



JOIN THE CLUB

Story by Caroline Phillips

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 All the basic mod-cons in an
 modest and well appointed
 budget location

The brochure for Castiglion del Bosco is printed on paper so thick, you could make a sturdy bench out of it. The owners feature themselves, with a sepia photograph of 15 of the Ferragamo family in chinos and white shirts, a study of stylish insouciance, flanked by their coterie of horses and dogs. Other images show rooms with billowing curtains, antiques and casually strewn cashmere throws. Forty minutes by car from Florence, this private estate belongs to Massimo Ferragamo. Massimo is the youngest son of the late Salvatore – cobbler to the likes of Marilyn Monroe and Eva Peron and founder of the eponymous luxury goods empire. Situated in the Province of Siena and 200 kilometers north of Rome, this vast property spans ten kilometers, comprising nearly 4,500 spectacular acres of protected nature preserve. Five times the size of New York's Central Park, nine times the size of Monaco and twelve times the size

of London's Hyde Park.

Massimo works out of the New York wing of the family business. His dream was to own a family and friends-style Italian country retreat. What he has created surpasses the accepted standard. With his expectations of service raised by his time in NYC, it surpasses even most Italian 5 star destinations.

We arrive by car, unlike the majority of the guests, who turn up at the estate in helicopters and private jets, via the military airport nearby at Grosseto. In the distance, a Medieval town shimmers atop distant hills.

Now, it may seem churlish to turn down a junior suite that costs €550 a night. It's not that it isn't beautifully furnished, with luxurious materials and care taken over every last detail. It even has a private terrace that looks over uninterrupted Tuscan countryside. But it's the twin beds that don't meet the approval of my travelling companion – my 13 year-old daughter, Ella. She had requested a dou-

ble and sleeping with her mother is still a treat, so this offering WILL NOT DO.

So we're shown a room the size of a principality with a drawing-cum-dining room that looks like a ballroom – probably, because it was. It even retains its coffered ceiling. We swish into the bedroom – and there's a four poster large enough to fit our regal retinue. So it comes to pass that we settle into our €3300 presidential suite.

Well, what do you get for that money plus 10% VAT? SOS buttons in every room – a comfort, no doubt, to the bullet-proof-glass classes. Furnishings from small ateliers and bottegas of Florence's artisanal elite. Green velvet slippers and a burnished Siena leather bag of shoe shining kit. They also throw in breakfast. "I could have 80 friends for a sleepover in here," says Ella, surveying the room with practised eye.

Now we're wandering through the pages of the brochure for real, among staff in olive uniforms that blend in with the



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buildings. "They're like Abercrombie & Fitch models," notes Ella. "They're so fit." Oh dear. We're in a setting that could be the backdrop of a cinquecento canvas – with a patchwork of vineyards, valleys and woods that recede forever. There's a breeze on our faces, sun above and all is well in this brochure. The only thing that's missing from the Renaissance view is the odd angel or seraphim. After only minutes, I feel as if I'm really inside the pearly gates.

We walk to the hub of the hilltop estate. This is the borgo - or 'village'. It's tea time and the place is surprisingly empty. In fact, there's nobody here at all. Like a Tuscan hamlet film set at siesta time. I half-expect Federico Fellini to start rolling his cameras. In fact, this is where some scenes of Anthony Minghella's *The English Patient* were shot. A lady in Ralph Lauren riding gear and a man with penetrating blue eyes hove into view, extras in our film. These two, I'm informed by our guide, are club members.

Ah, the club. CdB is not just a private estate set amid the Brunello vineyards of the Val d'Orcia, one of the finest wine making regions of the world. Opening in 2009 as a members-only country club, it was reportedly built as a playground for Massimo's friends. The joining fee was a cool 1 to 3 million euros and the annual dues a further €40,000. For that price members – who currently number around forty – get estate rights. It's like a buh-zillionaires' time-share.

The original aim was to get 120 members. But even the most exclusive resort that Italy has ever seen has had problems in the recession. So now CdB has just started offering golf memberships – a snip at €25,000 per individual. Plus, it has just launched as a destination for lesser mortals – allowing holidays for non-members in its nine villas and 23 suites. There's plenty to lure the discerning and classy clientele – mostly Hamptons types and Eurostocracy – who end up here.

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 We could make a very
 amusing pun about wedge
 here. But we won't

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If a 13 year old being indulged with a spa treatment makes you wince - at least I'm not having her injected with botox - then let me add that she has a facial that involves pearls.

