





An ornate, dark wood headboard with intricate carvings and a large mirror. A red bedspread with a patterned border is visible on the left side of the frame.

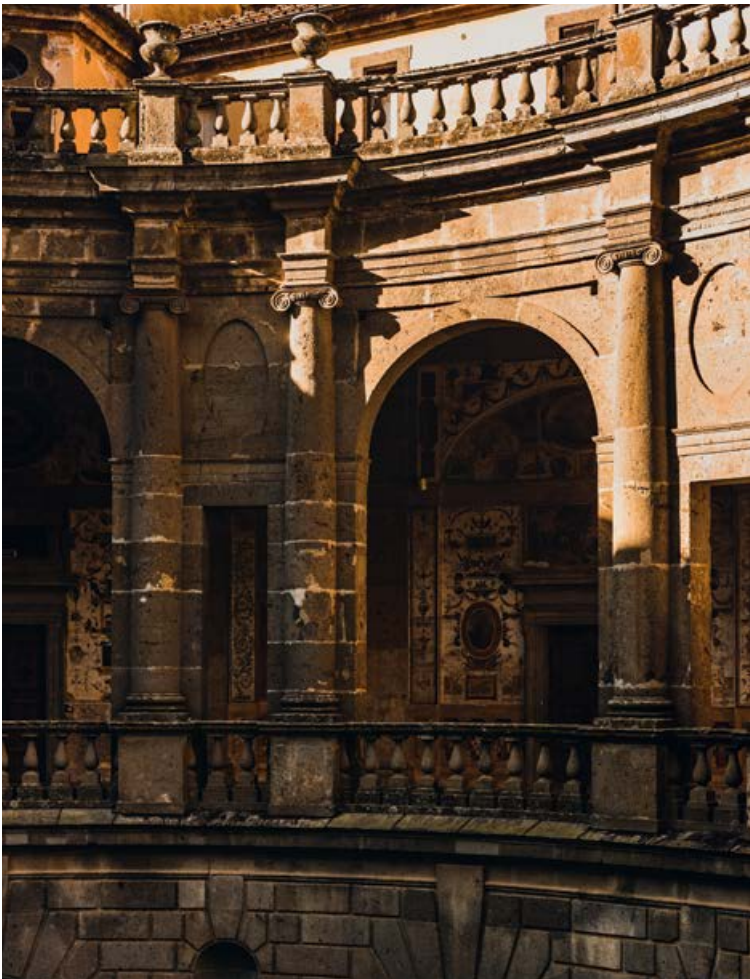
# Golden Tickets

ITALY'S MOST FANTASTICAL YET FORGOTTEN PALAZZOS ARE HOME TO COUNTS, PRINCESSES, AND STARRY-EYED SCHOLARS. STEVE KING CRACKS THE CODE ON THESE ENTIRELY UNUSUAL PLACES TO STAY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ØIVIND HAUG











**I**N VETRALLA ONE NIGHT I was introduced to a friend of a friend who reached into a coat pocket and removed a number of jagged, colorful ceramic fragments. He had uncovered them that afternoon in his garden in Ischia di Castro, not far away. “Nothing special,” he said. “Probably late 17th or early 18th century. But quite nice, don’t you think?” I thought they were wonderful. All of Tuscia was, for me, like that. A pocketful of shattered splendors.

Tuscia—the region in northern Lazio and southern Tuscany—was the heartland of Etruscan civilization from the eighth to the third century B.C. Later it was a place where rich Romans went when they wanted a break from the city. The houses of numerous noble families—Farnese, Orsini, Ruspoli, Lante Della Rovere, del Drago—are there, many of them still occupied by members of the same families. In the mid-20th century, it became popular with artists, writers, and filmmakers. Yet today, if Tuscia is known at all, it is known merely as the part of the country around the city of Viterbo that you must pass through on the way from Rome to Florence. How fabulous that this leafy bohemian playground full of aristocrats and eccentrics should be so—not neglected, exactly, but so overgrown and unsupervised. Over the past few years, many of its interesting inhabitants have slowly opened their interesting houses as places to stay. Visiting all, or just two or three of them, involves a road trip that will acquaint you with the whole region.

