

A Rome apartment fit for an emperor

Napoleon III's former residence has been converted by a principessa into a sumptuous and unusual place to stay, writes Peter Freedman

The first time that my wife - then girlfriend - and I visited Rome was more than 20 years ago, in the course of touring Europe on a Euro-Rail Pass. We, and our (back-)pack, slept near the station in a dive so vile that we have repressed its name from memory.

Having so botched our last visit, we resolved to take a different approach on our return to Rome this summer. Specifically, we followed the principle of "When in Rome, do as Romans III did," and stayed at La Residenza Napoleone III, the recently restored former residence of the man who was to become Emperor of France from 1852 to 1870.

True, we didn't know much about Napoleon III

before we left, but we guessed that he had never schlepped around Europe on a EuroRail pass. As we learnt, he had resided at the Residenza when he was still a young man about town in the late 1840s.

La Residenza Napoleone III is a three-story suite in the 14th-century Palazzo Ruspoli, on the Via Condotti, the Bond Street of Rome. In short, shopping Central, indeed, Rome Central. It may well also be the grandest set bed and breakfast in the world, complete with a principessa as landlady. (The Ruspoli family has this week been mourning the death of its head, Dado Ruspoli, the playboy prince and, in his day, Dambeyant figurehead of Italian high society.)

Staying there puts the icing on the other side of the brocade ribbon in an Italian steady state, if not the starring in a TV show on life-styles of the rich and royal.

In *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Dumas names the Palazzo Ruspoli as the best place in Rome from which to enjoy the carnival. In his memoir, *Journey in Italy*, Goethe describes the position, which since 1941 along the front of the Palazzo is the spot "where the elegant world met".

Byron purchased the land suit in the days when the English Grand Tourists of the 18th and 19th centuries congregated in the nearby "English Ghetto", all but inventing the institution of tourism in the process.



Large 17th-century frescoes in the gallery of the Palazzo Ruspoli

La Residenza, in short, offers the dream suite of history, royalty and shopping - and luxury is the perfect Rome base for everyone from honeymooners and romantic weekenders to tycoon-in-town or Antiques, for whom the owner also is either Paola, Queen or Valentine.

Anyone who wants to feel like visiting aristocracy should also be satisfied. The grand marble staircase that

leads to the apartment was built personally and also provides the sense of fantasy that turns a stay at the apartment into a theatrical performance, with Letizia as director, and Ami, her brother, as stage manager and crew.

Thus, when we return from our evening stroll, it's as if the doors have been, Damien Hirst beside the canopy, principessa and the post-style bed, and now stream with yellow roses. More candles float and flicker in the bathroom's marble sink, while an Athenian opera plays on the stereo.

The accommodation, in fact, comprises two apartments. The grander one, where Napoleone III lived and we sleep, boasts three main rooms, each more sumptuous than the last.

The bedroom is large and grand enough to stage an opera, with ceiling almost five metres high. One of the six vaulted paintings of rustic scenes decorating the walls forms the headboard of the gigantic bed. Another pulls away from the wall to reveal a small but exquisite marble bathroom, stocked with Bulgari perfumes, soaps and gels.

All these rooms drip with antique furnishings, paintings and tapestries, along with parquet and hand-jointed floors, hand-stained walls, ceilings and shutters.

Highlights of the sitting room include a bottle of Chianti from the Ruspoli family vineyards in Tuscany, and a desk with black-and-white photograph of grandee Alessandro

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Ruspoli, circa 1850, wearing an eye-patch and ceremonial gait. (It is his nephew, as Gianni Robbe, guardian of the Pope, the second apartment, the roof garden suite, may be smaller but it includes a large, split-level roof terrace, complete with terracotta pots, planted with lavender and rosemary, and views over the domes and bell-towers of the Rome skyline.

Younger couples might prefer the terrace apartment, which feels like a romantic hideaway. More affluent guests, of course, can take both suites and, if they have older children, billet them in the roof apartment.

We use the terrace for evening cocktails and for breakfast - served by Ami, the butler, on a long tablecloth strewn with convolvulus and ivy, and set with Bulgari silverware. Sun fans are provided by the house.

When the sound of bells ringing in the adjacent bell tower is joined by the hum of buses chattering Latin phrases, we wonder for a moment whether this time Letizia has outside help by arranging the whole thing. It seems, at any rate, the final touch.

DETAILS

Address: Via dei Fori Imperiali, 101, Rome. Access and details all by phone on-line to Rome. La Residenza Napoleone III costs €1200-€1500 per night and the Roof Garden suite costs €600-€1400 per night. Continental breakfast is included. Tel: +39 06 773 2099