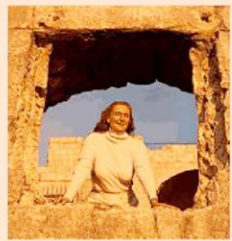


Strolling across the Croatian island of Lopud one summer morning in 2008, en route from its harbour to one of the finest sandy beaches in Dalmatia, we happened unexpectedly on an "art pavilion". There in the island's hinterland, amid a landscape of wild rosemary, figs and olives, stood an austere structure of blackened wood, a collaboration, the sign said, by David Adjaye and Olafur Eliasson entitled "Your black Horizon". We ventured into the darkness, which was penetrated by a narrow horizontal band of brilliant sunlight and stood captivated as that single line of light seemed to change colour.

Later, over a fish lunch in a scruffy waterfront restaurant as we waited for the ferry back to Dubrovnik, I fell into conversation with the owner and asked about the artwork. Yes, he said, it had been brought to the island by Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza, the collector, patron and philanthropist who was born into one dynasty (the Thyssen family, whose fortune was based on steel and industry) and married into another, the Hapsburgs. She was fixing up the



monastery at the northern end of the harbour too. He didn't know more, but the pavilion, which I later learnt had been commissioned for the 2005 Venice Biennale, was becoming a magnet for yachts, and as far as he was concerned anything that brought customers to this tiny car-free island was a good thing.

Next week, a dozen years on, that 15th-century monastery finally reopens as a hotel that, though it has just five rooms, could be the country's finest and one of Europe's most remarkable.

"I first came to Dubrovnik in December 1992, just after the siege," says Thyssen-Bornemisza. As Yugoslavia fragmented, this strikingly beautiful walled city had been bombed for seven months. "The place was devastated," she recalls. "Parts of it were still on fire." Then in her early 30s, she had recently organised a conference at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna on the protection of cultural heritage in occupied territories, and as a result she had been asked to come and help with the conservation effort in Dubrovnik.

Her base was a lab in the city's war-damaged Franciscan monastery, where at lunchtime she would join the monks in their refectory. "I used to get on really well with the eldest friar, Pio Mario," she recalls. He told her about the Franciscan monastery on the island of Lopud and one spring day they set out in "a little fishing boat" to see it. "It was a total ruin," she says. "Most of the ceilings and roofs were missing, but it was amazing too. Despite the damage I felt this extraordinary sense of peace. I don't want to sound like an old hippie, but there really was some incredibly powerful energy here."

Established in 1483 (hence the hotel's name, Lopud 1483) and later fortified, the monastery was on the World Monuments Fund list of buildings in danger. She determined to do something and the following year, she took the architect Frank Gehry out to look at it. "But Gehry said: 'I don't do old buildings.'"

In the end the painstaking and protected project was realised by the Zagreb practice Arkitekti. And the result — she is giving me a virtual tour via WhatsApp, walking from room to room — is somewhere between a

## A room with a pew



Hotel insider | On a tiny Croatian island, one of the world's leading art collectors has spent years restoring an ancient monastery into a remarkable five-room hotel that opens next week. By *Claire Wrathall*



### The summer of the private hotel

Restaurants, bars and borders might be reopening but anxieties about coronavirus remain. Such is the demand for personal space, where contact with others can be minimised, that a new breed of accommodation is emerging this summer: the private hotel.

With five bedrooms, Lopud 1483 will run as an exclusive-use property for July and August, before becoming a conventional hotel in September, and it is far from alone. On Santorini, for example, Istorla is a chic 12-suite hotel that this summer will keep its chef and staff but only be available to single groups — at €80,000 per week (it is available via [fivestarsgreece.com](http://fivestarsgreece.com)). Rather than being driven by concerns about whether they can implement social distancing, the owners say they are simply responding to raised demand for "privacy, seclusion and safety".

It's a similar story at Browber Hall ([Browberhall.co.uk](http://Browberhall.co.uk)) an award-winning eight-bedroom hotel in the Yorkshire Dales, which will reopen on August 1 for private groups only, from £3,400 per week. Meanwhile, some villa companies are moving into the same space, adding hotel services such as spa treatments, chefs and cleaners. The Greek Villas has 57 properties in its new private hotel programme, from three to 11 bedrooms and €12,000 to €80,000 per week ([thegreekvillas.com](http://thegreekvillas.com)).

museum, a supremely elegant (and commensurately expensive) boutique hotel and a 21st-century spiritual retreat, complete with church, campanile and Romanesque cloister.

