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IN THE CLEAR: in excellent visibility a diver swims through one of the ruined buildings

The lake of Capo d'Acqua in central Italy is a fascinating dive for two reasons: the visibility of its water and the medieval ruins submerged within. Swiss photographer **Franco Banfi** went to see it for himself and took these fantastic photographs. Words by **Marc Grainger**

TRAVEL DOWN a certain short country road in central Italy, past fields of wheat dotted with red poppies, and you might just come across Capo d'Acqua – a small, secluded lake that, beneath its surface, conceals the remains of a magnificent submerged medieval village.

Although 'conceals' perhaps isn't the right word: the water here is as clear and blue as can be and the crumbling buildings within are plainly visible from the shore, giving it



SWIM CITY



>> the surreal appearance of an enormous aquarium full of giant ornaments – and making for an incredible dive.

It was this vista that left Swiss underwater photographer Franco Banfi breathless as he approached the lake. He travelled to Capo d'Acqua with Dante Cetrioli, whose dive school exclusively controls access to the man-made lake, about two hours' drive out of Rome, near the town of Capetrano. Lying within the Gran Sasso and Laga Mountains National Park at about 300m above sea level, it is fed by surface and underwater springs that once supported the nearby Tirino river. During the Middle Ages, two watermills and a paint factory were built near these springs, and it is these centuries-old buildings that form today's enchanting underwater scene. While the remains of the mills are completely submerged, the top of the paint factory protrudes through the water.

Capo d'Acqua was created in the 1960s when a dam was built and a reservoir formed to serve the surrounding area, flooding the bygone buildings; today, it feeds a hydroelectric power plant. The lake's water permeates through the karstic subsoil of the Campo Imperatore plateau in the Apennines, becoming rich in minerals before feeding the basin via underwater springs that gush between the old paving stones, resulting in a visibility of 40m.

Banfi marvelled at the view from the shore. He recalls: 'I admired the town

WATER WORKS: the ruins of two watermills make for a unique diving experience



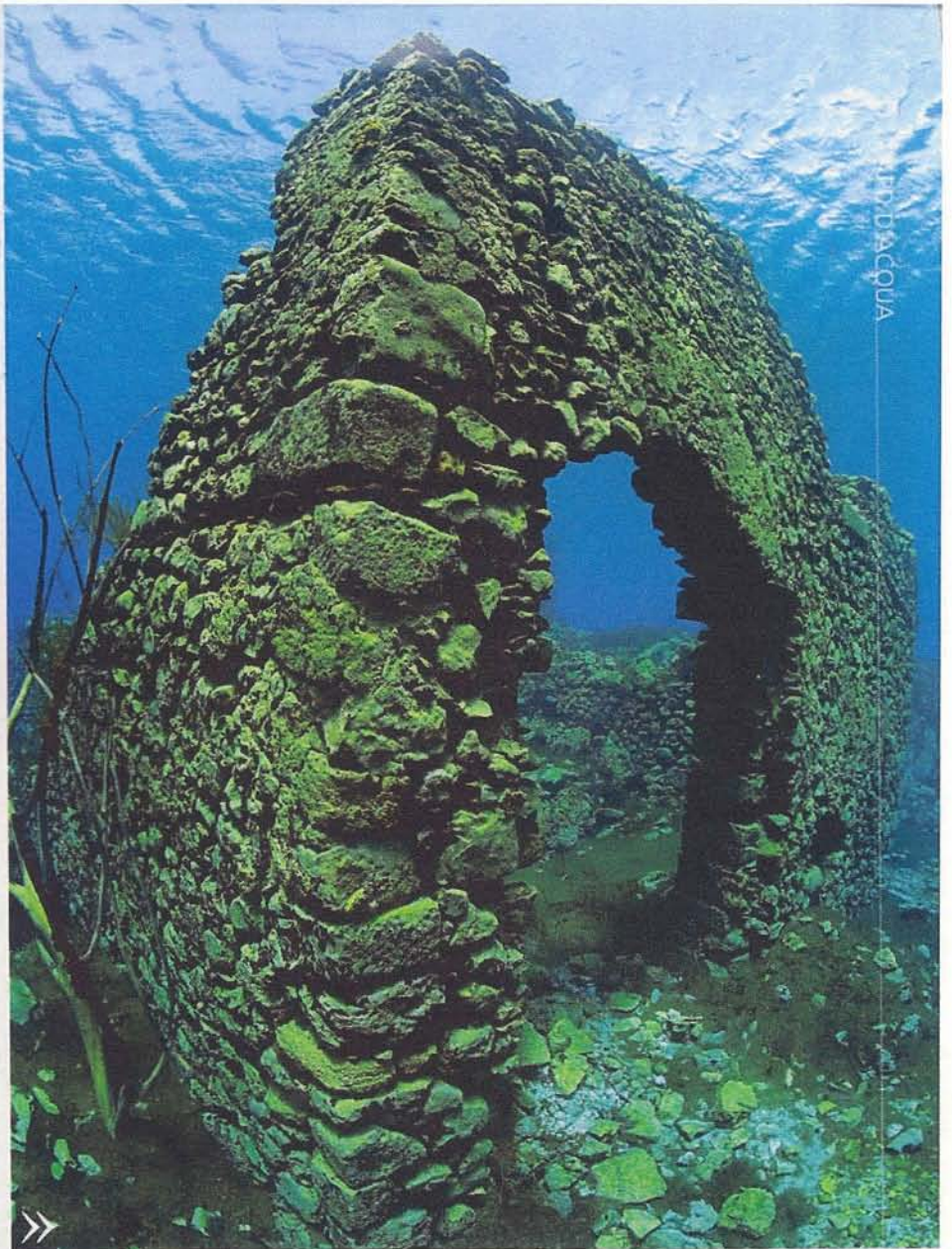
through the water: the submerged medieval buildings, the dry-stone walls, the remains of the paved paths, the skeletal underwater trees with their outstretched branches in unnatural positions. Capo d'Acqua is the clearest lake I ever seen.'