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 There's a winery which produces 200,000 bottles a year and is the fifth largest producer of Brunello di Montalcino. The garden - heady with lavender and rosemary - was created by the folk who did Sting's Tuscan pile and the 18-hole Tom Westkopf signature golf course is par excellence prima class. Golf is like Mandarin translated into Norwegian and read backwards for me, but I'm taking their word for it.

You can lie in the infinity pool, peering through its wrap-around glass into the valleys below, where they hunt boar. For those who don't have any blood lust to sate, there's everything from bocce (Tuscan boules) to a Culinary Academy. It's all achingly smart.

We wander through the borgo with mellow taupe 17th century stables now converted into suites. Strolling into the piazzetta (a tiny piazza) with a well, it looks onto the ruins of a 12th century castle. "This is la canonica - the priest's old

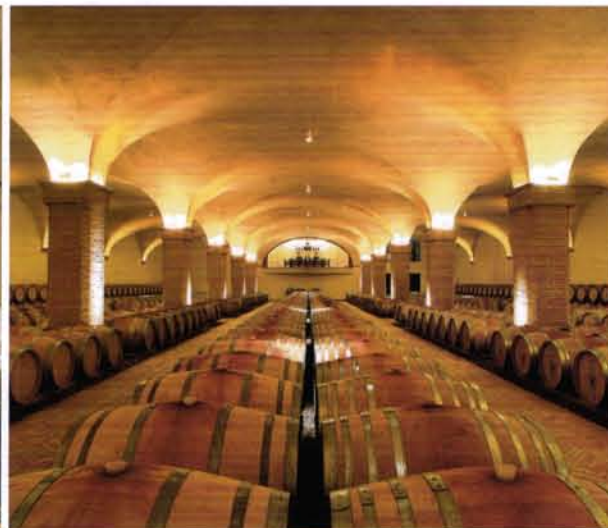
house," says our guide, writing it down for me. It's now a restaurant - complete with bell and tower - and a board outside with daily specials. He whisks us into the Chiesa di San Michele Arcangelo - a 700 year old chapel with 14th century Pietro Lorenzetti frescoes. "You can rent a priest," he explains cheerily. Nah. You're alright, thanks.

Instead of hiring a padre, Ella and I go to the Daniela Steiner spa, where we've been invited for hers and hers treatments. If a 13 year old being indulged with a spa treatment makes you wince - at least I'm not having her injected with botox - then let me add that she has a facial that involves pearls. In fact, my therapist, Egle, also exfoliates me the same way. Then she massages me with what she dubs, "An elixir of beeswax, champagne, precious gold powder and caviar."

A gimmick for spoilt, rich girls? Perhaps, but it leaves our skin silkily smooth and glowing with specks of gold dust. We

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 'We will fight them on the
 deckchairs, we will fight
 them on the loungers'.
 Not a German towel in sight.

sauna afterwards with Old Money from New York: a family doing a European Tour.

Our first introduction to the club members is when we meet a black labrador and Jack Russell, pooches with the look of seasoned private jet travellers. Then we meet their charming owners, Christian and Karine. A shareholder in CdB, it turns out that he's Christian Courtin-Clarins, skincare and cosmetics guru and chairman of the Clarins family's empire. This makes Ella - who specialises in collecting Clarins samples from department stores - almost faint.

We lunch with them on the terrace of La Canonica, en famiglia, with their English nanny and knee-high children. The hilltop town of Montalcino looks back at us, as we eat bruschetta. If the best cookery is like a fine marriage, some of the food at CdB is, I'm afraid to say, speed-dating. Often, it lacks the immaculate quality of ingredients that need nothing

more than temperature control. Surprisingly, it's sometimes over-cooked (meat and fish) or under-cooked (potatoes).

In Il Drago, their gastronomic restaurant, we're served anaemic pastry parcels of oily eggplant and lemon sorbet with rocket. Imagine melted spinach ice-cream. It's Heston Blumenthal gone wrong. When it should be River Café gone right. Whoever said you cannot eat badly in Italy might have to reconsider. I'm told the wine is worth celebrating - but having clocked up a quarter of a century as a teetotaler, I'd be the wrong person to ask.

