

# Chic RETREATS

FROM ITALY TO BALI, SPAIN TO THAILAND, WE SIZE UP SIX OF THE MOST OUTSTANDING HOTELS YOU COULD CARE TO VISIT

**WORDS BY**  
JONATHAN LOBBAN,  
CHRISTIAN BARKER  
& DARREN HO



## VIVA LOCARNO

Hotel Locarno is a paragon of old-world Roman romance and understated class

**WORDS BY** JONATHAN LOBBAN **PHOTOGRAPHS** JASON MICHAEL LANG

Don't get me wrong, luxury hotel chains are wonderful and all, especially when one is traveling on business or a tight schedule and requires absolute professionalism ("You call this service? I ordered a Caesar salad with *three* slices of chicken, not *four!*"), but my own personal opinion is that one's first visit to a magical foreign city absolutely requires a unique, magical hotel experience. An experience like that provided by Rome's Hotel Locarno.

The first time I stayed at Hotel Locarno, I was a complete virgin to Rome (although after visiting the Eternal City several times since, it could be argued there is no such thing as a Roman virgin). My wife had just fallen pregnant with twins and, feeling a strange pull to the city mythically founded by twosome babes, Romulus and Remus, we impulse-bought a pair of tickets to Italy. In hindsight, for Roman newbies such as us it was a genius move. Hotel Locarno is the type of establishment that – if you're the sort of person that lives for eclectic, understated elegance, originality, authenticity, old-world romance and who values charisma over polish – will forever colour your view of Rome for the better.

Location-wise, it is *fantastico*, being only a stone's throw from Piazza del Popolo, Rome's oldest Piazza and the ancient entrance to the city. Characterised by its huge obelisks and chic outdoor cafes, Piazza del Popolo has become one of *the* spots to dine and be seen since they ceased pesky traffic passing through the Piazza a few years back. And whilst you'll find a smattering of foreigners, tourist-phobes will be glad to know it's not as saturated with gawking, clueless hordes as the nearby Spanish Steps, a mere 500 metres or so from Hotel Locarno.

Found on a cosy little lane, Via della Panna, near the banks of the Tiber and a short stroll to the boutiques (keep a close

eye on your wallet and credit cards – not because of thieves, but your girl), your first sight of Hotel Locarno will be of a quaint, subtle-looking 1920s-era building flanked by vintage-looking bicycles available for guests use, if they're so daring. (Read *stupido*. As a former petrified driver on Rome's caffeine-fuelled streets, it takes nerves of steel and a thick skin to stay in one piece.)

But first impressions do count. When we arrived, exhausted from a 17-hour flight, we had barely stepped out of the taxi into the blinking Roman dawn when we were greeted by Alessandro, the hotel's long-serving doorman, porter and jack-of-all-things, whom we later learned was a former captain in the Italian Army. From there we passed through the light-filled,

**"HOTEL LOCARNO  
WILL FOREVER COLOUR  
YOUR VIEW OF ROME  
FOR THE BETTER"**

citrus tree-lined terracotta courtyard and up a grand marble staircase to a refined Venetian-style suite, replete with parquet floors, high ceilings, stained glass windows and handsome Art Deco-era furniture. It's anything but tourist kitsch. A former bank owned by a Venetian family (hence its distinct style) converted into elegant apartments

which adjoins Hotel Locarno via the courtyard, some years back.

In fact, the entire hotel is the result of a life-time love affair by the two aforementioned women. Built as a five-star in 1925, Hotel Locarno became severely run down during the depression era and was used by American troops at the end of WW2 as a pinball parlour (without doubt the most stylish pinball den in history, one must

surmise). Bought and rescued in the sixties she remained loyal to its original character, sourcing Art Nouveau accessories to furnish the rooms, such as the precious 1920s lamps from Tiffany & Co and Paris you'll find in some of the bedrooms, and 17th-century cupboards and 16th-century drawers for the Venetian suites. Even the lift (pictured opposite) is 1920s-vintage, a wrought-iron cage elevator rising four floors through the middle of a U-shaped staircase in the main building.

One of my favourite aspects of Hotel Locarno, however, is the hotel's marble-topped walnut bar, where a small number of guests and Rome's bohemian sophisticates still faithfully sip aperitifs and muse. It's like entering another era, the type of charming place Oscar Wilde would have chosen to patronise had he filed his last few remaining years alive in Rome, not Paris. There, a well-groomed, smartly-presented barman in a Humphrey Bogart-like suit, or even

herself, will offer you a drink and, if your Italian is good enough, precious gems of local advice: don't sit down for *un caffè* at the Piazza Navona during the day, you will get charged triple. Try the bucatini all'amatriciana at Al Moro, by the Trevi Fountain; the doors don't open until 1pm – look for the long queue of Roman businessmen.

The rooms are reasonable (by European standards), starting from \$350/night, heading up to \$1300/night for the largest Venetian corner suite, with views over the courtyard and opulent green marble bathroom. Classified as only a three-star, Hotel Locarno is five-star in class and heavy on understated cool. Stay here once and you'll always come back, as I did, with the photographer Jason Michael Lang, who took these photographs. To borrow from a well-known credit card marketing campaign, the experience is priceless. ■