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Timeless HERITAGE

Inside Ferruccio Ferragamo's private Tuscan residence at Il Borro

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ITALIAN HOURS

*From **Florence** to **Palermo**, a journey through Italy during the heart of summer offers lessons in art, design, culture and of course, cuisine*

By REBECCA ANNE PROCTOR



A view from the terrace of the Popolo Suite at Hotel de Russie by Rocco Forte Hotels in Rome



Roads, streets, strada, strade, and piazza upon piazza, a journey through Italy leads one down many paths, many avenues of discovery. The country holds a special place in my heart for it was here in the cities of Venice and Florence that my family would spend each summer so that my mother could paint and my father could write and fulfil his research. Many summers turned into high school and university and Italy became another home, if not another cultural identity for me. Yet despite how familiar we are with a place, it is when we discover new aspects, new characteristics, like those of a close friend, that our relationship with it deepens.

This summer took me throughout Italy, with stops in Florence and Rome, cities I know like the back of my hand, but that provided this time new angles and places of reference. Moving as it is called to Italy's "profondo sud" (the profound south) I travelled for the first time to Puglia, visiting the historic town of Ugento where a visionary restoration project has turned a 17th-century castle into a luxury hotel, museum and world-class cookery school. Catching a plane from the Bari airport, I made my last stop: Palermo. There I spent a day perusing the city, relishing in its Sicilian Baroque art and architecture, the edgy glamour of the people, and haunting feeling of a place that seems to always waver on the tip of time. Sicily is still largely "off-the-map" and that is part of its charm, its beautiful chaos beckons those who love discovery, get lost on its streets and don't mind the elegant disorder that defines them.

Other days were spent at Verdura Resort, located an hour from Palermo and operated by Rocco Forte Hotels. Palm trees encircle each villa with mesmerising views out into the sea – a sea that is as close as one could be to Africa. Deep crimson sunsets remind one of the continent's proximity; there's an earthy beauty to Verdura that is similar to what one finds in Tunisia or Morocco – serenity and a connection with nature. The following provides in-depth details of my discoveries of these new special places in *bella Italia*.

A view from the bedroom of the Repubblica Suite at Hotel Savoy by Rocco Forte Hotels in Florence



FIRENZE, THE HOTEL SAVOY

The city of the Medici and the heart of the Renaissance, a visit to Florence offers a step back in time, centuries back to when there was a rebirth of the importance of classical antiquity. A walk amidst the city centre's numerous piazzas and palazzos reveals sculptural works done in the likeness of the ancient Romans. Florence is a city in continual dialogue with the past. Yet its multitude of historical wonders accompanies its contemporaneity as well as the city's inherent love of fashion and art – both of which are celebrated in one of the city's latest hotels: The Hotel Savoy in Piazza della Repubblica. It reopened in April this year after an extensive renovation project and with a unique collaboration with Emilio Pucci. The prestigious hotel was built 125 years ago in 1893 on the site where the Mercato Vecchio and the church of San Tommaso once stood. When the hotel opened, it was praised for its modern and luxurious touches, which at that time included central heating, an elevator and electric lights. Even after the hotel's refurbishment, its character of innovation and modernity holds strong. Rocco Forte's Director of Design, Olga Polizzi, has injected the timeless elegance of the Hotel Savoy with contemporary touches while maintaining its Florentine identity.

As soon as I entered the lobby from the busy side street of Piazza della Repubblica, an aura of stately glamour emanated the space. It is dressed in white colouring, vibrant Pucci touches found on the sofas and pillows, tables and chairs. A large portrait by Italian artist Luca Pignatelli stares out at visitors from one side – a taste of the many artworks by the artist found throughout the hotel. Elegantly shaped metal lamps and lighting by Florentine artisan Il Bronzetto endow the hotel with a rich feeling of craftsmanship. The company, which has been creating its designs since 1963, leans towards classical Italian products, designing everything from the ornate to the rustic in style. Polizzi sought the finest Tuscan craftsmen – from Chelini and Ceccarelli to Il Bronzetto and



An interior view of the new lobby at Hotel Savoy

Castorina – to lovingly handcrafted bespoke pieces for the hotel, bringing together the old and the new. After a quick and studied look around, I was taken to my room, a Junior Deluxe Suite overlooking Piazza della Repubblica.

