



IS THIS THE MOST FASHIONABLE HOTEL IN THE WORLD?

It favours maximalism over minimalism, pays homage to its Florentine surroundings and has designers following its lead. Welcome to Hotel Vittoria, says **Dominic Lutyens**

With a degree of understatement not normally associated with Italians, Daniele Giovenali, commercial director of Florence's Una hotel chain, describes its latest venture, Hotel Vittoria, as "not just a place to sleep". Nearer the mark is his next statement: "We want to surprise our guests." The place certainly does. It's discreetly located in a narrow, unassuming street in the city's historic area, San Frediano, and its exterior — unchanged since the early 1900s, when the building was a removal company's warehouse — is modest. The interior is anything but.

Forget any idea of a politely conventional lobby: as you walk in, you step on a mosaic floor that sweeps ceilingward and loops the loop, before morphing into the reception desk. There's nothing mousy about its motifs — William-Morris-on-acid flowers that are seriously oversized versions of those found in twee petit point. Smothering floors and climbing

the walls, it mimics both carpets and wallpaper, but is neither. This entrance wastes no time in establishing the tone of Hotel Vittoria's interior — a heady mix of the flagrantly flamboyant, hyper-glamorous and humorous.

In the bar and restaurant is a spectacularly long, S-shaped table that snakes across the room. Suspended above the table, by way of lighting, and mirroring its form, is a serpentine light box with a richly colourful, abstract stained-glass pattern like the kind seen in 1960s modernist churches. Around the walls are mosaic-covered ledges — for computers providing broadband internet access — that project surreally into the spacelike peninsulas. Each door to the hotel's 84 rooms masquerades as a (different) painting, depicting a full-length, gilt-framed portrait of a society lady or nobleman. The bedrooms are lit in theatrically rich nightclub hues, from indigo to onyx.

The bathrooms — whose gentian-violet mosaic tiles glow like ultraviolet — are neon netherworlds. The lighting ►



Opposite

A fantastical mosaic installation, designed by the hotel's interior designer, Fabio Novembre, confronts you the moment you step inside. The mosaic soars ceilingward and loops the loop above you, before morphing into the reception desk

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In the ground-floor open-plan area, encompassing the reception and bar, stands Novembre's scarlet. And seating system. At one end sits a glass-topped table designed by Novembre — a tribute to 1960s pop artist Robert Indiana's iconic painting, Love



Upstairs, each door to the hotel's 84 rooms masquerades as a full-size portrait of a nobleman or society lady. The Italian Renaissance is a big influence on the hotel's style and the paintings on the bedroom doors are mainly reproductions of canvases found in Florence's Uffizi gallery ▶



Left The chandelier, created specially for the hotel by the Italian lighting company Alt Firme di Vetro, creates a spectacular light show in the lobby. Its simple arabesques jocularly mimic – in shorthand – an old-fashioned, rococo chandelier

Above The bedrooms have all the glamour of a ritzy nightclub. Fibreoptic lights subtly shine through the gaps between black leather panels on the walls. The end of the bed cleverly doubles as a bar in wenge wood, which is flanked by two bar stools. The bedroom wardrobes are lit by blue, red or white light

"The décor is a reaction against anonymous aesthetics"

everywhere is ambient and clubby: a huge ceiling light has minimalist neon tubes twisted to mimic rococo chandeliers.

Much of the furniture is high baroque, and none more so than the Italian architect and designer Fabio Novembre's scarlet, floor-to-ceiling And seating system, resembling a giant spring. Redolent of the 1960s furniture of the Danish designer Verner Panton, it provides low-level seating to loll on.

When minimalism was the order of the day, Novembre cultivated his own romantic, decorative and organic aesthetic. Based on a hunch that baroque interiors were about to swing back into vogue (they have), the ultra-directional Italian manufacturer Cappellini put his And seating into production.

Novembre, who designed the hotel's interiors and also designed the showrooms for the Italian company Bisazza — purveyor of panoramic, super-ritzy mosaics — is riding the crest of a wave: the maximalist wave. Mosaic has long been deemed naff, but Novembre has helped make it fashionable again. The Una group is on a mission to create hotels that capture the flavour of the city they are in, and Novembre's approach chimes with this aim. The move also reflects the fact that "designer" hotels have become standardised, with a homogeneous — and often cheesy — aesthetic, and are regarded as old hat. "In the past, people liked hotels that were the same the world over," says Giovenali. "It was

reassuring. But today people travel to discover new things. That extends to not wanting to stay in a minimalist hotel."

A big influence on Novembre's interiors for Hotel Vittoria is Florence's history and the Italian Renaissance: "I like to steep myself in the spirit of a place, then filter it through my own sensibility to create a new environment," he says. His references to Florence are subliminal: he uses irises (associated with the city) as a motif and, inspired by that, purple. The paintings on bedroom doors are reproductions of those in the city's Uffizi Gallery and the dining table is inspired by the refectory tables of Italian monasteries.

The main appeal of Hotel Vittoria for design buffs is not just that it's breathtakingly theatrical, but that its style represents the way forward in interiors. It's new — a stylistic turning point. We haven't seen the back of minimalism yet, but interiors are becoming richer and more ornate, which makes the playfully designed, exuberantly decorative Hotel Vittoria a standard-bearer for maximalism — and arguably the most fashionable hotel today. □

Hotel Vittoria, Via Pisana 59, Florence (00 39 055 22 771; www.unahotels.it). Rooms start at £170 a night