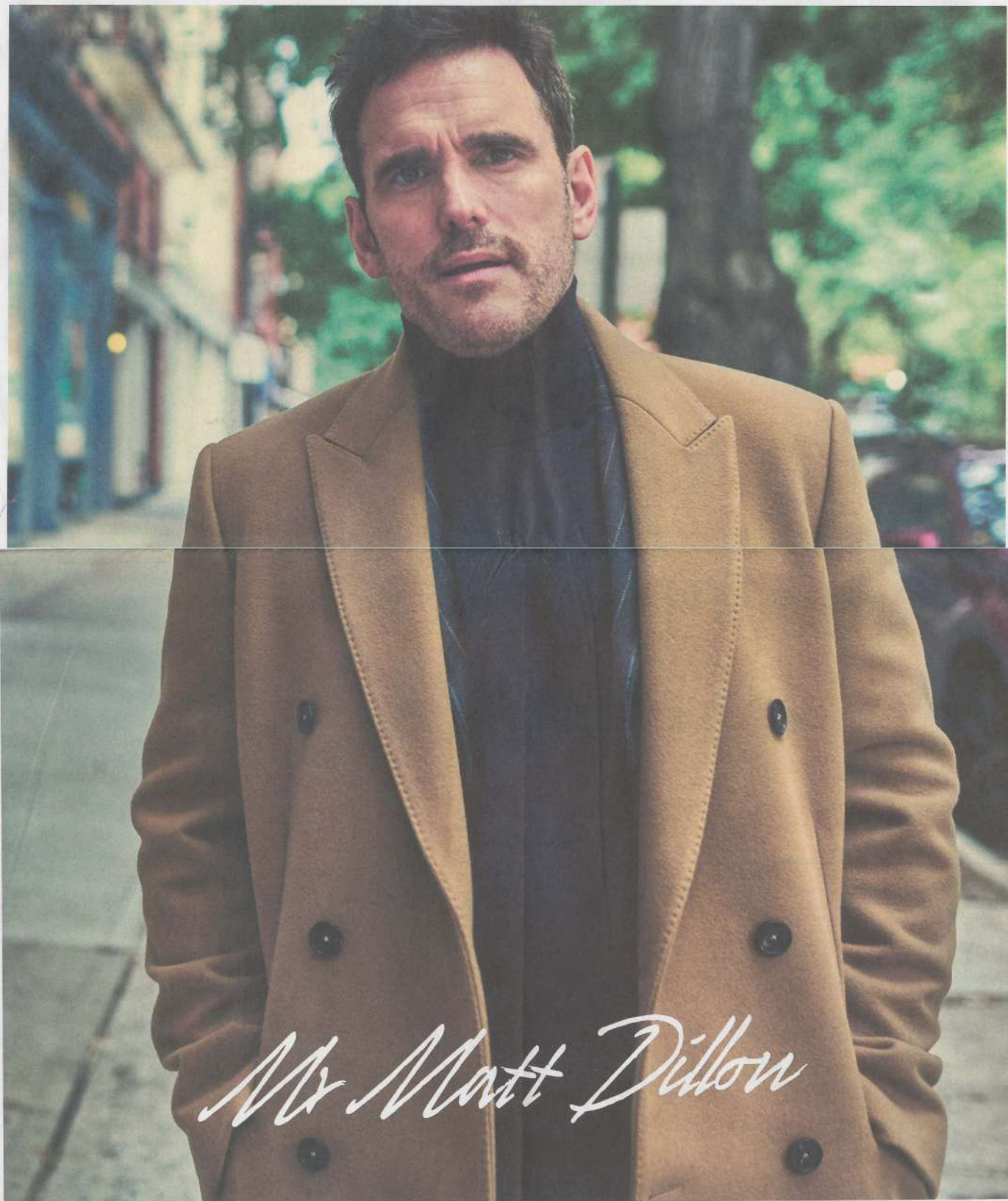


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*Mr Matt Dillon*

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# TO THE MANOR DRAWN

*Hotels: so old fashioned. The new thing is renting an entire stately home, servants and all*

Words by Mr Samuel Muston

**Waking up in the Duke of Serbelloni's bedroom** is a singular experience. Like emerging from sleep and finding yourself in a dream done by Mr Franco Zeffirelli. The sun makes its slow, inching progress across the pontiff-red silk on the walls. There is a writing desk to my right, strewn with silver, which looks like it has been borrowed from a doge; two Empire-gilt mirrors either side of the bed; and across from this aristocratic assemblage, the main event: the shimmering lake and boats of Como, the beetling crag behind it lit by sunlight that flows in through the windows. All is well in this particular square footage of the world.