#### RELAIS VILLA LINA, RONCIGLIONE

Paola Iglori’s family has owned land near Lake Vico—about an hour’s drive from Rome—for centuries. Among the properties still in their possession is Relais Villa Lina, in Ronciglione. Paola is an author and a photographer, an untamable free spirit, and an authority on Native American culture. Villa Lina’s jarringly eclectic yet oddly coherent interiors—in which ancient and modern elements with nothing in common size each other up, decide they quite like what they see, and fall madly in love—faithfully reflect their owner’s distinctive personal style.

In addition to the five-room main villa there are half a dozen houses scattered over 90 acres of farmland, much of which is still actively cultivated. These include the six-bedroom Torre del Falco, with its exquisite patchwork of Neapolitan floor tiles, Renaissance prints, glass-domed Stargazer’s Bathroom, frescoed library, and winter garden, and the more sparsely decorated and startlingly authentic little Shepherd’s House—though it is unlikely that many other shepherds’ houses in Tuscia or elsewhere are hung with paintings by the noted neo-Expressionist artist Sandro Chia, Paola’s ex-husband.

For breakfast, the first figs of the season, pale and delicious. Paola stripped them with practiced fingertips. We ate like pagans. Skins and scraps strewn on the tablecloth alongside unused silverware. Afterward Paola led me into the garden. Hers is an important garden, the kind people write books about. We walked in the dewy,

*Above from left: Inside Il Vesconte, in Bolsena; the main building at Relais Villa Lina. Opposite, clockwise from top left: A garden gate at Castello Ruspoli; the kitchen at Corte della Maestà; Villa Farnese’s Renaissance façade; a photo of Claudia Ruspoli’s mother. Previous pages: Castello Ruspoli*





bosky shade. Paola spoke of the seasons and the planets. Cycles of life, death, rebirth. Phallic and yonic symbolism. Rites and rituals. We entered a maze. The hem of her dress became damp as it skimmed over grass and leaves and earth. She was telling me something about a sequence. If only you properly understand this sequence, she said, follow it meticulously, a great secret—the great secret—will at last be revealed, a cosmic mystery unraveled. On we went, observing, I suppose, that crucial sequence, moving among those shadows in that important garden of hers, making our way, step by step, ever closer to the Big Metaphysical Reveal.

#### TENUTA DI PATERNOSTRO, VETRALLA

Driving west, past Lake Vico, toward Tenuta di Paternostro, alongside its owner, former Fendi executive Olivia Mariotti, in her orange Volkswagen Beetle convertible with the top down—its paint job and her flame-colored hair a startling visual rhyme. The burble of her voice and that of the Volkswagen's engine also harmonized in a strangely soothing way. The branches of trees arched over the road and met in the middle. I daydreamed as we shot through a tunnel of flickering green light.

The *tenuta*, or estate, is a ranchlike spread outside the pretty hillside town of Vetralla, with an ochre-toned villa set among olive groves and rolling pastures populated with retired racehorses that

