

ForbesLife

EXECUTIVE WOMAN

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a black and white vertically striped, long-sleeved, knee-length dress and black high-heeled shoes, is walking on a red carpet. She is smiling and looking back over her shoulder. She is carrying a black handbag. The background shows a grand building entrance with ornate columns and a red carpeted staircase.

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SPECIAL
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ISSUE

On the road with ABC's Kate Snow,
Good Morning America weekend co-anchor

Grand style on a small scale

BY VALERIE WATERHOUSE

Last fall, when we surveyed 50 C-level executives about their lodging preferences, the luxury boutique hotel was high on the wish list, for both business and pleasure. This summer, with the euro trouncing the dollar, savvy travelers are discovering that these cosseting, smaller properties—located in and around art and business cities or deeper into the countryside—can be less costly than Europe's brand-name hotels. Indeed, bookings at more compact luxury hotels are starting to reflect the renewed interest in them. "We've seen the preference for smaller properties really take off since 2005," says Francesca della Torre di Lavagna, executive marketing director at Relais La Suvera, a 36-room villa hotel in the Tuscan hills. The countrified atmosphere of such properties means more freedom to dress up or down during your stay. Since Italy and France appeared in our survey as top destinations despite the exchange rate, we focused on some of the finest boutique hotels there—all with origins as private villas, and many with women at the helm. (Note: Prices accurate as of press time.)

Villa San Carlo Borromeo





singers, and Italian footballers are frequent guests. Fitness-minded business executives often hold seminars here.

Woman behind the scenes: Marchesa Matilde Bocca Salvo di Pietraganzili began working for her father's company, Sina Hotels (the proprietors of Villa Matilde), in 1973. Now vice president, she oversees the promotion and decor of the group's establishments, including Villa Matilde, a former Bocca family seat.

Insiders know: Book one of the 12 historic rooms in the original villa (rather than the outbuildings), preferably those on the ground floor with high, frescoed ceilings.

Room rates: From €220 for a low-season double to €443 for a high-season suite. Relais Villa Matilde, Viale Marconi 29, Romano Canavese; 39-0125/639-290, sinahotels.com.

Villa San Carlo Borromeo, Milan-Senago

What to expect: Art and culture are the driving forces behind this grand-style villa, which appears more like a palace than a hotel—yet the founder's daily presence at the 51-room establishment ensures that it maintains an intimate feel. Most rooms have high frescoed and coffered ceilings and exquisite antiques and paintings; you may find yourself sleeping alongside a Renoir, Monet, or Chagall. However, there's little to see in Senago, so make the most of the hotel's "cultural trips" to Milan (12 km away) or Lake Como (a half-hour ride). Don't miss the pastry chef's handmade chocolates, in the villa's restaurant.

Who goes: Top business executives from companies such as Microsoft, Ferrari, Bayer, Campari, and Shell; entrepreneurs; artists and writers.

Woman behind the scenes: Cristina Frua De Angeli opened the hotel in 2004. An industrial heir, she is the president of the International University of the Second Renaissance, a cultural organization that began restoring the villa in 1983. Frua also heads the publishing house Spirali and acts as a patron to writers and artists.

Insiders know: The villa is close to Malpensa and Linate airports, and makes an excellent jet-lag recovery spot. Rooms near the banquet area can be noisy, as the villa often hosts weddings.

Room rates: From €210 for a low-season "poet's room" to €1,300 for a high-season "prince's suite." Villa San Carlo Borromeo, Piazza Borromeo 20, Milano-Senago; 39-02/994-741, villa borromeo.com.

Ristorante Hotel Villa Crespi, Piedmont

What to expect: Renowned for its cuisine, Villa Crespi is widely regarded as a "restaurant with rooms"—yet the 14 opulent chambers in this minaret-topped Moorish villa are among the most hotly sought bookings on the fringe of jewel-like Lake Orta. During the day, visit the picture-book town of Orta San Giulio, then return to the villa for a leisurely evening feast: Chef Antonino Cannavacciuolo's blend of Neapolitan and Piedmontese flavors has won him two *Michelin* stars. Try unusual sea-meets-countryside combinations like mussels with red beans.

Who goes: Food aficionados and gourmands from Italy and beyond.

Woman behind the scenes: Cinzia Cannavacciuolo, who, with her husband, Antonino, assumed the management of Villa Crespi in 1999. The restaurant is Antonino's focus; Cinzia oversees the hotel.

Insiders know: The hotel is located on a well-trafficked road, a ten-minute walk from Orta San Giulio. Even so, it's difficult to get around using public transportation; best to hire a car.

Room rates: From €140 for a low-season single to €550 for a high-season suite. Ristorante Hotel Villa Crespi, Via G. Fava 18, Orta San Giulio; 39-0322/911-902, hotelvillacrespi.it.



From top: Relais Villa Matilde; Catherine and David Gardner of Villa Bordon; Ristorante Hotel Villa Crespi