

Ex-ambassador Hopton trades Tehran for Maremma

Posted on October 4, 2026 by Alina Trabattoni, Sabina Castelfranco

VENTURINA, Tuscany — In an olive grove near the sea, a digger driver nicknamed Michelangelo lifts huge boulders into place like a sculptor. He works for Nicholas Hopton, the former British ambassador to Yemen, Qatar, Iran, and Libya, whose book Maremma Mia is out now.

Hopton spent 35 years in some of the toughest postings on the planet, also served at the British Embassy in Rome, and now chairs the advisory board for the Middle East and Mediterranean programmes at Cambridge's Centre for Geopolitics. He bought an old farmhouse in the Maremma rather than Chianti, after spotting it on the internet. He spoke to the Italy Now podcast.

Q. Your love affair with Italy began at 16. What hooked you?

"My first visit to Italy was marked by the exotic and the unknown. I had my little green book, *Buongiorno Italia* (Good Morning Italia), and I was fascinated by *La Vita Nuova* (The New Life), Dante's very slim volume of early poetry. But it was really the people. To be honest, there was also a *ragazza italiana* (Italian girl) in the background as well."

Source: https://italynow.co.uk/ex-ambassador-hopton-trades-tehran-for-tuscan-olive-groves/



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Italian scenes (*Credits: Italy Now*)

Q. Why the Maremma and not Chianti?

“Chianti had always been the dream, but it was always out of reach, elusive. The Maremma has most of what Chianti has. Not quite the same intensity and level of great art, but pretty much everything else. It was serendipity that brought us to this house. It was the first house that we saw, remarkably, on the internet.”

Q. Why do visitors want to come to the Maremma?

“Family and others want to rent our place so we’re delighted with that. They want to come here because we have just a wonderful choice of things that they can do, such as sailing, cycling, and walking. There’s history, there’s wine, thermal baths, you name it. It’s a great area to take a holiday in.”





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Various Casa Hopton, Maremma (*Credits: Nick Hopton*)

Q. Is negotiating with a Tuscan builder harder than in Tehran?

“Nothing really prepares you for it. The challenge of dealing with our wonderful Italian builders and *geometra* and the town hall and all the other bureaucracy we had to navigate certainly matched and maybe at times was even more than the challenges in Tehran or Tripoli. I thought I spoke Italian before I started the process. I didn’t.”

Q. Who is Michelangelo the digger driver?

“Like that Renaissance great master, Michelangelo the digger driver was able, and still is, because I still do work with him, to manipulate and move and place huge great rocks and create art out of them with a delicacy which is unimaginable.”





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Maremma fields, Hopton olive grove and Italian dinner (*Credits: Italy Now, Hopton*)

Q. Which Maremma story will listeners not believe?

“The story I like the best is the story of San Cerbone, a mid-sixth century bishop in the early church. He was summoned to Rome by the pope and he was followed by a flock of geese all the way to Rome. Such was his charisma. Later a king of the Ostrogoths sentenced him to be killed by a wild bear. Given his extraordinary divine proximity to the powers that be, the bear dropped to its knees and licked his feet. I love that story.”

Q. What is your advice for anyone dreaming of an Italian farmhouse?

“You need to find someone to help you navigate it. Someone who is either local or has been steeped in how things operate locally. Our local builder was more than a builder, became a friend and really helped navigate all the bureaucracy and the pitfalls.”

Follow Nicholas Hopton on X and LinkedIn.

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