

SUITE DREAMS

A GROWING NUMBER OF LUXURY BRANDS ARE TAKING THEIR DESIGN SKILLS OFF THE RUNWAY AND INTO THE BUSINESS OF HOSPITALITY, AND MILAN HAS BEEN THEIR PRIME TESTING GROUND

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Milan has long been recognised as Italy's fashion capital and the biggest names in design — Armani, Bulgari, Dolce & Gabbana and Prada — are now setting a new trend in taste. They are creating hotels, restaurants, bars and cafes to complement their world-famous labels and adding a different dimension to this dynamic city.

Giorgio Armani is synonymous with Italian style and his sumptuous Armani Hotel seems an extension of the man's personal mystique. As soon as you enter the tiny ground-floor foyer, your senses are assaulted by a spicy fragrance reminiscent of an Arabian souk. An express elevator plucks you from the banality of the streets and propels you to level seven, where you find floor-to-ceiling windows that seem to defy gravity and provide a panoramic view of Milan's rooftops while you check in. The hotel opened in 2011 following the success of Armani's debut hotel in Dubai's Burj Khalifa, and is a partnership with the UAE property developer, Emaar.

Hidden inside an austere building designed by Enrico Griffini in the 1930s, the Armani is located on Via Manzoni on the edge of Milan's renowned "Golden Triangle" fashion quarter. Soft beige tones and sleek furnishings give a soothing minimalist look to this hotel and a €40 (\$60) glass of Dom Perignon in the seventh-floor Bamboo Bar seems the ideal way to put the scorching summer heat behind you, with glimpses of the Duomo, Milan's landmark cathedral, though the louvred windows.

Armani has combined his taste for fine furnishings and uncompromising attention to detail with impeccable service to create a luxurious experience that showcases his brand. "I have concentrated all my efforts on delivering my personal aesthetic vision within a precisely defined ambience of total comfort," says a statement from the 81-year-old doyen of Italian design. He has a reputation for showing up unannounced, but is nowhere in sight on this occasion and hotel staff are strictly forbidden to speak on his behalf. Somehow the hotel speaks for itself.

You can choose from 95 rooms and suites, the pinnacle being the 200sqm presidential suite with its own cocktail bar and private terrace, for up to €10,000 a night.

Throughout the hotel creamy brown floors are covered in smooth Asian limestone and large neutral rugs. Muted beige and mushroom-coloured furnishings from Armani's Casa collection are complemented by Eastern-inspired lamps and tables. Mini-bars and

cupboards are discreetly hidden and guests can close the blinds or check who's outside their door by pushing a button on the hotel iPad beside the bed. Bathrooms have the finest fittings and one-way glass shower doors give guests total privacy, even from each other.

The entire eighth floor, covering an area of 1000sqm, is devoted to beauty and relaxation, featuring spa treatments and a fitness gym. Downstairs the Emporio Armani Caffé sits inside the designer's clothing and homewares emporium and is bustling with a lunchtime crowd of fashionistas, office workers and curiosity seekers. With its shiny black furnishings and red lacquered look, the cafe resembles a Japanese bento box and is great for people-watching. The credit cards have had an early morning workout and a procession of Louis Vuitton and Prada handbags pass by in search of a table and Armani's take on the classic Milanese risotto or choice of salads. Those on a budget gravitate to the bar for what is still one of the most expensive espressos in town.

Armani did not begin the fashion branded-hotel phenomenon. It was the Italian jewellery and fashion brand Bulgari, now owned by the French LVMH luxury group, which first merged design with hospitality when it opened the Bulgari Hotel in Milan's upscale Brera district in 2004. The hotel is a partnership between the fashion brand and the Ritz-Carlton chain and it recently celebrated its 10-year anniversary with a complete makeover. Bulgari has since replicated the concept in London and Bali. A new hotel is due to open in Shanghai in 2016 and there are others in the pipeline.

