

FACING PAGE, FROM TOP: Pizzinini (left) and Scolari at the entrance of the palazzo, which was built in 1723. A vintage light fixture by Gino Sarfatti hangs above a sideboard by Gianfranco Frattini in a bedroom; the tile flooring dates to 1910. **THIS PAGE:** The ceiling sculpture and illuminated artworks in the ground-floor stairwell are by Scolari, and the vintage tables came from an Italian café.



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ith its stunning beaches, historic architecture, charming villages, olive groves, and vineyards, Italy's Salento—located in the stiletto heel of the country's boot—would seem to have it all. But while regions like Tuscany, Umbria, and even Sicily boomed in the second half of the 20th century, this bucolic area with 3,000 years of history somehow escaped notice. No longer: In the last few years, a fashionable crowd has begun to discover Salento's charms, from the Baroque city of Lecce, known as the Florence of the South, to beaches such as Punta della Suina on the bay of Gallipoli.

Six years ago, Antonio Scolari and Christian Pizzinini, a couple who own a travel public relations firm in Milan, began visiting this part of Puglia, lured by a friend whose parents reside there. "We realized it was fantastic," Scolari says. "They call it the California of Italy. It's warm from spring until October, and there is good production of wine and olives and a great cultural scene."

They decided to buy a home in Salento with the idea of splitting their time between this area and Milan. With hot spots like Lecce becoming more expensive, they focused their search on Galatina, a city in the heart of the region, halfway between the Ionian and Adriatic coasts. "It's not touristic at all, but it has great history, including a church, Santa Caterina d'Alessandria, that was built in the 14th century," Pizzinini says. "Best of all, it is full of Baroque architecture that was not destroyed





from the 1960s to the 1980s, which was the worst period in Italy for historic buildings.”

With the guidance of Luciano Colantonio, who owns a design gallery in Brescia, the couple have become avid collectors of midcentury Italian furniture by such designers as Gio Ponti, Franco Albini, Luigi Caccia Dominioni, and Osvaldo Borsani. They also collect contemporary art and planned to have an informal gallery space where they could curate exhibitions. “Most homes in Salento are either very ethnic or feel very heavy, with antiques from the 16th and 17th centuries,” Pizzinini says. “We wanted to do something that felt more contemporary.”

They struck gold when they discovered a two-story apartment in a wing of the Palazzo Mongiò dell’Elefante, which dates back to 1723. The building, abandoned for half a century, was “very dirty and full of birds,” Pizzinini says. But it nevertheless had wonderful features, including an entry with a barrel-vaulted ceiling, traces of historic wall colors, like pink, pistachio, and gray, and magical views of the city from the terrace. Best of all, during the 1920s, the home had been renovated with modern cement tile floors whose hues and patterns coordinated perfectly with their vintage furniture collection.

Rather than hire an architect or designer, the two men directed the renovation themselves, mostly long-distance from Milan, and somehow managed to get it done within six months. They also designed the interiors, and Scolari created custom furnishings, including lighting and rugs, hiring local artisans to produce them by hand. “Design is our passion,” Pizzinini says. “We see a lot of hotels and restaurants in our work, and that inspires us. We always seem to have our luggage in our hands.”

Their Salento lifestyle is so relaxed and appealing that, with the help of the Internet, they now live in Galatina for eight months of the year. Better yet, friends keep coming to visit, and some of them have been asking to buy their furniture, both the vintage pieces they collect as well as Scolari’s designs. “We’ve been thinking this might be our next chapter,” Scolari says. “The world seems to be in love at the moment with Italian design.” *Originally published in ELLEDECOR Italy.* ■

TOP LEFT: An Eames table and chairs in the home office off the entry; the light fixture is by Barovier&Toso, and the artwork is by Mandla Reuter. **LEFT:** A bathroom features a vintage vanity, a wall sculpture by Christian’s cousin Helmut Pizzinini, and a sconce by Ignazio Gardella. **FACING PAGE:** In another bedroom, the bed was designed by Gio Ponti for Rome’s Hotel Parco dei Principi, the midcentury floor lamp is by Stilnovo, the table and armchair are vintage, and the wall sculpture is attributed to C. Jeré; the existing wall paint has been distressed. For details, see Resources.

