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SEPTEMBER 2004

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CHECKING IN

25 Best New Hotels in Italy

From the top of the boot to the toe, the Italian hotel scene is booming. Here, our favorite places, whether urban style setters or idyllic country retreats. **BY VALERIE WATERHOUSE**

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Super-Agents

SAMPLE


W

HEN ALAIN DUCASSE, France's most treasured chef, heads to Italy, one of his country's culinary rivals, to build a Tuscan inn, L'Andana, something is up. Based on the flurry of recent openings, it seems that owning an Italian hotel is the status symbol du jour. And it's not only Ducasse. Elite families are converting their estates into resorts, and entrepreneurs are opening their doors, to make guests feel right at home. »

The 12th-century Castello di Vicarello, overlooking the Tuscan countryside in Poggi del Sasso.



SAMPLE



The industrial lobby of Milan's Hotel Straf. Right: A guest room.



3 Florence Designed by Michele Bonan (the talent behind many of Florence's Ferragamo-owned hotels), the 20 sleek rooms

CITY SLICKERS

1 **Milan** With its cement walls, slate floors, and scratched mirrors, the **Hotel Straf**—right by the duomo—resembles a building site more than a luxury hotel. In fact, rumor has it that one guest woke up screaming, after a trapped-in-a-bunker nightmare (she took refuge in her bathroom in the middle of the night). But that hasn't deterred guests like John Malkovich and young designers who showcase their collections in the sprawling suites during fashion week. Obviously, word has spread: Ristorante Straf is packed with photographers and bleached-blond Asian shoppers, just waiting for a celebrity sighting. 3 Via San Raffaele; 800/337-4685 or 39-02/805-081; www.straf.it; doubles from \$185.

2 Never mind the buzzing bar scene, the top-notch service, the sleek architecture by Ed Tuttle, of Amanhotels. The 117-room **Park Hyatt Milan's** claim to fame is that it has the largest bathrooms of any hotel in Milan. Occupying 45 percent of each guest room, the travertine spaces are equipped with glass-walled showers, massive sunken tubs, double washbasins, walk-in closets, and scads of mirrors. Downstairs, holistic treatments at the small-but-satisfying spa beckon after a spree at the neighboring Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II shopping arcade. 1 Via Tommaso Grossi; 800/778-7477 or 39-02/8821-1234; www.milan.park.hyatt.com; doubles from \$557.

at **J.K. Place** mix wenge wood fittings, pleated sconces, and soothing shades of cream, gray, and brown. But the best thing is the hotel's friendly service. Sabrina, the bookings manager, greets you at the door; the staff will gladly supply tips on where to eat and shop. The homey atmosphere continues in the glass-ceilinged dining room, where guests chat around the communal breakfast table and arrange to meet for drinks on the bijou roof terrace, with views of Florence's Santa Maria Novella church. 7 Piazza Santa Maria Novella; 800/525-4800 or 39-055/264-5181; www.jkplace.com; doubles from \$390.

4 Visitors to the 84-room **UNA Hotel Vittoria**, from wonder-boy architect Fabio Novembre, just might think they've stumbled into a disco. Guests cozy up on a giant spiral seat designed by Novembre for Cappellini. A swirling, floor-to-ceiling floral mosaic encompasses the reception desk. Rooms are outfitted with black-leather walls and fiber-optic lights. Bathrooms—located right by the doorway—are encased in crystal, providing little privacy (make sure your partner doesn't call room service while you're in the shower). But it's not all glitz. Novembre pays homage to the hotel's historic San Frediano neighborhood: the doors of each room are painted with portraits of Renaissance Tuscan nobles. 59 Via Pisana, 39-055/22771; www.unahotels.it; doubles from \$278. »

WHO STAYS WHERE? **5** **Musicians** Classical pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy and orchestra director Zubin Mehta check into suite 211 at **Hotel Greif** (Piazza Walther; 39-0471/318-000; www.greif.it; doubles from \$196), in Bolzano, near the Dolomites; it's furnished with a grand piano. **6** **Fashionistas** Model Eva Herzigova and photographer David LaChapelle are just two of the boldfaced guests at Milan's **3 Rooms** (10 Corso Como; 39-02/626-163; www.3rooms-10corsocomo.com; doubles from \$364), attached to the 10 Corso Como boutique. **7** **VIPS** In out-of-the-way Padua, the **Methis Hotel** (70 Riviera Paleocapa; 39-049/872-5555; www.methishotel.com; doubles from \$211) is a hideaway for Italian dignitaries like Susanna Agnelli and Giorgio Armani. **8** **Movie Stars** Al Pacino and Joseph Fiennes have stayed at Venice's **Hotel Al Ponte Antico** (Calle dell'Aseo, Cannaregio; 39-041/241-1944; www.alponteantico.com; doubles from \$223).

