

The Marvels of the Villa San Michele in Florence

by Susan Van Allen

Fat raindrops poured from dark clouds on to the red-roofs of Florence. Lightning flashed over Brunelleschi's dome, followed by rumbles and claps of thunder. As I sipped my Chianti and took in the view from Villa San Michele in Fiesole, I couldn't help but gloat. Past the cypress and olive trees down there in the city I knew tourists were hovering under umbrellas and jumping puddles, while I was having one of the most serendipitous moments of my visit to Italy.

My plan had been to drop my bags and then hop a hotel shuttle right back into town - see the Duomo, the Botticellis in the Uffizi, shop for sandals. So what if I was heat-wilted and tired from days of indulgence and hiking the Tuscan countryside -- I was still determined to cover a bunch of Florence "must dos."

But the moment the cab pulled up to the Michelangelo-designed arched façade of this converted 15th century Franciscan monastery, I could feel my "be-a-good-tourist-see-all-the-sights" resolve melting away into the old world comfort and elegance of Villa San Michele.

Danytza Contreras, (the guest relations manager) greeted me in the chapel turned lobby, looking as though she'd just stepped out of the pages of Italian *Vogue*. With her bright-eyed charm, she

coaxed me to have a look around, leading me through the grand, airy downstairs rooms, furnished with plush antiques and a masterpiece fresco of The Last Supper in the Cenacolo dining room. By the time we reached the neatly terraced Italian gardens where we could see the sky darkening over Florence, I'd taken Danytza up on her suggestion to have lunch at the hotel's loggia restaurant.

There handsome tuxedoed waiters hovered about, serving me Tuscan specialties - a delicately spiced lentil soup, a glass of Chianti, followed by a tower of vibrant berry gelato. Taking in the delicious flavors and the dramatic view of the storm, I knew what it must have been like to be a Medici. There I was, escaping Florence's dog days of summer in Fiesole, just like those merchant-princes had done centuries ago.

The spacious suite where I spent the night was a far cry from the monk's quarters it had originally been. In the Carrara-marbled bathroom's Jacuzzi tub, I soaked away the aches I'd gained from previous days of touring. Before collapsing into the luxurious king-sized bed, I caught from my window a dreamy glimpse across the twinkling gardens - there on a private patio a couple was enjoying a candlelit dinner outside their suite, which had once been the monk's limonaia.



THE VILLA SAN MICHELE FACADE designed by Michelangelo. Photo by Genevis Loci.

The sun streamed through the glass roof of the former winter garden onto the breakfast buffet-two massive wood banquet tables displaying an assortment of fresh fruits, breads, cheeses, sausages and sliced meats. Pumped up by

a cappuccino, I practiced my Italian on the waiter, even though he spoke perfect English. As I rattled off my Florence tourist plans for the day, he simply smiled, pointed to the sun and asked, "La piscina (the pool)?"

At the top of the villa gardens, I floated in the still clear water, staring up at the chiaroscuro blue sky. Behind me were the lush old Fiesole woodlands, in front of me a breathtaking view of the Arno valley, looking just as the Renaissance masters had painted it.

It was as if the archangel Michael, for whom the Villa is named, had intervened and

done his saintly work; giving a weary traveler a vacation from her vacation... sweeping me up to heaven (or at least to a heavenly spot), tossing away my schedule, and giving me time and rest to prepare to take in the glorious treasures of Florence with freshened eyes.

For more information, contact the Villa San Michele at Di Fiesole, Via Doccia 4, 50014 Fiesole, Florence, Italy; TEL: 011 - 39 - 055 567 8200; FAX: 011 - 39 - 055 567 8250; e-mail: reservations@villasanmichele.net; web site: www.villasanmichele.orient-express.com.