

A Tale of Seven Stars

“Think of the butler as your personal assistant,” advised the young lady who checked me into the *Town House Galleria* in Milan. As Oprah would say, that was an “Aha!” moment. I could not imagine what to do with a butler, but I could think of a million things to delegate to a personal assistant.

I’d only experienced butler service once before, when my husband and I celebrated our 10th anniversary at the *Cipriani* in Venice. I was intimidated by the elegant man who entered our suite quietly, set the table for breakfast, and inquired about our plans for the day. Looking back, I realize I thought of him as a high-level concierge, a person who would book a table at the best restaurant, organize a gathering and procure impossible tickets.

The *Town House Galleria* opened in March 2007 as the first 7-star hotel in Europe. Key to the lofty designation is providing a butler for each of the 24 suites. Clearly, having a butler at one’s disposal at all times is extreme luxury, and privacy is precious to many of the spectacularly well-heeled who can afford such a place, but it is difficult to ascertain what other specifics set apart such a property besides offering the very best of everything.

If you’ve even heard of a 7-star hotel before, it was probably the *Burj Al Arab* in Dubai, which a journalist proclaimed was 7-star because it was so above-and-beyond most 5-stars. The appellation stuck, although the hotel modestly refers to itself with its official 5-star ranking. Seeking more official certification as a 7-star, *Town House*

Galleria management procured the services of The SGS Group, a Swiss company founded in 1878 that conducts inspection, verification, testing and certification services for a variety of industries. Of course, now that the term is in the air, there is no stopping it: 7-star properties are under construction in Beijing, Islamabad, Manila, Abu Dhabi, Iran and Fiji.

The *Town House Galleria* would assert that everything about it is above and beyond. The accommodations may prove their point. My butler, *Tomasso*, gave me a tour of the two-level *Vivaldi Junior Suite*. Lost on me was much of the high-tech wizardry, especially a piece that included special lighting, including a piece of artwork that twisted and changed color; two flat-screen TVs with international satellite and a *Nespresso* machine with lots of little coffee pods.

Shower chromotherapy, anyone? At the flick of a switch, changing colors glowed from the ceiling. And I had never seen such an array of bath amenities. Custom products included exfoliant and foot cream. The generously sized black containers with raspberry lettering formed a long line beside the sink.

Every suite in the hotel is individually decorated but they have in common rich color accents, avante-garde furnishings, luxury bedding and preservation of historical detail. Looking out my tall French doors, I observed the buzz in the *Galleria* below.

The *Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II*, named after the first king of a united Italy, celebrates the unification in glorious floor and ceiling mosaics and sculptures. This center of luxury goods, cafes and fine dining connects the piazzas of two of Milan’s most famous landmarks: the *Duomo* and the *Teatro Alla Scala*.

When it opened in 1877, the *Galleria* was one of the world’s first shopping malls, and a dramatic one. A soaring arched glass and cast iron roof covers the arcade. After taking in the view, it was time to put down my *Baccarat* water glass and leave my gilded cage.

“Tomasso, can you stop by and help me plan my afternoon?”

It was heavenly to have at my beck and call a man — in a morning suit, no

less — who was never annoyed by my continuous questions and requests. He suggested a perfect walk, and knew where to get the best pastry and unusual luggage.

Later, on the way back to the hotel, it occurred to me that the friends who were meeting me at the hotel to go out to dinner might not find it. People think it is in the *Galleria*. Technically, it is, but there is no entrance from the *Galleria*.

The entrance is on *Via Silvio Pellico*, a bordering street. When I arrived in Milan and hailed a taxi at the train station, the driver admitted he did not know exactly where the hotel was located, although he had heard of it. His dispatcher provided directions.



Milan’s Duomo is the second larg

and A Butler

The entrance is beyond discreet: on the side of an archway guarded by a well-dressed man with a clipboard. Through the archway, lies a courtyard. To the rear of the courtyard, an exterior glass elevator to bring you up to the hotel. No one enters unexpected or unannounced. The Town House Galleria is, above all, about privacy and discretion. It's ideal for royals, rock stars and other masters of the universe.

Unfortunately, chances of running into another guest are remote. As Tomasso joked — or maybe not — Naomi Campbell could be staying in the next room but you would never know it. There is no lobby to speak of, the lounge is usually empty, the restaurant sparsely populated. There is no gym, pool or spa on site.

When I summoned Tomasso to call my friends, I provided names so the man with the clipboard wouldn't turn them away. Tomasso made contact and gave detailed directions.

Ending the conversation, he said, "If you have any trouble, call me. I am Tomasso, Madame Cochran's butler."

Was my face red!

When I began to dress for dinner, I found my favorite ruffled white blouse clean but wrinkled. No problem. All anyone has to do here at the Town House, 24 hours a day, is pick up the phone. Butlers answer in your native tongue. Each butler speaks at least two languages in addition to their own. So I rang.

"Tomasso, could I trouble you to iron a blouse for me?"

"I'm right outside your room, Madame," he announced. He always seemed to be right there. I never did learn where the staff hid out. I was getting princess-and-the-pea-spoiled, rapidly.

In the morning, breakfast beckoned, but there was no menu. A server sim-

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ply asks, "What would you like, Madame?"

Initially I was thrown, but asked for one of my favorites: a one-and-a-half egg, spinach and mushroom omelet, a cup of plain Greek yogurt with raspberries and toasted almonds and a cappuccino with — not skim, not 1% — 2% milk.

At dinner there was a creative menu but the chef asked if we could ignore it. *Giacomo Gaspari* prefers to size people up, Ayurvedically speaking. According to this ancient healing system from India, there are three types of energies, or doshas; I'm a Pitta. Digestion is the identifying feature: food, energy, ideas. I'm always weighing my options, so it rang true when I first heard it in Sedona, and now from the lips of this Italian chef who has lived



on four continents. He created a beautiful, healthful meal featuring lots of seafood (Pittas crave water) and citrus.

The restaurant is only rarely open to non-guests; personal referrals sometimes do the trick. Chef Gaspari is available round the clock. He lives at the hotel in case someone wants a full

dinner in the middle of the night when they arrive.

Leaving the Town House is hard to do, but when the time came I had one more request of Tomasso.

"Can you pack for me?" I asked. Remembering an image on the hotel Web site, visions of icy lavender tissue paper danced in my head.

"Absolutely, Madame. Shall I begin now?"

— Ann Cochran

Ann Cochran wrote about Bergamo for the June 2007 issue of *Dream of Italy*.



The Details

Town House Galleria
Galleria Vittorio Emanuele
Via Silvio Pellico, 8
Milan
(39) 02 89058297
www.townhouse.it
Rates: Start at 800€ per night,
with breakfast.

1 € = \$1.54 at press time

est Gothic cathedral in the world.