

## Destination: Tuscany



Courtesy Villa Magiacane

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#### Villa Magiacane

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[www.steinhotels.com/magiacane](http://www.steinhotels.com/magiacane)



When you first drive up the lavender-lined path that leads to the Villa Magiacane—a unique hideaway some eight miles south of Florence that is bound to give the venerable Villa San Michele a run for its money—you feel as though you'd stumbled onto a Bernardo Bertolucci set. The sculpted gardens, lush with jasmine, citrus trees and slender cypresses; the gnarled olive grove; the surrounding vineyards; the huge terraces with views of Florence—everything has an air of orchestrated

flawlessness that makes you question its authenticity and age. But then you learn that the pink stucco villa was commissioned by Cardinal Francesco Maria Machiavelli (uncle of Niccolò), that Michelangelo is rumored to have been consulted on the façade and that the frescoes on the first-floor terrace, discovered during the renovation, date from the 16th century. And you realize that Magiacane is the real deal.

The villa, which belongs to the Stein Hotels & Resorts, a Barcelona-based collection of boutique properties across Europe that recently expanded to the U.S., opened its doors to guests in 2005, providing an exquisite new hotel option to those wanting to combine Florence's city life with the Tuscan countryside. Occupying 740 acres, Magiacane comprises two sumptuous villas, one of which was renovated and opened just last year; three swimming pools, including one with an infinity edge; manicured gardens; and elegant common spaces decorated with Zimbabwean owner Glynn Cohen's holdings of mostly African art and a mix of antique and modern furniture.

The heart of the property is the 16th-century Main Villa, whose façade is similar enough to that of the nearby Villa San Michele, the region's most famous hotel that is housed in a former 15th-century monastery, to lend credence to the story that Michelangelo was involved in its conception, as well. Magiacane contains two large loggias, outfitted with lounge chairs and daybeds, that look toward Florence. From either one, Brunelleschi's cupola of the Duomo appears, perfectly centered, in the distance above the treetops. It is said that when Niccolò Machiavelli was exiled here from Florence, he most appreciated the fact that Magiacane was built on a straight axis facing his beloved city-state. (He wrote *The Prince* down the road, in nearby San Casciano.)

Perhaps the most exquisite details at Magiacane are the beautifully restored pastel-colored frescoes that ornament the Main Villa. Depicting hunting scenes, they were lost for decades behind layers of paint and discovered by Cohen, who bought the property in 2000 and who is actively involved with [Friends of Florence](#), a U.S.-based nonprofit that finances historic restorations. "We started scraping at the paint, because we hoped we might come across a fresco or two," he says. "After three years of restoration, we had discovered fifteen large-scale scenes, and there are probably more hidden in the ceiling of the terrace, which we have yet to get to."

The twenty-six guest rooms are located in the Main Villa and in the recently completed and more modern Vineyard Villa, which has a pretty courtyard, furnished with tables and cushy wicker daybeds, that is edged by a small herb garden. Once you've arrived in the idyllic Magiacane setting, chances are you won't want to leave, although the sights, museums and shops of Florence are only a twenty-minute drive away. When I visited, most guests seemed to spend their days at one of the two outdoor pools, lounging, reading and occasionally ordering a snack or drink from the friendly staff. There's also a small, brand-new spa with four treatment rooms, a sauna and steam room and a dramatic underground lap pool area, whose mood lighting, gurgling fountain and marble columns evoke the steamy atmosphere of a Turkish hammam.

Chef Massimo Bocus, formerly of Florence's [J.K. Place](#), cooks up delicious dinners that are served at a different spot on the property each night, so if you're there for a long weekend, you won't eat in front of the same backdrop twice. The menu consists of fresh Tuscan fare. Lunches may include antipasti of zucchini tossed with Parmesan and pine nuts, juicy tomatoes and velvety mozzarella di bufala, and dainty plates of pasta. Dinners are lengthy affairs with multiple courses and wines to match (Magiacane produces its own Chianti and Merlot). If you're lucky, you'll dine one night on the second-floor loggia of the Main Villa, where you can watch the countryside turn crimson during sunset and gradually transform into a sparkling wonderland as small lights illuminate the surrounding hills. It's the perfect conclusion to this Tuscan fantasy. **Rooms from \$485.**

For additional pictures and to view the photo above larger, click on the image.