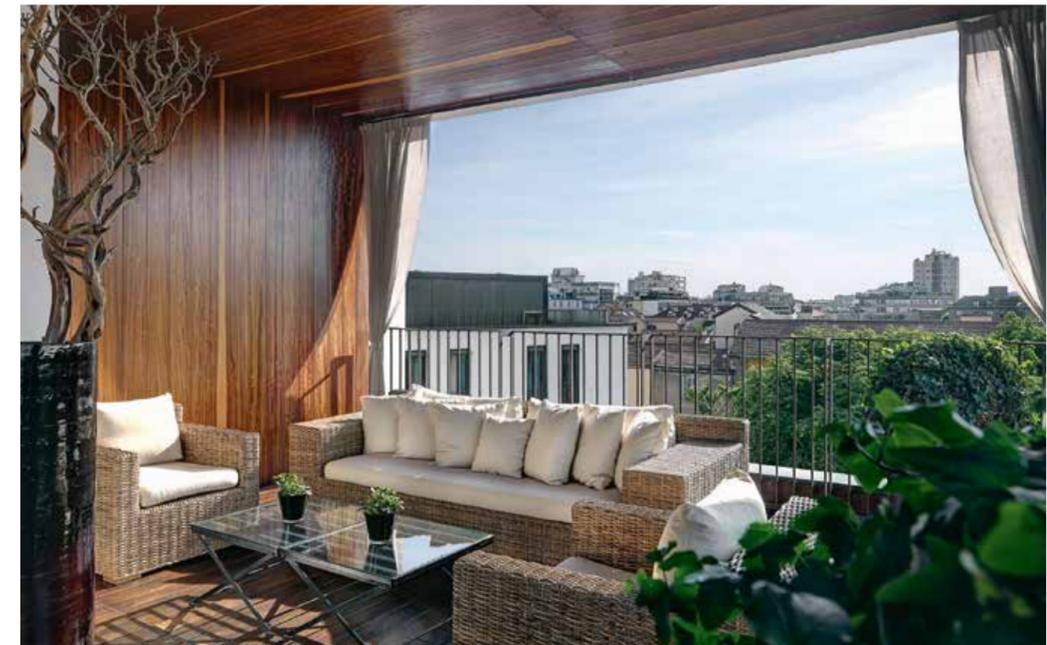
Attilio Marro, general manager of the Milan hotel, likes to describe the Bulgari as "a luxury hotel with a contemporary twist". "We design our hotels with a vision of contemporary Italian luxury that has guided the brand in the past 130 years of history, using precious materials, great craftsmanship and the unmistakable creative sensibility that transcends time," Marro says.

The five-star Milan hotel has only 58 stylish rooms and suites and features a stunning garden cocktail lounge — one of the coolest places to be when the city's notorious humidity take its toll. A couple of Porsches are parked at the main entrance and the lobby is filled with portraits of famous faces, including Meg Ryan and Eric Bana, who support Bulgari's favorite charity, Save the Children.

Marro is unwilling to discuss his clients' identity or their demographics, yet he clearly knows his customers well. "These are individuals who like to reward themselves with fine things, who own several nice cars and have a city house and a country retreat or beach house, they own or charter yachts. They are used to very



Clockwise, the exterior, Signature suite and a guest room at the Armani Hotel in Milan; the balcony of a suite, the subterranean spa and the restaurant at the Bulgari Hotel





Clockwise from above: Café Trussardi in Piazza della Scala, a room in the now closed Maison Moschino, and Martini Bistrot

good service. They have their own cigar humidors and wine cellars. They collect art. We are not necessarily speaking about the private jet crowd, but about first-class, or even business-class travellers with a different attitude. Their expectations are of the highest level and require exceptional service to maintain.”

The hotel combines contemporary design with a warm, relaxed ambience. Chunky sofas, bulging bookcases and generous bathtubs help make clients feel at home. The rooms are furnished in neutral autumn tones and many clients compete for choice garden views. There are sketches of Bulgari jewellery designs by the elevators and a subterranean candle-lit spa with an iridescent pool you might find in Bali or Bangkok. But the 4000sqm private garden remains one of Milan’s best-kept secrets and a tranquil oasis in the heart of the city.