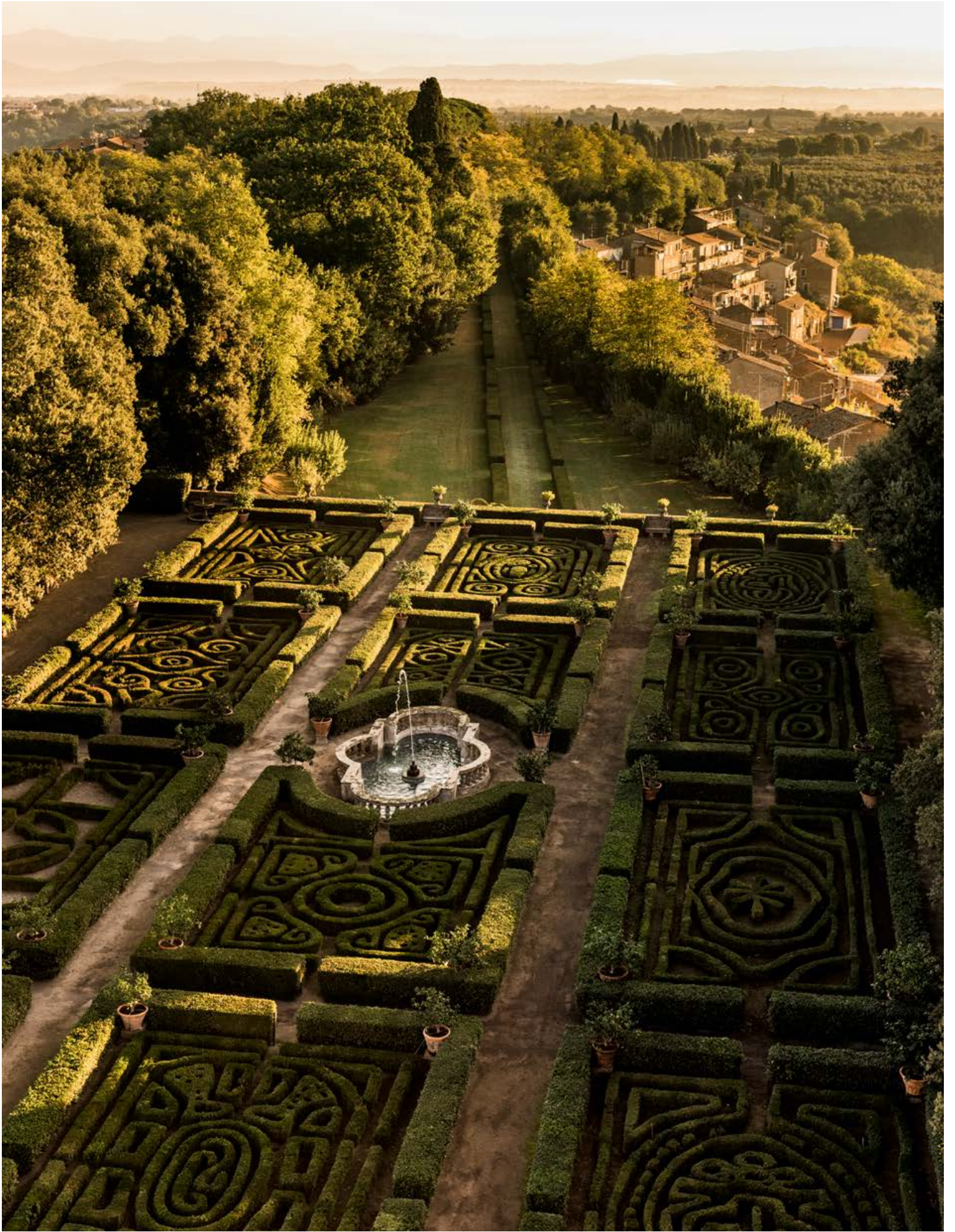
#### THERE WERE SENEGALESE CARVINGS, MEXICAN DRUMS, AND LADDERS TO NOWHERE RESCUED FROM A VALENTINO SHOOT

belonged to Olivia's father. I loved watching the horses perambulate slowly, thoughtfully, in twos or threes, heads bowed as if in deep philosophical discussion. When, a few years ago, Olivia took over the property, she began to extract herself from a career in fashion and luxury goods to oversee its renovation. The more time I spent here, the more I came to enjoy its comforts and to admire the sensitivity of Olivia's taste, which accounts not only for its opulence but for its warmth; its wholesome good vibes, as well.

