

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, APRIL 15, 2001

HOTEL CHECK-IN



TUSCANY

Living a fantasy starring pecorino and Chianti

By FRANCINE PROSE

Along with shelter and comfort, certain hotels offer fantasy — the chance to imagine, for a night or two, that you are living a different life. So Sette Querce, an appealing, hospitable inn in southern Tuscany, invites you to pretend that you are staying in your own apartment, or perhaps visiting a relative who has the good fortune to live in San Casciano dei Bagni, a lovely medieval hill town in a remarkably unspoiled section of the Italian countryside.

Approximately equidistant from Rome and Florence (a two-hour drive from either city on the A1 autostrada) Sette Querce (the name means "seven oaks") has been in operation five years, since it was completely renovated and transformed from a modest, old-fashioned locanda, or inn, with many bedrooms, few bathrooms, and a restaurant known locally for its awful food. With the help of an architect from Rome and the British designer Tricia Guild, the owners — a married couple, Daniela Boni and Sylvestro Baraldo, and Daniela's brother, Maurizio — gutted the old hotel and created nine suites that rise up a hillside on levels reached by a series of staircases; each room is different, but all are meant to give the impression of a guest suite in a rustic but elegant country house.

Our room, No. 208, featured a sleeping alcove with a wrought-iron bed and heavy down quilts (my husband, Howie, and I visited in chilly mid-March), a separate sitting area with a sofa, armchairs and a TV, a small kitchen with a minibar, a stove, a dining table and chairs — and just enough cooking equipment to brew tea (a selection of teas was provided) or prepare a simple meal. Everything was decorated in shades of blue: the pale, sponge-painted walls, the upholstery and bedding, and the blue-and-white spatterware bowls and pitchers.

These touches (like the framed family photos on the walls, the stacks of Italian fashion magazines and of books by authors ranging from Ivana Trump to Ernest Hemingway) are clearly meant to add touches of cozy domesticity without sacrificing the luxuries (a heated towel rack) that one expects from a good hotel. Several of the rooms have whirlpool baths, others have canopied beds; one has a balcony.

Breakfast (excellent cappuccino, fresh rolls, salami and homemade preserves) is brought to your room; the hotel has no restaurant. But it hardly matters since, a few minutes' walk away, in a former stable

with whitewashed stone walls and enormously tall vaulted ceilings, is the marvelous Ristorante Daniela, run by Sette Querce's owners. Our lunch there was so enjoyable that we returned for dinner.

Mr. Baraldo, a former classics scholar, is the chef, and with his staff, prepares inspired, original takes on traditional Tuscan and Roman country cuisine, made principally with local ingredients. From the menu, which changes monthly, we chose potato-pasta tortelli filled with pigeon ragu, baked pecorino with truffles, rabbit stuffed with cubed potatoes and fennel seed, and tiny lamb patties in an artichoke-lemon sauce.

After dinner, you can walk off your meal in the winding cobblestone streets, which ascend past walled gardens and through charming piazzas to a 13th-century tower overlooking the valley. Alternatively, when the massive Spa Fonteverde complex, being built by Centro Termale Fonteverde, opens just down the road this summer (it's hoped), you can soak in thermal pools fed by the natural hot springs that abound in the area, and for which the town is named.

In short, staying at Sette Querce and dining at Ristorante Daniela provides the ultimate fantasy of a certain sort: all the pleasures and comforts of home, assuming home is a place that produces glorious olive oil, pecorino and Chianti.

Sette Querce, 53040 San Casciano dei Bagni; (39-05) 785-8174, fax (39-05) 785-8172; www.settequerce.it. Doubles \$112 to \$180, at 2,215 lire to the dollar, with Continental breakfast. Closed most of January.

FRANCINE PROSE's most recent novel is "Blue Angel" (HarperCollins).

NEW DELHI

A peaceful, chic hideaway that's perhaps a bit too quiet

By CELIA W. DUGGER

In a city where luxury hotels are generally big, swanky establishments, the Manor bills itself as New Delhi's first designer boutique hotel. It is small, stylish and tucked away from the capital's hurly-burly in Friends Colony, a leafy residential neighborhood favored by industrialists.

So on a rare weekend when my husband, Barry Bearak, and I were both at home in New Delhi, we sent our two sons off to sleepovers and headed through the snarly traffic for a night off. Our arrival gave a foretaste of the uneven quality of staying at the Manor, which is at once exquisitely, meticulously designed and oddly, annoyingly impractical. We registered in the sleek, sunlit

Philippe Schullier/Editing, for The New York Times



Rakesh Sahai/Black Star, for The New York Times

TOP Suite 208 at Sette Querce in Tuscany, with its wrought-iron bed and shades of blue.

ABOVE Silks and dark woods give the Beaux Valette room at La Tour Rose in Lyon a van Eyck feeling.

LEFT Chic minimalism is the style in rooms at the Manor Hotel in New Delhi.

lobby and were escorted to our room. We saw no other guests then — or indeed until we spotted a couple at breakfast the next morning — yet it took a half-hour for the staff to bring us our one piece of luggage.

The 18-room hotel is certainly peaceful. In fact, it has a kind of hushed quality that made me feel as though I should whisper. Unlike most hotels in India, where children are welcomed and pampered, the staff that waited on us said that only adults were allowed. (The management later said there is no formal policy, but acknowledged that children are discouraged.)

We had booked a club room, but were upgraded (as anonymous guests) to a bigger deluxe room. The room was of a piece with the hotel's chic, minimalist aesthetic. The materials were lavish, the shapes geometric and the adornment spare.

One wall was largely glass and looked out on a vine-covered exterior wall. The curtains and bed covers were made of raw silk in shades of fawn, mink and beige. The coffee table was a square of black granite. The floor lamps cast circles of light on the ceiling. And the walls were bare except for

one starkly framed piece of fabric made by an African tribe.

Still, for a hotel that had so clearly been planned down to the last detail, there were small, inexplicable lapses. The shower door in the bathroom — which was modern and luxurious, with lots of black and green granite — had a handle on the outside, but none on the inside to pull it closed. The private wood deck off the room had a pleasant view of a small garden, but no chairs. (The staff said they would bring them if asked.) The door locks were difficult to operate and the television was small for such a costly hotel.

After lazing around in the room, we took a stroll through the two-story hotel, walking on terrazzo floors made under the guidance of Italian artisans flown to India. Originally opened as a small country lodge in the 1950's, the hotel was completely redesigned and reopened in 1999. It has a small exercise room, but otherwise it mainly offers spots to pass the time in stillness. There is a rooftop terrace with a rock garden and a grouping of couches on the second floor.

But the hotel's most memorable tableau is surely its large, brilliant green lawn.

Three chaise longues with pristine white pillows are asymmetrically arranged on the grass like a modernist painting.

The dining room looks out on the lawn and has a beautiful bar made of a yellow onyx illuminated from within by lights. Unfortunately, we could not have a glass of wine or a cocktail because the hotel does not yet have a liquor license, a problem that is undoubtedly hurting the hotel's business. The management hopes to get its license soon, but was uncertain when exactly that would be.

The restaurant, Seventy-Seven, serves fancy, cosmopolitan cuisine using ingredients like morels, saffron and lobster. My husband described it as a "Bouley wannabe, down to the chocolate soufflé." The food itself was disappointing and we were the only people there at the dinner hour.

The soundtrack could also use some fine tuning. At breakfast, a Muzak version of "Broken Hearted Melody" played like a broken record. We listened to it at least 18 times while we ate our omelets.

For a hotel with so much going for it, the

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