After a tour of the gardens, we have moved inside and are talking in the formal dining room, a recreation of the one she recalls from her family's former home, the Villa Favorita, in Lugano, complete with Renaissance torches, Baroque candelabra and cabinets displaying exquisitely wrought silver. The walnut table was made in Florence in 1550 and the chairs in Dresden in 1727. They stand on a 16th-century Medallion Ushak carpet.

The paintings include a Furini of St Sebastian and a Liberation of St Peter one might take for a Caravaggio, though in fact it's the work of another Italian who settled in Malta, Mattia Preti. All that's missing are her grandfather's Canalettos, which are now in the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, a museum created in 1992 when her father loaned and then sold 775 outstanding works of art — from Renaissance masterpieces to Rothkos — to the Spanish government for \$350m, a sum reckoned to be about one-fifth of what it might have realised on the open market. But there remains plenty the family did not sell for her to exhibit here.

Next door there's a sitting room, where the camera on her phone settles first on a reliquary bust in polychromed walnut of a young girl, dating back to the 14th century. On the opposite wall hangs a portrait, c1527, by a follower of Dürer. There's a 16th-century French tapestry of a landowner threatening to punish his gardeners, the ugliness of the people in striking contrast with the beauty of the nature that surrounds them, while opposite hangs a photograph by Thomas Struth. "This is three generations of collector in one space," she says, explaining that the photograph

belongs to TBA21, a foundation she established to commission and disseminate contemporary art.

Passing Rineke Dijkstra's 1996 portrait of two boys in Dubrovnik, we ascend to the five spacious elegant bedrooms, which have been converted from the monks' cells. All the new furniture is by the Italian minimalist Paola Lenti, but there are historic pieces in each one, from carved chests to chairs you are welcome to sit on. Much of the ancient plaster is original too, occasionally inscribed with the vestiges of images and, in the master suite, the letters IL DU, I double take. Il duce: the remnants of a pro-Mussolini slogan dating back to



the occupation of the monastery by Italian troops. "I'd left it there because I very much believe in maintaining all the different layers of the history," she says. "But I think we should get rid of it now."

The bedrooms also feature contemporary art. I am struck by works by Xiomara De Oliver, Patricia Leite, Billy Childish and Aranda/Lasch. But I don't see every room. Thyssen-Bornemisza's two daughters from her marriage to Karl von Habsburg, as well as her mother (Fiona Campbell-Walter, a supermodel of her day much photographed by Cecil Beaton and Norman Parkinson), are still in residence, having locked down here in March.

But it is the views that make the most impression: across the limpid Adriatic towards the neighbouring island of Šipan (where, on my last visit, the harbour was home to a pod of dolphins), and northwest to Mtjet, site of another important fortified monastery, this time on an islet in a lake.

The hotel won't have a restaurant as such, but there will be a chef. There's no pool, though a stone staircase descends directly to a rocky shore off which you can swim. (Croatian karst is very sharp; pack aqua shoes.) And there are paddleboards, canoes and fishing equipment, as well as a personal trainer and yoga teacher on call. But then you come to Lopud to be, not to do, she stresses, "to stop projecting and let yourself be inspired".

Not that Thyssen-Bornemisza has entirely turned her back on the party-girl persona that made her a regular in the gossip columns of the 1980s. Should guests "want to throw a party, it can be organised in half a day," she enthuses, taking up the state of the art sound system she's had installed on the terrace at the top of the ramparts. Come Septem-



ber it will be possible to book individual rooms, but till then she's restricting bookings to those who want to take the place over entirely. As such it joins a growing number of small properties reinventing themselves as "private hotels" for this summer (see sidebar), a response to soaring demand for peaceful retreats away from possible crowds.

She points her camera towards the hill that rises above the monastery. "We call this Beverly Hill. It's where all the sophisticated live," she says, reeling off the mostly French and Italian names of those with summer homes here, among them Toto Bergamo Rossi, the aristocratic director of the Venetian Heritage foundation, the New York-based interior and landscape designer Lucie Rees Roberts "and a billionaire hedge fund guy", who has recently acquired a lot of land. "But at least one is allowed to build within 200m of us," she adds. "So we're safe," a word that keeps recurring in her conversation.