**WHO SHOULD GO:** Even though Villa Mangiacane welcomes children of all ages, the property struck me as distinctly adult. There are no special kids' activities, and the decor, much of it owner Glynn Cohen's personal pieces, includes fragile items like lamps with porcelain bases and original artwork. Couples or small groups of friends traveling together will be happiest here. It's also a magical setting for a small destination wedding, which Mangiacane will help arrange if you take over the entire property.

**WHO SHOULD NOT GO:** Families with children who require entertainment and hipsters who want to be in the thick of city action.

**IDEAL LENGTH OF STAY:** A long weekend.

**ROOM TO GET:** Romantics should ask to stay in the Main Villa, which has eight rooms done in a classic style with sumptuous Italian linens and fabrics. Because of the villa's layout, each suite has its own charm. I stayed in Suite 3, a duplex with a king-size bed on a mezzanine and a walk-in closet behind a secret door leading off the bathroom. It's is beautifully appointed and airy room but opens directly onto the main terrace where breakfast and one dinner were served, so you can hear some of the activity. More private is Suite 4, a duplex with a living room done in a warm golden yellow color scheme and a bathroom (downstairs from the bedroom) whose window overlooks the countryside. The Main Villa accommodation I liked least was the over-the-top Royal Suite, whose extralarge sculpted silver bed, onyx-and-marble bathroom and flat-screen plasma television had a touch of Vegas that felt out of place in the natural Tuscan setting.

Those craving more modern design—and luxe baths—should reserve one of the eighteen rooms in the Vineyard Villa. Most bathrooms have separate large showers and tubs; some come with huge black Jacuzzis. Ask for one of the bottom-floor suites that come with their own plunge pool, a small private garden and a path that leads to the infinity pool.

**DON'T MISS:** Ask the hotel to arrange a hot-air balloon ride, a wonderful aerial introduction to Tuscany's countryside and the red rooftops of Florence. Also make an appointment for a cellar visit and a wine tasting at the Castello di Bossi, a historic castle and one of Tuscany's finest vineyards, a forty-five-minute drive away. (Tip: besides the wine, be sure to buy a few bottles of the smooth homemade olive oil.)

**INDAGARE TIP:** For a totally authentic Italian meal, head to Cantinetta del Nonno in the nearby village of San Casciano. Don't expect much ambience at this modest restaurant—lighting is harsh and the setting rustic—but the food is absolutely divine. We feasted on silky prosciutto di Parma and Parmesan, penne with a hearty meat *ragù*, spicy homemade sausage and the lightest cheesecake, served with a blackberry coulis, that I have ever tasted. The charming Sylvia Piazzini, who works in Mangiacane's reception but may as well be the property's concierge and who knows the area very well, having been born in Casciano, said: "It's exactly how my mama cooks."

**GETTING THERE:** There are no direct flights from the United States to Florence's Amerigo Vespucci Airport ([www.aeroporto.firenze.it](http://www.aeroporto.firenze.it)). Air France, Lufthansa and Meridiana offer connecting flights through Frankfurt, Paris and London. You can also fly into Rome or Milan (Delta flies direct from Atlanta, US Airways from Philadelphia, and Continental from Newark) and connect to Florence by plane or train. Or you can fly into Pisa, sixty miles west of Florence.

If you have a limited amount of time or are traveling with a small group, consider chartering Lufthansa's excellent new [private jet service](#).

Villa Mangiacane also has two helicopter pads.

**SPECIAL PACKAGE:** Until January 2008, Lufthansa and Villa Mangiacane are offering two packages that include private jet transfer from Frankfurt to Florence and three or five night stays at Mangiacane (breakfast, a dinner, wine tasting and city transfer to Florence are part of the price). Rates, based on two persons, from \$21,358 for a transfer with a small private jet and three nights at Mangiacane. For more information, contact Lufthansa Private Jet Service at 888-261-0814.

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