

# Club culture

What's the right recipe for luxury? To find the answer, we visit an historic hotel where familiarity meets grandeur.

By *Laura Rysman*  
Photography *Isabella De Maddalena*

“Luxury isn’t five stars or three stars,” says Danilo Zucchetti, reclining in a tasseled velvet chair next to an intricately carved black marble fireplace. “Luxury is the opposite of mediocrity.”

As managing director of the Villa d’Este on Lake Como, Zucchetti is leading the grand hotel through its 148th year, which has been one of its most challenging. Set at the water’s edge with a view of the sharp, verdant mountains that surround the lake, the hotel is an old favourite of the Grand Tour circuit. It spreads out over a lush property with 10 hectares of gardens, a few individual villas and a pair of grand palazzos from the 16th and 19th centuries. As many as 330 guests can be housed among its genteel dominion of frescoed ceilings, marble staircases, tooled wood armchairs and burnished paintings.

History has elevated the Villa d’Este to the level of a social club – with appeal beyond that of a mere hotel. Guests return season after season, even in difficult periods. “I’ve been coming here for 22 years and it was the first place I wanted to visit after all these months holed up in my St Moritz chalet,” says one visitor, as he nurses a negroni at a lakeside table on the stone terrace.

“The definition of tourism in Italy is culture and history,” says Zucchetti. “These days, guests are looking for the possibility to socialise with each other

(1) Hotel overlooking Lake Como and its shoreside pool (2) Formal yet friendly service awaits (3) Villa d’Este’s interiors maintain their historic charm



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and to have extraordinary experiences linked to the surrounding territory’s nature and past.” The hotel arranges excursions to wineries and the lake’s spectacular villas, as well as boat tours. There is also a long-established calendar of annual events that take place on its grounds. This might be an historic period, Zucchetti says, but the long-lived hotel has weathered worse – world wars, the 1918 flu pandemic – and remains “an emblem of Italian essence and what Italy has to offer to the world”.

Hotel chains compose a tiny minority of the Italian hospitality world, with its patchwork of independents. Villa d’Este is the flagship in a small group including the Palace Hotel and the Hotel Barchetta Excelsior in Como, and the Villa La Massa in Florence’s countryside.

The primary appeal of destinations such as these is authenticity but Zucchetti believes that what’s needed now “is to combine the human touch of these hotels with the safety and consistency of chain hotels, and to revive tourism by focusing on ‘brand Italy’ as a whole.” Tourism constitutes 13.3 per cent of Italy’s GDP yet, he points out, lamentably there’s no national body overseeing the industry.

“We’ve always depended on Brits and Americans here, but now Italians and Europeans are discovering what the Anglo-Saxons already knew – that Italy offers beauty, history, nature, friendliness and, of course, food.” This moment might be ideal for a return to the reassuring serenity of grand hotels: of stylish service, thick curtains and crystal chandeliers, charm and steadfast experience. — (M)

**Monocle comment:** The wealth of difference in Italian hotels and the abundance of small family-run set-ups is part of what makes this a great nation for hospitality. But in tough times, teamwork makes for light work – and storied players can lead the way.