NEXT CHECKING IN | ITALY

THE BEST... 9 POOL The seventh-floor rooftop aerie at Rome's urban-cool **Es Hotel** (171 Via Turati; 39-06/444-841; www.eshotel.it; doubles from \$411) is the location of choice whenever the fashion crowd wants to clink glasses over the opening of a new boutique.

10 GARDEN The acre-wide landscaped grounds of the **Bulgari Hotel, Milano** (7B Via Privata Fratelli Gabba; 39-02/805-8051; www.bulgarihotels.com; doubles from \$706) are a favorite lunchtime haunt for stressed-out Milanese professionals, who find the roses, camellias, and century-old chestnut trees to be the best pick-me-ups around. It's just three minutes from Via Montenapoleone.

11 HOTEL PARKING LOT (BELIEVE IT OR NOT!) In Puglia's tony town of Taranto, the **Relais Villa San Martino** (59 Via Taranto, Km 2, Martina Franca; 39-080/485-7719; www.relaisvillasanmartino.com; doubles from \$308), a country retreat with a Moroccan-inspired spa, next year will be opening a guarded area for Ferraris only. Lesser vehicles will have to settle for the unattended car park outside.

12 Venice In an 18th-century palazzo just steps from the Peggy Guggenheim museum, **DD.724** is the brainchild of hotelier Chiara Bocchini, whose mission is to offer an alternative to the scalloped curtains and Murano glass chandeliers that characterize most Venetian hotels. Abstract paintings by contemporary artists hang in the tiny lobby; the seven one-of-a-kind rooms have wood-beamed ceilings, velvet armchairs, and Signoria di Firenze linens. The details are almost perfect save for the little signs next to the stylish Millefiori candles that warn: NOT FOR USING. 724 Dorsoduro; 39-041/277-0262, www.dd724.it; doubles from \$248.

13 Naples Costantinopoli 104 is a secret oasis in the city's laundry line-strewn and moped-filled heart. Push through a door into the courtyard of a crumbling palazzo, walk beneath a 17th-century archway, around the corner, past an antique re-

stor's workshop, and you'll find the hotel compound. Palm trees and bougainvillea cluster about a swimming pool; an Art Nouveau stained-glass window glistens in the rust-colored villa's façade. Though the 19 rooms are plain, many overlook the inner garden. The best is Suite 104, with a medieval stone door frame behind the bed, a sunken bath, and a prime pool-side location. 104 Via Santa Maria di Costantinopoli; 39-081/557-1035; www.costantinopoli104.it; doubles from \$210.

14 Rome At the end of a hectic, culture-packed day, the extravagant foyer of the 239-room **Exedra** (ostrich-leather armchairs, fringed damask sofas) can bring on Stendhal syndrome, an illness that supposedly results from sensory overload. But book one of the 26 simply furnished rooms (rare yellow marble, original beams) on the fourth floor of this former papal granary, and you'll quickly recover. In the evening, drift down to the Adam Tihany-designed champagne bar, lined with oversized paparazzi photographs; chandeliers with long strands of droplets hover above the wenge wood tables like falling rain. 47 Piazza della Repubblica; 888/626-7265 or 39-06/489-381; www.boscolohotels.com; doubles from \$347.

COUNTRY RETREATS

15 Tuscany On a hard-to-find hilltop with views over olive groves and vineyards and rolling hills, the 12th-century **Castello di Vicarello** is the dream house of Aurora and Carlo Baccheschi Berti, who once worked in fashion and advertising in Milan. The castle has two outdoor pools and just five suites decorated with Indonesian antiques, Balinese furniture, and contemporary art (two more will open in 2005). The 60-acre grounds contain a vineyard, 1,200 olive trees, and a flock

of chickens. Get up early enough and you can hunt for eggs with Carlo. Or help him pick from among the 1,500 plants; the artichokes are served raw, stuffed, or fried, along with homemade pasta and bread during the spring. 1 Via Vicarello, Poggi del Sasso; 39-0564/990-718; www.castellodivicarello.it; doubles from \$310.

