

PAPAL PAMPERING

Christopher Kanal visits Florence to investigate Europe's first city centre private residence club.

It's a crisp February afternoon and I am being shown around Palazzo Tornabuoni in Florence by Canadian Jane Guarducci from development company Fingen Group. The palace's long darkened corridors are a hive of activity as local builders and artisans are hard at work completing the renovation. The light from their work lamps throws big shadows across the 500-year-old walls, solid with history, illuminating magnificent frescoes and carvings in the dark.

A painstakingly restored 15th-century palace, located on Florence's most upmarket shopping street Via Tornabuoni, and a few blocks from Ponte Vecchio, Palazzo Tornabuoni is a work of art. Previously a 'society of towers', it was Giovanni Battista di Francesco Tornabuoni who transformed the 40 towers into a small palace and what is now a microcosm of previously hidden Florentine art and architecture. Today, a privileged few have a unique opportunity to enjoy their own private art show in a luxury apartment set in the formal papal palace and follow an illustrious line of residents that have included Pope Leo XI and the grand Medicis.

The history of the palace lies in the details – each one holds a story. Even as a dusty building site, the place is spellbinding. In the *Salon del Muse*, now a two-bedroom apartment, Jane tells me that the first opera *Daphne* was performed over 400 years ago. In another room, I am shown a marble fireplace adorned with mosaics by Giacomo Raffaelli (1790).

However, the story of Palazzo Tornabuoni could have

been very different indeed. Only four years ago, Palazzo Tornabuoni was a disused bank, an empty shell of its former self. Then, along came Florentine aristocrat Jacopo Mazzei, one of the *patrizi fiorentini* and part of the Chianti wine-making dynasty, who invested £73 million in the restoration of the building. Mazzei brought together a team of Florence's finest artisans and restorers.

Palazzo Tornabuoni is being touted as Europe's first city centre private residence club with 36 apartments managed by Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, which has just opened a hotel nearby. Each of the individual residences, ranging from 83m² studios to one (117m²) or two and three-bedroom apartments (213m²), are being sold on a fractional ownership basis. Eight memberships are being sold for each residence. Every owner becomes an investor and can use any apartment within their category at any time, as long as it is available. All apartments are luxuriously fitted out with modern furnishings such as Boffi kitchens. The palace has a club room as well as a library and cigar room, a spa and a wine cellar. Owners get access to the best recreational facilities that Florence has to offer, from free membership of the Florence Tennis Club and various golf clubs to the use of a private hunting lodge.

'I think the possibility of seeing this 18th century stucco work and then staying under frescoes in the room where the first opera was performed is incredible,' says Jane, as we sit down in one of the completed apartments admiring the vaulted ceilings above us. 'It's an honour.' ■

Apartments cost from €210,000 for a studio residence to €528,000 for a two/three-bedroom apartment, with annual service charges from €8,242 to €21,110. More information can be found on www.palazzotornabuoni.com and +39 055 268 966.



