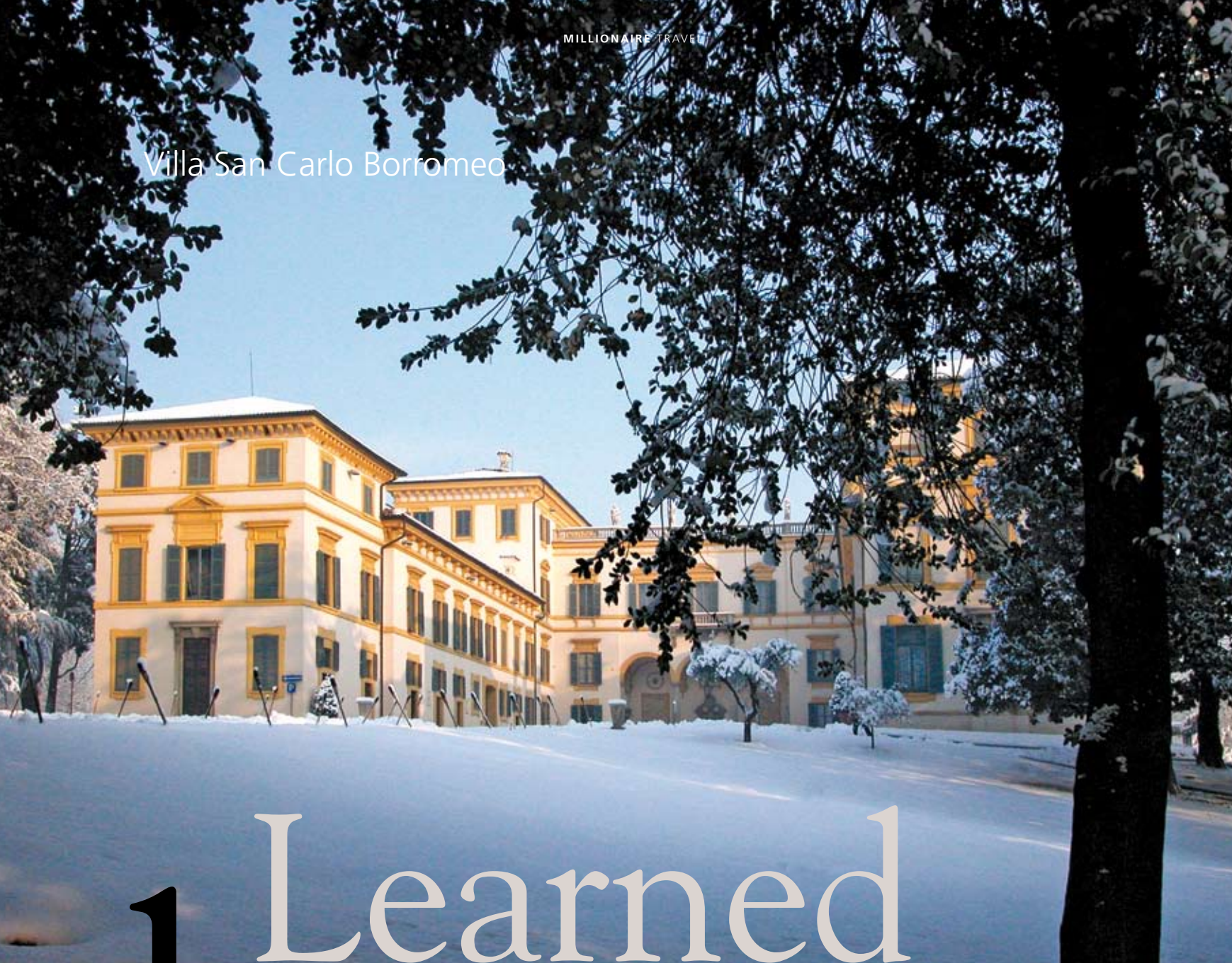


Villa San Carlo Borromeo



1 Learned luxury

A restored 14th-Century villa turned into a five-star hotel caught our eye in Milan. When it is spring, the botanical garden seems to celebrate romance. If you get there when it snows, you will never be happier – at home with Renoir, Da Vinci, Monet or bumping into Karl Lagerfeld under frescoed ceilings

text **Shalini Seth**

THE OLD AND THE NEW
CO-EXIST IN MILAN. LITTLE
BOUTIQUES SELL AVANT-GARDE
CLOTHING IN ALLEYWAYS OFF
THE DUOMO, WHICH
HOUSES THE WORLD'S
OLDEST MALL

When you go to Villa Borromeo in Milan don't try to sit on the throne in the lobby. "It is a throne built in the 1500s, coming from the Vatican, whose former owner was the Patriarch Great Maestro of the Order of the Knights of Santo Sepolcro," says Cristina Frua de Angeli, president of the foundation that owns Villa San Carlo Borromeo.

