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La Dolce Via

THE ITALIAN RESORT WHERE YOU CAN
BOOK A ROOM AND A ROADSTER

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In a fertile patch of Italian countryside, Andrea Mancini is creating a piece of paradise for Mazda MX-5 lovers. Welcome to Miataland!

Zoom with a view



Andrea Mancini is offering guests at his countryside hotel the chance to enjoy scenic drives in beautiful rural Italy



> **Piedicolle has 322 residents, and a rather suspicious dog knows I am not one of them.**

As I walk down one of the minuscule village's two streets — lined with tan stone houses and pots of fresh flowers, drenched in golden sunlight and pin-drop silence — there's a growl somewhere, and too close, behind my head. But a little old lady pops out of a wooden doorway. "Buona sera!" she wishes me cheerily, then tuts at the errant canine before hauling it back indoors.

That's as much excitement as one should expect to get in Piedicolle, and in the many other similar villages that sit serenely on hilltops across Umbria province. Life is seductively slow here deep in the Italian heartland, some 80 miles north of Rome. The hills are dotted with rough stone villas, and a warm breeze ruffles fields of olives, sunflowers and corn as they soak up the squintingly bright sun. In small towns a few miles apart, old men sit placidly on wooden benches, children kick footballs or drip ice-cream over their chins, and giggling teenagers poke at smartphones as they share pizza. Rural idyll... Scratch all that. Tear up the script sheet. Enter Andrea Mancini.

To him, there's one vital thing missing in this languid scene: a Mazda MX-5 Miata two-seater sports car charging up the winding hill roads. And he wants to make sure you can have it.

Andrea is possibly the world's biggest fan of Mazda's legendary roadster, the MX-5 (known as the Miata in the US), owning an astonishing 30 of them. >

Now, the 45-year-old is bringing his idea of bliss to the Umbrian hinterland: a country hotel where Miata-loving guests can not only recharge their batteries, but also enjoy exploring this scenic region in one of his cars.

An exclusive preview invitation means the Zoom-Zoom team are Miataland's first guests, weeks before it officially opens for bookings, and earlier that afternoon Andrea proffered us a box of car keys: "Which one would you like?" I'll have the dark chocolate truffle with hazelnut cream... no, the almond praline! Is this what being a spoilt kid is like? Art Director Dan chose a mint 1993 Eunos M2 1002, while I went for a gobstopper of an immaculate 2004 Mazdaspeed Miata Turbo.

Now, against a dipping sun, we fire up our rides once more, provoking another couple of barks from the village dog as we leave Piedicolle behind and head back to Miataland after our long session of local exploration. A mile or so further, concealed behind a thicket of cypress trees at the end of a long gravel path, are the Pearly Gates.

We park our cars in the cavernous wooden 'hangar', lining them up with 13 other Miatas — the rest are still at Andrea's current home in Bracciano, 60 miles away — and settle down on deckchairs in front of the pool, with Andrea and a couple of icy Peronis. The panoramic view stretches miles, and once the engines are off, the only soundtrack is the chirping of a very enthusiastic cricket.

In a business suit, you could picture the clean-cut, bespectacled Andrea as the automotive consultant that he is. But here, clad in a white Miataland T-shirt and cap of his own design, he is truly in his element. "How was the car?" he asks me eagerly, handing out plates of prosciutto and smoked cheese. "Beautiful, no? Such perfect balance! What a seamless turbo!"

I readily concur, my hands and feet still fresh from an afternoon of working the slick gearbox



and progressive steering through flowing roads, the communicative chassis whispering a close description of the tarmac as the 1.8-litre Mazdaspeed engine demands I stay on the throttle, wind in my hair, the sun on my arms... I snap out of my reverie, drizzle some olive oil on crusty local bread and survey my present surroundings.

Miataland is set in five hectares of fruit trees and wooded trails, with a two-century-old villa at its heart. Once owned by a count, the villa houses a large kitchen and common area, the living quarters that Andrea and his wife Claudia are relocating to, and two guest rooms, all dark wood, ornately carved metal door handles and distinctive Deruta tiles in the bathrooms.

Adjacent to the villa is an entirely new construction, matching the architectural style of its older counterpart, but with five contemporary guest rooms featuring full-length windows, light wood floors, expansive showers and clever detail touches such as Miata stereos to operate music in the room. In the basement, there's a workshop area, with space set aside for an eight-seat cinema. Between the two buildings is a shimmering infinity swimming pool that urges you to leap in, and off to one end, there's the hangar that houses Andrea's beloved Miatas.

It may seem an obvious fit for someone who was an amateur kart racer and had a petrolhead father, but how did Andrea become the extreme Miata buff that he is? "I first saw one at the Fiera di Roma in 1990, when I was still a student," he explains. "I looked at the pop-up headlights, I sat in it and I fell in love with it immediately. I then went home with ten brochures!"

In 1998, Andrea tells us, he was working in a car dealership and finally managed to realise his dream of owning a Miata by buying a customer's trade-in. However, he sold this car two years later to buy >



"The panoramic view stretches miles, and once the engines are off, the only soundtrack is the chirping of a cricket"



Take in a sunset by the pool, shoot the breeze with Andrea or head out in cars like this Silver Edition Mk1 or Velocity Red Mazdaspeed Turbo Mk2



Miataland distils the textures and motifs of nearby towns such as Todi and Deruta – ideal stops to shop or dine at while on an exploratory drive



“Andrea lives and breathes Miatas. He is a fount of knowledge, each model’s history ready on his lips”



a brand-new Miata, an Mk2 1.8 Miracle special edition. But deeply regretting the loss of his first car, Andrea swore he would never sell a vehicle again. He still has the Miracle – just the one owner on the logbook – and now it has 29 stablemates.

Every generation; most model years; colours from yellow to silver to red to blue; home-grown as well as imported from Japan, the US, Germany and the UK; from absolutely stock to firebreathing custom. Each is as authentic as it can be: Andrea strives for originality – be it in trim, paint or technical specification – and rarity, even collecting multiple editions of a limited series.

Miataland is as much a place as it is one person and his passion. It is not a cliché to say that Andrea lives and breathes Miatas. He is a fount of knowledge, with every detail of not only his cars but the model’s entire history ready on his lips. Each keyring and accessory, including collections of radios and steering wheels, tells a story of painstaking obsession. He is active on Miata forums and fan clubs, has stacks of authentic literature and spends a huge amount of his time driving, maintaining, restoring and discussing his Miatas – not to mention always keeping an eye out for the next one. (With 2015 being the year of the Mk4, it’s an easy decision: he’s just taken delivery of a 2.0-litre model in white.)

Sharing his collection with strangers can’t be easy, though, can it? “I don’t see Miataland being for people who just use a car to do the shopping and pick up the kids from school,” admits Andrea. “I would like my guests to be Miata or Mazda fans, or at least driving enthusiasts.” But still, trusting them with his babies? “Well, you can judge a person’s driving abilities quite quickly, so I’d first give a new guest a car that I think suits them.” So, not the 400bhp V8-engined Miata for me today, then...

The next day, as dawn breaks, I belt up in his precious single-owner Mk2, pristine in British Racing >