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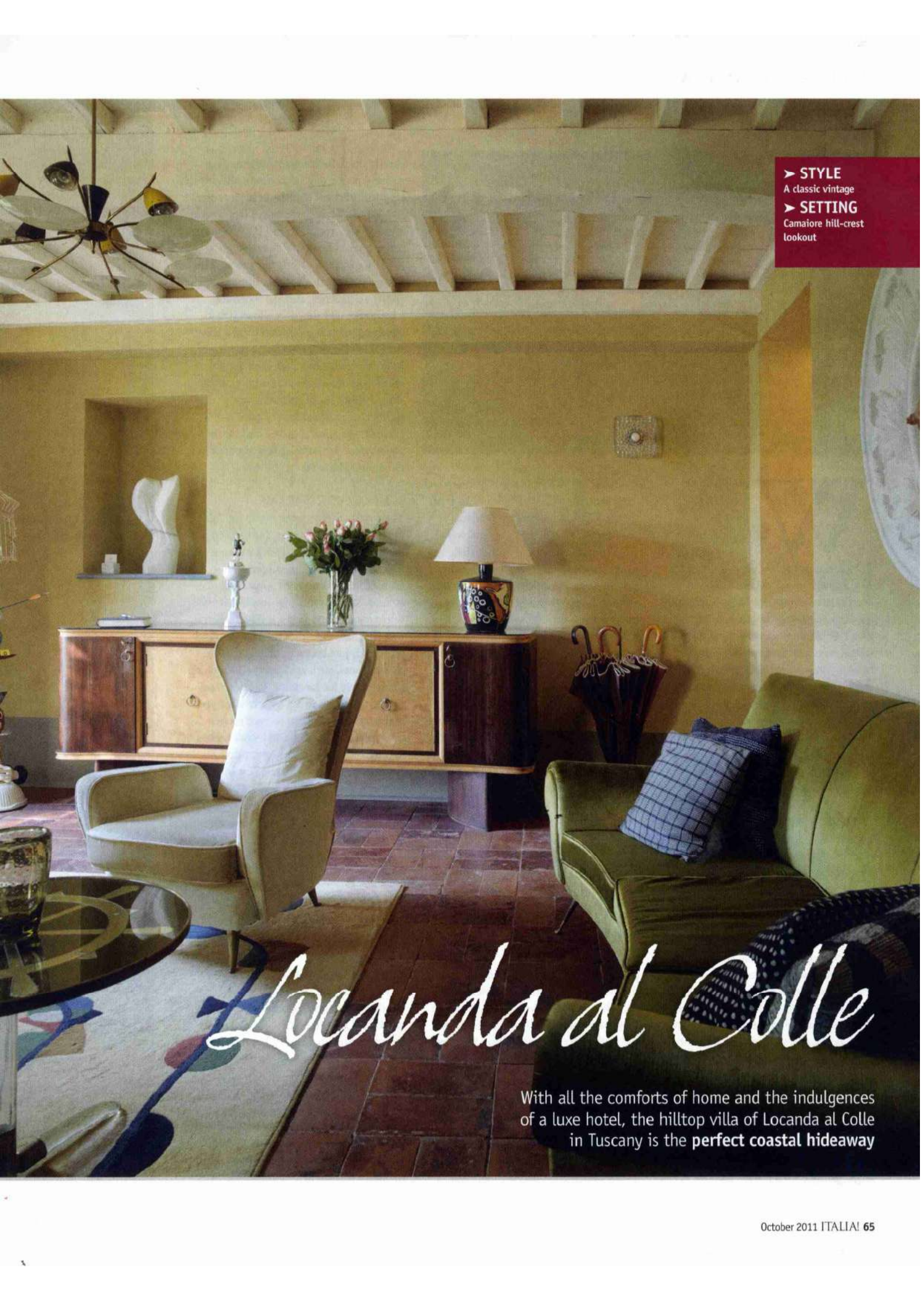
Anthem

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> **STYLE**
A classic vintage

> **SETTING**
Camaione hill-crest
lookout

Locanda al Colle

With all the comforts of home and the indulgences of a luxe hotel, the hilltop villa of Locanda al Colle in Tuscany is the **perfect coastal hideaway**



When I was 17, I had a fantasy about how I wanted my life to be. I wanted to go to Florence and paint, draw, and sketch. And be very, very romantic. Alas, an overprotective uncle saw how distracted I was by English schoolboys, thought that I would never be able to cope with Italian men, and dashed my dreams of heading off to the atelier schools with the long-haired Chelsea girls and dreadlocked ex-Etonians. Now, a decade later, Locanda al Colle has reinvigorated my lust for Tuscany. These days I am greedier than that schoolgirl: why settle for the hustle and bustle of the city when you can have rolling hills and rural romance, too?