He and Cetrioli dived in to explore the ruins at close quarters, starting with the first of the two mills. The structures retain their medieval details, and divers can swim among the passages, arches and rooms, which contrast sharply with the deep blue backdrop, as if set against a summer sky.

'I explored the ruins of the mill and noticed a backwater tank, while tree trunks – smoothed by the water over time – rose from the bottom, adding to the eerie feel of the place,' Banfi says. 'I was among the buildings of a village that still felt alive and seemed abandoned only a short time ago.'

'There's very little algae or sediment around the stone walls, which have kept their colours and structure, and seem still solid,' he continued. 'The temptation to stand upright to walk was intense: only the awareness of the sediment on the bottom, and the knowledge that any movement could muddy this magical water, stopped me.' But despite appearing sturdy, these old walls are indeed fragile. It is forbidden to lean on the stones, which are loose and are disturbed with the slightest movement.

The pair then turned in the direction of the former paint factory. Here, a soft, tangled lawn of green aquatic plants marks



CAPO D'ACQUA



PAINT JOB: the old paint factory rises from the water



» the building's edge, concealing the lake bottom and the brown trout looking for shelter. As the factory is only partially underwater, it retains much of its integrity and majesty. It is surrounded by a thick carpet of emerald-coloured algae.

From here, the ruins of the second mill are visible. It is in worse condition than the first, but the blades of its waterwheel are evident, albeit partly covered by sediment. The village is perhaps less photogenic here: the dry-stone walls are shorter and damaged, yet still retain their charm. Still, the damage here is not to the detriment of Capo d'Acqua, as the mystery of the lake, coupled with the beauty of the Italian countryside, makes it a captivating dive. ■

▶ NEED TO KNOW

DIVE CENTRE

Diving in Capo d'Acqua is exclusively managed by L'Aquila-based Atlantide Diving School (00 39 347 34 20 185, email info@atlantidesub.com or see www.atlantidesub.com). Contact Dante Cetrioli, who arranges diving trips to the lake between March and October. He speaks Italian and English and charges €20 to dive the lake.

GETTING THERE

Several low-cost airlines regularly fly from the UK to Rome International Airport, which is a couple of hours' drive from Capo d'Acqua, or to the satellite airport of Ciampino to the south of the capital. Abruzzo International Airport in Pescara on the Adriatic coast is an alternative destination, and is about 45 minutes from the lake by car.