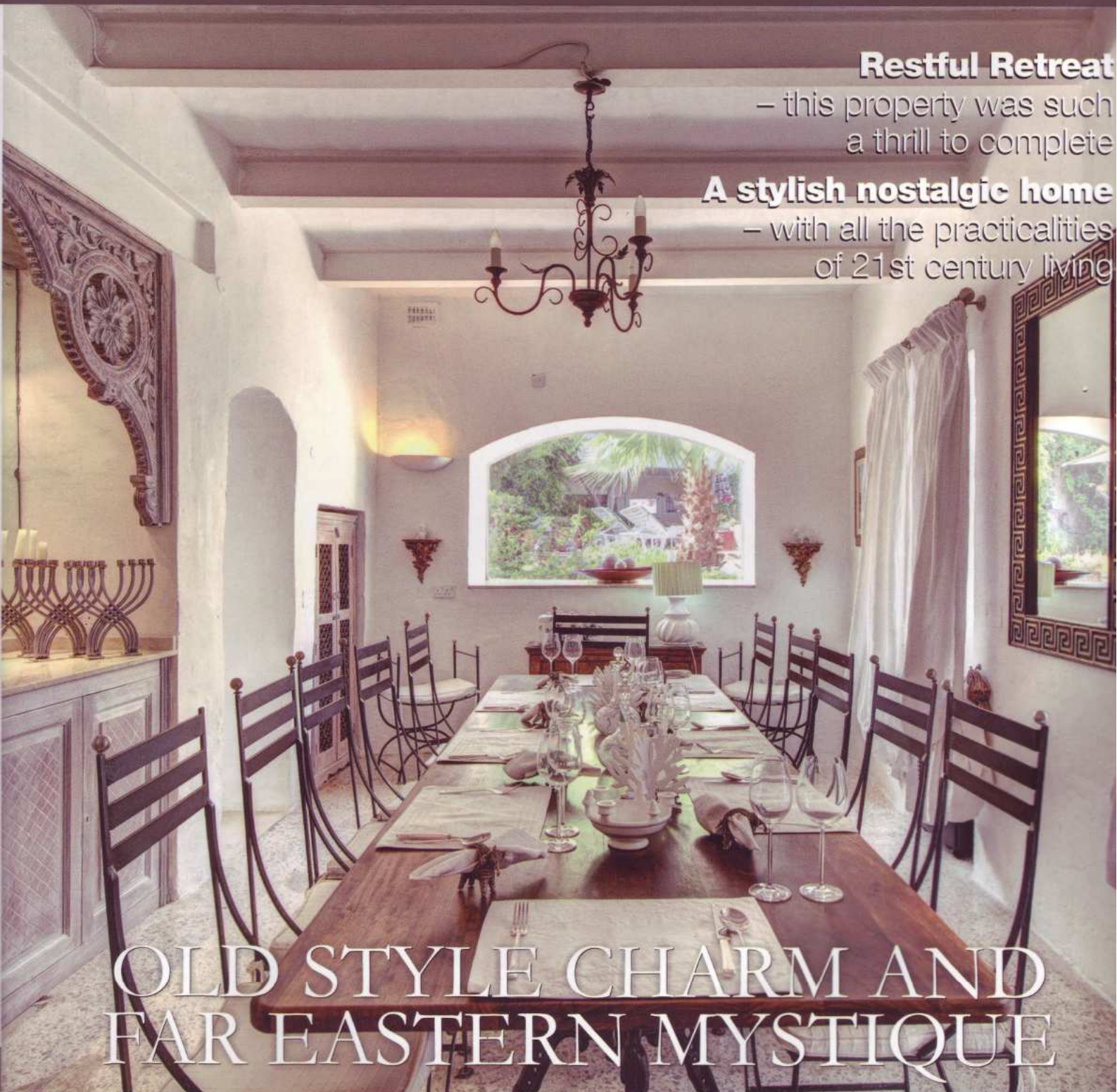
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## Restful Retreat

