

UNITED



A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER



# Hemispheres

## THREE PERFECT DAYS IN BUENOS AIRES

MEET SIX TECH GURUS  
WHO ARE CHANGING  
THE WAY WE LIVE

MOTORCYCLE FANATIC  
EWAN MCGREGOR  
REVS UP THE HEMI Q&A

OAXACA'S IRRESISTIBLY  
DELICIOUS CALDO DE PIEDRA  
(KEY INGREDIENT: ROCKS)

UNCOVERING THE  
SECRETS OF COLLEGE  
BOWL STADIUMS







A decorative graphic featuring a blue ribbon that zig-zags across the page. The ribbon has three horizontal sections. The top section contains the text 'BY JENNIFER MILLER'. The middle section contains the title 'A LAND APART' in large, bold, black letters. The bottom section contains the text 'PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK ABOUZEID'. There are four red, multi-pointed stars scattered around the ribbon: two in the top right and two in the bottom left. The entire graphic is set against a background of horizontal lines.

BY JENNIFER MILLER

# A LAND APART

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK ABOUZEID

SEBORGIA, A TINY TOWN IN NORTHWEST ITALY, HAS LONG CONSIDERED ITSELF A COMPLETELY SOVEREIGN STATE. IT HAS ITS OWN PRINCE, ITS OWN PASSPORTS, ITS OWN CURRENCY (OF SORTS) AND, WITH BIG CHANGES IN THE OFFING, ALL THE AMBITION AND INTRIGUE OF A MUCH, MUCH LARGER COUNTRY.





**PRINCELY REWARD**  
Prince Marcello Menegatto looks on as the Cross of the Knights, or Croce Templare, is placed on a loyal knight

# ON

AN INTENSELY HOT LATE-SUMMER AFTERNOON, A SMALL CROWD GATHERED IN THE MAIN SQUARE OF THE PRINCIPALITY OF SEBORGIA TO WATCH PRINCE MARCELLO

MENEGATTO INDUCT KNIGHTS INTO HIS COURT. A RED CARPET HAD BEEN UNROLLED, LEADING TO THE ENTRYWAY OF THE CHURCH OF SAN BERNARDO, AND ONE BY ONE, WHITE-ROBED MEN WALKED DOWN IT, APPROACHING THE NEWLY CROWNED PRINCE; BEHIND HIM WAS A BOOM BOX PLAYING CEREMONIAL MUZAK. UPON REACHING THE CHURCH, EACH MAN KNELT BEFORE MENEGATTO, WHO TAPPED THE BLADE OF AN IMPOSSIBLY LONG SWORD AGAINST THE INDUCTEE'S SHOULDERS. IT LOOKED LIKE A SCENE FROM A MOVIE, EXCEPT THAT THE PRINCE WAS SWEATING PROFUSELY AND SEEMED TERRIFIED HE MIGHT INJURE SOMEONE.

Out in the audience, Franco Ronchi stood, looking equally heat-stricken and anxious. An aspiring perfumer and amateur actor, he had recently made a play to be named the Italian consul for São Tomé, a small island off the coast of Central Africa, but was denied. Hungry for distinction, Ronchi now dreamed of becoming the consul for Seborgia. He'd taken a handful of vacation days from his job at a Milanese shipping company to arrange an audience with the prince, yet Menegatto kept putting the meeting off. The day was trying. That morning, Ronchi had left his B&B when the air was still cool, wearing crisp gray dress pants, a black sport coat and a tie



of pastel yellow, blue and gray. By the time of the knighting he was sagging visibly, soaked through, doing his best to maintain his composure in the blazing sun. As to whether he was concerned about the prince's seeming lack of interest, Ronchi smiled. "In Italy," he said, "everything is difficult but nothing is impossible." It's a line he'd picked up earlier from a Seborgan baron, and he would use it again and again in the days ahead.

After the ceremony, Ronchi trailed the procession—the prince, his wife and the knights and ministers—across the main piazza and down one of the narrow, shaded streets toward a restaurant called the Rabbit, where he was to have his audience with the prince. It was postponed.

