

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN

# TRAVEL + INDULGENCE

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# TUSCANY'S NEW WAVE

Grand historic estates are moving with the times

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**L**unch in Tuscany can be a spectacular affair. We've settled in to the terrace restaurant at Castello del Nero, a glorious 12th-century estate that recently became COMO Hotels' first property in mainland Europe, and are bickering gently over menu choices when the wind starts to pick up. I glance across to the surrounding hills and notice the bank of grey clouds that has been lurking in the distance is suddenly approaching at speed.

The wind begins to gust, the sky darkens and within minutes we are sheltering under the canopy as spears of rain hurl themselves against the ground. Waiters scuttle out in wellies to rescue cushions and lower parasols, and we raise our eyebrows at other guests and make wearily ironic quips; what else would you expect in Tuscany in the summer?

This perennial tourist favourite, with rolling hills that stretch south from Villa San Florence and Pisa, has long been home to luxury historic-house hotels and estates. But something is afoot among the crisp linen and crystalware — this most traditional of destinations is beginning to move with the times.

The big news last March was the reopening of Castello del Nero, a gorgeous castle

flanked by vineyards and olive groves, 30 minutes' drive south of Florence. It's had a contemporary makeover that contrasts with many of the other Tuscan grande dames. The coolly elegant lobby, dominated by a table of abstract sculptures and lime-washed walls, is a clear signal that COMO is keen to be a game-changer in the region. Compared with its previous, Italian-owned incarnation, it's a fairly radical makeover — deep, rich colours replaced with crisp whites and pale greys, exposed brickwork and bare walls, save for the occasional oversized mirror, softened by heavy silver drapes.

If this all sounds a touch monastic, it's actually rather lovely. The minimalism is lightened with splashes of colour and playfulness: royal blue chairs in the bar, oversized lampshades dotted across the vaulted ceilings of the restaurant. Everything feels sumptuously comfortable and pleasingly unpretentious. All too often in minimalist hotels I feel that simply by walking into a room I am disturbing the balance, making it look a mess. At Castello del Nero I feel pampered; by the bed that almost sighs when I sink into it, by the thickly padded loungers in our small, private garden, and by the staff who whisk unobtrusively around the pool area. Of course, pampered is exactly what you should feel when you are paying \$860 or more a night. Room rates are generally astronomical in Tuscany, kept high by steady demand, which has increased in recent years with a growing number of Chinese tourists visiting the region.

Until recently this has meant these kinds of historic properties are accessible only to a small number of very wealthy guests. For

some hotels this is seen as a selling point, but others in the region are beginning to introduce opportunities for non-residents to visit, opening up these spectacular buildings to a wider cross-section of people.

Perhaps surprisingly, one of the hotels aiming to open its doors a little wider is Belmond's Villa San Michele, Tuscany's ultimate grande dame. Even in a region positively groaning with gorgeous historic properties, San Michele stands apart. It's a former medieval monastery with a facade attributed to Michelangelo, surrounded by the lush hills of Fiesole, with jaw-dropping views across Florence. It is strikingly beautiful: terraced gardens dripping scarlet geraniums step down from the pool to the parasol-dotted lawn; a long, vine-clad terrace houses the Michelin-starred restaurant La Loggia; and inside, stonework and staircases that have been in place for hundreds of years gleam like new.

"We know we are one of the most iconic hotels in Florence," says Alessandro Cozzolino, the hotel's executive chef. "But we also know the perception is that we are very exclusive, that people don't just come for drinks or dinner."

Cozzolino, who joined San Michele this year, is keen to change the hotel's reputation, following the lead of Emanuele Manfredi, who arrived as general manager in 2016 determined to blow away many of the cobwebs. Striking modern art has been dotted around the public rooms, and an "art car" — a hand-painted, vintage Fiat 1100 Musone repurposed as an electric vehicle — is available to

guests for a personalised tour of Florence. Cozzolino has introduced "pool moon parties", monthly events that, while being a little more staid than the Thai equivalent, definitely appeal to a young crowd. Other new events include informal cookery classes and "Leonardo's table" evenings, when a shared table of Renaissance dishes is created and there is an opportunity to dress up in period clothes. Cozzolino is also keen to encourage visitors and locals to venture through San Michele's impressive doors for sunset cocktails or dinner at La Loggia, although it's worth noting that a couple of gin-and-tonics will set you back about \$50.

