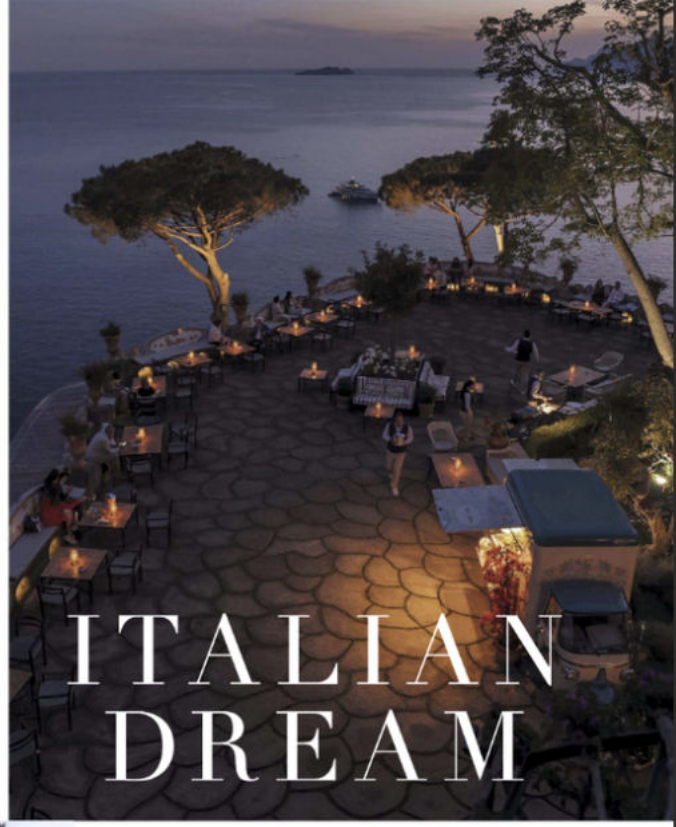

ITALIAN DREAM

The superb Il San Pietro di Positano is one of the world's best hotels – and it's easy to see why

WORDS
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Of all the grande dames that pepper the lemon-scented Amalfi Coast, there is one particular five-star outerop that carries mythical status: Il San Pietro di Positano. A byword for discreet glamour, this family-run hotel just outside Positano has long attracted a particular type of A-lister; seducing the likes of Gregory Peck, Rudolf Nureyev and Julia Roberts.

It opened in the summer of 1970 on the feast of San Pietro, to whom the small 17th-century chapel was dedicated. A lavish inaugural party and fireworks display marked the unveiling (a tradition that celebrates the start of each season to this day) and over the next decade, the jet-set and glitterati would come to discover its la dolce vita charm.

It was the realisation of a dream for its perfectionist creator, Carlo "Carlino" Cinque, who set to work in 1962. The build was a sinuous and complex project "like a beautiful woman with curves in all the right places". An eccentric who was orphaned at the age of eight, Carlino's hotel became his family. Guests were sacred and animals never far away; at one stage there were foxes, toucans and even penguins (a leash would allow them to swim and catch fish).

When Carlino died in 1984 his nephew Salvatore and niece Virginia took the reins. Virginia remains ever present but the management has long been the responsibility of her two sons, Carlo and Vito, following the death of Salvatore in 1996.

With a 12-year renovation project that was completed in 2020, the hotel is slick and stylish but old-world glamour and traditions are mercifully kept alive. At dinner in its Michelin-star restaurant Zass, men are required to wear long trousers and no mobile phones are allowed, but there isn't a whiff of stuffiness and the atmosphere crackles.

We enjoy a slice of Neapolitan pizza to start, while chef Alois Vanlangenaeker's menu is a showcase of refined Italian classics; my tortellone with ricotta, broad beans and Vito's Genovese sauce is possibly the best pasta I have eaten. Produce comes from the hotel's organic vegetable garden or local suppliers and is served from the state-of-the-art kitchen, named the most environmentally friendly in the world.

Facilities are first-class; there's a heated outdoor pool, beach club, beachside restaurant, sprawling bar terrace (home to a three-wheeler serving sushi and sashimi), spa, fitness centre and the iconic tennis court sandwiched between the rocks and the sea. The sense of space is astonishing, as are the complimentary experiences, from a shuttle boat to Positano to a two-hour yacht cruise. But best of all? The staff. Many have been here for decades – some for more than 40 years. Their love and warmth provide a sprinkle of magic amid the stardust and make this one of the world's greatest hotels.

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