



SAN PIETRO

PARADISE-FOR HOLLYWOOD'S TOP STARS ? AND YOU

BY JESSE NASH

In the south of Italy, there's a little piece of heaven waiting patiently for your arrival. It's a magical place that excites the senses as you wend your way through a glorious landscape of gentle mountains by a placid sea. Here an orange rooftop, anchored by a garden of lemons and limes; there a church bell waxing melodic to the rhythm of the breaking surf. A chorus of seagulls cheers in the distance. You touch your face to confirm that you're awake.



Glorious sun-drenched villas that have borne silent witness to untold escapades of love and adventure nestle against a mountainside, set against a backdrop of turquoise tranquillity. No matter your gender, you are Alice and this is Wonderland. You are gazing giddily from the balcony of the Hotel San Pietro in the village of Positano.

Chiseled into the rock face, in all its glory, San Pietro is paradise high in the Amalfi Cliffs overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. Rose gardens, lemon groves and wild arugula cover much of the hillside. From your lofty perch, you stand among the stars. The San Pietro has long been a haven for celebrities. Julia Roberts took her then boyfriend, Benjamin Bratt, to the San Pietro on their first vacation together and love blossomed. Sting brought the Dalai Lama as his guest, and they talked music and pomodoro. Tina Turner came alone and exercised her interior designing skills by re-arranging her room. Dustin Hoffman did some gardening there; to make sure the tomatoes were to his liking, he personally inspected and picked them one morning.

Every magical wonderland has a queen, of course, and the queen of Positano is Virginia Attanasio Cinque, owner of the Hotel San Pietro. Legendary director Franco Zeffirelli and acclaimed novelist Gore Vidal, Virginia's good friends, often hold court at the San Pietro and can be found sharing a meal with this illuminated Positanian, sometimes with her two handsome young sons, Carlo [Vice President] and Vito [Manager], who can be seen on premises alongside Virginia running the day-to-day operation of the hotel. Sometimes they just bring their favorite house guests—for example, Elizabeth Taylor and Jeremy Irons.

Virginia Attanasio Cinque and her brothers and sisters have established the gold standard for hotels in the region: the Palazzo Murat is owned by Dr. Mario Attanasio; the Hotel Miramare, owned by Carlo Attanasio and Rosa Attanasio Russo, is one of the first hotels to open in Positano during the early part of World War II; and, finally, the Punta Regina, also owned by Rosa Attanasio Russo, is a quaint little boutique property. Marilù Attanasio Vespoli also is involved in the activities of all the hotels. Hospitality is truly a family affair.

The aerial view of the property and its kaleidoscope of flowers will leave you breathless. The hotel's chapel welcomes you. Just a few floors below is a realm of cantilevered terraces and gardens, along with 61 uniquely constructed rooms, all of which provide astonishing sea views. Even many of its bathrooms feature breathtaking seascapes, along with a relaxing whirlpool bath. No two rooms are alike. We know; Virginia had us visit almost every one.



There is also a pool, beautifully situated atop one of the hotel's highest terraces. From this elevation you can take an elevator, cut into the mountainside when the hotel first opened, 262 feet down to the sea, then enjoy a champagne Bellini, while lounging in a charming sunbathing

area, replete with a bar and private beach. It's the only way.

And if you insist on bringing your helicopter, Virginia will be waiting for you there, too, at the hotel's private helicopter pad.

Fitness is important, and there is a tennis court available. For hardcore fitness buffs, there is even a modern exercise center filled with treadmills, hand weights, and musculation machines.

Although the property is one of the most breathtaking in the world, it is Virginia who establishes the spirit of the hotel, its sister properties and this historic family. Her presence can be felt everywhere.

Once you've entered the San Pietro, it is only moments before Virginia greets you. A warm smile blossoms. Her energy is unbounded, and you will immediately feel adopted—a member of her extended family and entitled to the luxury which abounds. Virginia makes the Hotel San Pietro feel like home in heaven, whether you stay for weeks or just one night.