As the hospitality industry cashes in on the influx of visitors arriving in Milan for Expo 2015, mayor Giuliano Pisapia says it’s no surprise that big fashion brands are moving into the sector. “It’s undoubtedly enriching our city and sending an image of charm, elegance and distinction around the world,” he tells WISH. “Milan was already an international city before Expo 2015 produced a substantial increase in tourist arrivals especially from Asia, Russia and the Persian Gulf. Today the challenge is to tap into the big wave of new tourism from newly industrialised countries. The fashion houses are great ambassadors for Milan around the world.”

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Industry observers say Armani and Bulgari have given an impetus to their rivals by encouraging other luxury hotels to restructure as well as promoting new openings. Fashion accounts for a fifth of Milan’s economic output and during spring-summer Fashion Week in September alone it generates €50 million’ worth of business.

Altagamma, a foundation that promotes Italy’s highest quality products and services, says there is a growing tendency for luxury brands to pursue opportunities that promote “lifestyle and experience”. “Italian brands understand very well how they should diversify into lifestyle brands and this began when

fashion brands began exploring new sectors, as Armani, Missoni and Versace did with homewares,” says Altagamma director-general Stefania Lazzaroni. “Others launched their own furnishings collection and then moved into food and hospitality. The fashion brands are tapping into significant synergies without undermining their core business and with positive spinoff for perceptions of their brands.”

Trussardi, which established itself in gloves and leather goods before expanding into jeans and ready-to-wear, is another brand to have embraced hospitality. It has a vibrant café, lounge and restaurant inside its flagship store overlooking Piazza della Scala. Café Trussardi is popular for breakfast business meetings or a glass of prosecco before an opera at La Scala next door. Gaia Trussardi, creative director of the family-owned group, said she wanted to create a “warm environment”. In the downstairs café, lush plants hang from the ceiling above the glass terrace and there is a buzz around the airy central marble bar that attracts lawyers and stockbrokers as well as international travellers throughout the day.

Executive chef Roberto Conti oversees the two Michelin-starred restaurant upstairs. “Investigating the elegance and harmony of the flavours is what drives us,” Conti tells WISH. “I don’t like complicated cooking.” His way with favourites like cotoletta Milanese and risotto has won fans. “The Rome chef Antonello Colonna came here twice two weeks ago and then came back last night. He’s coming back for lunch today.”

Not every attempt by designer brands to capitalise off the runway has been a success. Maison Moschino, a quaint hotel that lived up to the eccentricity of the fashion label, closed its doors last year after a rental dispute in a highly competitive market. Set in a 19th-century railway station building, the hotel opened to great fanfare in 2010. It had a fairytale theme, with rooms inspired by *Alice in Wonderland* and *Hansel and Gretel*. It has now been taken over by the NH chain and is undergoing a massive restructure. Moschino declined to comment on the closure but Giulia Crivelli, fashion editor at Italy’s influential business daily, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, says she’s baffled by it.

“I don’t know why it went badly,” she says. “Perhaps there are many reasons for it: wrong location, poor publicity, insufficient quality-price relationship. Or perhaps Moschino and the Aeffe group, to which it belongs, did not invest or understand how different the task of managing hotels is from being fashion stylists.”

When Dolce & Gabbana opened their restaurant, Gold, in Milan in 2006, it attracted football players, television stars and the occasional cameo appearance from their pals Madonna and Kylie Minogue. Tucked away in a piazza not far from the historic centre, it was as brash as its owners with glass chandeliers, mirrored tabletops and leather banquettes.

But after they emerged from their tax evasion trial last year, the dynamic duo of Italian fashion decided to sell the restaurant. They are now concentrating on Bar Martini and Martini Bistrot, a highly successful collaboration with the vermouth brand. At the heart of Corso Venezia amid their flagship stores, it seems the perfect way to showcase the upscale brand and it’s hard to find a free table for an aperitivo or late night cocktail.

Prada is one big name which has not yet ventured into either hotels or restaurants. But it has bought an 80 per cent slice of Milan’s most beloved pastry shop. Founded in 1824, Pasticceria Marchesi has served the people of Milan with its revered pastries, candies and chocolates from its Corso Magenta store which looks much as it must have nearly 200 years ago.

One long-time employee said she could not wait for Prada to open its spinoff pasticceria in the premier fashion street, Via Montenapoleone, in September. It’s certain to attract plenty of industry buzz just across the road from the luxury brand’s latest collection. **W**