

Hospitality

The Family Touch



Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria in Sorrento, Italy

An Interview with Guido Fiorentino,
President and Chief Executive Officer, Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria

EDITORS' NOTE Guido Fiorentino has held his current post since November 2010. Prior to this, he was the Chief Executive Officer for Meridiano VAT Italia Srl for 21 years.

PROPERTY BRIEF Perched on the cliff edge of Sorrento, the inimitable Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria (exvitt.it) has a history full of superlatives. Owned and operated by the Fiorentino family since 1834, the property has hosted Richard Wagner and Oscar Wilde, who enjoyed the same breathtaking views of the Bay of Naples and Mount Vesuvius as today's guests. Ruins of Roman Emperor Augustus' villa are said to lay beneath the property and the past is also alive in such details as the 18th-century columns, frescoed ceilings, and antiques displayed throughout. Outside, the region's beauty is evident in the lush gardens, filled with Mediterranean plants, citrus, and olive groves. A quick elevator ride sweeps guests from the port directly to the hotel, a cool touch Wilde and Wagner could only have dreamed of.



Guido Fiorentino

Would you talk about the storied history of the property and how it has evolved to where it stands today?

We celebrated our 180th anniversary in 2014 and we're proud to say this beautiful old hotel is still family owned. I am a fifth generation Fiorentino, in fact. The property comprises three different buildings, each with its own name. My family initially invested in a new hotel, La Vittoria. The building we call Vittoria was built in 1834 and is the oldest part of the property. La Vittoria was the first modern hotel in the area and offered private bathrooms, a link to the harbor via a funicular railway created in a Roman tunnel, and electric lighting. It was a purpose-built hotel rather than a converted group of villas, which is more common with old properties.

In 1887 we built La Rivale, which means "competitor," next to La Vittoria. Between the two is an unusual smaller property – La Favorita – built in an architectural style reminiscent of a Swiss chalet. It was built to celebrate the wedding between Francesco di Borbone II, Crown Prince of the Regno delle due Sicilie, and the Bavarian Princess, Maria Sofia of Wittelsbach.

La Favorita was created especially for an English Lord who loved to stay in Sorrento during the winter. He said the other two buildings were too big for him, and he wanted something smaller and more private for himself and his family. So we built this delightful 12-room chalet just for him.

Since those early days, my family has encountered many situations. For example, during the Second World War, the property was taken over by the American Army as an official rest camp.

After the war we set our sights on the luxury market, which remains our focus.

When guests arrive at the hotel, there is a strong feeling of being welcomed into a family home, because we treat each salon and bedroom as if it were a room in a house.

To give you an example, when my mother travels and finds a unique piece of antique furniture – a chair or painting – she will buy it with a particular room in mind. Consequently, each room is furnished with antiques that are specific to it. So there is nothing uniform about our rooms – each one is an individual with its own character.

How have you made sure the property offers all of the modern accessories without losing its historic feel?

It's a big challenge, but we have continually updated our technology to meet the demands of today's traveler.

We always are updating our systems, which is difficult with an older property. For example, our walls are constructed of tufa – a variety of limestone – and Wi-Fi won't penetrate it. So we had to install more antennae. These days, poor Wi-Fi can be a bigger issue than an uncomfortable bed.

The buildings were not built to accommodate air-conditioning either so we had to install it and maintain it, back of house, to make sure guests feel the benefits without being confronted by it.

How do you define your client?

We're focused on the luxury high-end market, including families. Historically, we've had many types of clients. We also have regular clients that come back to the hotel because they feel it's like a second home.

During the summer of 2011, one of our customers asked to have a drink with me. I met him and he showed me a picture of myself at age five together with him. It proved how many years he has been coming to our hotel. He said he feels like part of our family.

We have many stories of guests who came for their honeymoon and who now come back with their grandchildren. Many guests also become friends with each other while staying with us and decide to holiday at the same time so they can meet again at our hotel.

There are not many hotels where you feel like part of the family and everybody knows you. Our concierge is a second-generation employee. He's been working with us for 40 years, so he knows all of the returning clients.

There are always members of the Fiorentino family around. Although we are management, we still want to give the hotel a family feel.

How have you made the food and beverage component so successful?

It's always very challenging to break even with food and beverage, but having three restaurants open during the summer helps. The Terrazza Bosquet has received the Michelin star award; we have another by the pool that's more casual; and we have a third in the hotel, which is open at lunchtime and has a terrace.

We decided to invest in the Bosquet and to try to get Michelin star recognition because, in the south of Italy, there is a big market for celebrations – such as weddings, anniversaries and birthdays and food plays a big part. A Michelin star chef is a very attractive draw for clients who are organizing celebration meals.

We help cover the cost of the Michelin-star restaurant with the other restaurants.

What is the nature of the spa product you have developed?

We started our spa project in 2006 by opening a small luxury boutique spa with just a few cabins. Each one is a suite with a private changing room, a single or double bed, and a big shower room. Each cabin has an outdoor space where guests can relax after their treatment.

We've developed a very intimate spa experience that's in line with our property. We want guests to experience and enjoy a spa with a special atmosphere – something different to other spas they may have visited. And we believe they truly do. ●