The floral haven

The Rou Estate, Corfu, Greece

Louisa Jones explores a sensitively restored limestone village in the hills of Corfu, where the Mediterranean flora takes centre stage

Photographs by Clive Nichols

THE ROU ESTATE is a seductive hideaway, a thoughtfully restored and planted Corfiot village set on dry-stone terraces among rustic glades and groves in the island's north-east. Every path, every window of its 14 houses reveals dramatically framed views across the sea to Albania, or back towards herb-scented mountains. 'Dramatic' is a key word in the vocabulary of Rou's rescuer and creator, British architect Dominic Skinner. He has restored the village like a giant theatre set, one where indoor and outdoor spaces flow into each other and out towards the idyllic Mediterranean surroundings, each scene with its own character and moods evolving throughout the year.

Corfu's climate is particularly clement, with abundant rainfall and humidity compared to the rest of Greece. Its north-eastern corner is further favoured with ➢

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a beautiful, gold-flecked limestone, for millennia used in its buildings. Against the general commercial trend in Corfu in the past half-century, Mr Skinner has shown great respect for tradition in his revival of both the architecture and its landscape. The resulting harmony goes far beyond the merely visual.

Mr Skinner trained and worked with Norman Foster and Partners in London, but spent much of his childhood in Corfu, where he met his wife, Claire, and still has extensive family. His garden advisors are the team of Jennifer Gay and Piers Goldson, both with long experience of Mediterranean conditions. Their initial survey of Rou focused on the restoration of existing vegetation, including fine trees such as the Jerusalem thorn *Paliurus spina-christi*. When the work was underway, typical of their recommendations was the adamant: 'Do not prune at nesting time.' The whole venture is environmentally sensitive.

Architecture and flora are inextricably entwined at Rou, where the latter not only softens the built landscape, but also enhances the stonework. Simple but bold combinations of pastel-coloured flowers are used, and blended with evergreen and evergrey foliage. The plants had to be drought-tolerant, able to withstand an occasional cold winter, perform well in summer heat and set off the colour of the stone.

The estate encompasses three main types of setting: the public spaces, the individual gardens of each house and the surrounding woodlands and meadows leading down to the sea. The heart of Rou is a dramatic pergola draped with wisteria, marking a kind of village square around an Italian-stone well. The pergola is underplanted with large-flowered *Allium stipitatum* Mount Everest, *Agapanthus praecox* subsp. *orientalis* and clear, bright-blue *Plumbago capensis* for continuous summer bloom. Other 'signature' plants include the hardy *Lavandula* × *allardii*, *Tulbaghia violacea*, star jasmine, cool-white Iceberg rosesand santolina. The individual gardens enable more complex mixtures of plants, and feature nepeta, wormwood, curry plant (*Helichrysum italicum*), cistus, phlomis, gaura and perovskia.

The surrounding natural glades already had mature olive, cypress and almond trees, mixed oaks (including the Valoria oak, *Quercus macrolepis*), the turpentine tree *Pistacia terebinthus* and the Mediterranean hackberry, *Celtis australis*. This mixture has been subtly enriched with nut, berry and fruit trees, including the strawberry tree, *Arbuntus unedo*, and the myrtle *Myrtus communis*, as well as groundcover plants including *Cyclamen hederifolium*, *Paeonia officinalis*, *Iris unguicularis*, *Liriope muscari*, *Anemone blanda*, hellebores and ferns such as *Polypodium cambricum*.

Just below the hamlet, in an old quarry, is a spectacular swimming pool overlooking the sea. The way down passes meadows that were roto-tilled in the first year to encourage diversity. They are cut in late May, and left to bare earth in summer. But they are nicely framed with shrubs such as *Quercus coccifera* and rosemary, so that harmonies of volume, plane, colour and texture are maintained.

Rou is meticulously maintained by two full-time and two part-time gardeners,

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