– this property was such a thrill to complete

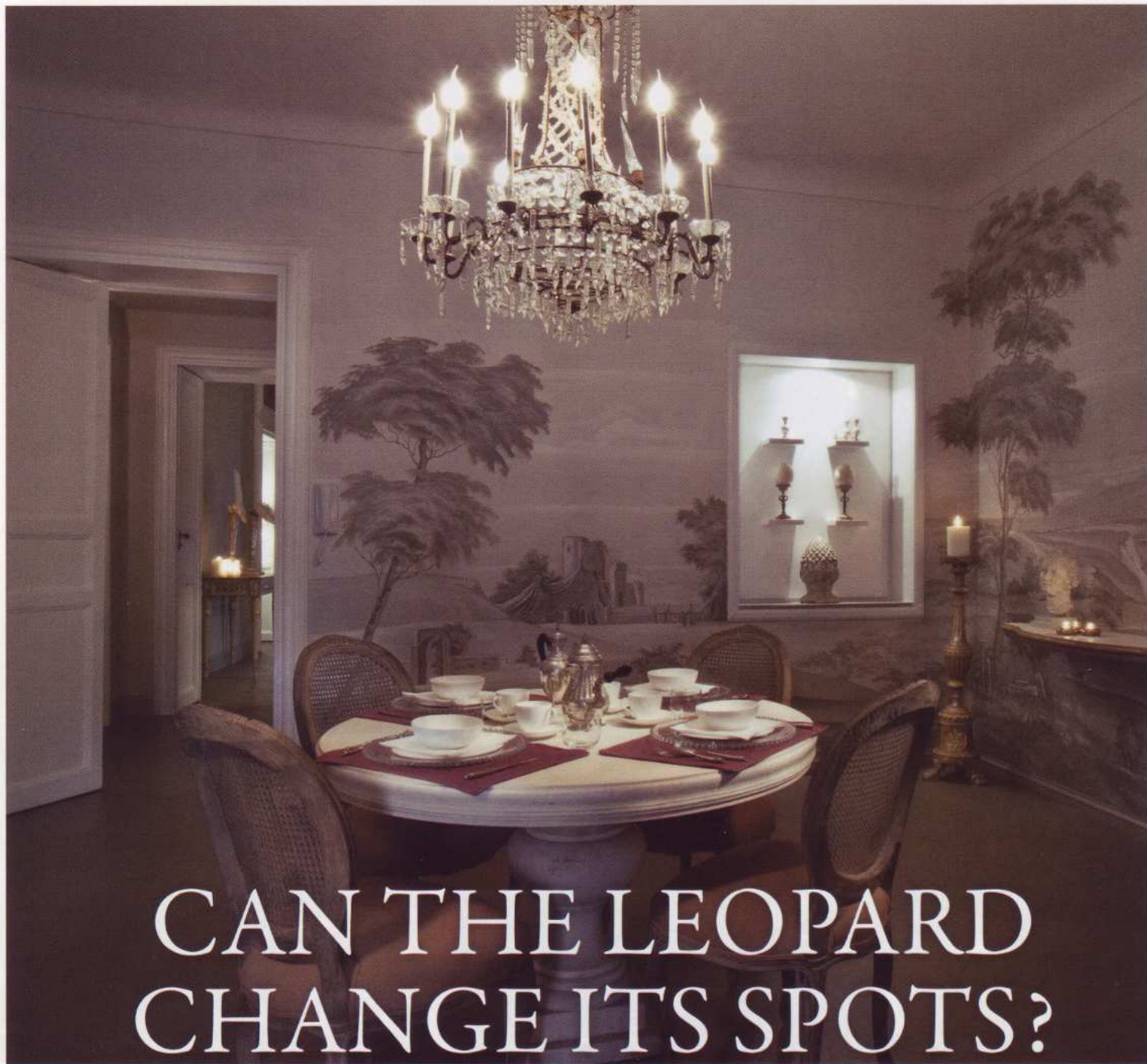
## A stylish nostalgic home

– with all the practicalities of 21st century living



OLD STYLE CHARM AND  
FAR EASTERN MYSTIQUE





# CAN THE LEOPARD CHANGE ITS SPOTS?

## Travel and Design in Sicily

**S**ICILY, THAT VERY LARGE NEIGHBOUR of ours hanging off the southern tip of Italy has always struck me as being a little sinister.

You only have to look at its history, particularly in the last 100 years with the huge Mafia involvement and its control of almost every part of life, private and public on the Island to see what I mean. A read also of Peter



Robb's chilling modern classic "Midnight in Sicily" (Random) tells of the horrific goings on in Sicily with, it would seem, very little control or interference from law and order in both Italy and the world in general.

What must it be like to live there today I kept asking myself with all the violent recent history between families and communities?

