

NOBLE HOUSE

Italy's aristocratic Ruspoli family has opened a one-suite hotel in its palazzo in Rome. MARINA PIGNATELLI checks out its exquisite luxury.

In 1776, Italy's Ruspoli family bought a Roman palace built by Bartolomeo Ammannati and restored by the architect Giovan Battista Contini, one of Bernini's pupils, and Martino Longhi junior, a well-known artist. Two years ago, when her children Marianita and Alessandro left that plush nest, Princess Letizia Ruspoli, Pietro Ruspoli's wife, decided to divide their huge apartment on the second floor of the palace, and create for a handful of discerning foreigners, the most special abode in Rome.

Though they believe they originally had Scottish origins, the Ruspolis are certain that they are descended from the emperor Charlemagne, who ruled from 800 to 814. Among Italian nobility, the Ruspoli family is best-known for its role in the discovery of Etruscan art and civilization in the region of Lazio. They also have a knack for real estate. The family moved from Florence to Rome in the 14th century, and in 1674, Bartolomeo Ruspoli bought from Prince Orsini a majestic castle in Cerveteri with 6,000 hectares of land. Beneath its grounds lay the secrets of the Etruscans.

At the end of the 17th century, Francesco Maria Ruspoli bought another castle, this one in Vignanello, near Viterbo, which had been built in 1490 over a fortress erected in the 13th century. Then, when he was made a prince in 1709, Francesco rented the magnificent palace in Largo Goldoni in the heart of Rome and transformed it into a high-society playground, as well as an art and music laboratory. Illustrious artists descended on the palazzo, among them the German composer George Frideric Handel, who composed his greatest sonatas while a guest in the prince's innumerable mansions. When he wasn't organizing memorable receptions for the Holy Roman Emperor, Francesco could be found engaged in diplomatic negotiations in the grand spaces of his Roman palace. They are the very rooms where today's Princess Ruspoli acts as, perhaps, the world's most exclusive innkeeper.

Three magnificent rooms, each about 2,150 square feet (200 square meters), are decorated with antique furnishings, massive oil paintings, 16th-century tapestries, parquet floors, hand-stenciled walls and frescoed ceilings. Letizia chose the name La Residenza Napoleone III in memory of the emperor of the French, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, who accompanied his mother, Hortense de Beauharnais, once queen of Holland, on her frequent sojourns to the palace.

The Green Room at the entrance is decorated with oil paintings by Giovanni Paolo Pannini, Charles-Louis Clérisseau and Vittorio Bigari and works by other famous artists, including a sculpture of the Immaculate Conception given to the family by Pope Pius IX. It is but one of many statues that were gifts from different popes to members of the Ruspoli family, which gave the church several cardinals and has long been known for its devotion to the papacy. Breakfast is served on an oval table in the middle of this room, on ancient lace tablecloths set with Bulgari silverware and old porcelain.

Next is the more intimate Yellow Room, a cozy and elegant sitting room. Beyond is the Bed Chamber, embellished with furnishings and works of art owned by the family, among them, six large late 17th-century paintings by Isaac de Moucheron, behind which Letizia has cleverly hidden a multi-language plasma television, DVD player, minibar and room safe, as well as an exquisite golden marble bathroom, a large walk-in closet and a lovely kitchenette. Another of the paintings serves as a headboard for the king-size canopied bed, draped with beautiful silk fabrics.

Princess Letizia Ruspoli's elegant and eloquent taste is on display in every detail: the way flowers are strategically placed throughout the grand rooms, the eclectic array of books and magazines, the perfumes that pervade every room, the Bulgari toiletries in the bathrooms, and even the DVD collection of shot-in-Rome movies and documentaries, showcasing the most impressive attractions of the Eternal City. This over-the-top luxury is so impressive, you may never want to leave, but when you do, a private tour guide and chauffeur-driven car can always be arranged. With advance notice, Ruspoli will organize a separate rooftop bedroom for children and monogrammed baskets for "etiquette-conscious" dogs. And for special occasions, her live-in staff will even prepare and serve meals to her guests. Combining technology and comfort, splendor and absolute privacy, La Residenza Napoleone III is the closest modernity gets to the Rome of the caesars. BG

