



Monastero Santa Rosa

INSIDE:

- Lecce's New Concept Hotel 4
- New in Florence and Milan 5
- Hotels Opening in 2014 6
- JK Place Roma 7

SPECIAL REPORT: NEW HOTELS IN ITALY

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CLIFFSIDE PARADISE on the AMALFI COAST

“Clang...Clang...Clang...”

A young man smartly dressed in blue trousers and a white and blue shirt pulls a rope back and forth ringing an old bell hanging off a white-washed Jerusalem-stone building. “Welcome to *Monastero Santa Rosa*,” he proudly announces. Reaching into a revolving wooden window, he offers us scented towels and lemon water to revive from our journey. The lazy Susan is one of the many vestiges of the cloistered nuns who once lived here.

We’re in tiny *Conca dei Marini*, just west of the town of *Amalfi*. You can be forgiven if you’ve never heard of Conca though around here the town is

famous for its *Grotta dello Smeraldo* (Green Grotto), said to rival Capri’s Blue Grotto, as well as the fact that *Sofia Loren* once owned a home here.

The opening of Monastero Santa Rosa as an ultra-luxury hotel might be the biggest thing to happen in this seaside village since Conca was sacked by Turkish pirates in 1543.



The young man takes our passports and asks us to wait by the window while he checks us in. It is deliberate positioning on his part, I’m sure; intended to give us our first glimpse of *heaven*, um, I mean the expansive views over Monastero’s colorful terraced garden, cliffside infinity pool and the dazzling deep blue ocean below.

continued on page 2



Meliá Villa Capri

Exploring Italy's New Hotels

We are always covering new hotels in the pages of *Dream of Italy*, but with an explosion of new places to stay in Italy, we decided to round up some of the latest selections and look ahead to what is opening in 2014.

Capri:

Meliá Villa Capri

Via G. Orlandi, 103
Anacapri
(39) 0818 373924
www.melia.com

Rates: Rooms from 350€ per night, with breakfast.

The former *Blu Capri Relais* has been taken over by the Spanish hotel chain *Melia* and is one of the newest entrants to Anacapri’s luxury hotel scene. *Anacapri*, of course, is the uber-fashionable, historic center of the island. The *Villa Capri* is geared towards adults and not the best choice for families. Guests rave about the anything-you-need attitude of the staff and service is one of the hotel’s great selling points. It doesn’t have the stunning ocean views that other nearby properties have.

continued on page 4

There are 40,000 hotels in Italy.

Monastero Santa Rosa *continued from page 1*

Walking down the airy, long stone hallway, every handful of feet we pass an antique dark wood door. These are the original doors to the nuns small cells. Now every third one or so is the entrance to one of Santa Rosa's 20 rooms and suites. Each guest room is named after a local plant or herb and we are lead into *Salvia*.

Though the rooms of this suite are not large, the predominant feeling is one of open airiness. The light-colored furniture and crisp white linens add to this feeling. Large, dark wood windows (including one above the bath tub) perfectly frame the view of the ocean outside.

There are classic touches.

Take for instance the beautiful antique Neapolitan cabinet that houses the mini bar. But there are also distinctly modern amenities as well. This is only the second hotel in Italy where I have seen American electrical outlets installed alongside European ones — a saving grace for an American traveling with far too many things to charge.

There's a true sense of tranquility here and you can understand how, even stripped bare of its modern comforts, this place provided refuge for the holy sisters.

THE HISTORY

Monastero Santa Rosa was founded as a closed-order Dominican monastery. *Sister Rosa Pandolfi*, a descendant of a noble family, spearheaded the project. She had been given the *Church of Santa Maria di Grado* here in Conca and decided to construct a convent next to it. It was completed in 1681 and dedicated to *St. Rose of Lima*. Over the next few centuries, the sisters of Santa



Bianca Sharma

Rosa became known for their confections (more on that later), apothecary and helping to fund a much-needed aqueduct to provide water to the citizens of Conca. In the mid-19th century, the nuns were evicted and the convent was handed over to the town.

In 1924, a Roman hotelier turned the former convent into a hotel whose motto was, "At each window, the sun. From each window, the sea." In the summer of 1962, while vacationing with her children in nearby *Ravello* (at Gore Vidal's home), Jackie Kennedy would visit the hotel when she brought her family to Conca to waterski. Sadly, a decade later the hotel fell into disrepair and sat vacant for decades.

That's where an American woman with foresight and fortitude comes into the story. In 1999, *Bianca Sharma*, a widowed mother with two teenage sons, was vacationing on the Amalfi Coast. While on a boat trip passing Conca, she looked up and saw the dilapidated monastery and "just knew" she had to bring it back to life as a hotel. It would take 12 years to bring to fruition.



THE GROUNDS

I simply cannot wait to get down to the pool before the sun sets on this unusually warm and sunny late October day. I take the glass elevator down to the lowest level it will go. There are at least a few dozen steps through the levels of the terraced garden of wisteria, herbs, flowers and fruit trees (designed by Vatican landscape gardener *Tiziano Gargiulo*). Then more steps down from the spa (one of only two hotel spas in the world that uses *Santa Maria Novella*



products) and dreamy massage area to the pool level. The stairs and setting don't make this hotel a good choice for the mobility challenged or young children.

As I settle into my lounge chair, a group of sea gulls arrive almost as if on cue. I watch as they fly in circles and find a perch on the edge of the infinity pool. This is the reason to come to Santa Rosa. Even along a coast of unparalleled beauty behind any bend, Monastero Santa Rosa takes extraordinary to a new level.