I was then guided through the novelties of the Hotel Savoy. Of note are the hotel's newly renovated Duomo Presidential Suite, four Grand View Suites and the Panoramic Suite. The top of the top in this grand hotel, each of these rooms comes with its own particularities. Combining modern luxury, space and light, these rooms are the hotel's gems. Each suite is designed to evoke a sense of tranquillity, with predominantly Italian design aspects mixed with a touch of Rocco Forte's British heritage. Newly decorated by Polizzi, like each of the hotel's illustrious 80 rooms, the suite was contemporary Italian in style with parquet floors, marble-clad bathrooms and mosaics. What I loved most was the detailing – the impressive hardcover books on art and culture stationed as if someone had just used them on the coffee table and the various ancient and modern sculptures decidedly placed in certain areas of the room where they would get the most recognition. Just being able to throw open your window at any time of day and watch the scene unfold below was a treat. I was aware of the passing of time; this was someone's view over a century ago.

At 152-square-metres the Duomo Presidential Suite is by far the largest suite of all the Rocco Forte Hotels. It occupies its own wing and offers enrapturing views of Brunelleschi's Cupola and Giotto's Campanile. Natural light floods the suite and highlights the its artistic characteristics – its turquoise blue colour, Timorous Beastie cushions, and the nature-themed wallpaper, adorned with animals, with its playful themes. Of note are stylish white statues featuring a hunting dog created by Ceccarelli Ceramics at the entrance of the suite as well as Chelini workshop, which inject a sense of Baroque style to the living room space.

The four Grand View Suites offer splendid views over the Piazza della Repubblica and are enhanced by a floral sylvan theme from its verdant painted wallpaper. Interestingly, each of the Grand View Suites is dedicated to a season and recalling the Putti Quattro Stagioni "four seasons" sculptures in the lobby. And perhaps my favourite is the Panoramic Suite on the fifth floor of the hotel. Its two-storey structure is unique and offers a series of small and cosy spaces decorated with muted tones of yellow, gold and grey. On the upper level, guests can relax on the romantic private terrace offering a 180-degree view over the city's Renaissance landmarks. It's a magical view that even captures the city's picturesque rooftops and the Tuscany countryside in the distance. It's the ideal place to enjoy a drink, *alla Italiana*, away from the crowds. Inside are gold leaf mirrors by Il Bronzetto and bespoke bookcases from Castorina lined

with works by both English and Italian classic authors.

An impressive new hotel, not just for its design, but also for its desire to marry Florentine heritage with contemporary fashion, and for that it deserves great praise. Each morning I sipped a cappuccino on the outside terrace, placing my cup on a table decorated with Pucci's specially made scarves of the Hotel Savoy – a reminder of the hotel's innovative dance between past and present.



This and below: Views of the bedroom in the Junior Deluxe Suite at Hotel Savoy by Rocco Forte Hotels

“COMBINING
MODERN LUXURY,
SPACE AND LIGHT,
THESE ROOMS ARE
THE HOTEL'S GEMS”



A view onto Hotel de Russie's verdant Secret Garden



ROME, HOTEL DE RUSSIE

I head south to Rome, a city still caught up in antiquity, where chaos-filled streets merge with ancient Roman ruins and sensuous Renaissance piazzas. I arrive at Piazza del Popolo, one of the city's largest piazzas, known for its Flaminio Obelisk, one of the 13 ancient obelisks in Rome, created during the kingdom of Pharaohs Ramesses II and Merneptah during 13th century BCE and placed in the Temple of Sun in Heliopolis. It was brought to Rome during 10th century BCE by the command of Augustus. One will uncover stories like this at every corner of the city.

Rome has layers and layers of history; a lifetime is not enough to uncover all its mysteries. I walk down the nearby Via del Babuino and come to Hotel de Russie, Rocco Forte's shining Roman gem of a hotel. Designed by Italian architect Giuseppe Valadier between 1816 and 1818, who was at the same time redeveloping the neighbouring Piazza del Popolo and the Pincio Hill above. During the hotel's eventful history, it played many roles. During World War II the hotel was requisitioned by the Military Information Services and afterwards was taken over by Count Romolo Vaselli. It then became the head office of the RAI, the Italian Television Channel until 1993. On 15 April 2000 it finally reopened and brought back to its former glory as a luxury hotel by Sir Rocco Forte.

