

CLIENTE: VILLA TRE VILLE
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CITY BRIEF

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ESCAPE FROM THE CITY: Zeffirelli villa now attracting jet-set crowd as Italian hotel

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Wednesday, October 20, 2010

DENNIS REDMONT

POSITANO - Hürriyet Daily News



Want to tune out over the manicured Amalfi Coast at the spot where Leonard Bernstein once composed, where Maria Callas sang, where Rudolf Nureyev danced, where Elizabeth Taylor hid away with her lovers, and where other legendary singers like Elton John and Lisa Minelli stayed as house guests of one of Italy's most famous opera and film director, Franco Zeffirelli?

If money is no object, then you can hide away at Villa Tre Ville where 16 suites, each

one named after one of its former occupants, let you listen to the soft winds and the sounds of surf under linden, pine and lemon trees over the rocky coast of Positano.

You will be able to choose any Italian food under the sun with your own chef to cook it at any time of the day, after he has picked it fresh from the vegetable garden, or fetched or fished it from the nearby Li Galli island, which Russian choreographer Leonid Massine and Nureyev once called home.

Zeffirelli, now 87, has a wealth of papers, rare books, costumes and scripts – all of which will eventually be housed at a museum to be located in one of Florence, Rome, New York or Moscow.

But you can already see his mother of pearl bedroom furniture from Syria, where Zeffirelli shot "Jesus of Nazareth," or many of the treasures he accumulated from his opera productions around the world at Villa Tre Ville – actually a set of four villas which its current owner calls a "home for friends" but where an entry ticket can go as high as 5,000 Euro for one night.

For 35 years, until Zeffirelli sold Villa Tre Ville to hotel tycoon Giovanni Russo during a long distance a phone call in 2007, the movie director used this paradise as a stage set for his guests – "the very best years of my life," he says.

Zeffirelli, who could no longer climb the steep stairs of his villa, even left his books, some of his drawings and nearly all the furniture and ceramics to Russo, who owns two other hotels in neighboring Sorrento.

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Russo carved a modern elevator inside the rock, using 12 donkeys and a staff of stone masons with manual pickaxes to restyle the four "dream homes" to starkly luxurious suites with majolica tiles and tropical plants – each of them with a plunging view over the azure bay. Private access to the sea is a few steps down and a private motor boat can speed you to Positano's trendy shops and narrow winding streets across the bay.

Each room has a pair of precision binoculars, a champagne bottle cooling in the ice bucket and a bar with big unopened bottles of hard liquor instead of your regular down-market-mini-bottles. Of course, you would want linen sheets and sparkling tiles from neighboring Vietri. Every detail has been put into consideration to make it feel like home, without altering the original Zeffirelli villas.

The Bernstein suite includes a giant shower cubicle built inside a former pizza oven which gushes light beams and water from an enormous shower head when you shampoo. That's the place where the American composer wrote the music for Zeffirelli's film "Brother, Son, Sister Moon," about the life of Saint Francis.

Maestro Zeffirelli suite – the most expensive at 5,000 Euros a night – features a bathroom of Carrara marble, gold decorations and a view of the sea from the transparent shower stall, besides a private terrace overlooking the sea and a frieze dating from 1781.

At Villa Azzura, the Diaghilev suite, named after the Russian choreographer Sergei Diaghilev, who was a regular guest at Villa Tre Ville and founder of the Ballet Russes, the mirrors reflect the shimmering sea and the green nature from the bathroom. That might be a little cheaper – something around 1,100 Euros, everything included.

"Actually, there were many Russians in this area so it was natural that Zeffirelli would agree to sell it to another 'Russo' [Russian]," jokes the Italian hotelier, whose last name is coincidentally also Russo.

The coincidences do not end here. Russo is also the owner of Li Galli islands, a stone's throw away, where he resides in summer months at Nureyev's former villa. That island was owned for 50 years by Russian choreographer Leonide Masine, whose French architect friend Le Corbusier built the main house, and where Nureyev dreamed of retiring before he died at age 55, having slept there only about 10 nights.

Russo used his own precious collections from his trips with his spouse Nicoletta Fiorucci all over the world to enrich the villa. A marble fountain they bought from Istanbul's antique market, with a stone dolphin, adorns the entrance of the hotel gate.

The couple continues the tradition of hosting artistic geniuses. Most recently, they hosted tenor Andrea Bocelli at Villa Tre Ville and artist and film maker Julian Schnabel, who suggested a darker pink pastel for the terrace walls overlooking the Mediterranean and then finished off a fresco entitled "Humanity Asleep" on the walls of the Club Lounge room which also features a fireplace with historic blue tiles, and ancient religious ceramics.

"My concept is 'zero kilometers for your food,' meaning all your ingredients, vegetables, fruit, eggs, fish come from within walking distance, all year round. It is like a family home where everyone can be friends," says Russo who was actually born in a kitchen, the last of seven sons, Asmara, in the capital of Italy's former colony of Eritrea, where his family once ran a hotel.

Russo entertains guests sometimes at a large table on a columned terrace under a pergola groaning with green vines, and guides them into the kitchen to talk with the chef before meals. Or he offers Cuban cigars after dinner over port or limoncello. Of course, there are no extras on the bill in this humble home.

Sleek spectacular yachts carrying Australian, Russian or Italian tycoons have already started anchoring in the bay last summer for a meal at the "zero kilometers" restaurant or a night on terra firma.

A group of Americans shut down the hotel for a weekend long wedding celebrations in September. The hotel arranged for the wedding license at Positano City Hall.

Meanwhile, Zeffirelli remains hyperactive, living in his Rome villa on the historic Via Appia and resting up from a complete cycle of his staged operas at the arena of Verona (Carmen, Aida, Madame Butterfly, Trovatore and a new production of Turandot).

He is at work on (only) three more opera stagings while also battling the mayor of Florence for a large single building to house his papers, sketches, costumes, letters, art books and scores.

Zeffirelli still has time to rail against his former political ally Premier Silvio Berlusconi, who is now the butt of his barbs for having slashed cultural subsidies for operas.

Zeffirelli has yet to visit Villa Tre Ville in its new era as a hotel. He has promised Russo he will return before year's end to the place where he planned "Taming of the Shrew" with Taylor and Richard Burton, and where he dreamt up his classic "Romeo and Juliet" films.