The Villa Chiesina guest house and pool at Tuscany's Castello di Vicarello. Right: One of the castle's dining areas.



The view of the Chiesa di San Clemente from room 337 at the San Clemente Palace in Venice. Below, right: A Murano chandelier, over the hotel's staircase.

SAMPLE



16 Chef Alain Ducasse runs two hotels in his native France, but for his first Italian venture he hooked up with wine producer Vittorio Moretti to create **L'Andana**. So far, this former hunting villa of Duke Leopold II has 20 rooms that are functional; another 13 will open by the year's end. Some of the interiors, decorated with antiques and false fireplaces, look more like stage sets. But the restaurant in the old granary (coming this month) and the main dining room (scheduled for 2005) are the region's most anticipated culinary openings. Ducasse's sous-chef, Christophe Martin, formerly of Monte Carlo's Le Louis XV, oversees the kitchens and uses olive oil and wine produced on the estate. *Località Badiola, Castiglione della Pescaia*; 39-0564/944-321; www.andana.it; doubles from \$483.

17 Until 2003, **Villa il Poggiale** was the private residence of the Vitta design family; 10 miles from Florence, it still has the atmosphere of a much-loved villa (these days, family friend Caterina Piccolomini is in charge). A bright green lawn fringed with Tuscan cypresses surrounds an arched loggia; the 24 rooms—19th-century frescoes, wood-beamed ceilings—are equally grand. The villa is intended for anyone who values authenticity over luxury: there's no elevator, and reception has

out as a monastery in the 12th century; it was later used as a hospital, which eventually shut down. Last year, the property was transformed into a 205-room resort, under the auspices of luxury chain Turin Hotels International. Most of the opulent rooms (damask wall-coverings, classic furnishings, marble-laden bathrooms) have views over the lagoon. More a village than a hotel, San Clemente has four acres of parks, a three-hole golf course, a small church, a 10,000-square-foot spa, and three restaurants, including Cà dei Frati, in the monastery's former laundry. As you wander back from one of the two tennis courts, you may spot toque-clad chef Gabriele Enrico picking herbs amid the kitchen gardens for dishes such as lobster with sautéed foie gras and asparagus compote. *1 Isola di San Clemente, San Marco*; 39-041/244-5001; www.sanclemente.thi.it; doubles from \$582. >>



limited hours. At night, guests let themselves in, then pour their own grappa at the drawing room's honesty bar. *69 Via Empolese, San Casciano val di Pesa*; 39-055/828-311; www.villailpoggiale.it; doubles from \$173.

18 **Rome** Five minutes outside the Grande Raccordo Anulare (the giant ring road around Rome), **La Torre Sebastiani** falls somewhere between city and country; visitors can make the most of both. This 14th-century tower is home to Stefano Sebastiani, former manager of London's Hotel Berkeley, and his Parisian partner, Sophie Desrue, who have decorated the four (soon to be five) rooms with Indian cotton bedspreads and gold-framed oil landscapes. They have also opened a barrel-vaulted restaurant, where guests dine on simple dishes such as pasta with lemon, alongside Stefano and Sophie, who eat most of their meals here, too. From La Torre Sebastiani, take Sophie's informal shuttle service (in her black Nissan) to the Grotta Rossa train, which whisks you to Rome's Piazza del Popolo in 12 minutes. *75 Via Ghisalba*; 39-06/3363-0066; www.torresebastiani.com; doubles from \$198.

ON THE WATERFRONT

19 **Venice** Set on a 17-acre private island in the Venetian lagoon, **San Clemente Palace** started

DARING DESIGN **20** Winning the "wildest" category is Rome's **Aleph** (*15 Via di San Basilio*; 800/337-4685 or 39-06/422-901; www.designhotels.com; doubles from \$420), a heaven and hell-themed hotel by Adam Tihany. Among the witty details: hooks for bathrobes shaped like devil's horns, and tiny plasma-TV screens on the floor in front of the toilets in some rooms. **21** The most fashionable hotel is the **Continente** (*6R Vicolo dell'Oro*; 39-055/27262; www.lungarnohotels.com; doubles from \$358): it's owned by the Ferragamo family. Live street scenes are projected on the lobby walls; a glass elevator whisks guests to a balcony with a view of the Ponte Vecchio.



