

From left: the chic La Fontelina beach club facing Capri's Unesco-listed faraglioni rock formations; panoramic view from the terrace of a Suite Studio in Capri Tiberio Palace hotel; Positano's cascading cityscape, as seen from a terrace at Le Sirenuse hotel



La Dolce

From Como to Capri, homegrown Italian hotels are making themselves over for the Roaring Twenties, pairing timeless design with heartfelt hospitality. By Lee Marshall



Viva 2.0



One

day, right at the end of the last millennium, a 22-year-old named Tony Aiello went to see a commercial property that was for sale on the isle of Capri. It was, he says, “at the end of the street ... at the end of the world” – a lane called Via le Botteghe which, back then, was in a decidedly unfashionable part of Capri’s main town, visited only by a few intrepid travellers on their way up to the ruins of the megalomaniac Emperor Tiberius’s residence, Villa Jovis, on the island’s northeast coast.

But Tony was a young man with a vision. That evening, he told his mother – a seamstress from Positano – that he was going to rent a store on Capri for the enormous sum of two-and-a-half-million lire a month – around \$1,500. She asked him where he would sleep. He replied that the place had high ceilings, so it should be easy to add a mezzanine floor just big enough for a bed and a small bathroom. And that’s exactly what he did. For two years after 100% Capri opened in 2000 (*100capri.com*), Tony Aiello slept inside the shop.

Back then, Aiello was sure about just two things. One was that linen could be raised from crumpled-suit status to status symbol. The other was his determination to make Capri both the real and spiritual home of a company that has since become a worldwide luxury resortwear brand and a disrupter in a



Above: a curio-filled sitting area at Tiberio Palace; opposite: the sun-drenched pool area at Le Sirenuse

market dominated by global conglomerates, with 14 boutiques in carefully selected locations around the world, from Portofino to St Barth's, Saint-Tropez, Mykonos, Miami and Dubai.

"This place is a Ferrari, a Rolls-Royce," Aiello enthuses. "Tiberius left the whole Roman empire behind just to come and live here for ten years". Like many of Italy's classic *dolce vita* destinations, Capri is still relevant, still vibrant, precisely because of people like Aiello, incomers or new generations of locals, who engage in a virtuous feedback loop: they leverage the legend associated with the destination but at the same time renew and refresh it.

That's exactly what two of the island's most desirable hotels have done. In 2007, the JK Place group created by Italian-Israeli hotelier Ori Kafri made JK Place Capri (jkcapri.com) only its second opening after its original Florence base – but brought new ideas and a new aesthetic to bear through Michele Bonan's deliciously tasteful transatlantic design scheme. The same is true of the Tiberio Palace (capritiberioplace.it) – just steps away from Aiello's 100% Capri flagship store – a once-tired old five-star that relaunched itself in 2010 with a positively jazzy makeover by Giampiero Panepinto that also reduced the number of rooms from 75 to 50.

Hop across to the Amalfi Coast by yacht, ferry or Riva runabout, and the story is the same. Up in lofty Ravello,

Mariella and Attilia Avino (soon to be joined by their younger sister Mariavittoria) are slowly and sustainably transforming Palazzo Avino (palazzoavino.com), a 43-room hotel with soaring, eagle-eye views down the coast. Bought and restored by their father in 1995, this blushing pink pile, an aristocratic residence with 12th-century foundations, was initially managed by the Virgin group as "Palazzo Sasso", but was taken back under family control and renamed Palazzo Avino at the start of the 2013 season.

By this time, the hotel already had its own beach club, but the Avino sisters have since brought in a talented young Neapolitan chef, Giovanni Vanacore, to head up Palazzo Avino's Michelin-starred restaurant, Rossellinis; asked a designer friend, Cristina Celestino, to apply her contemporary romantic touch to what they call a "capsule collection" of seven rooms on all floors; and added a boutique with a selection of clothes and accessories by artisanal makers and designers like Caterina Gatta or House of Mua Mua. Called The Pink Palace, the store occupies a tiny corner site just across from the hotel's main entrance. Mariella, whose pet project this is, refers to it as "a globetrotter's walk-in wardrobe"; her sister jokes that "it allows Mariella to shop and work at the same time".

In addition to Palazzo Avino, three more of this fabled region's most coveted accommodations – Le Sirenuse, Il San Pietro and the Santa Caterina – are all family-owned and run. >

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This is something of a tradition on *la Costiera Amalfitana* – but curiously, it’s also connected to these luxe palaces’ readiness to innovate and change things around. The chain of command between the general manager who meets the guests and gauges the mood, and the head office that approves the budget, consists of just one link. In 2016, Vito and Carlo Cinque of Il San Pietro in Positano (ilsanpietro.com) spent around three-million euros on something most guests never even see – the kitchens of the hotel’s two restaurants, which now combine the kind of design that makes it into the pages of interiors magazines with state-of-the-art eco-technology. And over at the Santa Caterina in Amalfi (hotelsantacaterina.it), the Gambardella family is about to unveil two new standalone villas a short walk from the main hotel, Villa Saracena and Villa della Marchesa.