Countless artists, intellectuals, celebrities and cognoscenti have stayed

within the hotel's stylish walls over the course of the 20th century. In a letter to his mother, French writer, filmmaker and artist Jean Cocteau described it as "paradise on earth." Here was a place where he could pick oranges from The Secret Garden, also designed by Valadier, featuring 2,800-square-metres of terraced gardens, full of palm trees, yews and white climbing roses while chatting to his friends. I couldn't agree more. This was my second stay, and returning is like coming back to an old friend. The courtyard is one of the places I cherish most. It is here that one can journey off alone with a book and drink in hand or with family at a lavish meal at the Jardin de Russie restaurant.

While I requited with my regular favourites, this time I was marvelled by significant renovations throughout the hotel. Led again by Polizzi, most notable is the hotel's new Valadier Suite. Dedicated to Valadier himself, it is dressed in a contemporary yet classic style. "For me, the Valadier Suite says Rome. I tried to continue the Roman feel of the hotel by furnishing the suite with Italian antiques, Roman statues, vibrant colours and furnishings from C&C Milano, who is quintessentially Italian," says Polizzi. It has floor-to-ceiling windows throughout and three French balconies that overlook the hotel's secret garden and Pincio Hill. A yellow and green palette adorns the suite endowing it with light and vivacity. Included among the furnishings are pieces by well-known designers, such as a sofa by Meridiani, embellished with cushions by Sophia's collection, a coffee table by Julian Chichester Garcon mixed with low reliefs reflecting Roman sculptural elements and an ancient Roman statue reflects the history of the city. The bedroom is separated from the living room area by two sliding doors, and is elegantly furnished with a king size bed, a walk-in wardrobe and a vanity desk leading into an exquisite white Italian Arabescata marble bathroom. The Valadier Suite is the epitome of Hotel de Russie's timeless grandeur.

One could spend their entire stay at the Hotel de Russie, relishing in private moments at its Stravinskij Bar or its spa, filled with Forte Organics products. Yet one cannot miss Rome. From the hotel's ideal location you can walk after dinner to Piazza di Spagna and grab a gelato – a pastime I did often with friends during high school and university – just walking the streets, enjoying the busy piazzas, vibrant chatter and the richness of the eternal city.

An interior view of the new Valadier Suite





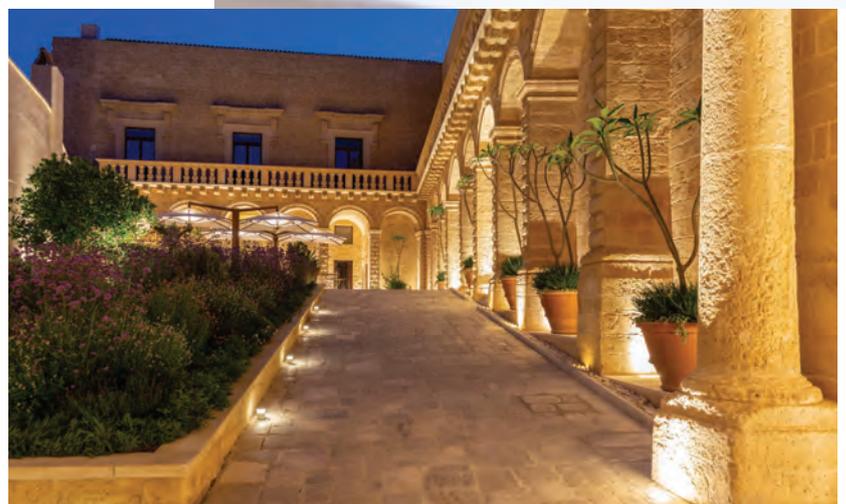
From the top: A view of the lounge at Castello di Ugento in Puglia. Photography by Roberto Corvaglia; A delicious breakfast spread in the courtyard of Castello di Ugento; An exterior view of Castello di Ugento

“I FOUND ITS THICK ANCIENT PIETRA *LECCESE* (A LOCAL STONE) WALLS AT ONCE WELCOMING AND FOREBODING”

