

Heartbreak hotels

For years she has scoured the globe, searching for The One. Now she's finally found it — only there are three. Ariel Leve falls in love with a trio of handsome Italian hotels



The way some people feel about finding a soul mate, I feel about finding a hotel. I've gone through a lot, and there's always

been something missing. Usually, there's nothing wrong with the hotel, there just isn't chemistry. "It's not you, it's me," I think. And then, last autumn, I found The One. Only there were three. Three hotels I could easily spend the rest of my life in.

What makes me fall for a hotel is the feeling I get while I'm there. I'd heard about the Splendido, the alluring villa on a hill top overlooking the harbour of Portofino, whose visitors ranged from Bogart and Bacall to Naomi Campbell and Sting. And as soon as I got there I understood the attraction. Even though I looked like a bag lady, I suddenly felt like Ava Gardner. Just being there, you feel glamorous. Standing on the terrace, looking out over the Ligurian Sea at dusk, the elegance and romanticism is overwhelming, but there isn't a whiff of stuffiness or elitism. The warmth of everyone who works there made me feel like a regular. And the food. I usually have a "been-there-

Above: a view of the Ligurian Sea from the Hotel Splendido. Right: inside the Villa San Michele

ate-that" attitude, but at La Terrazza, the open-air restaurant, I studied the menu like it was the Torah. I was at the hotel for two nights, and in the morning I began having separation anxiety. Having found my dream hotel, I didn't want to leave. Would I ever love again? Turns out I would. A few hours later.

The Villa San Michele was a different kind of experience, but just as powerful. Situated in the hills, minutes from Florence's centre, this restored 15th-century monastery has

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a view of the city that is like a hallucination. The rooms and the food are as flawless as the Splendido, but the atmosphere is tranquil — a sense of having escaped. Sitting on the loggia eating Tuscan cuisine, it's impossible not to feel like a princess. The only problem with it was that it spoiled me. What could possibly top it?

When I told my friend Liza that I was going to be staying at the Caruso Hotel in Ravello, she said something I've never heard anyone say: "I wish I was you." Arriving there after the winding car ride up the mountain, there was a sense of having reached a personal summit. The 11th-century



palazzo is situated on the highest point in Ravello, with 360-degree views of the Amalfi coast, faded frescoes and vaulted ceilings. It is the ideal place to stare out at the sky and sea. Swim to the edge of the open-air infinity pool and you're looking off a cliff over the coast, surrounded by lemon trees, bougainvillea and wisteria. It is five-star luxury that blends seamlessly into the natural setting. It is elegant and relaxed and even the fussiest person will find nothing wrong. Ravello is a special place. And perhaps most telling about the Caruso is, as with finding a soul mate, there is not one thing about it I would need to change.



HOW TO GET THERE

 Ariel Leve travelled with British Airways and Orient-Express, tel: 020 7960 0500. Visit: www.hotelsplendido.com (from £524 a night); www.villasanmichele.com (from £563); www.hotelcaruso.com (from £450)