Legendary Positano hotel Le Sirenuse (sirenuse.it) is celebrating its 70th anniversary in 2021, but look beyond its elegant antique decor, assembled over the years by the late Franco Sersale (one of the four siblings who opened up their family villa to guests in 1951) and you find a much younger vibe. With the help of British curator Silka Rittson-Thomas, co-owners Antonio and Carla Sersale began to commission a series of site-specific artworks for the Positano hotel in 2015 (Martin Creed, Stanley Whitney and Rita Ackermann are just some of the artists invited so far). Wrapped around columns, hanging from a traditional cross-vaulted ceiling or, in the case of a mural by LA-based artist Alex Israel, marching boldly up a staircase, these pieces hide in plain sight amidst the 18th-century Neapolitan consoles and oil paintings of distant Sersale ancestors.

Meanwhile, Antonio and Carla’s sons Aldo and Francesco both came on board in 2021. Aldo oversees the hotel’s restaurants and bars – like cool alfresco terrace Franco’s Bar, a few steps away from the property, which this year took on famed Italian mixologist Mattia Pastori as its cocktail consultant. Francesco Sersale has been helping his mother Carla out with the marketing and strategic planning of Emporio Sirenuse (emporiosirenuse.com), the resortwear and lifestyle brand she created back in 1990. Originally it consisted of a single store across from the hotel, run along the lines of The Pink Palace as a showcase for Carla’s favourite small designers and labels. But in 2013, Emporio shifted gears, launching its own collections, which are designed by Carla’s Milan-based designer niece Viola Parrocchetti and crafted by tailors in Mumbai. Emporio Sirenuse embraces collaborations with creatives and other niche brands; in 2021 alone, these have included British designer Emilia Wickstead, whimsical US “escapewear” company Tombolo and French artist Louis Barthélemy, who has created a capsule collection that melds Amalfi Coast and North African motifs in a fresh and playful mix.

Even Lake Como has been roused from its slumber in recent years. Long seen as a place of timeless elegance, epitomised by the aristocratic charms of the quintessential Italian lakeside resort, Villa d’Este, the Como scene was reshuffled by the arrival of Il Sereno in 2017 and the Mandarin Oriental Lake Como in 2019. The Italian cousin of Le Sereno in St Barth’s, Il Sereno (ilsereno.com) is an instant neo-Modernist classic, designed inside and out by Patricia Urquiola, with a gourmet restaurant overseen by Milanese chef Andrea Berton and a 18m-long freshwater infinity pool suspended over the lake. In June 2021, the hotel unveiled its standalone penthouse suite. With widescreen lake views, the huge new suite feels like a contemporary take on the kind of mid-century-modern interior that Marcello Mastroianni might have lolled around in an Antonioni film. Its contents are almost entirely “shoppable” – from classic design pieces by Franco Albini and others to silk foulards and cushions created by Urquiola.

If Lake Como is unchanging, Portofino is, in one sense at least, unchangeable. Locals will tell you that no new houses have been built in this exquisite Mediterranean harbour village since the 1940s – at least. While that’s difficult to verify, it was certainly untouched by the construction boom that ruined so much of the Italian seaside in the 1960s and 1970s, and strict zoning laws mean that is unlikely to change anytime soon. But that doesn’t mean existing buildings can’t be renovated, change hands or be repurposed.

Portofino town doesn’t have a beach as such – that role is filled by the bay of Paraggi, a five-minute drive north. It was here, in 2017, that restaurateur Enrico Buonocore opened a branch of Langosteria (langosteria.com), a chain founded 14 years ago with a single Milanese restaurant specialising in seafood of a quality and variety rarely seen in Italy’s fashion and design capital. “When I launched here in Portofino,” Buonocore tells me over a plate of one of Langosteria’s flagship dishes, steamed Alaskan king crab, “everyone said, ‘Nobody goes to eat in Paraggi in the evening – it’s a daytime beach place.’ Boy, did I prove them wrong.” But one fly in the ointment remained: Bagni Fiore, the iconic beach establishment right in front of Langosteria Paraggi’s elegant terrace, was under separate ownership. Finally, in 2021, Buonocore bought that too, inking the deal under a beach umbrella. He’s convinced that a destination like Portofino “thrives when it achieves a critical mass”, and is therefore unfazed by the other big Portofino culinary splashdown of 2021 – Cracco Portofino, the Ligurian outpost of Milanese uber-chef Carlo Cracco, who has already announced that this will be his first entirely meatless restaurant.

So confident is Buonocore with the allure of his own brand, and at ease with the idea that quality breeds quality, that >



Above: brothers Carlo (left) and Vito Cinque, owners of Positano's Il San Pietro hotel; right: vintage postcards capture the spirit of old Portofino



Above: enjoying cocktails at Il Pellicano; right: the terrace of Langosteria restaurant on Paraggi bay



Above: a vaulted courtyard at Palazzo Avino; left: Pellicano Hotels CEO Marie-Louise Scio; below: Le Sirenuse owners Carla and Antonio Sersale, and their sons Aldo (right) and Francesco; top right: a view of San Montano beach from Hotel Mezzatorre on the isle of Ischia





Above: approaching San Fruttuoso abbey, unreachable by car, via gozzo – a Ligurian fishing boat – on a day trip from Portofino with Splendido Mare; right: the Patricia Urquiola-designed Alcova Suite at Il Sereno hotel



he has handed the seasonal management of Bagni Fiore to Belmond, owners of the nearby Belmond Hotel Splendido and Belmond Splendido Mare.

