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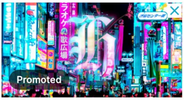

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Where do the Italian elite go on holiday?

By Kate Wickers

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Holiday in Forte dei Marmi, the little-known beach town favoured by the Italian elite. Photo / Getty Images

Likened to the Côte d’Azur, come and rub shoulders with the Italian elite in Forte dei Marmi, writes Kate Wickers

I arrive at the Italian resort of Forte dei Marmi, which sits pretty on the Tuscan coastline, just as the beach clubs are unpacking their sunbeds to position on immaculately raked sands.

In late April it's still a little chilly in the morning, but by lunchtime I'm settling down in a deckchair to order a Campari spritz at sun-dappled Alpemare, the beach club belonging to legendary Italian tenor, Andrea Bocelli.

Truth is, in August I'd be lucky to get a seat here, as this is the most sought-after of Forte dei Marmi's bagnos, where the rich and famous mingle over seafood lunches.

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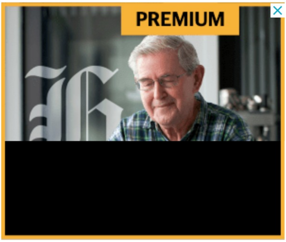

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Today, though, I have the restored 1920s bathing gem, with turquoise-blue changing huts and elegant cabanas, all to myself, and the invitation from the friendly waiter is to "fai con calma (take it easy)".

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Forte dei Marmi sits pretty on the Tuscan coastline in Italy. Photo / Supplied

Although tourism began here in the late 1800s, it was the likes of Sophia Loren who put the resort on the map, while holidaying in the 1960s. Once Luciano Visconti and Giorgio Armani snapped up villas here, its stylish fate was sealed.

Attractive pastel-hued villas, third and fourth-generation owned, make up the bulk of the town, but there have been some notable foreign interlopers, among them Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whose cream villa circled with cypress trees sits in Vittoria Apuana, Forte's prettiest neighbourhood.

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La Serena Hotel recently underwent a major refurbishment, transforming it into a stylish retreat with a blend of vintage and modern elements.

I'm staying at hotel La Serena, built in the 1960s, which has recently enjoyed a major refurbishment.

It is a breath of fresh air among Forte's extravagantly priced, five-star hotels, with 28 rooms (six of which are suites), and a garden and pool shaded by soaring umbrella pines.

Hotel La Serena, built in the 1960s, has recently enjoyed a major refurbishment. Photo / Supplied

The abundance of artworks (two towering sculptural figures, recently acquired from the Venice Biennial, are a talking point), and an elegant bar and restaurant, the Ikon, make it feel extra special, but there's nothing pretentious about the place.

Informality in practice includes the gratis lunch (think hot seafood salad, grilled aubergine, local cheese, and focaccia) left out for guests to tuck into, and the complimentary green bicycles (both electric and push variety).

"Let us know if you need anything," I'm reminded frequently. I'm not sure what else would make my stay more complete as my garden suite is vast, with a '60s inspired designer leather bed, and a Carrera marble bathroom with views of the mountains it was chiselled from.

On my private terrace, I sit amid pots of wisteria, sipping a local Eco di Mare white wine, and enjoying the view over rooftops to the ocean. There's no doubt that I'm living the dolce vita.

The pool at Hotel La Serena. Photo / Supplied

Eighty beach clubs line Forte’s wide sandy beach, so you could lose weeks to sampling them, from those that offer old-world charm such as Augustus, and Alpemare, to more budget-friendly places such as Bagno Sacro Cuore, where I lunch, barefoot in the sand, on linguine with clams.

The retro signage of each plays a huge part in Forte's cultural heritage, with the oldest dating to the 1930s (don't miss those of Camilla, Maestrale, and Sud Est).

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By electric bike, along the flat, coast-hugging trail, is the nicest way to reach the neighbouring resort of Viareggio (a 30km round trip). Viareggio's heyday was the 1920s and 30s, and, although it's now a little tired in places, the liberty-style architecture (Italy's answer to Art Nouveau) is joyous.

