

SEXTANTIO ALBERGO DIFFUSO

SANTO STEFANO
DI SESSANIO
ITALY

THE PLACE Nestled in the heart of the quiet Abruzzo region in central Italy there is a characterful sixteenth-century village: Santo Stefano di Sessanio. Its massive, ancient stones speak volumes, and narrow passageways and porticos with stairs open onto sun-drenched *piazzettas* or a labyrinth of alleyways. However, some of the houses are barely standing. At 4,100 feet (1,250 m) above sea level and only a stone's throw from the Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga National Park in the Apennine Mountains, Santo Stefano di Sessanio is a well-kept secret, surrounded by the incredible beauty of the *Abruzzese* landscape—reminiscent of New Zealand but with mountain peaks as high as the Alps.

THE STORY The unique villages of Abruzzo are all too often abandoned to the hands of fate. Young people move away, leaving the older generation behind. Slowly but surely the villages become dominated by uninhabited houses, deserted squares, and empty benches. This was the case in Santo Stefano di Sessanio, until 1999, that is, when the Swedish-Italian millionaire Daniele Kihlgren rode into town. He was on a solo motorbike tour, and, as an idealist, he felt compelled to do something about this sad situation. Kihlgren bought one house quickly followed by another ten, acquiring plots of no less than 43,000 sq. ft. (4,000 m²) from various owners whose houses had fallen into decay. He made a deal with local government officials to preserve Santo Stefano and restore it to its original state: no new houses and a ban on the use of concrete. In exchange, Kihlgren would invest the considerable sum of around 4.5 million euros (about 5.4 million dollars) to give the village a new lease on life.

CLIMATE
JULY
AVG. LOW: 64°F (18°C)
AVG. HIGH: 82°F (28°C)
JANUARY
AVG. LOW: 23°F (-5°C)
AVG. HIGH: 53°F (12°C)

AIRPORT
ROME
112 MILES (180 KM)
PESCARA
55 MILES (90 KM)

PRICE RANGE
\$

ROOMS
27 ROOMS
AND SUITES

ACCOMMODATION In 2004, five years after Kihlgren first wandered the streets of Santo Stefano, the village was ready to begin its new life. Kihlgren enlisted the help of big names such as architect David Chipperfield, who also supports the concept of *conservative restoration*. Representative of this relatively new concept in the hotel business, Albergo Diffuso consists of hotel rooms distributed over 32 restored village houses. The authentic character of the rooms is cleverly combined with modern elements, such as home automation systems, in-floor heating, and open fireplaces. There is no TV, but there is an internet connection. The Folk Museum of Abruzzo and some of the older residents of Santo Stefano were involved in the restoration project. This becomes obvious in details such as the heavy bedspreads and patterned linen—based on traditional woven designs and specially commissioned for this venture.

ON THE MENU At the wine bar, Il Cantinone, you can drink an *aperitivo* followed by a light meal, or in the morning you can enjoy a full homemade breakfast. At Kihlgren's own restaurant, Locanda Sotto gli Archi, his passion for conservation is evident in the menu. The dishes are made with ingredients once widely used, but now largely forgotten, such as certain varieties of herbs and vegetables and, most notably, the Santo Stefano gray lentil, which has fallen out of favor elsewhere. The attention to detail is extraordinary; even the blue edging on the plates is a particular shade that has historical meaning. It was tracked down by Kihlgren's team (with help from the museum) and specially mixed to be put to use again.

MUST-DO In winter, it is worth making the 16-mile (25-km) journey from Santo Stefano to go skiing in Campo Imperatore, one of the oldest ski resorts in Italy. In summer, visitors hike up to Rocca Calascio, a fortress with stunning views over Campo Imperatore and the Gran Sasso National Park. Two well-known movies were also filmed here: *The Name of the Rose* and *Ladyhawke*, starring Michelle Pfeiffer and Rutger Hauer.

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