INDIVIDUAL FEATURES

Locanda al Colle combines the best parts of a home and a hotel: there's no reception desk or uniforms or paid bars, and the owner, Riccardo, has created an atmosphere of luxurious informality that never compromises the level of professionalism. He has cleverly arranged the nine bedrooms, giving each of them individual features so you can stay in one that seems tailor-made for you. Mr Smith and I were checked into a top-floor room that has a slanted chestnut-beam ceiling, stone floors, elegant antiques, a state-of-the-art shower and a bath (so we were both happy). Our favourite bit though (on this we agree) is a private roof terrace complete with a day-bed for lounging on when the sun is too hot, and a fireplace to keep you warm once it has gone down. Other rooms are suitable for families or larger groups, with private gardens or

kitchens, but with our secluded room and long stints alone by the swimming pool, there was nothing more we needed.

Riccardo has a great eye, and was buying up Grayson Perrys and Mark Francis pieces before the big gallerists. Over two decades spent travelling around Europe working in fashion, he has accumulated an eclectic collection of furniture, re-upholstering chairs owned by Mussolini's son-in-law to make them "less Fascist, more funky". He's filled the Locanda with these treasures, each piece beautiful in its own right, combining them seamlessly with the traditional local architecture to create a guesthouse that feels immaculate, every detail considered, but not so precious that you can't run around trying out every armchair for size.

Locanda's location makes for plenty of adventures. On our four-wheeled

excursions, Mr Smith pointed out that my yelping at the Italian drivers was probably more dangerous than anything they were doing. Half an hour away was the walled city of Lucca, where we hired bicycles and rode the 30-minute loop; it's amazing how much guilt it relieved when we tucked into our daily pizza. In under an hour, we were in the middle of Florence, climbing over the side of the Ponte Santa Trinità to picnic on one of its buttresses. Hidden from passing tourists, with a beer, a *gelato* and an unopened

sketchbook, there was lots of snogging – making up for that unromantic all-girls art-history school trip all those years ago.

Versilia's long stretches of beach were within a ten-minute grasp; Pisa's leaning tower only a bit more. When we got lazy, Pietrasanta was just 5km away. This compact, unspoilt town has impressive churches, galleries, antique shops and a belltower that the *padre* allows you to climb up, even if you are wearing a short skirt. Here, Enoteca Marcucci has one of Italy's best wine lists and, incidentally, selected all the Locanda's house vintages. After a quick hit of culture, some sightseeing, and a splash of good old Catholic guilt, we could be back at the hotel before the bubbles fizzled out of our remaining Prosecco.

SCHOOLGIRL DREAMS

The meals are worth staying in for. Like in all great Italian homes, the kitchen is the heart, and there is always someone in it squeezing fresh blood oranges or filling the building with appetising aromas. We ate on the patio when it was warm enough and in the kitchen when it wasn't. There is no menu – Riccardo and his friends just create unpredictable yet classic dishes, such as slippery mushrooms in filo pastry for breakfast. Riccardo has a knack of anticipating exactly what you desire, before the thought even crosses your mind. "Yes, of course I want a glass of pink Prosecco with my tiramisu." Grateful sigh. "Yes, of course I want raspberry cheesecake for my breakfast."

Once, while watching *The Godfather*, an Italian friend interrupted a kitchen

The owner, Riccardo, has created an atmosphere of luxurious informality that never compromises the level of professionalism

scene to tell me – with no trace of irony – "People think that in Italy we eat spaghetti and meatballs all the time, but we don't! Only, like, three times a week." When it came to our very last meal, as I hadn't been able to find the classic dish on any menu during our escapades, Locanda's kitchen rustled some up for us. As greedy as my demands were, as ever, they did everything they, or we, could think of to make our stay as perfect as possible. Locanda al Colle – thanks for making a schoolgirl's dreams come true.

