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PLEA TO SAVE MEDIEVAL VILLAGES

The founder of Sextantio Albergo Diffuso (above), Daniele Kihlgren, is seeking new investment to help him continue rescuing abandoned villages in Italy, breathing new life into them via hospitality projects, writes April Hutchinson.

Italian-Swedish Kihlgren completed his restoration of the village of Santo Stefano di Sessanio in 2005, opening 27 "hotel rooms" there under this concept of "albergo diffuso", where guests stay at rooms scattered in different houses. The project was soon hailed worldwide as a unique endeavor, joined Design Hotels and recently won the Mr & Mrs Smith Eco Award for best responsible hotel.

Kihlgren then moved on to create Sextantio Le Grotte della Civita, turning a series of caves, or grotto, into an 18-room hotel in the Unesco World Heritage town of Matera in Basilica over the course of 10 years.

But speaking to *lfluxury* at the annual Sleep hotel design show in London, Kihlgren said he desperately needed investment to continue saving these villages.

"Italy has in its mountains 2,000 semi-abandoned historic towns and 15,000 where the abandonment is nearly total," he said. "We have nine in the Abruzzo region and a grant in the Sassi in Matera – but we have received 500 village restoration proposals. Now we need the funding to export this model of salvation and conversion into at least 50 villages."

British architect David Chipperfield is already supportive of Kihlgren's mission, whereby the entrepreneur stays as true as possible to the original form of the village and its interiors, adding underfloor heating and a modern bathroom suite, but keeping the rooms as simple as possible.

"People are looking for identity, for the true Italy and this is what we are preserving," said Kihlgren. "This started as a cultural project to save what is seen as only considered "minor" heritage in Italy, but in fact these medieval villages represent a huge part of our past and no one is doing much about it."

He said once local mayors in part-abandoned villages heard what he was doing, they called and begged him to take their towns on as well.

"This is a model that can work economically – we have proved that so far as our numbers have been outstanding at the two hotels, we just need to move on with financial support," he said. (sextantio.it)

ECO TIPS

ILL DRINK TO THAT Park Hyatt Maldives Hadahaa has retained its prestigious Silver EarthCheck certification for a second year, thanks to a host of green initiatives, including a scheme to reuse glass drinking water bottles that has reduced plastic bottle waste by 100,000 per year (maldives.hadahaapark.hyatt.com). **CARBON CUTBACK** Brazil's eco-resort credentials have taken a leap forward with the opening of the virtually zero-carbon, eight-villa



Butterfly House Bahia (left) on the Marau Peninsula, which has been designed using reclaimed timber (butterflyhousebahia.com).

ECO-CAPITAL Copenhagen has hit an eco-high, with 71% of hotel rooms in the Danish capital now certified as environmentally friendly. Stylish boutique properties that have received Denmark's prestigious "Green Key" accolade include the Anderson Boutique Hotel and Hotel Kong Arthur (green-key.dk).

LORD OF THE CHAINS New Zealand is set to complete its nationwide "Nga Haerenga Cycle Trail" in 2014, offering a total of 23 Great Rides which mean cyclists will be able to explore about 1,553 miles of the very best of the country's landscape, environment, culture and heritage (nzcyclisttrail.com).

THE WILD SIDE Wilderness Safaris will open Hoanib Skieleton Coast Camp in Namibia in 2014 and a new Zimbabwe highlights itinerary is also being launched. The company is marking its 30th birthday this year and operates more than 60 camps in nine countries. Its wide-ranging work includes hosting 500 rural children a year in its camps (wilderness-safaris.com).

voice of reason

Francesco Galli Zugara,
founder and CEO, Aqua Expeditions

I established Aqua Expeditions with the aim of introducing five-star boutique river cruising to some of the world's most beautiful and remotest stretches of water. Since the launch of the first vessel, Aqua Amazon, on the Peruvian Amazon, our aim has been to establish a long-term commitment to raising awareness of the Pacaya Samiria Reserve through high-end tourism, and to protect the fragile and increasingly endangered ecosystem in which the vessels operate.

As we begin work on our third vessel Aqua Mekong – which will start cruising on the Mekong River in Cambodia and Vietnam in 2014 – this ethos remains at the heart of everything we do; be it creating jag and itineraries to local villages or artisans, through to the construction choices that we make for our 20-cabin vessels.

On the Amazon to date, we have ensured our operations have a positive impact on the riverside communities. We provide medical assistance in villages from our onboard paramedic, as well as education and guidance in sustainable and eco-friendly practices. Where possible, we source all ingredients locally, creating an efficient supply chain that benefits our guests – by offering the freshest ingredients – and the local producers, saving on the trip to Iquitos and ensuring a fair price for their goods.

Our passengers are encouraged to adopt an active role in the protection of the area through the lectures and have carried out campaigns, in collaboration with the locals, such as releasing endangered *Taricaya* turtles back into the wild. To nurture this species, we have been working with conservationists since 2008 to protect the eggs until they hatch and then release hatchlings into the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve.

At the end of the cruises, guests can support the work of the Marabé Rescue Centre with a visit to feed the baby calves and learn about the importance of wildlife conservation in the area.

Being a positive force on the rivers on which our vessels operate is at the heart of our mission statement and we continue to seek out further ways to live up to this goal. (aquaexpeditions.com)

"Our passengers are encouraged to adopt an active role"