If you do get a room or a suite (€430 to €1,500), look around you carefully. The 14th-Century residence is cluttered with history. "All furniture comes from privately owned collections from various countries; some have been found through antique dealers to whom it had been previously sold through auction from the former owners," says the president.

When it comes to having a well-signed guest book, it is difficult to upstage Leonardo Da Vinci. Throw in figures of historical importance such as Montesquieu and the 20th-Century classical writer Jorge Luis Borges, and the property could just get by on glory.

Even so, you could take your time being impressed. Today, not only is the villa converted into a five-star hotel but it also houses an art museum, the headquarters of the Second Renaissance International University and the publishing house Spirali. This is in addition to the 12-hectare botanical park loaned out for weddings. The grassy plane which seems like a large amphitheatre is circled by cedar, magnolia, yew, chestnut, lime, walnut, red beech, ash, white birch, Japanese acacia, spruce, white pine and American oak trees.

"Basically, the University of the Second Renaissance is a cultural foundation where lectures, conferences and meetings

La galleria, Milan Piazza del Duomo





The throne from the Vatican

YOU COULD WANDER INTO THE PERMANENT ART MUSEUM THAT HOSTS WORKS BY RENOIR, MONET AND CHAGALL ALONGSIDE MANY RUSSIAN ARTISTS



The terrace of Villa Borromeo

are held. It is not a campus area with students,” Frua de Angeli says.

Senago, the province 13km from the city of Milan, is familiar with Da Vinci. “The people of Senago have been told by their great-grandfathers and grandmothers, who in turn were told that Leonardo was often seen at the villa. But this is no definite proof,” says Frua de Angeli. Given that the villa was once a fortress of the Visconti family, which along with the Sforza family formed the duo of the most important families in the region, it is highly likely that the tales are true. Da Vinci was in the service of Ludovico Sforza during his Milan years.

Located on a man-made hill, the site of a Celtic settlement, the villa was a Roman stronghold, then a Longobards fortress. The Visconti family erected the present-day palace on its ruins. In 1629, Federico Borromeo hosted the theologians of the time at the villa to safeguard them from the plague in Milan.

There is no such thing as too much history in Milan, which has a curious relationship with it. Cabs, some driven by women in mini-skirts, wait patiently as trams, in use since the 1920s, pass them on the brick roads. Little boutiques sell avant-garde clothing in alleyways off the Duomo and to reach the best parties you have to know the by-lanes by heart. Although this is the town where Alfa Romeo has its factories, in the province that hosts the Monza Formula One, speed is not as prized as a vintage car, which can still be seen making way through café-littered streets.

During Milan Fashion Week, which is just one of the reasons the city is known as the world capital of design and style, fashion writers from across the world do as much trend-spotting on the streets as they do on the runway.

“We have hosted Karl Lagerfeld; recently, the emerging Russian stylist Valentin Yudashkin organised a fashion show in the villa’s frame. Ferrari pilots for the Grand Prix of Monza also stay at our hotel during the Formula One week,” Frua de Angeli tells us.

The Villa Borromeo also organises the Festival of Modernity. Intellectuals, journalists, writers, economists, politicians and historians come together to discuss themes such as war, civil rights, tolerance, peace and scientific research. Come Spring, the villa will be abuzz talking about Freedom.

As one would expect, there is plenty in this thinking-man’s five-star retreat. You could wander into the permanent art museum that hosts works by Renoir, Monet and Chagall alongside many Russian artists, not to mention the ongoing exhibitions of contemporary art.

Each room and suite is divided into sub-categories named after a prince, an ambassador, an artist, a poet, or a star. You could opt to stay in deluxe rooms called Sigmund Freud or Eugène Ionesco, or upgrade to Suite Dante Alighieri.

Not all names are for dropping. “We have impressionist paintings in each room and suite. We prefer not to >



ALTHOUGH THIS IS THE TOWN WHERE ALFA ROMEO HAS ITS FACTORIES, IN THE PROVINCE THAT HOSTS THE MONZA FORMULA ONE, SPEED IS NOT AS PRIZED AS A VINTAGE CAR

mention the artists' names for obvious security reasons," Frua de Angeli says.

But it is also constantly being restored, like much of Italy that balances modern architecture with its historical treasures. "The first work began in 1671 by Giberto Borromeo, who completed its interior decoration, adding furniture, chandeliers and beautiful works of art to what Federico Borromeo had already put in place. Restoration continue today," Frua de Angeli says.

In 1983, the Second Renaissance International University purchased the villa and the park, neglected for more than 20

years, from the Borromeo family. The terrace had collapsed, the roof was damaged all over, the walls were badly affected by damp, and the door and window frames were ruined. The park was almost completely overgrown.

While you can thank them for the impeccable central heating and air conditioning, there is more to modernity than that. Says Frua de Angeli: "We are also restoring a second villa called Villa Rasini Medolago, about 1km north of the Villa Borromeo. Between the two we are also planning to build a golf course, a club house and a spa, in an area of 50 hectares." ■