Villa San Michele is one of two Tuscan properties owned by Belmond (formerly Orient Express), and many guests pair a stay in Fiesole with time at Castello di Casole, which is about half an hour's drive south of Florence and was bought by Belmond last year. Casole is the most expensive place we visit — rooms cost from about \$1350 — but it's also the one I

warm to least. There are only 39 guestrooms scattered throughout the main house and surrounding outbuildings, furnished in a more traditional style with heavy wood furniture and tones of pale apricot and yellow. The small number of rooms should create a boutique feel, but the public spaces and terraces are so large it instead feels a little empty. The estate spans 1700ha — it's one of the largest in Italy — with 32 villas dotted between the olive groves. There are plans to build 15 more villas and 20 new hotel suites, and the grounds can certainly absorb more people. The charming courtyard at the heart of the main building is empty save for a few chairs and feels rather forlorn.

Not that this seems to bother the clientele, mostly American, some with young families, who appear poolside at the end of the day after trips to Florence or Siena, both reachable by the free hotel shuttle. I suspect many guests love Casole for its grandeur, spectacular hilltop location and glamorous history as the former home of Earl Edoardo Visconti, brother of film director Luchino Visconti. Walkers and nature lovers are well catered for too, with hiking routes from the property and a safari tour through the estate, with a chance to see wild boar, porcupines and deer.

The only problem with Casole is if you don't have a car, there is no village or town within walking distance, so if you want a night off from Michelin grandeur for a more authentic Tuscan meal, you need a taxi.

The beauty of Castello del Nero, on the other hand, is it is an easy 15-minute walk into the small town of Tavarnelle Val di Pesa, which is delightfully unspoilt, with a handful of bars and restaurants opening out on to a wide square, and a long main street dotted with small shops and, of course, a gelateria.

We spend a considerable amount of time wandering back and forth to Tavarnelle. On the first afternoon we scope out the town and stop at the gelateria for small tubs of dark chocolate, and rum-and-raisin ice cream — a bargain at about \$1.50 each; probably a quarter of the cost in Florence or Pisa. On the two following days we go for lunch at Borgo Antico, a simple courtyard restaurant that adjoins a small hotel. We drink local rose, eat our way through the menu — crostini, unctuous pasta, fresh salads, coffee — and on both days the bill comes to about \$50, less than half the cost of our lunches at the hotels.

On our last evening, when lunch and the afternoon heat have worn off a little, we set out on one of the three hiking paths that lead from the hotel, sneaking a couple of beers from the minibar for a private sunset mo-



ment. It's a classic Chianti evening; soft light across lush hills, the neat lines of the vineyards and the freckles of the olive groves creating a unique geometric pattern across the landscape. It's astonishing that despite the millions of tourists who flock to this part of Italy each year, so much of the countryside is unspoilt and tranquil. It's a fantastic place to

walk, and there is something reassuring about being surrounded by vineyards and olive farms still producing wine and oil as they have for centuries. It's this timelessness that people love about Tuscany, and this is why Castello del Nero is such a breath of fresh air. The 50 rooms are a striking counterpoint to the lushness outside. The Shambhala spa is a soothing retreat if the Tuscan sun starts to bite. And there are plans to renovate some of the cottages dotted across the estate, to create villas that will offer a chance to self-cater.

COMO and Belmond are not alone in their desire to update classic Tuscan estates. On our last morning we pop in to Borgo Pignano, a 300ha organic estate a few minutes' drive from Castello di Casole where the grand exterior opens up into chic, elegant lounges and wide terraces with extraordinary views. This year Pignano has become home to a resident artist, available to guests for private tuition and classes, and an in-house herbalist with their own "laboratory". Guests can tour the hotel's herb and flower gardens before heading to the lab to find out how perfumes, oils and soaps are made. The hotel also has its own bees as part of the organic farm, and aspiring apiarists can spend time learning the necessary skills.

These initiatives offer a way to become involved with the landscape rather than simply lazing by the pool. Too often luxury hotels feel like bubbles of privilege, existing separately from their surroundings, and if moves are afoot to make some of Tuscany's extraordinary estates more contemporary and more accessible to non-residents, this can only be a good thing. In many ways, these extraordinarily beautiful properties are historic monuments, and should be open to all.

*Annabelle Thorpe was a guest of Abercrombie & Kent.*

**THE TIMES**

## IN THE KNOW

Abercrombie & Kent offers a 12-day trip, Rome to Venice: A Connoisseur's Italy, priced from \$18,160 a person twin share. The journey incorporates Florence and the Tuscany region, and the itinerary can be tailor-made to include properties mentioned in this article.

■ [abercrombiekent.com.au](http://abercrombiekent.com.au)









**COMO Castello del Nero, main and above left; Castello di Casole, above; guestroom and exterior of Villa San Michele, below left**