



BELMOND
VILLA SAN MICHELE
FLORENCE



PRESS KIT

Belmond Villa San Michele introduced by Maggie O'Sullivan

OVERVIEW

Florence is a city that can only be described by superlatives and yet none really does it justice. This is where the greatest artists of the Renaissance – perhaps of all time – lived and worked: Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Botticelli, Fra Angelico. Raphaels and Titians line the walls of its galleries; its chapels and churches boast frescoes by Giotto, Masolino, Masaccio and Ghirlandaio.

Iconic buildings? They're here in abundance, from the mighty Duomo, with its Brunelleschi Dome and Giotto bell tower, the churches of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella, and the Palazzo Vecchio and Pitti Palace.

And then there are the cobbled streets and stone bridges; the markets and designer shops; the restaurants and pavement cafés, all woven into the sumptuous fabric of this beautiful city. Small wonder that the city's historic centre has been declared a World Heritage Site – or that it attracts more than 13 million tourists every year.

High above Florence in the Fiesole hills, surrounded by ancient woodland and fanned by soft breezes scented with lemon, orange and rose, sits a former 15th-century monastery. This is Belmond Villa San Michele, an authentic microcosm of Florence itself, with a façade attributed to Michelangelo, a fresco of The Last Supper by Nicodemo Ferrucci, and a 16th-century loggia offering panoramic views over the city and the Chianti hills beyond.

HISTORY & BACKGROUND

The city of Fiesole is just 8km from Florence and was once every bit as powerful as its neighbour. This was where the richest Florentines, including the legendary Medicis, built their villas. Fra Angelico, the artist and Dominican friar, was born and took his vows here. And it was from Monteceleri Park in the Fiesole hills that Leonardo da Vinci first demonstrated his flying machine.

About the time da Vinci was launching himself off hilltops, a community of Franciscan monks built a monastery on land adjacent to Monteceleri Park, donated by a wealthy Florentine family called the Davanzatis. The family contributed to the monastery's upkeep over the years, giving the monks woodlands, further buildings and money, and in 1600, it was renovated and enlarged by Giovanni di Bartolommeo Davanzati, who added the Michelangelo façade and the imposing loggia we see today.

The Davanzatis also helped to fill the monastery with important paintings, sculptures and frescoes, including *The Last Supper* by Nicodemo Ferrucci, commissioned to decorate the friars' not-so-humble refectory. While a number of these treasures were fortunately retained after Napoleon dissolved the monastic orders in 1808, many were dispersed among Italy's galleries and churches. The triptych attributed to Niccolò di Piero Gerini in the Galleria dell'Accademia and another above the high altar in Santa Trinità church both came from Belmond Villa San Michele.

New Owners and New Beginnings

In 1900, the monastery was bought by an American named Henry White Cannon. Cannon landscaped the gardens, erected large greenhouses and restored the building according to the fashion of the day: wrought iron gates were added and a rust-coloured patina was applied to the walls. He also converted the courtyard into a Victorian winter garden with a roof of glass and iron.

The villa was badly damaged during the Second World War and in 1950, its new owner, one Lucien Tessier, set about restoring the 20 rooms on the first floor, while he lived on the second floor. To finance the substantial cost, he opened part of the villa as a hotel.

In 1982, Orient-Express Hotels, now Belmond, bought Villa San Michele and the surrounding land and embarked upon comprehensive restoration of the buildings in cooperation with the Florence Fine Arts Authority.

World-Class Hotel with a World-Class View

Every guest lucky enough to stay at Belmond Villa San Michele mentions the spectacular view. How could they not? Stretching down across the Arno Valley and over the rooftops of Florence, it has to be one of the world's most breathtaking panoramas and is particularly enchanting at night, when Florence sparkles like diamonds on a cloth of velvet.

There is no one vantage point at Belmond Villa San Michele: the view is equally stunning from the Loggia restaurant as it is from the Italian garden, the pool terrace and many of the rooms and suites. However, while you can pick out the mighty dome of the Cathedral from your breakfast table, it will take around 20 minutes to reach it, either under your own steam or via the hotel's regular shuttle service. And that's just the way most guests like it, spending a morning or an afternoon exploring the treasures of Florence before retreating to the bucolic paradise above it.

Sanctuary with a Historical Setting

Belmond Villa San Michele is more than just a sanctuary from the 21st century. It is also one of the finest hotels in Italy. Just how do you marry Renaissance Tuscany with 21st-century luxury? It's not easy.

When Belmond bought the villa in 1982 the façade attributed to Michelangelo was in a poor state of repair. It was decided that replacing the most badly corroded stones would destroy the beauty of the austere design, so restorers concentrated instead on halting the damage and preserving the existing stone.

The first step was to remove the Davanzati family's heraldic emblem and install it in the entrance arcade. The emblem you see on the façade today is in fact a copy of the original. The next stage was to wash the façade with distilled water to neutralise the corrosive acid which erodes stone. Any areas that were deemed likely to crumble or break off were reinforced. The final stage was to apply a protective coat of varnish.