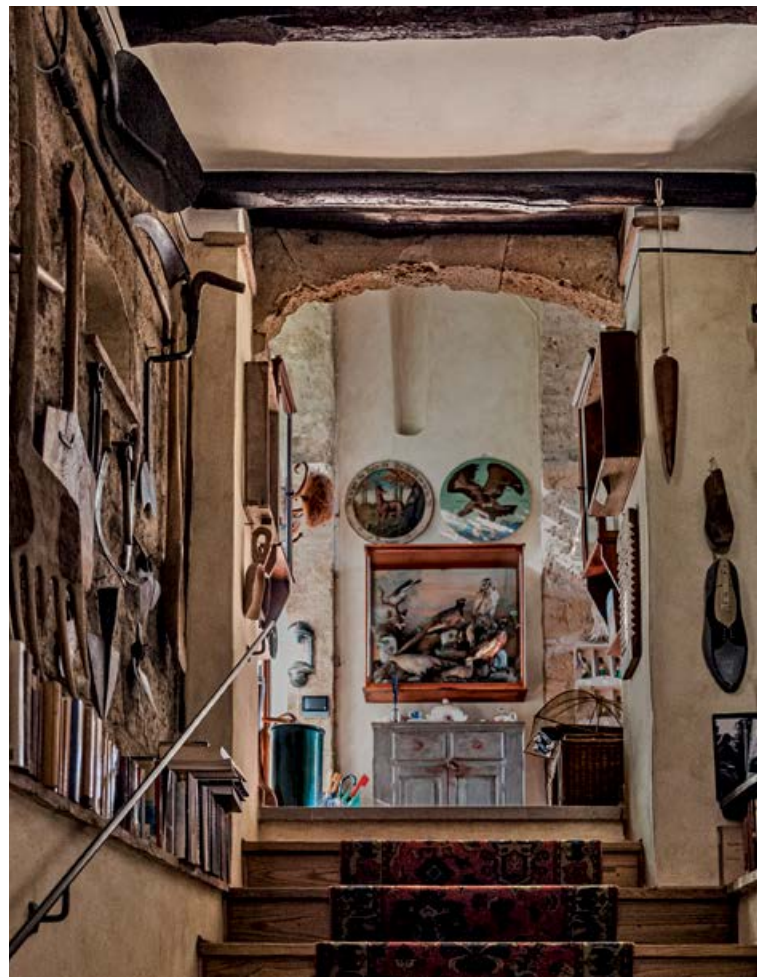
There are Senegalese carvings, Mexican drums, an Aubusson rug, ladders to nowhere rescued from a Valentino shoot that Olivia worked on with the photographer Tim Walker. I was especially fond of the small, plain desk in my room—a desk, I fancied, like one Leonard Cohen might have had in Hydra in the '60s, only this one was illuminated by a huge chandelier that dangled from a distant ceiling, quite unlike anything Leonard Cohen might have had in Hydra. The dining table downstairs, by contrast, is the size of a lap pool, a single slab of petrified timber that was shipped across oceans and continents from New Zealand to Italy. But I preferred dining on cushions on the grass in front of the hay barn, watching the horses in silhouette against the sunset sky, listening to Olivia outline her plans—such as persuading wellness gurus to lead Transcendental Meditation seminars here—and eating and drinking by candlelight.

*Above from left: Olivia Mariotti in her VW Beetle convertible; the façade of Il Vesconte. Opposite: Sunrise over the gardens at Ruspoli*













#### LA COMMENDA DEI CAVALIERI DELL'ORDINE DI MALTA, VIGNANELLO

There was a hint of drizzle in the air when I reached this elegantly converted four-suite inn, so I was pleased to find an umbrella poking out of a pot by the door—and even more pleased to discover that it was not an umbrella after all but a rusty old sword, recalling the days when the building was a lodge for the Knights of Malta.

Those knights of yore would, however, be in for a shock if they saw the place today. Though the exteriors remain impeccably demure, the interiors, by Cesare Barro, are a cheerful crusade of color and contrasts. Honest-to-goodness heirlooms go head-to-head with finds from all over—marble busts versus Bakelite phones. The effect, though, is not in the least unsettling, and the rooms were among the most straightforwardly practical and, in a way, homely of any I saw in Tuscia.

