

SHADES

Having been a noble Italian family's retreat, a bishop's palace and a local inn, this 18th-century piano nobile apartment on the Amalfi Coast has had as varied and interesting a life as its owner

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THIS PAGE The apartment is in a palazzo in the town of Minori on the Tyrrhenian Sea
OPPOSITE In the sitting room, red velvet sofas complement the oyster-pink walls and the original ceiling frescoes, which were discovered during the renovation project

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'The furniture in this home represents the story of my life,' says Maria Arcangeli. And judging by the combination of antiques, ceramics, paintings, books and treasured family photographs, it's been quite a life thus far. Occupying the piano nobile of an 18th-century palazzo overlooking the seafront of Minori, in southern Italy, her apartment has a low-key internal entrance accessed via a rusting central staircase underpinned by pock-marked plasterwork. The building's faded beauty lies close to my heart, too, given that sprightly octogenarian Maria also happens to be my downstairs neighbour.

Much like Minori itself, which is one of the Amalfi coast's lesser-known working towns, hers is a home that reveals its treasures unexpectedly and without any fanfare. Behind the unassuming dark green front door lies an enfilade of rooms topped by sweeping frescoes, giving visitors the impression of having entered a world where time plays to its own rhythm.

Largely open plan, the dual-aspect apartment has views of the main church to the rear and an uninterrupted stretch of the Tyrrhenian Sea to the front. It features original terracotta floors and earthy paint tones, with the steel-framed mezzanine bringing a more modern element to the space. 'I was fascinated from the moment I saw it,' says Maria, who moved to the region from her family home in Abruzzo when she got married. 'I loved its scale and volume – qualities I appreciate much more than superficial details.'

Built in 1700 by the noble Roman Braschi clan as a coastal retreat, the palazzo was eventually bought by the family of Maria's husband Antonio, who introduced a taller rear addition in around 1800. Over the years, the apartment has been the home of the town's bishop and, incongruously, also served as a local inn from the 1940s onwards, offering shelter to the region's travelling market traders and their stock. By the time Maria first set eyes on it in 1965, the space had fallen into disrepair; rows of toilet stalls obscured its scale and its rooms were full of discarded furniture. 'But I always hoped that I would live here one day,' she explains.

Several decades later, Maria and Antonio consulted the Roman architect Stefano Dorata about reworking the space. However, these plans were shelved after her husband's sudden death in 2000 and it was not until 2013, with her children grown up and her grandchildren soon to be settled in London, that Maria once again turned her attention to the prospect of

MEZZANINE The linearity of the steel-frame is softened by a curving wall, with books stacked in its hollow beams introducing dashes of colour. Under it, more books are stored on the shelf of an antique basin used by guests. **HALLWAY** Below the dado rails, the walls are painted to resemble marble, a foil to the warm terracotta of the tiled floor, which runs throughout the apartment. **KITCHEN** Maria eschewed wall cabinets, choosing to display her copperware instead. A team of specialist set designers from Rome frescoed the ceiling based on one of Maria's favourite paintings





DINING ROOM One side of the double-aspect space looks out over the *lungomare* (promenade) to the sea beyond. Maria found the antique chandelier in a junk shop in Salerno. **TERRACE** In this covered outdoor space, which overlooks the Basilica di Santa Trofimena, she has paired a stone basin with a mix of Vietri tiles sourced from flea markets



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renovation. 'It was finally the moment to do something for me,' she says. 'This time, I drew up the designs myself. The key was the idea of occupying the apartment fully – saving no room for best but using every space.'

Having always harboured dreams of being an architect, Maria conceived a layout that involved minimal intervention, but incorporated several clever tweaks. The original floors were taken up, levelled and returned; the doorways were reinforced with steel supports; and the false ceilings were removed. 'It was tough, costly and tiring,' she recalls. 'But it also signalled the start of a new chapter in my life.'

Rather than create superfluous spare rooms, she designed a mezzanine in the sitting room that leads up to a study-cum-bedroom, with an adjoining shower room hidden behind a mirrored door. Under the iron-framed structure, a marble basin, picked up at an antique store in Cava de' Tirreni, serves as an impromptu cloakroom area for visitors, its character shared unapologetically within the open-plan space. 'It was all a labour of love,' she says. 'For example, I did not want the mezzanine to look too linear or too new. So I aged the iron balustrades myself.'

Topped by a distinctive eau de nil fresco, which includes a reproduction of one of Maria's favourite paintings at its centre, the kitchen is both simple and practical. 'It was inspired by *pizzaioli* [pizza makers] and the way that they work,' she says of the thick marble counters. 'I wanted to be able to roll out dough and make pastry on a robust surface.' The oven was chosen after she checked its proportions against her biggest pot, while the scrubbed and well-used farmhouse table once belonged to her mother-in-law, Beatrice.

Things have been reused whenever possible, including the original wooden supports of the doorways, the chunky forms of which were upcycled into a handsome kitchen cabinet used by Maria for storing glassware she has collected. Cooking for extended family from London and Rome is a cherished pastime. 'In the summer or at Christmas, we all gather around the table to eat,' says Maria. 'I love fish and I often invent new recipes to try out on the family.'

Her bedroom features a striking Art Deco-style fresco that was probably added in the 1930s. Its tones are picked out by a cleverly designed undulating half wall, behind which sits a dressing area and her bathroom, complete with a monochrome terrazzo floor and a tub swathed in black granite.

This is a home in which inherited pieces sit easily next to antique finds, where blood-red sofas are thoughtfully placed for convivial conversation. Some items, such as the 19th-century cream earthenware by Nicola Giustiniani, are precious, while others are playful – including a replica of Queen Elizabeth II's red dispatch box, gifted to Maria by her set designer daughter-in-law, Laura Pozzaglio.

On a balmy evening last summer, the hum of conversation and clinking of crystal glasses spilled from one room to the next. At the centre of it all, in a black evening gown, was Maria, celebrating her eightieth birthday – not that you'd know it. Seeing her standing there, her charismatic spirit only enhanced by time, I had the comforting sense that this house – rather like its owner – still has many chapters left to unfold □



HALLWAY Double doors leading from the entrance hall into Maria's bedroom were embellished by the Roman restoration team with designs she had created. **BATHROOM** 'I've always enjoyed old-fashioned bathrooms with generous tubs and basins,' says Maria, who chose the monochrome tiled flooring from Mipa to create a visual focus. The white bath contrasts dramatically with its black granite cladding. **BEDROOM** The muted tones of an original Art Deco fresco determined the bedroom's colour scheme, showcasing the antique bed Maria bought when she was just 19