NEED TO KNOW

- ROOMS** Nine, including two suites.
- RATES** £150–£300, including breakfast and tax
- CHECK-OUT** 10am, but flexible (by half an hour) subject to availability.
- EARLIEST CHECK-IN** 12 noon
- FACILITIES** Leafy gardens, access to the nearby Cavallone beach club, and free WiFi throughout. In rooms: Complimentary bottled water, iPod dock and Erbario Toscano bath products. Poolside: the slender rectangular pool is heated, and flanked by a stone patio dotted with sun-loungers and parasols.
- CHILDREN** Smith Juniors are welcome; cots (free) and extra beds (£60–£80, depending on the season) can be provided. Babysitting is £20 an hour (book 24 hours ahead).
- ALSO** Canine companions can come too. Ask owner Riccardo to arrange a poolside massage or an Italian or cookery class (for you, not the canines). He can also organise scooter rental or bicycle hire.



IN THE KNOW

- **OUR FAVOURITE ROOMS** Deluxe room Aurora's panoramic terrace has an outdoor chiminea beside a day-bed; inside, it's elegant and luxurious, with a green and gold palette and black and white photos of nudes adorning the walls. If you crave space, opt for the taupe-toned Colle suite, which has a fireplace in the sitting room, 1950s animal-print armchairs, elegant Tiffany lamps and a stately four-poster bed. Plus, it's an easy sneak to the pool from the terrace.
- **HOTEL BAR** Help yourself to drinks from the honesty bar, and enjoy them on the terrace, in the gardens, by the pool, or in one of the cosy sitting rooms.
- **HOTEL RESTAURANT** There's no formal restaurant, but lunch is served every day, and twice a week (on Wednesdays and Saturdays) guests are invited to a sociable dinner hosted by Riccardo and his friends. Candlelit tables on the terrace set the scene for a memorable meal (washed down with plenty of vino). Typical dishes include sesame tuna and farro wheat with pesto.
- **TOP TABLE** On the terrace in clement weather, naturally; at the communal kitchen table if it gets too chilly (unlikely).
- **ROOM SERVICE** None, but in any case, it's wise to save your appetite for the three main meals.
- **DRESS CODE** One of the hotel's signature colours: chartreuse, olive, dusky grey or pearl pink.
- **LOCAL KNOWLEDGE** The town of Pietrasanta, ten minutes away by car, is a hub of artistic industry: visit one of the studios (Riccardo can arrange a tour) and look out for exhibitions in the Piazza del Duomo or the church of Sant'Agostino.

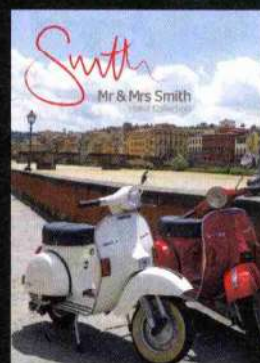
LOCAL EATING & DRINKING

Most wining and/or dining destinations are a short drive away in the neighbouring towns and villages. Trattoria Il Marzocco on Via Marzocco in Pietrasanta serves delicious dishes that nod to Sicily, Morocco and India (☎ +39 0584 71446). Sample Tuscan specialties at Trattoria Gatto Nero in Piazza Carducci, Pietrasanta (☎ +39 0584 70135). Dishes are hearty and flavour-packed: pasta with broccoli and pine nuts, and rabbit with rosemary. For faultless fish, head to Trattoria Buonomio on Via Sant'Andrea in Viareggio (☎ +39 0584 943 266). Antipasti are generous; seafood, succulent. Set in an old farmhouse, Osteria il Vignaccio delivers on dazzling views and Tuscan cuisine cooked to ancient recipes (☎ +39 0584 914 200). The restaurant is tucked away on Via della Chiesa, in Località Santa Lucia di Camaiore. Sample local wines at Enoteca Marcucci in Pietrasanta (☎ +39 0584 791 962).

GET A ROOM!

Hotel details: 231 Via la Stretta, Località Capezzano Pianore, 55041 Camaiore
To book: Ring Mr & Mrs Smith's expert Travel Team on ☎ 0845 034 0700 or go to www.mrandmrsmith.com/luxury-hotels/locanda-al-colle
Reviewed by Martha Freud, designer

The kitchen is the heart and there is always someone in it squeezing fresh blood oranges or filling the building with appetising aromas



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