Ronchi was philosophical. As a reminder, he repeated the mantra, before adding stoically: "May destiny do its course."

**DRIVE 45 MILES EAST** from the French border and up a tortuous road and you'll pass a large blue and white sign that reads, "The Principality of Seborga." From this point, according to Seborga's 300 or so residents, you are no longer on Italian soil but in a sovereign nation: a place with its own government, including an elected prince, ministers and a coterie of knights, as well as ambassadors who reside in Luxembourg, Germany, France and Bahrain. You can walk down the town's cobblestone streets and feel that you're on the set of a Shakespeare play, or look out windows onto a sweeping view of the Mediterranean. You can also try to dig up a few rare *luigini*, the local currency, to pay for your espresso. (Stores in town accept *luigini* alongside the euro, but because one *luigino* equals 4.285 euros, making change can be a complicated procedure.)

Seborga traces its sovereign origins to 954 A.D., when the Benedictine monks of Lerino gained full control of the town after building a monastery there. In 1097, Seborga became a protectorate of the Holy Roman Empire and later, in the 18th century, of the kingdom of Sardinia.

Then, in 1861, most Italian states merged into the new kingdom of Italy. A



#### PEOPLE'S "PRINCESS"

Clockwise from right, Nina Menegatto, foreign minister and wife of the prince; the Church of San Bernardo, in the center of Seborga; the view of the Mediterranean coast





few stragglers were tossed back to France, and Monaco became independent. And Seborga? In the midst of all this dividing and ceding and shuffling, the principality was swept into the dustbin of history. Due to a clerical error, Seborga didn't appear on any of the lists—which meant it became part of Italy by default. Seborgans accepted Italian governance (they didn't have much of a choice) but they held to the belief that they deserved sovereignty. The question was: How were they going to get it?

A Seborgan gardener named Giorgio Carbone believed he had the answer. He would first restore the town's ancient traditions, including the elected office of prince. Not surprisingly, in 1963, the citizens of Seborga elected him to that position, and he assumed the title Giorgio I. Such titles would become critical as a way to increase the distance between Italy and Seborga, says Baron Jean-Philippe Arnotte, Giorgio I's muttonchop-sporting adviser and Seborga's

diplomatic representative in Luxembourg. Arnotte (whose title was purchased in part from a Northern Irish baron) helped Giorgio I develop a coat of arms and a system of heraldry, and began piecing together a Seborgan national history. The plan was to use this history—one that proved the town's sovereign status—to win national and international recognition. More than four decades later, however, the project remained unfinished; Giorgio I died in 2009. (He attained a new title in death: "His Tremendousness.")

At the time, Marcello Menegatto was merely a 30-year-old, Vespa-riding businessman. Swiss by birth and hailing from family wealth, he first came to Seborga when he and his wife, Nina, bought a farm outside town. "In the beginning, we just wanted a place for our animals. We didn't take the whole independence thing seriously," Nina Menegatto says. "My husband never wanted to be prince."

But the town had other ideas. Giorgio I's former ministers talked Menegatto into running after a slate of subpar candidates turned up to vie for His Tremendousness' throne. "They just wanted the title. They didn't care about the people of Seborga," Menegatto says. But he did—and the fact that he owns a construction company didn't hurt. "My husband's dream is to build a big hotel and a golf course here," Nina Menegatto says.

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**STANDING ON CEREMONY** Clockwise from top left, walking the carpet at Seborga's knighting ceremony; Baron Jean-Philippe Arnotte, Seborgan founding father and ambassador to Luxembourg; one of the town's many quaint alleyways; Seborga-brand shoes





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MARCELLO MENEGATTO doesn't look like a politician—or even a prince, really. He is a hulking man, over 6 feet, with thinning, curly gelled hair and a doughy middle. He's got a Euro-preppy aesthetic: expensive distressed jeans and shoes with severely pointed toes. He's more Monaco than medieval, and he stands out as he strolls through Seborga.