Her enthusiasm and lust for perfection have attracted many luminaries. Some of the biggest names in politics, Hollywood, the literary world, and society have visited the San Pietro. Aside from those mentioned earlier, Sir Laurence Olivier was a guest, as has been Liza Minnelli, Gregory Peck, Catherine Deneuve, Marcello Mastroianni, Henry Mancini, and Oscar-nominated director ("The Pianist") Roman Polansky. Isn't it time your name was added to the list?

HISTORY

The San Pietro is considered by many an architectural wonder of Italy's Sorrento Peninsula, largely because it is etched in stone in the jagged cliffs that define the panoramic Amalfi Coast between the Lattari Mountains to the north and the breathtaking Bay of Salerno to the south. Yet the construction of the San Pietro owes less to architects and designers than it does to Virginia Cinque's uncle, Carlo "Carlino" Cinque; with simply some technical engineering advice, he created this extraordinary masterpiece.

"Carlino," as he was affectionately known by family and friends, grew up in the Cinque family's Hotel Miramare in Positano. He loved to show off his homeland to guests from all over the world, and his warm personality ensured that guests soon became friends, falling under the spell of Positano, and of the magnetic Carlo. It wasn't long before Carlo Cinque and his exuberant character



became legendary throughout Europe and the United States.

In 1962, the San Pietro began to take shape. Carlo bought a piece of land at the peak of a rock cliff face about two kilometers south of Positano. Nothing existed there except the ancient chapel of San Pietro. He immediately went to work chiseling his imaginative ideas into the stone. A small apartment and a glorious garden soon resulted. Gradually he added other rooms, other gardens and terraces, and soon the idea of creating the most perfect hotel on the crest of a cliff was born.

After eight years of hard work, the first 33 rooms facing the sea opened, along with a large lobby and a spectacular terrace. Today the San Pietro boasts of 61 rooms, cleverly tucked into the cliffs, and occupying nearly a dozen ledges; every room has a private balcony and dazzling view. Carlo wanted this Garden of Eden integrated with the property's magnificent medley of plants and flowers, so the colorful flora that decorates the countryside also resides within. Vines hang from the ceilings and bougainvillea cascade from every balcony, their exquisite pink flowers and grape arbors spreading shade and delight across every terrace.

The San Pietro also boasts of a dining area with some of the best cuisine in all of Italy (try the pizza, I think it's some of the best in the world! And the mozzarella de buffalo and pomodoro!-Heaven on Earth! Or just a nice bowl of pasta. And if it's not on the menu, just ask. The chef and his staff are imaginative and are at your service.) Terra-cotta tile floors are everywhere; they were designed by the famed Stingo Brothers, well-known Neapolitan ceramic artisans. Marvelous paintings, filled with myriad images of grace and glory—from dancing princesses to flying horses—can be found in most rooms; they were painted by renowned German artists, Ursula Kluth and Michele Theile.

No two rooms have the same decor. However, all have cool tile floors, sybaritic bathrooms and exquisite furnishings.

Carlo died in 1974, but he wanted the San Pietro to endure long after his death. So he left the hotel to his niece and nephew—Virginia and Salvatore; they have successfully carried on Carlo's spirit of affection and warm Italian hospitality, and continued to develop friendships with their guests just as their uncle did.

Since the death of Virginia's brother, Salvatore, in 1996, she and her sons, Carlo and Vito, have managed the hotel without any change in spirit or style. Virginia remains the strong matriarch—a woman of vision, who knows how to make a total stranger feel welcomed in minutes, whether they're famous or just like you and me. She is a rarity in an industry made up mostly of men, and her strength and character will ensure that the San Pietro will live on for many generations to come. The hotel is a remarkable demonstration of how beauty and intelligence, when combined with tenacious determination, can create paradise.

-- With George Flowers.

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