Mornings have always looked handsome at the Villa Sola Cabiati, near Trezzano in northern Italy. Ever since the noble Milanese family Serbelloni rebuilt this palace in the 1700s, it has glamed bright, one of the finest of the many aristocratic houses threaded like diamonds on a necklace along this stretch of the Y-shaped lake. Until recently, the Tiepolo trompe l'oeil frescoes, the Meissen porcelain and Napoleon's old bed, in which he lay with Empress Joséphine, had been available only to guests of the duke. But since the summer of 2018, this six-bedroom property has partnered with the nearby Grand Hotel Trezzano to open its doors to guests who are willing to pay for the pleasure.

And what pleasure it is. Although it is shorn of its aristocratic owners for the season, it still ticks along with two butlers, a maid and a house manager, a private chef and, by the looks of the manicured lawns, half a gross of gardeners, all of whom will happily minister to your every whim. Food, drink and travel on the lake are all included in the price. You want it, your staff will produce it. Cake for breakfast? Fine. Champagne at tea time? Done. Massages before dinner? Why not? It is perhaps the ultimate property in which to host a party of friends. But as much as it stands alone in quality, it is part of a new wave of luxury tourism, the "aristo rental".

Not so long ago, if you had the means and you were going abroad, you would find a five-star hotel, book a suite and



arrive there in imperial style and have your friends over for drinks. But it was a drag, restrictive, formalistic – too many frock-coated doorman, seldom a kitchen, never a garden to take the air in. Then along came Airbnb, followed by higher-end progeny such as One Fine Stay and The Thinking Traveller. Suddenly, you could rent a whole house in Le Marais or the Hollywood Hills. But while this was all very well and these houses were all perfectly nice, they lacked bottom, a sense of the historical.

The new super-rentals combine pedigree with prettiness, and allow those of substantial means to live like an aristocrat for a few days or weeks: the knick-knacks of the family, the baronial arms, the signed pictures of royalties long gone are the attraction, as much as the full retinue of staff. As Ms Susan Ward Davies, travel and lifestyle director of *Elle* magazine, points out, "A lot of wealthy people today can afford almost any material thing. What they want is access to a world that previously money couldn't buy, the kind of extraordinary experience that only those in the know can offer – something all your rich friends haven't done yet."

This sense of flaunting novelty, of showing off a little, is the reason that these types of house are the ultimate places to host a party of friends. They are grand stage sets, places of fantasy, houses that are often wonderfully impractical to live in day to day.

Travel companies, seldom slow on the uptake, have clocked this. The Wilderness Reserve in Suffolk, eastern England, has, for the past few years,

“  
These houses are grand stage sets, places of fantasy, and wonderfully impractical to live in day to day  
”

offered an entire Georgian estate, complete with manor house and outbuildings, for rent. Now, the Oetker Collection of hotels, one of the grandest luxury groups in the world, The Lanesborough in London and Le Bristol in Paris among them, has launched the Masterpiece Estates.

Guests can rent fully staffed, historically significant houses – Glen

Affric, Farleigh Wallop, Hound Lodge, but soon to girdle the world – and are hosted by the owners themselves. Ms Anne Benichou of the Oetker Collection describes the idea thus: "It is an entirely unique experience, entering into the history of these houses and making the destination unforgettable and inspiring to our clientele, [allowing them] to consider travel in a new light."

It is, perhaps, even more than a new light, however. It is, rather, a completely new impulse altogether. "Travellers seek full immersion in a destination," says Ms Jessica Andrews of Ampersand Travel, which organises tailor-made trips the world over. "Simply snapping away with a camera is no longer enough. They want to live and breathe every bit of atmosphere and experience a destination through the eyes of a local."

Sitting outside in Como's autumn sun, amid the pressing splendour of a noble family's 400-year history, served by smiling butlers at a long table covered in wine glasses and pasta and surrounded by friends, it does make you see travel in a new light. A light I could happily bathe in for quite some time, for the record. ●

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