Tales of corrupt officials, shootings, bodies

words **Jim Dunn**





in car boots, bodies in cement and hanging from rafters all over the place around. You couldn't make it up, as they say.

It was this book which I was reading as I toured a small corner of Sicily, the southeast, over a week in Springtime. It makes a good travel companion as it ranges across the art, food, history and violence of Sicily but it is not a guide.

You might also want to reacquaint yourselves with the Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa classic "The Leopard", a gorgeous read of a book looking at 18th century Sicily and the levelling out of its society during that period. Burt Lancaster stars in a re-issue of the Visconti 1960 classic film of the book.

The roads were quiet as we explored, apart from the local maniacs who seem to think that we are all genuine targets for tail-gating, as one overtakes and another takes its place. They are like bees around soft fruit as you drive and they certainly do not encourage a gentle amble through the countryside which is always dominated by the brooding Mount Etna to be seen from everywhere as you travel around.







That Spring the wild flowers were in outrageous abundance by the roadside stretching ambitiously as if to touch either side of the small country roads and lanes as we concentrated on visiting some of the Baroque cities like Noto, our base, Syracuse, Modica and Ragusa.

The area is renowned for its Baroque towns and cities with their beautifully weathered Palazzi, elegant squares and café life. The area has eight Unesco World Heritage sites and more recently its Michelin starred restaurants to attract visitors. Drive around the Val di Noto and you will not regret it.





Sicily is a place to view gorgeous Baroque, bump along numerous potholed roads and eat some truly terrific meals not to mention sampling the local wine.

Ending the day in central Noto, with a Sicilian Aperitivo, a glass of wine and the local equivalent of tapas, at a pavement café, in the cool of the evening, surrounded by wonderful architecture turning a gorgeous deep orange in the light is surely one of the great pleasures of life.

They say the Island has had a decade of rejuvenating transformation, presumably with European money but there is still a long way to go. Can the Sicily of The Leopard fame change it spots they ask?

There is still too much blight along huge tracts of the coast, too much litter and not enough good hotels but the basics are still there to be worked on in this Island that has inspired writers, painters and travellers for centuries.

Unlike Tuscany and Umbria whose tapestry hills and Renaissance towns have long attracted property buyers interested in having a home there, the market in Sicily still contains great bargains to be had by alert buyers. There is a "dilapidado" around every corner, across every field, on top of every small hill and in every town just waiting for some tender love and care.....and a good healthy bank balance.

If you are after a rural existence, Sicily offers vineyards and olive groves at approximately half the cost of Tuscany. For €250,000 you can buy an unmodernised home in a hectare of land. And if you are looking to spend more there's the 12 bedroom (and 12 bathroomed) Palazzo Hedone at €3.65m in another Baroque gem of a town Scicli. The





equivalent on the mainland in Tuscany or Umbria would probably cost you double that amount.

Our base for our visit was the utterly scrumptious Villadorata in Noto [www.7roomsvilladorata.it](http://www.7roomsvilladorata.it) It's truly a work of love and devotion by the owner Christina who is not only an astute businesswoman wary enough to spot the gap in the luxury accommodation market in Noto but is an efficient operator. She is at the Palazzo every day and personally looks after every guest and detail. And when she isn't there and is shopping for essentials for her pampered guests she has a delightful backup team.

The breakfast, buffet style, of a Spring morning on the wide terrace outside her private apartment with the rooftop views away to the distance and the exploring of the day to be planned and some fluffy eggs to be consumed, is a must.

Eating at breakfast is communal at a large family table which initially filled me with horror as I am wary of fellow guests and strangers until I have had a good look at them and I have a partner who just refuses to be civil to most strangers before 10am!

However I have to say it worked very well and in the end we met people who have now become friends and we shared not only dinner a couple of times but tips on what to do and where to go in the area.

As you can see from the photographs Christina has created,

out of a part of the huge 18th century Palazzo Dorata, the rest is a museum, seven very large ensuite rooms with every modern facility in tranquil colours of gray and cream. It's strictly B and B at the Villa but Christina is on hand to recommend and book the best local restaurants, which are just a stroll away and where the food is excellent and the bill at the end is certainly not a worry.

And the good news also is that Christina and her husband are about to embark on a country version of the Villa Dorata by converting an old building near Noto into luxury accommodation for her lucky customers. 🍷