The HB hotel in Jesolo, just 25 miles from Venice. Above, right: Rejuvenating in the seawater pools at Tuscany's Tombolo Talasso Resort.

22 A 45-minute boat-and-cab trip from St. Mark's Square, in the seaside resort town of Jesolo, the **HB** hotel is an all-white, 1960's structure that was once the area's top hotel, before it slowly sank into disrepair. Then, new owner Marina Boccato changed its name from the fusty-sounding Bellevue to the pencil-sharp HB. She revamped the 64 rooms and replaced outmoded lobby furnishings with wicker sofas, white cushions, and cacti in giant pots. The negatives: bathrooms are old-fashioned in an unbecoming way (though plans are afoot to renew them), and the beach is often packed, elbow-to-elbow. 100 Via Oriente, Jesolo Pineta; 39-0421/961-233; www.hbjesolo.it; doubles from \$149; open May 1–September 15.

23 **Sardinia** The 47-room **La Coluccia**—near the small town of Santa Teresa di Gallura—is ideal for couples craving undisturbed beach time. The stretch of sand alongside the hotel is so remote, there's no danger of guests getting distracted by Sardinia's famously high-oc-



tane social life. The only decision to make is whether to sunbathe by the gleaming free-form pool, take a boat trip to the nearby archipelago of La Maddalena, or build sandcastles on the beach. As is typical of a Mediterranean village, the hotel is whitewashed, though it combines an arrestingly modern design scheme (wave-shaped façade, mosaic-lined tubular showers) with traditional details such as a juniper branch-covered arbor. Località Conca Verde, Santa Teresa di Gallura; 39-0789/758-004; www.mobygest.it; doubles from \$322.

SUPER SPAS

24 **South Tirol** The only way to reach the **Vigilius Mountain Resort** atop Monte San Vigilio is by cable car. Once there, guests can ski (in winter), go Nordic walking (in summer), or indulge in a bath of warm hay, gathered from surrounding meadows (year-round). But the main attraction is architect Matteo Thun's ingenious design: from above, the hotel resembles a fallen log; untreated larch slats on the façade blend with the surrounding woods; grass grows on the roof; the quartz-tiled thermal pool overlooks the pine trees. The 41 rooms have heated stone screens separating bath and bed zones, and minimalist furniture from B&B Italia. The only downside is Ristorante 1500, where some dishes—sheep's cheese-crust lamb with olive gnocchi—are a tad heavy for those on a health regime. Vigiljoch, Lana Südtirol; 39-0473/556-600; www.vigilius.it; doubles from \$341.

ON THE HORIZON

- Italy's growth spurt isn't over yet:
- **The Four Seasons Hotel, Firenze, is opening in Palazzo della Gherardesca in early 2006.**
 - **Next year, UNA Hotels & Resorts reopens both the historic Hotel Palace in Catania, Sicily, and Naples's 19th-century Hotel Napoli.**
 - **In 2005, Terme di Merano—Merano's classic spa hotel—comes back, with a Matteo Thun makeover.**
 - **A 350-room hotel by Frank Gehry is rumored to be rolling into the new Venice airport boat terminal by 2006.**
 - **Giorgio Armani and Dubai-based Emaar Properties plan to open a Milan hotel before 2008.**
 - **Hilton is building a 380-room hotel in Venice's neo-Gothic Molino Stucky. Opening date unknown.**
 - **A 261-room Jean Nouvel creation is planned for Florence's former Fiat complex. No opening date set.**

25 **Tuscany** Water, not wine, is the point at the Antinori family's beachfront **Tombolo Talasso Resort**, one of Italy's first thalassotherapy spas. In a 1930's structure, the lobby (wicker chairs with animal-print cushions; coconut mats) is pleasant enough. But the décor in the rooms (a pastiche of checked and floral fabrics and kitschy seascape paintings) doesn't quite hit the spot. Still, you won't be fretting over the color scheme once you're wallowing in the waters of the five pools in the faux-cave spa. Will it be the seawater massage bed, the warm waterfalls, or the relaxation pool with colored lights? 3 Via del Corallo, Marina di Castagneto Carducci; 39-0565/74530; www.tombolotalasso.it; doubles from \$434. +

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