I was greeted by the formidable owner, Nathalie Pignatelli di Montecalvo, a princess several times over, by birth and marriage, who quickly became one of my favorite people in Tuscia. Immaculate, curious, and thoughtful, she is also wickedly funny, provocative, and unfiltered, with astonishing green eyes and a sailor's mouth. Strolling through a forest with her that afternoon, I paused to read a small, official-looking sign but could not quite

#### I SLEPT IN FEDERICO FELLINI'S BED, WONDERING IF IT MAY HAVE SOME CREATIVE BENEFICIAL EFFECTS

decipher it. I asked Nathalie if she would mind translating it for me. "It says that you must not litter here, in this beautiful place," she replied crisply, "and that if you do, you are a motherfucker."

That evening we chatted about silly, random things—sharks, siblings, Studio 54—as we made our way around the orchard behind the house, picking up pieces of fallen fruit from the ground or plucking ripe ones from the trees, piling them all into a large basket

that eventually became too heavy for me to hold. In the morning the same basket—now full to overflowing with still more fruit, gathered, presumably, by other, more patient hands—was laid out on my breakfast table. That gorgeous

image of natural abundance lingers in my mind as clearly as any of the precious things I saw inside any of Tuscia's splendid palaces.

#### IL VESCONTE, BOLSENA

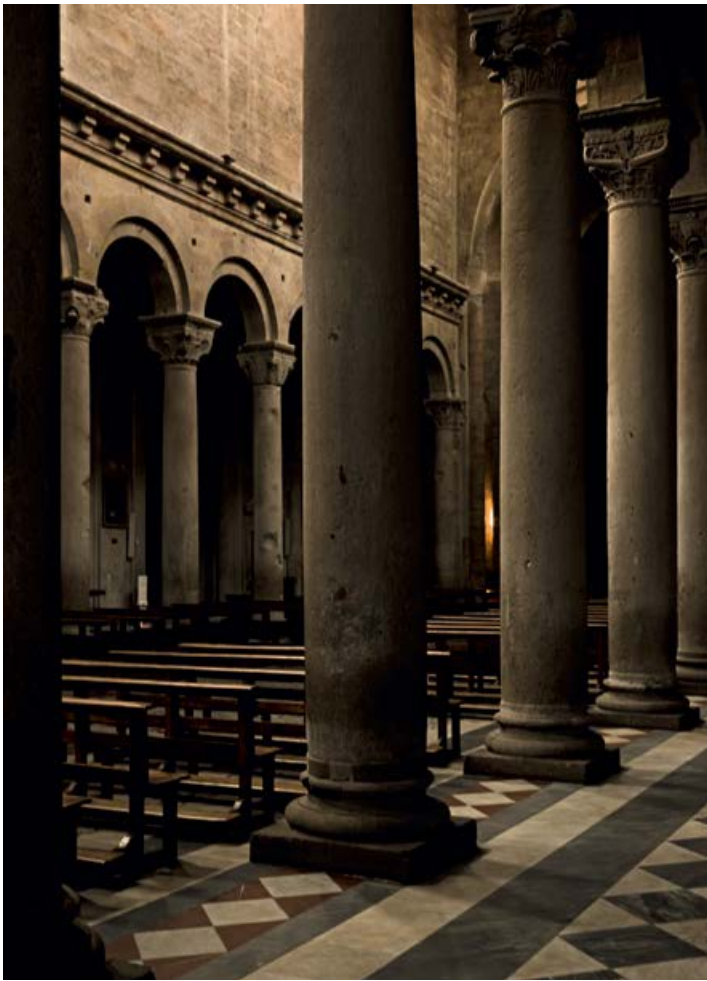
Few of those splendid palaces, or anyway those that you can stay in, contain more precious things than Il Vesconte, seat of the Counts of Cozza Caposavi for half a millennium, in Bolsena, by the lake of the same name. The more I wandered along its echoing passages, across its miles of eroded terra-cotta, up and down its foot-scooped stairs, the bigger and more unnavigable it seemed to become. Finding my own bedroom required serious concentration—left after the Turner seascape, right past the framed papal documents. Finding

*Above from left: A staircase at Renaissance-era Villa Farnese; tableware at Tenuta di Paternostro, west of Lake Vico. Opposite, clockwise from top left: A soft-lit salon at Ruspoli; the village of Civita di Bagnoregio is accessible only by foot; an interior at Corte della Maestà; cypress near Viterbo*









any of the other 11 rooms would certainly have been beyond me. Another hundred years or so and I might have got the hang of it.