Among the most beautiful is Bagno Martinelli with its bulbous cupola and decorative plaster work, and Gran Caffe Margherita (where composer Puccini liked to hang out), for its colourful domes and oriental design.

Take a day trip to the neighbouring resort of Viareggio. Photo / Getty Images

Back in Forte I take a leisurely passeggiata (slow, sociable stroll) around the centre, where arbored trees etch marble-paved piazzas, lined with cafes and the boutiques of Italian design giants, among them Prada, Missoni, and Dolce & Gabbana.

I happen across the studio of artisan clog-maker, Giuseppe, crammed with made-to-measure wooden foot moulds, each bespoke for his, literally, well-heeled clients.

More pocket-friendly, the weekly Wednesday market, is where you'll find clothes (a great buy are the cotton sweaters from local brand, La Rigue di Forte dei Marmi), coastal-inspired pottery, and leather goods.

After browsing, lunch on well-stuffed focaccia (try the Pastrami with pickles) at All' Antico Vinaio, located on pretty Piazza Garibaldi.

Take a leisurely passeggiata (slow, sociable stroll) around the centre of Forte dei Marmi. Photo / Supplied

If Forte has one defining feature, then the Pontile pier, built in 1876, is it.

It's not until you gaze back on the town from the end of this 275m jetty that Forte's full beauty unfolds, set as it is against the majestic Apuan alps, where, incongruous with the warm spring evening, I spot snow on high peaks.

PRADA
PRADA
PRADA

The resort town has attracted the likes of Prada and Giorgio Armani, cementing its status as a fashionable Italian retreat. Photo / Jimmy De Paris

The cities of Lucca, Pisa, and Florence are all within an easy train journey, as is the Unesco World Heritage Site of Cinque Terre – a string of five coastal towns.

During high season, it's best to visit these by train, departing from the port city of La Spezia, but during quieter months a car is preferable, for the birds' eye, coastal views alone.

Monterosso and Vernazza, with their pastel-hued houses, and geranium-filled balconies, are picture-postcard pretty, but Manarola proves to be my favourite, where I zig-zag from the top of town and the pretty belltower through narrow alleyways to the harbour, where rocks are splashed by crystal-clear blue water.

Five kilometres from Forte is the pine-scented hill town of Pietrasanta, famed for its galleries and public artworks.

The first you'll see is Colombian artist Botero's immense bronze warrior sculpture. Further into the town, it's Rachel Lee Hovnanian's giant Poor Teddy in Repose that takes centre stage, with its heart daggered.

Sculptors have visited for centuries, coming to work with marble quarried from the nearby Carrera mines, among them Moor, Miro, and Michelangelo, who worked here from 1515–18.

In the church of Sant 'Antonio Abate, Botero's frescoes - Porta del Paradiso (Gate of Heaven), and Porta dell 'Inferno (hell), painted in 1993, are extraordinary (look for Mother Teresa and Hitler among his trademark rotund figures).

Despite its modern appeal, Forte dei Marmi retains a quaint charm. Photo / Jimmy De Paris

Back beachside in Forte, at family-owned Ristorante Gilda, I tuck into a delicious seafood fritto misto, saving room for Grandma's dessert (aged 70, you'll find her in the kitchen making her trademark torta della nonna).

Tonight, the toast of salute is to the joys of travelling out of season when the weather is pleasant, there's no scrum for a sunbed, and no need to suck in my stomach (thankfully, in April, the supermodels in Gucci bikinis are yet to arrive).

Checklist

FORTE DEI MARMI, ITALY

GETTING THERE

Fly from Auckland to Rome with Qatar Airways, Singapore Airlines or Emirates with one stopover. From Rome, drive to Forte dei Marmi in four hours, or take the train in three hours and 50 minutes (fastest service).

DETAILS

Doubles at La Serena from $452 on a B&B basis. The property is open from April until the end of October.
laserenahotel.it

italia.it/en