One year into his reign, Menegatto still has an uneasy relationship with his title. At a dinner in honor of Seborgan National Day, he sat at a long table in the town square while women in Renaissance-style velvet gowns served him plates of grilled meat. He wore a sash in the Seborgan colors of blue and white. He looked bored. The next day he disappeared in the middle of an interview for this story, ducking out to buy a pack of cigarettes and failing to return. When his wife called to ask where he was, he told her he'd gone home. He said he thought the interview was over. Not even his wife bought that excuse.

Part of his ambivalence might owe to the fact that not everyone in town is so delighted with the new leader. Certain factions have refused to abdicate allegiance to Giorgio I. They call themselves the "White Knights" and they hold late-night meetings at their headquarters (a bed and breakfast outside town) to plan ways of sabotaging the new regime. After the knighting ceremony, for instance, the prince and his wife rode through town in a horse-drawn carriage. Later, the White Knights collected the horse droppings and left them in a bag outside the prince's office.

This kind of behavior is precisely why Menegatto didn't want to be prince in the first place. Even though notable Seborgans asked him to run for the position, he found the competition nasty. "My opponents

were trying to find out everything bad I'd done in the last 20 years!" he says.

Meanwhile, Nina Menegatto, who has a master's degree in marketing and was elected minister of foreign affairs, has thrown herself into her new role with abandon. She spends her days preparing documents for the Hague and conversing with foreign media. She runs the principality's PR campaign and has partnered with an Italian fashion company to make a line called Principato di Seborga. In a tiny shop along one of Seborga's narrow streets, you can buy sneakers named for the prince: The "Marcello Primo" comes in crocodile

Nina was invited by a friend from boarding school, and used the opportunity to network with Arab investors.

She is intelligent and charming, but is quick to point out that being the prince's wife doesn't make her royalty—not that the Seborgan people recognize the distinction. "It takes me an hour to get across town," she says. "People are always stopping me, calling me 'our princess.'"

She talks passionately about Seborgan independence and her plans to build a new playground beside the central piazza. She is eager to bring tourism to Seborga while also preserving the town's cultural and aesthetic integrity. "We won't build anything taller than five stories," she says. "But we do want a new hotel and shops and restaurants. And of course we'll have to run our own schools and collect taxes and do everything a country does."

**A FEW WEEKS AFTER** Franco Ronchi returned to Milan, he received word that his request to become the consul for Seborga had been denied. The decision was made by Nina Menegatto. It's one of her new duties, and she aims to be much more discriminating about titles than Giorgio I was. "So many people write to me saying they want to be a consul or a minister," she says. "I tell them they must

HIS FOES IN THIS TINY PRINCIPALITY HAVE BEEN FIERCE. "MY OPPONENTS," SAYS THE PRINCE, "WERE TRYING TO FIND OUT EVERYTHING BAD I'D DONE IN THE LAST 20 YEARS!"

and snake leather for 245 euros (about \$335). In the main piazza, tourists can buy Seborgan-themed bags and perfumes, polo shirts with the Seborgan crest and even Seborgan license plates and passports. (Arnotte says he's traveled abroad on such a passport without difficulty.)

Nina Menegatto's English is impeccable and, with her long brown hair and fashionable outfits, she bears a resemblance to the Duchess of Cambridge (née Kate Middleton), whom she admires. "She's so down-to-earth," Nina says. The highlight of her job so far was a trip to England for a polo match hosted by Queen Elizabeth.

come here if they're serious. In the past, some of our consuls haven't really done anything. Like the one in Indonesia."

Though disappointed, Ronchi consoles himself with the dream of one day selling his perfumes in New York City. And he takes solace in a few encouraging words from Arnotte. "He told me to be patient and wait for the position," Ronchi says. Then he shrugs. "But if that is not successful, I will try for another African country."

**JENNIFER MILLER** is a writer in Brooklyn, N.Y. Her first novel, *The Year of the Gadfly*, is due out in May.