For dinner on my last night in Tuscia, my hosts, Il Vesconte's owner Lorenzo and his son Francesco, were joined by a friend, a marquis from Umbria, and his daughter; another friend, a prince from Naples, and his wife, the princess; and two young baronesses from Calabria. The young women were, I would guess, in their early to mid-20s, about the same age as Francesco, each with curly hair piled high. So, in total, eight paid-up members of the Italian nobility, and me, a King in name only.

After dinner the Umbrian gentleman produced a wooden box of Montecristos. There were no other takers, so he went about his preparations solo. He was short, stout, and nearly bald, with twinkly eyes and a pencil-thin, jet-black mustache that made me wonder if he might have been a good magician. As indeed he proved to be, for in the time it took for a thick puff of his cigar smoke to clear—presto!—the young ladies had vanished along with Francesco, none of whom would be seen again until the following afternoon.

I spent the night in Federico Fellini's bed—a bed, that is, in which the great director, a friend of the family, used to sleep when he came to stay. I could not help wondering if sharing the maestro's bed, even in this more or less accidental and entirely chaste, solitary fashion, might have some creative beneficial effect, get my synapses firing. But I slept deeply, untroubled by wild, poetic visions, and woke up no closer to genius than I had been the night before. 🍷

## Elsewhere in Tuscia

Three additional properties here deserve special mention. **Corte della Maestà** ([cortedellamaesta.com](http://cortedellamaesta.com)), in Civita di Bagnoregio, is a wonder within a wonder—four suites in the magnificently decorated home of psychiatrist and writer Paolo Crepet and his wife, Cristiana Melis, a bubble of luxury and calm in the middle of one of the most picturesque towns in Italy. Breakfast in the garden, among trees and flowers, with ancient walls to one side, views to the horizon from another, is lovely. **B&B a Piazza del Gesù** ([bbapiazzadelgesu.com](http://bbapiazzadelgesu.com)), in Viterbo, is a side project of architect Raffaele Ascenzi and his wife, Valeria, comprising three pared-down, effortlessly chic rooms in their sprawling medieval town house. Presently under restoration, the **Rocca Farnese**, in Ischia di Castro, will, in time, become a magnificent addition to this list. For now, contact its owner, art historian Stefano Aluffi-Pentini ([apvoi.com](http://apvoi.com)), for information. (Though you can't overnight, the nearby 18th-century Villa Farnese and Palazzo dei Papi are delightful day trips.) And on the eastern side of Lake Vico, the family-owned **Castello Ruspoli** ([castelloruspoli.com](http://castelloruspoli.com)) is open to the public during the daytime; in the summer Claudia Ruspoli herself will happily show you around the castle and its Renaissance-era gardens. To stay the night, however, you have to be invited. **Relais Villa Lina** ([relaisvillalina.com](http://relaisvillalina.com)), **Tenuta di Paternostro** ([tenutadipaternostro.it](http://tenutadipaternostro.it)), **La Commenda** ([commendaordinemalta.com](http://commendaordinemalta.com)), and **Il Vesconte** ([vescontebnb.com](http://vescontebnb.com)) are available to book, in part or in whole. A restaurant, **Locanda del Portale**, together with five new rooms in the Casa Portale, will open at Relais Villa Lina this spring. S.K.

Above from left: Palazzo dei Papi doubled as the pope's residence when Viterbo was the seat of the Catholic Church; the historic village of Caprarola is dominated by Villa Farnese. Opposite: An interior at Il Vesconte





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