PUGLIA, CASTELLO DI UGENTO

The southern state of Puglia has a very different history to its Roman and Florentine siblings. The Castello di Ugento is an historic monument with roots dating back to the Normans. I found its thick ancient *pietra leccese* (a local stone) walls at once welcoming and foreboding, characteristics that have remained from the fortress that it once was. I was greeted to a vibrant, cosy scene in the castle’s outdoor courtyard where owner Massimo d’Amore, former ex-PepsiCo CEO and his partner Diana Bianchi, awaited me for dinner. The castle has belonged to the d’Amore family since 1643, the couple proceeded to tell me over eating a delightfully gourmet meal prepared under the leadership of Chef Odette Fada. It took them six years to renovate. The stonewalls were sandblasted back to their original light honey colour; a team of experts was called to restore the castle’s 17th-century frescoes in the first-floor salons, which they hope to turn into a museum wing. And the walled gardens, one of my favourite areas, were meticulously landscaped. Bianchi tells me she hopes to stage outdoor massages and yoga in the garden. Of note at this luxury boutique hotel is its state-of-the-art cooking school located beneath the arched ceiling of the castle’s old storehouses. Focusing on cuisine from both Puglia and Italian eno-gastronomy, it has hosted students from the renowned Culinary Institute of America to spend several months amidst its walls.

This majestic home-away-from-home is still a work in progress, but what’s impressive is the insistence on combing ancient architecture with contemporary design. There’s an elegant dialogue to be had here and one to relish in as the past and the present intertwine. Also owned by d’Amore and Bianchi is the nearby Masseria delle Mandorle, a restored 18th-century masseria coloured in Puglia’s typical white tufo stone, a look that immediately made me think of Greece. Here, you’ll find a gym, private pool, restaurant and terrace where you can catch views of the surrounding countryside. Bliss.



A view of the pool at Rocco Forte's Verdura Resort in Palermo



The spa pool at Verdura Resort by Rocco Forte Hotels in Palermo



PALERMO, VERDURA RESORT

To the southern-most tip of Italy, where the country brushes with the tip of North Africa, is Sicily. The vast landscape of this region is profound in vision and history. Having lived in the Middle East for nearly a decade with frequent trips to Africa, this first taste of Sicily resurrects memories of the earthy North African climate, merging Mediterranean touches with a distinct African vibe. The only Rocco Forte resort hotel, Verdura is known for its many golf courses and endless beachfront views. Its strong, modernist, environmentally sensitive architecture incorporates a design aesthetic, led by Polizzi, which is firmly rooted in Sicilian culture and inspired by its Mediterranean landscape. The surrounding countryside has a raw and rugged scenery, one that architect, Flavio Albanese of Vicenza and Palermo, used to his advantage. He applied minimalist and contemporary lines to construct Verdura's rooms, restaurants, spa and outdoor entertainment areas.

The 230-hectare property has 203 rooms and suites that are generously sized and grouped so that each one has a private terrace with an uninterrupted view of the sea framed by its many palm trees and verdant landscape. From my room I could catch a deep crimson sunset surrounded by orange, lemon and olive groves and just make out the mountains in the distance. Albanese took his inspiration from Mexican architect Luis Barragan, and incorporated bold, Latin terracotta and ochre for the exterior of the buildings. He then used varying textures by mixing stone, sand and wood resulting in earthy structures. "My inspiration always starts with the place," said Polizzi when speaking about Verdura's interiors. "Every project is a different thinking process: you ask, 'What is right for this place?' I found Sicily hard, raw and rugged and this was reflected in the square, strong forms we have used and the hot colours. We also aimed to achieve a balance here between luxury and important ecological considerations."



An exterior view of Villa Iris at Verdura Resort by Rocco Forte Hotels in Palermo



“EVERY PROJECT IS A DIFFERENT THINKING PROCESS: YOU ASK, ‘WHAT IS RIGHT FOR THIS PLACE?’” - OLGA POLIZZI

Each space incorporates contemporary design into a relaxed setting, one that melds with the local scenery and resort vibe. Polizzi travelled throughout Sicily looking for materials. She found that handcrafted tiles were a key traditional feature of houses and villas in Sicily and so they became a cornerstone of the design for Verdura. She enlisted Sicilian company Caltagirone to handcraft the tiles used throughout the resort and accompanied them with soft throws, lampshades and cushions in the bedroom. Polizzi then used Sicilian colours – ochre, violet, and scarlet – to accentuate the space against a white background. I loved the modern four-poster bed made in dark wood with simple romantic white muslin curtains. Once again, the sight whisked me away to the exotic Orient. Soft lighting is provided by lamps with fabric cylinders and made by Italian lighting company, Flos. Verdura’s a Sicilian dream. One taste and you’ll be hooked to its alluring character and culture that sits between Italy and the Orient. ■

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An interior view of the Ambassador Suite at Verdura Resort by Rocco Forte Hotels in Palermo