

Luxury, Italian-Style: The San Lorenzo Lodges



Ann Abel, CONTRIBUTOR
[FULL BIO](#) ✓

Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.

Stefano Barbini is a man of strong opinions. At dinner with journalists, the owner of northern Italy's exquisite, private [White Deer Mountain Lodge](#) announces that he hates sommeliers. "It's too theoretical," he explains. "If I want to drink tobacco, I'll drink a cigar. I want to know the man behind the wine." And so a local wine expert—emphatically not a somm—helped him choose wines to match the rustic, delicious mountain cuisine cooked by his wife, co-owner and self-taught chef, Giorgia.

The food—which has passion as its secret ingredient—is so good that Michelin asked the Barbinis for permission to include the house as "special place" in its guidebook. They said no. The Südtirol has the most Michelin stars in Italy, and he didn't think they needed one too. "It attracts guests, but maybe they're the wrong kind of guests," he says. "No White Deer guest has ever asked about Michelin-star restaurants nearby." Guests ask where their family goes, and they happily tell them.



San Lorenzo Lodges
White Deer San Lorenzo Mountain Lodge [-]

The lodge is a 16th-century house overlooking the intersection of three valleys, near the village of San Lorenzo in the Dolomites. It's stunning country, laced with trails for hiking and snowshoeing—you can actually see white deer—and there are several ski areas nearby. The house, which is well-heated by fireplaces and stoves, is a perfect place to warm up, with three bedrooms for couples and a bunk bed room for children upstairs and a series of cozy lounges and dining areas down below. (I recently stayed as their guest.)

The Barbini's hands-on attention is Italian hospitality in the truest sense of the word. They don't send a fancy car to pick you at the airport. (Innsbruck is the closest, just over an hour away.) Stefano often comes himself. "Americans usually think I'm just the driver," he says wryly, adding that he enjoys their reactions when they discover that he is not. From there on in, a stay at White Deer means a family is being cared for by another family. It's little wonder that one family booked it for Christmas through 2025—they consider it their place.



San Lorenzo Lodges
White Deer in winter [-]

Even when guests drive themselves, he meets them in a nearby village and then drives or leads them up the switchbacks to the house (unless they use the helipad). He won't send or publish directions, and he's gone as far as to fake a different location online—"luxury now is not being found by Google Maps," he says.

His new ideas about the new luxury extend elsewhere. His guests, he says, are the kind of people who can dine in every Michelin-starred restaurant and stay in the most opulent hotels in the world. "They love milking goats, making their own butter and having a drink in an old mountain hut. It's the simple things that money can't buy." For people who have done everything, "surprise is the new luxury."

Barbini learned to speak his mind during an illustrious, self-made career in the fashion business. He'd stepped down as Escada's CEO for France and Italy as the fashion house underwent a change in direction and was being aggressively headhunted, but his children were young and he'd never see them if he took another fashion job. He and Giorgia were driving across Italy when an offer came through, and before the drive was finished, they'd made up their minds and he called back to decline.



San Lorenzo Lodges

Stefano Barbini in the White Deer wine cellar [-]

Instead they moved from Rome to their winter home in the Dolomites, built a new house for their family, turned the original structure into White Deer Lodge and opened it in 2010. (He'd purchased that first house within 24 hours of seeing it, even though it was in ruins. "In life you must move quickly. If you start thinking of all the positives and negatives you will never make a decision.") He and Giorgia met as colleagues at Escada. She's also a granddaughter of the founder of Brioni. The couple's fashion background is apparent in the quiet luxury of White Deer Lodge. One of the beds belonged to a great-, great-, great- (at least) grandparent. The materials are sumptuous: antique woods, quartzite, cashmere and fox fur. It's one of few lodges to sheet the beds with Italian linens, which are high maintenance but have a luxurious feel that can't be replicated. Giorgia designed some of the beds and Stefano built them—he says the carpentry workshop has long been his refuge from the stress of the business world. He also made the enormous sauna of antique wood himself, after other builders said it was impossible. Many guests take him up on his offer to teach them to chop wood, an activity that turns out to be highly satisfying.

He was also particular about crafting the crazy golf course he envisioned. Inspired by Constance Lemuria in the Seychelles, where the ocean-facing tee of the 15th hole is many meters above the little swath of green with the hole, he wanted to build the smallest, most vertical course in the world. He asked Ron Kirby to create it. Kirby said no, he was in the professional course business and not interested in some personal folly. Barbini convinced the design team to come for a few days, and by the end of their stay they'd agreed to the project. The 18 holes all begin on one small green and end on several others, quite a ways below.



San Lorenzo Lodges
Blue Deer Sea Lodge [-]

The golf course may be a creative flourish, but White Deer is mostly about understatement. “It’s not for the nouveau riche.” That’s why its following is so devoted—and why enough guests urged the Barbinis to replicate the experience elsewhere in Italy, they did so. But the only place they thought could match the beauty and emotional power of the Alps was on the open sea.

Under the company name San Lorenzo Lodges, they launched the [Blue Deer Sea Lodge](#), a gorgeous four-cabin, 74-foot catamaran custom-built by Sunreef Yachts, in 2015. (A third property, in Rome, is coming soon.) In summers, she plies the waters around the Pontine and Aeolian Islands. The Barbinis aren’t as hands-on here, having delegated the hospitality to an enthusiastic, kind crew of four mostly Italian sailors who between them make up the handsome cabins, drive zodiacs and lead Scuba dives, and make outstanding meals, using the famous fresh mozzarella from Gaeta and whatever they pull from the sea. (Hope that someone, possibly you, pulls up dozens of *ricci* sea urchins—the chef makes a luxuriant “*ricci* with pasta,” rather than the other way around. They stint on nothing on the Blue Deer.)



San Lorenzo Lodges
The lounge on the Blue Deer [-]

The cabins are large and inviting, with large vertical windows, but guests often stay on deck: in the sun on the bow, in the shade on the stern, the lounge or the indoor and outdoor dining areas. While it’s a base to explore remote islands, snorkel or swim it’s also a place to do nothing other than let time and the seascape unspool.