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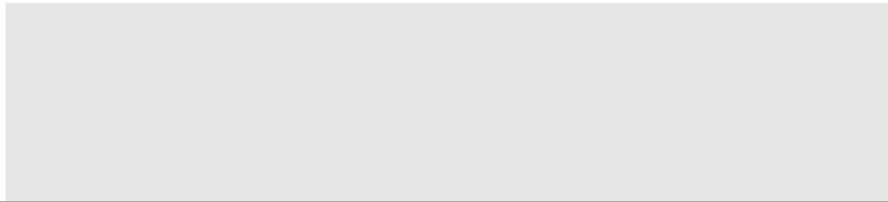
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The Italian Job

A lucky Baltimorean gets her wish—a cozy home away from home in Florence.

BY CHRISTIANNA MCCAUSLAND PHOTOGRAPHED BY ARRIGO COPPITZ



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Who hasn't been to Florence and watched those lucky Florentines strolling the crooked streets with their baskets of market wares only to disappear into mysterious alleyways or through tiny doors in ancient buildings and not wondered where those alleys and doors led? Part of the charm of the Italian city is its neighborhoods, which are decidedly quaint and, for most tourists, something to admire from afar. That was true for a Baltimore native as well until she fulfilled a longtime wish to have her own getaway apartment in Firenze.

"I've always had an affinity for Italy and spending time in Italy," says the owner, a Baltimore-based business owner. "We thought it would be special and different to have an apartment there."

Florence is the city of domes, sacred objects and a russet-roofed skyline bisected by the Arno River. It is the capital city of Tuscany, one of the most revered and romanticized regions of Italy. What Florence is not is an easy place to purchase real estate. "You need to take everything you know about real estate from the U.S. and throw it away," she says.

The homeowner wanted to find a small flat that she and her significant other could use as a base from which to explore the city. Since they'd use it for only a few days every few months, it needed to be low maintenance. Working with Suzanne Pitcher, a real estate agent from Pitcher & Flacomio, the couple scoured as many as 35 apartments over the course of four months before they found the perfect space. It is centrally located on the Oltra Arno ("The other side of the Arno") in the Santo Spirito neighborhood that is populated by artisans and craftspeople.

"When I walked in, I just knew," she says. "The red brick walls, the high beamed ceilings— it had a lot of architectural elements that made it really special. And I knew with a little work, it could be fantastic."

Finding the apartment was only the beginning of the adventure. After navigating the murky waters of Italian real estate settlement practices, the couple still had much to do in the apartment. Most importantly, there was no kitchen, as Italian homes only come with kitchen hookups and do not include what is considered a staple in American homes. And a second bathroom needed to be added to the master bedroom. The couple needed a reputable contractor. On a recommendation from Pitcher they hired the contracting company Cogesim, owned by Franco Fratoni and Marco Boreaniz, a dynamic duo who would prove invaluable to the design of the apartment.

The owner hired Jay Jenkins, who was responsible for the design of her Baltimore home and also a good friend, to do the apartment's interior design. Shortly after the settlement, Jenkins and the couple arrived in Italy. For four days the three Americans crammed themselves into a car with Fratoni and Boreaniz, who drove them on a whirlwind tour of Florentine showrooms and factories, translating as the owners and Jenkins selected lighting fixtures, carpet, marble, furniture, antiques— even sheets, towels and kitchen essentials. As the purchases mounted, a style began to emerge, one that brought classic Tuscan colors together with a modern sensibility.

Jenkins laughs when he recalls that four-day marathon and says it was “exhausting.” However, he underscores how important the Italian team was to the project's success. “Everyone was so nice. People were really interested in what we were doing and how they could help us,” he says of their Italian vendors. “Within a four-day trip we had to be very concise with our schedule and how much time we could devote to each element.”

With the haul from the shop-a-thon in tow, the project began with the basics of installation. The new bathroom was added to the master bedroom. Jenkins says it was impossible to re-create the popular, palatial bath so common in America. Instead, he worked with a small arsenal of quality materials— white marble, glass and mirrors— to design an efficient bathing space that is “crisp, clean and beautiful.” The kitchen, too, needed to be small and to fit with the main living space where it resides.

“In Europe, kitchens are more like furniture than in typical American kitchens,” says Jenkins. “Instead of a simple white kitchen or a dark wood kitchen typical of America, we went for the impact and made it a red kitchen so it had a relation to everything we did in the room.”

An oven, dishwasher and sink (with disposal) are all incorporated into the small kitchen, but they nestle into the galley-style space so the kitchen looks more like a large hutch. This furniture-like quality and the red-painted wood reduce the feeling that the living room is stuck in a kitchen.

The living area sofas set the tone for the entire apartment. Jenkins selected a gold-tinged linen that evokes the Tuscan colors for which the region is famous. A similar warm tone was painted on the walls and a colorful carpet from the owner's Baltimore home brings the palette together and highlights the red tones of the original terra-cotta tile floor.

By contrast, the master bedroom is sleek, more evocative of contemporary American style. “The rest of the apartment is very colorful and very Tuscan, very warm,” says Jenkins. “For a relief from that and from a busy schedule and a hectic city, we decided the bedroom needed to be monochromatic so it was relaxing, an oasis away from everything else.”

Jenkins used light colored wall-to-wall carpeting (an oddity in Europe) and built-in white storage closets that help to make the room look larger. A similarly soft-toned fabric was used on the upholstered headboard. A rich, cocoa-colored wall paint creates the soothing feel of a sanctuary.

To offset the relative lack of natural light (the apartment has few windows and came with no lights), Jenkins purchased clean, contemporary light fixtures. In this, the relaxed Italian approach to all things proved helpful. “In Italy it seems you can get away with doing things more easily than in America,” says Jenkins. “If I pointed to any place on a wall and said ‘I want a light there,’ it would happen. There are less codes and restrictions and there are different ways of doing things there that make many things less complicated.”

Most of the art in the apartment was collected by the owner from Florentine artists. But the large painting in the living space is a reminder of home. When trying to decide what could fill the large blank wall, the owner thought of Baltimore-based artist Tammra Sigler. She and Jenkins immediately hopped online, spotted the painting on Sigler's Web site, communicated with her instantly via e-mail and on the owner's next trip back to America, she picked up the painting and brought it back to Florence. Although it comes from a continent away, both the image and the coloration seem at home in Tuscany.

Designing an apartment abroad is not without its pitfalls. The homeowner recalls the phone call she received from Franco and Marco that the sofas would not fit through the charming but decidedly tiny front door of the building. “I still don't know how they got it in,” she says with a laugh. “I wonder if they sawed it in half and put it back together. And I don't want to know!”

For Jenkins, it was a challenge working outside his office where every imaginable resource is at his fingertips. He recalls how he and the owner were trying to find a mirror and a frame. “We burned up two pairs of shoes each trying to find it,” he says. “It was terribly fun,” he continues. “It was an exciting challenge. It was like that show, ‘Supermarket Sweep.’ One day we'd go to a department store and buy everything for the kitchen. That's really fun.” Along the way they found great florists, artisans who created custom-designed dishes for the house, and other resources.

The homeowner aptly describes the little flat as a “nest,” a petite haven in a beautiful city in a quaint neighborhood where residents still bring produce home from the market in baskets, women hang laundry on a line between ancient buildings and men chat animatedly on street corners. “It feels like home to me,” says the owner, both of the apartment and the city itself. “When I land there, I feel like I belong.”

RESOURCES

Design Jenkins Baer Associates, Baltimore, 410-727-4100

Artwork Tammra Sigler, Baltimore, <http://www.tammasigler.com>