Other major renovations included transforming the villa's ancient Limonaia, a storage house in the grounds for potted lemons, into two large suites, and repairing a small chapel, using materials and methods identical to those of the 17th century.

Needless to say, there was much to be done to restore the interiors, too. In the refectory, centuries of smoke from the fireplace and candles, steam from the food and even human breath had taken their toll on Nicodemo Ferrucci's fresco of *The Last Supper*, dulling the colours and obscuring the detail.

The highly skilled restoration was carried out by the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, a Florence-based public institute of the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and a global leader in the field of art restoration. The process involved removing thick layers of dust and debris, repairing the stucco work and retouching damaged areas with hand-prepared limewash in traditional colours. Laborious and expensive, certainly, but the result has been hugely

rewarding, revealing previously unseen details, such as the little white cat at the foot of the table in the first lunette and a window with a cloud just above.

In 2000/01, the geometric, wooden ceiling in the main hall, bearing the crest of the Davanzati family, was totally restored, to reveal its simple but exquisite beauty.

No Reception Area

The unique historical nature of the building impacts on the hotel in other ways, too. For example, you will never see – or hear - a room service trolley trundling down the corridors of Belmond Villa San Michele. Room service is always delivered on a tray and set up on a table by two waiters, just as it would be in the restaurant or in the gardens.

Equally, there is no formal reception area at Belmond Villa San Michele: arriving guests feel as if they've stepped into a church nave, complete with altar and two raised box pews, rather than a hotel lobby – which, of course, they have.

And while planning constraints mean that guest rooms in the main building are smaller than you might find in many modern hotels, there are compensations: all are exquisitely decorated and furnished with restored period pieces, including antique wardrobes, chairs and finely crafted chests.

One is even reputed to have its own ghost: the unfortunate Friar Ubaldo, condemned to haunt room 22 of Belmond Villa San Michele for all eternity.

FEATURES

Rooms for Romance

There are 45 rooms and suites at Belmond Villa San Michele, located both in the old monastery building and in the gardens. All of the garden rooms and suites enjoy the heart-stopping view over Florence, while those in the monastery have views over Florence, the gardens or the internal cloister. Garden suites also have their own private gardens edged with hedges of box and laurel.

The most prestigious suite, with its canopied king-size bed, is the vast Michelangelo Suite which occupies the whole width of the façade. Originally the monks' library, it later served as Napoleon Bonaparte's headquarters in Florence. More romantic, perhaps, is the Donatello Suite which occupies a corner of the building and hence has views of both the gardens and Florence. This was once the prior's quarters and the wardrobe is a 16th-century sideboard. For those who really want to get away from it all, there's the secluded Limonaia Suite and Villa tucked away in the grounds, while from next year (2017), guests will also be able to book the little chapel with its exquisitely restored frescoes.

Other romantic spaces at Belmond Villa San Michele include the gazebo above the pool garden and Lovers' Corner, a secluded spot in the Italian garden where guests can have an apéritif or dinner for two (There are two proposals of marriage in Lovers' Corner every week). On the other hand, a stroll through the softly scented gardens at dusk, with the lights of Florence twinkling below, is usually enough to bring out the old romantic in most guests.

The Finest Tuscan Cuisine

The Loggia Restaurant at Belmond Villa San Michele invariably has reviewers reaching for their dictionary of culinary superlatives. With tables set among the soaring stone arches, not only does this restaurant have ringside seats for the best view in Tuscany, it also serves some of the region's finest cuisine, with dishes made from fresh local produce and seasonal ingredients.

Executive Chef Attilio Di Fabrizio says: 'I love to think that my best dish is the one that I still need to create and that I will prepare tomorrow.'

Attilio also runs the hotel's renowned Cookery School, which specialises in teaching a variety of skills in small, exclusive classes. Learn the secrets of Caterina de' Medici's Cookbook; master the Art of Pasta, or roll up your sleeves for an exclusive journey with hotel's Pastry Chef through the world of pastries and desserts. Classes are followed by lunch in the Loggia Restaurant.

Children's cookery classes are also available.

The Perfect Italian Garden

For many, Belmond Villa San Michele's lovely gardens, scented by roses and lemon and orange blossom and hugged by ancient woodland, are every bit as important as its Renaissance frescoes. Of particular note are the Chinese hibiscus, the Jasminium catalonic and the villa's 300-year-old wisteria which, when in bloom, swathes the back of the building in a cloak of purple.

The formal Italian garden and terraces were created in the early Eighties by Pietro Porcinai, one of the finest Italian landscape architects of the 20th century. Today, they are immaculately maintained by the Frontera family.

Like the buildings, the gardens and the swimming pool, which was one of the first infinity pools in Italy, are all protected and cannot be changed in any way without permission.

Only at Belmond Villa San Michele

Belmond Villa San Michele offers guests a number of unique experiences designed to enhance their stay, from personalised shopping tours to a visit to a local cashmere farm.

Sculpt like Michelangelo

A rare chance for guests to get beneath the skin of the great Italian sculptor, painter, architect, poet, and engineer is by taking a class in clay modeling, plaster casting or marble carving at Florence's Galleria Romanelli, a former church. Classes are taught in the Galleria's tiny workshop where generations of the Romanelli family have worked for hundreds of years.