It's the reboot of the latter establishment that is the icing on Portofino's new torta. Inaugurated in 1902 as the Hotel Splendid, the Belmond Hotel Splendido (belmond.com) itself is the ultimate Italian grand hotel: surrounded by lush terraced gardens, it surveys Portofino from a lofty, aristocratic perch above town. At the end of the 1990s, Belmond's former avatar, Orient Express Hotels, acquired a small guesthouse on the village's main harbourside piazza that was "like a hostel", in the words of Splendido's public-relations manager Danilo Quagliozi, with 35 tiny rooms. The idea was that it would become the grande dame's breezy seaside cousin. But in its first incarnation, the 16-room Splendido Mare struggled to develop a character of its own, being viewed by many guests, Quagliozi readily admits, as "the Splendido annexe".

This has all changed with its latest renovation, which was piloted by Paris-based design studio Festen. Referencing the maritime soul of Portofino in its use of materials like natural wood, brass and rope, the new-look Mare is both suavely contemporary and winkingly retro. Artisanal design details like the white and yellow geometric bathroom tiles, inspired by nearby Santa Margherita's jaunty beach cabins, combine with mid-century-modern pieces by Giò Ponti and other Italian designers that were mostly bought at auction by Festen's partners Charlotte de Tonnac and Hugo Sauzay – not always an easy process, Quagliozi relates, as the

Belmond money guys, used to long corporate timescales, were called on to approve purchases in a matter of seconds. Add to this the assured, innovative seafood cuisine on show at the harbourside restaurant, DaV Mare, overseen by the Cerea brothers of the famed Da Vittorio in Bergamo, and what has been achieved here is the elusive thing so many of Italy's classic destinations are chasing – how to update your formula for the kids and even grandchildren of those clients that discovered you in the *dolce vita* years.

That was exactly what Marie-Louise Sciò, the CEO and creative director of Pellicano Hotels, did when she launched her online store Issimo in May 2020, just as Italy was beginning to emerge from the dark days of its first lockdown. Sciò's father built the group around two legendary hotels, Il Pellicano on the Argentario peninsula and La Posta Vecchia, a former Getty villa on the coast north of Rome. In 2005, at her father's request, Marie-Louise began to redesign some of Il Pellicano's bathrooms (hotelilpellicano.com); just a year later, finding nobody else that got the spirit of the place as she and her family did, she piloted a major rehaul of the entire hotel. Since then, Pellicano Hotels has also taken over the



Clockwise from left: sisters Mariella (left) and Attilia Avino of Palazzo Avino hotel in Ravello; a seafood creation at Splendido Mare's DaV restaurant; a sundeck atop ancient stonework at Il Pellicano hotel; the penthouse suite at JK Place Capri



management of the Hotel Mezzatorre (mezzatorre.com) on the increasingly chic Gulf of Naples island of Ischia and launched creative collaborations with cool partners that range from artist and photographer Juergen Teller to German sandal brand Birkenstock.

Like the Sersales and the Avino sisters, Sciò realised early on that the guests who came to the resort year after year were buying into a particular Italian lifestyle. Issimo (issimoissimo.com) was a way of making that lifestyle available online – because Sciò had noticed that “although there are plenty of fabulous e-commerce sites, there was nothing that really talks only about Italy”. Issimo, she explains, endeavours “to bring online that lifestyle, that aesthetic, that passion for Italy ... also that subtlety and non-ostentatiousness”. She also points out that postwar shift in the country’s mood, style and self-confidence that was labelled *la dolce vita* was “actually quite inclusive ... it made everyone feel part of something fabulous”. Issimo reflects this, offering everything from an eight-euro jar of amatriciana pasta sauce to a pair of 1959 replica swing moccasins, priced at €1,090, from Ferragamo’s Creations archive collection.

Back in Capri, over a plate of spaghetti al pomodoro in his spectacular cool white villa overlooking Capri’s famous *faraglioni* rockstacks, served with a glass of Dom Pérignon (because ... why not?), Aiello points out another factor that links Capri to places like Portofino, the Amalfi Coast or Lake Como – though on Capri, it’s even more marked. One of the reasons for the island’s enduring magnetism and mystique is, Aiello assures me, to do with the fact that “you can’t simply turn up at a real-estate agency with 200 million euros and say: ‘I want a villa.’ It’s not just about money – it’s about relationships, timing, upbringing, culture ... As soon as you put a foot wrong – Paff! You’re out.”

One day, Aiello tells me, his Capri property will host 100% Capri’s first foray into hospitality, offering a handful of suites in what must be one of the island’s most coveted corners. But he’s in no rush to complete the project. “Things take longer on Capri. Especially in a location like this, where building permits are super locked down. But I don’t mind: the longer it takes, and the more you do it with respect for the place and the people who live here, the more you enjoy it”. ♦