The Amalfi Coast is a UNES

In fact, anyone coming here should be encouraged to leave the coastal touring to a minimum or even switch hotels and do your day trips from the other hotel. Seriously. This is one of those hotels you don't want to leave for nearly any reason. It is the perfect destination for a honeymoon or wedding (there's a 12th-century chapel on the grounds).

INSPIRATION BEHIND SANTA ROSA

The next morning, I head to the restaurant's terrace for breakfast. I have been told the owner is here (she lives part-time in nearby *Positano* and the rest of the year in Hilton Head, SC and Durango, CO) and when I hear someone address her at a nearby table, I get up to introduce myself to Mrs. Sharma. She invites me to sit and recounts the story of discovering Santa Rosa soon after her husband, Ken Sharma, the co-founder of i2 Technologies, passed away.



"I just had to do it," Sharma, who had no previous hotel experience, says. "My accountant tried to talk me out of it. A lot of people tried to talk me out of it."

But she threw herself into the project completely, even when bureaucracy stopped construction for nearly two years.

"Were there any other hotels in Italy that particularly inspired your work here Santa Rosa?" I ask Sharma.



She mentions her appreciation for Lake Como's iconic hotel, *Villa d'Este*, as

well as the small, exclusive *Villa Feltrinelli on Lake Garda*.

"I like the design of the *Rocco Forte* hotels like the *Savoy* (Florence) and *Hotel de Russie* (Rome). "There's an Italian sense, but they put a little eclectic, modern feel into the rooms," she says, adding that the fabric headboards in some of Santa Rosa's rooms were inspired by these properties.

In the years when Santa Rosa was developing from dream into a reality, when Sharma would visit other hotels, she would write down things she liked on a piece of hotel stationery to keep track.

"One of the things I did note during some hotel stays is that many properties try too hard to add gimmicky amenities, and that actually made me decide to keep it quite simple. One copied feature, though, is the back-lit mirror in the bathrooms. Got that one from the Hudson Hotel in New York City," she says.

For Sharma, it wasn't so much bringing outside ideas and influences to Santa Rosa, rather remaining true to the structure and history of the place. Sharma had consultants urging her to turn the monastery into apartment-residences, but that would have meant destroying the layout of the nuns' former cells.

Originally working with a British architecture team, Sharma ultimately turned to a local architect, *Francesco Avolio de Martino*, from right here in



Conca. He spent years working for Marriott and offered the perfect balance of honoring both the history of the building and the needs of international luxury travelers.

Sharma says that shopping for unique pieces for the interior was serious fun. Many of the antiques came from shops in Naples. She had alabaster lamps she saw in northern Italy copied. When I

continued on page 8

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remark that I loved the knitted turquoise throw blanket in my room, the former Montessori teachers laughs and says, "Aren't those great, I got them at Land's End."

Sharma declines to put a number on what she spent in total. "Honestly, I

CULINARY PLEASURES

Of course, a visit to any luxury Italian hotel isn't complete without experiencing its culinary offerings and here at Monastero, the mix of complementing setting and flavors that add up to something spectacular.

vegetable garden lovingly tended by gardener, *Salvatore*, and of course fresh seafood from the ocean just feet away. The 3,000 strong wine list features plenty of local vintages

Don't leave without trying the famous *Sfogliatella Santa Rosa*, the shell-shaped

"I should have stayed Italian from the get-go," she says.

"I thought I had to bring in people from the outside.

I should have trusted a little more."

haven't even added it all," she says. Locals and published reports speculate the original property went for \$10 million and Sharma put perhaps \$40 million more into it.

"I can say the hotel is supporting itself," she notes. A majority of the guests are American or British and the hotel enjoyed a robust season in 2013.

Was there anything she wishes she had done differently?

"I should have stayed Italian from the get-go," she says. "I thought I had to bring in people from the outside. I should have trusted a little more."

And the pool. Though it is absolutely stunning as it is, Sharma says she planned for the pool to be "a true infinity pool" and the same dark blue color as the sea below, but it was mistakenly installed in a turquoise color.

Monastero's German-born chef, Christoph Bob, has worked at some of Italy's Michelin-starred restaurants, including *La Pergola* at Rome's *Calvalieri Hilton*, the restaurant at *Villa Feltrinelli* on Lake Garda and *Torre del Saracino* in Naples.



Bob, who is married to an Amalfi native, says, "I not only fell in love with my wife, I fell in love with the destination and its food. Nowhere on earth does the sun and the soil give us such richness of flavors

as do the fresh produce, herbs, and seafood found right here on our coast."

All of the ingredients are locally sourced, with the olive oil from right here in tiny Conca, the pasta from *Pastificio dei Campi* just over the mountain in *Gragnano* (considered Italy's premiere pasta-producing town), many of the vegetables from the Monastero's own terraced

ricotta and pastry invented by the Dominican sisters. Their version includes semolina, dried fruits, ricotta cheese and rose water in the body; garnished with cream and black cherries on top. Every year during the Festival of Santa Rosa in late August, Sharma gives out the traditional sfogliatelle to the local children.

As we reluctantly leave Santa Rosa, we're asked for a confession. This is a former religious institution after all. Turns out the guest survey is a "confession" and we're asked to slip it into a slot labeled "*la tua confessione*"



next to the original dark wood confessional. I confess I can't wait to return to Monastero Santa Rosa.

Monastero Santa Rosa
Via Roma, 2
Conca dei Marini
(39) 089 8321199

www.monasterosantarosa.com
Rates: Rooms start at 375 to 550€ and suites start at 990 to 1250€, depending on the season. Breakfast is included.



There are no trains serving the Amalfi Coast.