

PietraSanta - the Italian town that's a millionaire magnet

 By [Marcus Brewster](#)

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If, like me, you've never heard of Pietrasanta, a small village 4km inland from the resorts of the Tyrrhenian Sea on Italy's west coast, then you will share my surprise when I tell you that it is a destination town and not a serendipitous drive-through, that it attracts Russian oligarchs and oil-rich sheiks and that it is always visited at least twice. The secret behind the repeat custom lies in the translation of the town's name - white stone. That's because Pietrasanta is in the heart of the Carrara region, famed since the Renaissance for its creamy-white marble so coveted by every sculptor from Michelangelo onwards.



Although the quarries are in nearby Carrara, Pietrasanta has developed into a community of sculptors and this industry of artistic endeavour drives the entire town. Contemporary sculptures dot every public space and contrast against the old stone of the buildings, piazzas and cathedral that feed off the 'pedestrianised' streets of the centro storico or historical centre. In fact, the city map pinpoints 54 artworks to see on a leisurely perambulation.

Commissioning sculptors

This is not to imply that the oligarchs and the sheiks are any more art loving than you or I, but they come to Pietrasanta for a reason - to commission sculptors. The commissions range from bespoke architectural design (fireplaces, stairwell balustrades) to the kind of decorative grandiosity (a pantheon of the gods, anybody?) befitting a casino to the whimsical (a favourite dog) to the commemorative (plaques and busts) to the outlandish. If you had more money than sense and questionable taste then why wouldn't you want a life-size version of your Lamborghini in marble?

And so, latter-day art patrons come to the town to find a sculptor, select a block of marble, view progress and finally collect the sculpture. This is all very good news for the appropriate high-end hostelrys - and none more so than the estimable Albergo Pietrasanta, a member of the Small Luxury Hotels collection.

A striking 17th-century palazzo with an enviable collection of modern art (more of this later), the Albergo comprises two buildings with frescoes dating back to the 18th century, a tranquil conservatory garden where breakfast is served and 20 individually furnished rooms. With an art collection valued at some 40 million euros, it's no wonder that each of those rooms is like another exhibition space in some acclaimed museum of contemporary art. Don't worry about the 19 bedrooms you're not seeing - there is more than enough fabulous creativity in the public spaces and stairwells to slake your artistic thirst.



Eco- and gay-friendly

The hotel, under its firecracker GM, Barbara Pardini, has claimed several accolades since it began operating in 1992. The Albergo was the first luxury hotel in Italy to be recognised as eco-friendly as well as the first gay-friendly luxury hotel in Italy (since 2004). And if you are feeling even remotely indolent, then a five-minute chat with Barbara will snap you right out of your siesta and energise you for one of the many outings and attractions she can conjure up.

Amongst her most popular excursions, Barbara will organise a jeep trip into the quarries of Carrara - this is adrenaline driving at its best and worthy of a ranking on the BBC show *Most Dangerous Roads*. For the more sedate, she will recommend a stroll to the sculpture studio of Martin Foot. Located in an old barn with speckles of marble dust dancing in shafts of light, the studio conjures up images of William Randolph Hearst's warehouse of European art treasures accumulated for the decoration of San Simeon, an image with which anyone who recalls *Citizen Kane* will be familiar. Some of the Albergo's guests come to Pietrasanta to attend sculpture classes, others do yoga retreats, or photography courses, or wine-tasting tours.



With a customer base for which indulgence is second nature, the Albergo Pietrasanta understands the psychology of the super-rich and has defined the guest experience in terms of luxury. As Barbara explains: "We conceptualise luxury in three ways. Luxury is time, so, for instance, breakfast is served from 6.30am to midday. If you want to luxuriate in your bed until noon, then we don't want to compromise that experience. Secondly, luxury is space - and that shows up in the generous dimensions of the rooms (and especially - as this traveller can attest to - the bathrooms!). Thirdly, luxury is the freedom to be who you are. And so at the Albergo there is no judgement, no snootiness, no hauteur or snobbishness; instead, in this gentle town, you can walk amongst the sculptures, open your mind, chip away at your preconceptions and uncover your authentic self.



www.albergopietrasanta.com

The writer was a guest of Small Luxury Hotels of the World, an unrivalled portfolio of some of the world's finest small independent hotels. Comprising over 520 hotels in more than 80 countries, the diversity of the individual hotels, and the experiences that they offer, is exceptional. From cutting-edge design hotels to palatial 17th-century mansions, city centre sanctuaries to remote private islands, historic country houses to idyllic resorts, Small Luxury Hotels of the World offers only the very best. www.slh.com

Images by Mark Leach

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