Private visit to the Duomo terraces

Dominating the Florence skyline, the Dome of Florence's Cathedral, or Duomo, was created by Brunelleschi in the 15th century. Guests booking a private tour of the city's most iconic landmark will have the opportunity to access its exclusive terraces for a close-up view of both the Dome and Giotto's bell tower.

'Raft-seeing' on the Arno

See Florence from the water on this exclusive raft tour of the city. Expert rafters guide guests along the Arno, starting at the San Niccolò Weir and drifting under the legendary Ponte Vecchio. Combine this with an excursion on the Lima river for a heart-racing ride through the rapids.

PEOPLE

Emanuele Manfroi , General Manager

Emanuele Manfroi was appointed General Manager of Belmond Villa San Michele in spring 2016, having worked in luxury hotels all around the world, including Park Hyatt Milano, Park Hyatt Sydney, Four Seasons Milan and Belmond Hotel Cipriani in Venice.

For Manfroi, who is proud to be half Tuscan (his mother is from the region), arriving at Belmond Villa San Michele was like coming home. 'Belmond Villa San Michele is a very special place,' he says. 'Not just because of the historic buildings and the beautiful gardens, but because it has a true connection with the Tuscan countryside. No other hotel in Florence can offer that.'

Nor does any other hotel in the region have anything like the villa's heart-stopping view over Florence, but for Emanuele Manfroi seeing the Duomo rising majestically above a misty sea of terracotta isn't really the point. 'Of course it's an amazing view, but what is really special, I think, is the way it makes you feel; the way it impacts on your soul. Wherever you are in the hotel, you catch sight of that view and just feel really at peace.'

Belmond Villa San Michele is a protected monument which means that not only is Emanuele Manfroi a hotelier, he is also a conservator. 'Because everything at the hotel is protected, and rightly so, we cannot move a wall or change a paint colour without permission. It's the same with the gardens – we can replace individual plants if necessary, but we can't change the planting. Inside the villa, we are obliged to maintain the frescoes and other items of artistic

and historical importance. Of course, we are honoured to do it but we are inspected four times a year just to keep us on our toes.'

Like parents, General Managers are not supposed to have favourites but Emanuele Manfroi admits to being partial to three of the rooms: 'I love No 8, the Michelangelo Suite, which stretches across the front of the hotel and was once the monastery library and later Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte's headquarters. I also like No 10, which though it doesn't have the amazing view, has such a strong feeling of the past, and No 44, the Limonaia Suite, which really has such a romantic outside space, with its own plunge pool and private garden.'

Emanuele Manfroi admits to a particular passion for the Tuscan cuisine served at the hotel and imparts one tip for anyone counting the calories: 'Italians only eat pasta at lunchtime – that way, they have the whole day to digest it.'

Paolo Greco, Hotel Doorman

Actress Julia Roberts is a regular guest at Belmond Villa San Michele but when she visited recently, there was something missing. Or rather someone: doorman Paolo Greco. When he reappeared just before she left, she gave him a delighted hug. But then, everyone – Hollywood actresses, heads of state, even royalty – loves Paolo.

A Tuscan born in Siena, Paolo has been the doorman – or what he called 'the hotel's good soldier' – at Belmond Villa San Michele since 1992. For more than 24 years he has welcomed the travel-weary with a beaming smile and a handshake. 'Some guests arrive in big cars that are far too wide for our narrow roads and are grumpy; others complain that the hotel is difficult to find. Many are totally stressed out. But the next time I see them, they are always relaxed. It is the effect of the hotel.'

While some guests require nothing more than a cheery 'buongiorno' from Paolo, or perhaps a restaurant recommendation, others require rather more attention. Paolo is happy to give it. 'I got a call from a guest who had recently left the hotel. His wife was upset because she had forgotten her purse and he wanted me to take it to her in Monte Carlo. I left at 9am and was in Monte Carlo by 11.30am. I had lunch there and stopped in Portofino on the way back. That was a very good day.'

Bono, Paul McCartney, Robert De Niro, the late Steve Jobs, Carla Bruni, Kofi Annan, HRH The Prince of Wales: Paolo has many 'favourite' guests, though he reserves a special place in his heart for Julia Roberts whom he once took on a sightseeing tour of the area.

Having previously worked at luxury hotels in Milan and Siena, Paolo has truly found his niche at Belmond Villa San Michele. 'I love every stone of it,' he says. 'The façade, the garden, the terrace...everything.'

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY & ENVIRONMENT

Belmond Villa San Michele offers practical support to the Florence-based foundation Angeli del Bello, which coordinates a network of volunteers to help maintain public spaces, including gardens, monumental parks, streets and squares, by removing graffiti and cutting grass.

The hotel is currently working with the Italian Union of the Blind to offer a Blind Dinner. The dinner will be held in a totally dark room so guests cannot see what they are eating and service will be by blind waiters who will receive two days' training at the hotel prior to the event. The aim is to raise awareness about blindness while offering an amazing gastronomic experience.