M. Clarins is a man with a passion for bio-diversity and leaving the world a better place. He talks about everything from bio-mimicry to tracts of the Alps that he's buying to retain habitats for butterflies. They're typical of the guests: understated, discerning and successful. His wife has stepped out of a Fleming novel. Karine may look like arm candy,



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but she's a grand fromage in a French TV production company who has also has a PHD in microelectronics and was an engineer working on defence security. Her particular area of expertise - inertial sensors developed for missile guidance systems. Not really my field. But I do introduce them to Parmigiano dipped in honey.

Most days, Ella and I dine alone and simply - on ciacchino (warm, salty Tuscan bread) and raw vegetables just plucked from the Orto, an organic garden, which yields 100 different herbs and vegetables. We dip them in olive oil from the estate. We savour fresh gnocchi - which we made in our cookery class on one occasion. One evening we eat steaks grilled over logs, the blue meat suffused with their woodiness. Knockout. The staff are solicitous and offer instant service. "Nice?" beams one waitress, every time she pops up beside us.

Massimo, having already spent six

years creating his vision, is focussed on the next five years of development. There are eleven ruined farmhouses still to refurbish: neglected buildings awaiting the artistic touch of his stylish wife, Chiara, in collaboration with Florentine-based interior designer, Teresa Burgisser Sancristoforo. "Don't call them ruins," begs a friend of Massimo. "He hates that word." In time, these will join the villas already finished with Chiara's trademark perfectionism - with their rural chic decor, incredible comfort, private pools and gourmet provisions delivered to holidaymakers. Meanwhile, there's nothing wrong with having authentic, decrepit (don't mention that 'r' word) farmhouses on the estate.

As for distractions, while you glide around in near heaven, one can hack around on Anglo-Arabian steeds from a nearby Valdarbia Equitazione. I would recommend you ride my steed, Giaguaro - who finished second in the 2007 Palio di

Siena, the famous horse race around the shell-shaped Medieval Piazza del Campo. He doesn't seem the briskly competitive type - but then the race is no more than a two-minute dash. Plod and occasionally canter up lush hills to the part 11th Century castle, Torre di Bibbiano, then back past sunlight-dappled woods and fields of blood-red poppies. It's a picturesque outing.

As I have made previously clear, I'm with Mark Twain on golf, believing that it's a 'good walk, spoiled'. For those of you - and I'm guessing that's most of you - who feel differently, the 18 hole Drago Golf Club course is among Italy's top three courses and conceived as one of the finest private membership clubs in Europe. The second nine holes are opening in June 2011. I concede, it's in a beautiful setting and very natural - cleaving in every fold and contour of the landscape. It offers a unique Tuscan experience, in that it is neither by the sea nor

Head in the clouds.
A priest-less view of
Castiglion del Bosco's
vineyards.



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in parkland. It also (so they tell me) has excellent practice facilities and - at 500 acres - is about three times the size of a normal golf course. Family membership is €60,000. Do visit the winery. The fifth largest producer of Brunello di Montalcino and one of the most prestigious estates in Montalcino, winemaking at CdB has been a craft for 800 years. It’s an oenophile’s paradise and boasts Cecilia Leoneschi - a young female onologist - and she oversees wine ageing in zillions of French oak barriques. They offer tastings in a spectacular members-only dining and tasting room, where members also have their personal wine storage lockers. Yet again, my palette is not worth consulting, I’m afraid.

There can’t be many destinations that offer the sophisticated traveller so many distractions, from the cookery classes, truffle hunting, landscape painting classes, a wild boar fair, trekking - deer, butterfly and boar - along the lattice of trails that cover the estate. Or attend chocolate and gelato-making classes in

Florence. With all the various distractions and pursuits on offer, Castiglion is nothing short of a very high end, aspirational holiday camp.

Papa Ferragamo had a mantra: beauty has no limits. It’s seen everywhere from Castiglion del Bosco’s clubby lounge to its library. It’s visible everywhere in the craftsmanship, fine leather, Murano glass, linens and bespoke furniture, in the passion and soul of the place. It’s also evident in the Renaissance vistas and the refurbishment of the borgo’s infrastructure. It’s there when we swim as the full moon casts its silver light on the cypress trees.

No brochure can capture any of this. Salvatore Farragamo got the idea absolutely right. His son has almost achieved the reality.

For information on Castiglion del Bosco visit their website castigliondelbosco.it. Caroline Phillips flew out courtesy of British Airways. For details and bookings visit their website ba.com.