She's already drawn my attention to the arrow slits in the impregnable stone walls and the window above the main gate "for throwing boiling oil", not to mention a handful of protective madonnas and a pair of guardian angels, intricately carved from limestone in Poland, c1725. "I think that's the primary objective these days: to feel safe."

Lopud 1483 ([lopud1483.com](http://lopud1483.com)) offers exclusive use for up to 10 people from €8,000 per night, or, from September, double rooms, from €1,400

### POSTCARD FROM . . .

#### STONEHENGE

#### DETAILS

Adult tickets to Stonehenge cost from £21.00, children from £12.70; they must be pre-booked at [english-heritage.org.uk](http://english-heritage.org.uk) (English Heritage and National Trust) English members, and children under five, go free. While most visitors will now walk to the stones, a limited number of shuttle buses are available for those with mobility issues. The morning and evening "stone circle experience" visits last one hour and cost £47 for adults

in the fields around Stonehenge, the grass has grown long and the butterflies are back. After more than three months without visitors, and following an extensive redevelopment of the site, the 4,500-year-old structure looks more at one with its surroundings than ever.

On this bright mid-June morning, I have the stones to myself. Next weekend, though, Stonehenge will finally be reopening, alongside 40 other English Heritage sites including Dover Castle, Whitby Abbey and Eltham Palace. Barnard Castle, dating from the 12th century and evidently worthy of an extended detour, is also on the list. But how do you prepare a prehistoric site for social distancing?

When I first visited Stonehenge more than a decade ago, it would have been a tall order: access was through a narrow tunnel, while an unglorious coach park and gift shop encroached on what little space there was to roam around the stones. All that has changed: the new visitor centre, opened in 2013, has retreated a mile away, its trunk-like supports and sloping roof folding easily into the landscape; stonage and clutter have been reduced to a minimum



around the stone circle, letting the 90-odd slabs speak for themselves.

Pre-lockdown, most visitors caught shuttle buses between the visitor centre and the stones. Now, they will have to walk, via an idyllic network of paths and open fields.

"What we're trying to do over the next couple of weeks is remark Stonehenge," explains Susan Greaney, my guide and senior properties historian for English Heritage. "It's your best time to come and experience it with not too many people here."

As we work our way along the edge

of the Cursus, a vast earthwork enclosure whose exact purpose remains as elusive as that of Stonehenge itself, Greaney explains that the site will be operating at reduced capacity, with all tickets booked in advance and a one-way system in place around the stone circle itself. However, ordinarily 70 per cent of visitors come from abroad, so until international tourism rebounds, domestic tourists will have a better chance of getting a slot. Should they wish for even more privacy, a limited number of tickets each day will allow

visitors to walk right among the stones at sunrise or sunset.

As the stones gradually rise into view across an empty field, crickets chirping in the long grass, it is hard to see the peace and quiet that the measures will bring as anything but an asset.

In all, English Heritage cares for more than 400 historic properties but it is prioritising the reopening of sites with extensive outdoor space. Stonehenge enjoys unbroken views across the sweeping chalk grasslands of Salisbury Plain. As we wander around the stone circle, buzzards and skylarks swoop between the barrows — Neolithic and Bronze Age burial mounds — that gently bulge on the horizon, while little puffball mushrooms are slowly starting to emerge from the soil.

The site's appeal seems only to have been enhanced in the digital age, perhaps even more so during lockdown. More than 3.6m people tuned in to watch online streams of the sunrise and sunset over Stonehenge for the summer solstice last weekend. And on the morning of my visit, news that a vast circle of prehistoric shafts has been discovered two miles away at

Durrington Walls is greeted with (admittedly mystified) excitement on social media.

"All historic sites have a timelessness that gives people reassurance, particularly in uncertain times," Stonehenge director Nichola Tasker later tells me. "Somewhere as old and ancient as Stonehenge, which has really seen all the comings and goings of history and humanity . . . it gives people a sense of perspective when we are facing emergencies and difficult times."

Henges are also uniquely British — they are nowhere to be found on continental Europe — and their meticulous construction does much to challenge the preconceptions of technological primitiveness or a lack of shared culture on the ancient isles.

To me, though, it is the sense of mystery that is key to understanding Stonehenge's continued allure. It tiptoe around the stones in a kind of solemn reverie, while Greaney, who has visited the site countless times, still finds herself taking photos, every angle revealing a slightly different perspective.