

Palace for paying guests

An Italian princess has turned her mansion in Rome's legendary designer district into a B&B. Perfect for shopaholics, says Frances Edmonds

THERE were arguments, tears and moods. The relatives sulked, the children were torn. But in true Italian-mamma style, Principessa Letizia Ruspoli got her way and turned their home, one of Rome's most beautiful palaces, into Europe's most expensive B&B.

Her husband, Don Pietro, pleaded before leaving for a weekend of shooting at their hunting lodge in Tuscany: "All I ask is that I have a bedroom to sleep in when I get back."

But the way the princess is moving walls and doors about, nothing is certain. Her daughter Marianne, 27, and son Alessandro, 23, are becoming used to their mother's new-found entrepreneurial skills, and are not surprised to discover their bedrooms are being rapidly renovated, and not for them.

The benefactors of all the vigour from this charismatic woman fighting to save the family heritage are the newly welcomed paying guests, who discover this very special place.

For shopaholics in love with Italian style, it is the ultimate weekend retail therapy amid the city's most drippingly luxurious shops and streets of breathtaking architecture. Uniquely, guests have all the joy of the city and the opportunity to creep into the lives of a very special family who, with much good humour, have become used to their mother's enterprise.

And the butler and the cook are also pleased. "We have the staff, our butler loves being busy; we have the beautiful things, but we don't have the money," says the princess, a petite, pretty fifty-something.

She got the idea of using her home as income from a cousin, who converted her magnificent palace into a beautiful private hotel in Tuscany. "You just cannot watch such valuable places fall apart. You have to do something to save them."

For the Ruspoli family celebrated members of Rome's elite *aristocrazia nera* (papal as opposed to merely secular aristocracy), Palazzo Ruspoli has been home since the 18th century. Situated on the Via Condotti, Rome's



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legendary designer-shopping street, the palace's true splendour is hidden from view by two massive wooden doors that swing open to reveal an illuminated courtyard of monuments and marble. A sweep of marble steps leads up to the apartments.

There is no doubt that the security of the family's future and heritage will owe much to the princess, who has not only restored some of the family's most magnificent rooms as a guest quarter but ingeniously adapted them to high-tech living. Don Pietro told his wife he did not wish to see flat-screened televisions in these gilded rooms, but where there is a will...

For my two-night stay at La Residenza Napoleone III, I felt like a welcome guest in my three-room suite, adorned with antique furnishings, massive oil paintings, 18th-century tapestries, parquet floors and hand-stencilled walls.

The state-of-the-art plasma TV screen is cunningly hidden behind a priceless painting; a fax machine and



internet access are disguised in a German walnut desk. The master bedroom boasts a large canopy bed draped with beautiful fabrics and silks. At the flick of a switch, a video screen suddenly appears from the ceiling.

One of six huge oil paintings forms the bed's headboard, another swings open to reveal an exquisite marble bathroom and another hides a wardrobe and well-stocked kitchen. Continental breakfast, served by the butler and maid, is included in the tariff.

There is now a second Roof Garden suite with its own charm. Terracotta pots bursting with lavender are dotted around a multi-level decked terrace

furnished with restful "shabby chic" green and ecru fabrics.

Boasting one of the largest roof gardens in Rome, this suite has stunning views across the Eternal City; a large sitting room with a small double bedroom and a marble en-suite bathroom.

Fresh flowers are laid out on the bed each evening. One hundred candles illuminate both suites at twilight, bottles of wine from the family's own Lilliano vineyard attend your evening arrival. One French banker, who regularly stays in the Residenza Napoleone III, is delighted to find his favourite sporting magazines and video recordings of recent football matches awaiting him.

Far left: Letizia Ruspoli

Left: huge oil paintings have aesthetic and practical purposes in the master bedroom

Below: there are stunning views of Rome from the roof gardens



Fact file

Palazzo Ruspoli

Largo Goldoni 56, 00186 Rome (00 39 347 733 7098; www.prestigiousrome.com)

Prices are per night and include Continental breakfast.

La Residenza Napoleone III suite: €1,200 (about £840, high season)

The Roof Garden: €500 (high season)

La Residenza Napoleone: €1,200 (May, June, September), €775 (April, July, August, October, November, December), €950 (January, February, March)

The Roof Garden Suite: €620, year round

After a cautious start, Letizia's determination and bravery is now showing deserved dividends. And a bleak future watching the family pile fall apart while another Caravaggio is sent to auction is a distant memory.

"I had a letter this morning addressed to the managing director of the company," says Letizia, going into peals of laughter at her late promotion in life. The family might have held many courtly titles but no one has held this one. A stay at the Palazzo Ruspoli is exclusive but, of course, the princess is quite unique.

PICTURES BY ANDREAS VON EINSIEDEL