

OPULENT EXPRESS

MICHELANGELO AND PRICELESS ARTWORKS



That old-fashioned splendour you just don't get today.

Third time lucky, as Chris Moerdyck goes in search of ultimate luxury

Take two ordinary everyday words – “orient” and “express” – string them together, and you get something entirely out of the ordinary. Visions of opulent, old-fashioned trains, grand hotels and sumptuous cruise liners.

I have been fortunate to have experienced three Orient Express Hotels. The first was our own Mount Nelson Hotel in Cape Town. It is outstanding and now that I live in Cape Town and don't have to fret about not being able to afford to stay at the Nellie, I do indulge myself roughly once a month by going to have tea there.

Yes, sometimes I feel guilty about spending the equivalent of the Western Cape's entire tourism budget on a cup of tea and a spectacular chunk of chocolate cake, but that doesn't last for long.

I've also had the privilege of staying at the Observatory Hotel in Sydney, Australia, another great Orient Express Hotel which is an island of calm on the busy waterfront and where mercifully, the staff say “good morning, sir”, and not “g' day mate”.

But, sorry to say, I've just recently experienced a sister Orient hotel that makes their opulence look distinctly motelish by comparison.

It's the magnificent and thoroughly overwhelming Villa San Michele at Doccia, situated on the hill of Fiesole overlooking the city of Florence, Italy.

What makes it so different? Well, for starters, the facade was sculpted by



Breathtaking views from the Villa San Michele hotel overlooking Florence, Italy.

Michelangelo and the whole place is an Italian national monument with original artworks dotted all over the place and each worth so much that flogging just one of them could probably pay the purchase price of the Nellie, The Observatory and a fistful of cruise ships. Which of course does give it something of a competitive edge, you must admit.

The original building on this site was a monastery, founded in the early years of the 15th century by Franciscan monks. The land on which it stood had been donated by a Florentine family, the Davanzatis, who

also contributed to the monastery's upkeep by gifts of woodlands, further buildings and money. The present building, with its imposing loggia, dates to 1600 when it was enlarged and completely renovated by Giovanni di Bartolommeo Davanzati.

The hotel's reception area is in the original chapel, but the original ornate altar is still there.

In 1982, Orient-Express Hotels, which already owned the celebrated Hotel Cipriani in Venice, bought the Villa San Michele and the surrounding land. Once more a comprehensive restoration of the buildings was embarked upon, this time with the cooperation of the Florence Fine Arts Authority.

Following the development and refurbishment plan, more rooms were created in the Italian garden area, outside the main building, and in 1994 six “junior” suites were added on the hillside between the garden and the pool. At the same time, the ancient Limonaia was transformed into two large suites. All these new rooms, with private gardens and terraces, offer the most breathtaking views of Florence, while blending imperceptibly into the woodland landscape.

In 1996, five additional suites, all with private gardens, were created below the Italian garden, giving the impression of a series of hanging gardens clinging to the hillside.

A thorough refurbishment of the first floor rooms was undertaken over two successive winters, involving the rooms over the loggia in 1997/98, and the Italian garden-view rooms in 1998/99, at which time the secluded, hermitage chapel was renovated and the fresco of *The Last Supper* beautifully restored. Completed by Nicodemo Ferrucci in 1642 the fresco was designed to decorate the refectory of the then monastery of San Michele. Smoke from the fireplace and candles, steam from food and even human breath over the centuries had dulled the colours and obscured the detail.

Inside the hotel, antique wardrobes, chairs and finely-crafted chests were restored to their former glory and continue to be used in the guest rooms to this day.

I was given a grand tour of the hotel after which all I had very little breath left that could still be taken away.

My wife and I were treated to a joint birthday dinner in the magnificent restaurant overlooking Florence.

Needless to say, the room rates are spectacular given the abysmal rate of exchange between the rand and the euro. And, if you have just shown the slightest interest in finding out what they are, I daresay this place will be out of your league.

