

THE HOTELS ISSUE



Italian artist Alex Folla's fresco in the foyer of Galleria Vik Milano.

COURTESY VIK RETREATS

Building an Empire With Galleria Vik Milano, the art-loving couple behind some of South America's most stylish hotels takes on the Old World. *by Tarajia Morrell*

DEPARTURES

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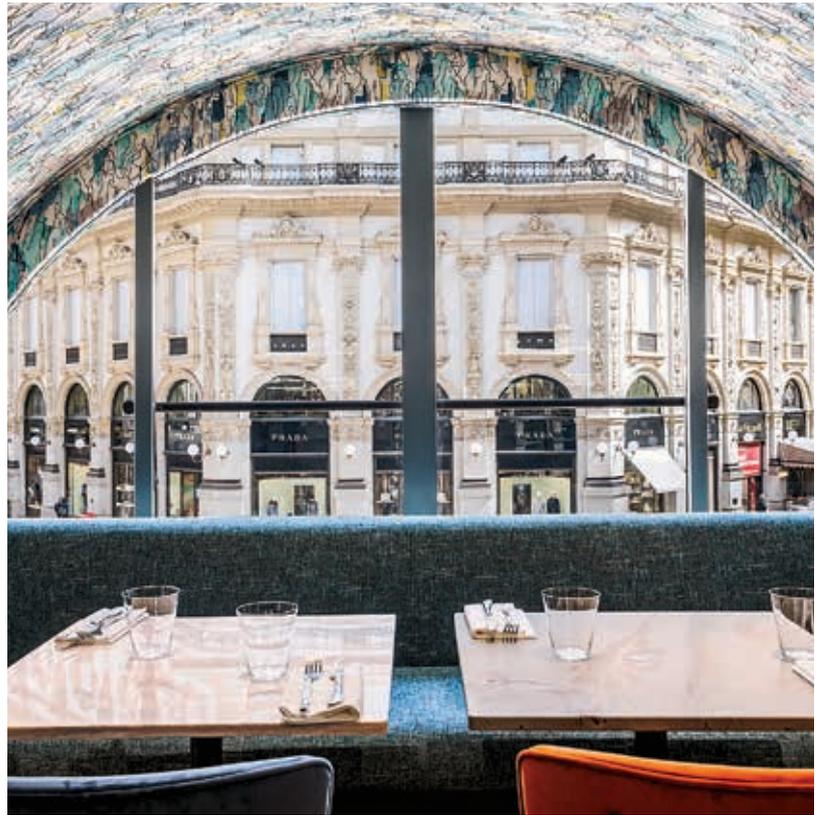
The second-floor Vikissimo restaurant offers views into Milan's Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II. Below: A guest room designed by Spanish artist Felipe Cardeña.

"I WAS AT a birthday party in Monaco when I got the tip," said hotelier Alex Vik, describing the genesis of what would become Galleria Vik Milano, a rapturously art-filled, 90-room hotel inside a Milan landmark. "I drove to the site and knew immediately what we would do."

The property stood inside the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, Italy's oldest shopping plaza and home to many of its iconic fashion brands. "I couldn't find the entrance," said Alex. "That was the first thing we needed to change," added his wife and business partner, Carrie.

The Viks have been in the hotel business for ten years, and have become known for their six stylish properties in Uruguay and Chile. College sweethearts, the couple, now in their sixties, have made their name synonymous with destinations in jaw-dropping landscapes where they offer impeccable service, exquisite food, and their own label of award-winning Chilean wines. They had never opened a Vik retreat outside South America, in a city, or in an existing structure—nor had they ever built a hotel with more than 23 rooms.

Milan was not in their plans. Town House Galleria, the property they bought,



occupied the northwestern arm of the five-story, glass-ceilinged mall, which opened shortly after its namesake became the king of unified Italy in 1861. During the Vik's six-month renovation, workers created a formidable entrance befitting the grand locale. With their usual flair for drama, the couple placed a bronze cast of Rodin's *The Thinker* in the entryway and decorated the foyer with a floor-to-ceiling fresco depicting Amazons, Titans, and other mythological beings holding up the world. Even visitors accustomed to the city's heroic imagery stop in their tracks.

The hotel is also accessible from the Galleria's arcade, where an entry that feeds though a private courtyard leads to SPOTto, the first of two restaurants headed by Uruguayan chef Marcelo Betancourt. The Viks brought the talented Betancourt, who oversees the restaurants at all three Uruguayan Vik Retreats, to impart "our way of doing things," according to Carrie. SPOTto is a lively tapas and wine bar, while Vikissimo, on the hotel's second floor, offers drinks, dancing, and food along with a view of the Galleria's massive central dome.

It's in the guest rooms, however, that the Viks' eye-popping, occasionally

outrageous aesthetic truly comes to life. The couple converted the existing hotel into suites, each with wildly distinct decor—midcentury, antique, and contemporary furniture plus one-of-a-kind artworks and installations by local and international artists. One suite features Uruguayan painter Eduardo Cardozo's pastel-colored canvases molded into drapery-like shapes, juxtaposed with original 19th-century painted ceilings. In another, an installation by street artist Felipe Cardeña consists of harlequin wall hangings, upholstery, and paintings made from a patchwork of chromatic textiles and textures. In the hallways, artists have painted directly onto the walls, creating abstract kaleidoscopic murals that usher guests to and from their rooms. Here the Viks continue to define what it means to "live with art," as they like to say.

In buying the old hotel, the Viks also acquired one of Milan's best-kept secrets: I Dodici Gatti, a classic pizzeria—named for 12 legendary stray cats—nestled into the steelwork of the arcade's roof. Every night, in-the-know locals enjoy wood-fired Neapolitan pizzas and homemade mozzarella—a remarkably good pairing with Viña Vik wines. *Rooms from \$534; galleriavikmilano.com.*