


“I’m an approachable princess, people don’t drop to their knees when they see me”

Princess Nina Menegatto of tiny Seborga – a principality within Italy – gives us the dos and don’ts of running your own country

 Words by **Chrissie McClatchie**

Nina Menegatto wasn’t born a princess. Nor did she marry into royalty. It’s a title she assumed in November 2019 when she was elected the first female ruler of the Principality of Seborga, a small village in the region of Liguria claiming sovereignty from Italy. “I’m an approachable princess,” she smiles. “People don’t drop to their knees when they see me.”

Like most hilltop communities along the Italian Riviera, the pedestrian alleyways of Seborga are a charming warren of thick stone buildings built during a period of history when fortifications were the fashion. To get there, a narrow road snakes its way into the hinterland from the seaside resort of Bordighera, with locals in trusty Fiat Pandas taking the hairpin bends at breakneck speeds. From Piazza Martiri Patrioti, the main square where Nina – or HSH Princess Nina of Seborga as she is now known – can often be found playing with her two-and-a-half year old daughter, the Mediterranean Sea shimmers and the silhouette of Monaco can be made out in the distance.

But the micronation of Seborga also has its own government, constitution, identity card, flag – even national anthem. And this small but passionate community is engaged in a David and Goliath-like match-up with the Italian state. At the heart of the matter is its belief that this particular 14 square

kilometres of land was never officially annexed during the country’s unification. “We have the right to be a principality,” Nina says. “We want our independence back.”

It’s a cause the population of just over 300 has been fighting for since 1963, when local flower grower Giorgio Carbone became Prince Giorgio I of Seborga. He ruled until his death in 2009, and was succeeded by Marcello Menegatto, Nina’s ex-husband. German-born Nina had met Marcello at boarding school in Switzerland and followed him home to Monaco. The couple quickly fell for the peace and space they found in Seborga, a 30-minute drive away. “We wanted a garden and a barbecue, things you can’t have in Monaco,” she says. “So, we started a small farm with horses and other animals here.”

Under Prince Marcello I’s rule, Nina served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, a position that took her to India and the White House. He abdicated three years ago and in the elections that followed, Nina was pitted against Giorgio’s daughter. The decision to run wasn’t an easy one (the leadership structure is an elective monarchy with one term lasting seven years). “I’m happier in the background, but I also realised how sad it would be to throw away nearly a decade of hard work,” she says. The result is testament to how much the villagers believe in her. The feeling is mutual. “I really love Seborga. It’s a big family,” she says.



COVID-19 has put on hold much of the face-to-face lobbying involved in the role, although just before the world locked down, the Ivory Coast became the first country to officially recognise Seborga's sovereignty (foreign representatives can also be found in nine other countries). A positive to emerge is that the pandemic seems to have silenced Frenchman Nicolas Mutte, who declared himself prince in 2016 and is known as the 'Imposter Prince'. "We haven't heard anything for a while," Nina says. "I hope it will stay like that."

She has also been busy working on her stamp issue and, in a first, banknotes to complement the coin she has already minted in her effigy (while the currency, called the luigini, isn't a legal tender, it's still listed on foreign exchange websites such as xe.com). After nearly two years of cancelled events, Nina is hoping this year will herald the return of other traditions.

"Seborga has always been known for its parties," she says. The biggest of all is National Day on 20 August when sentries guard the entrance to the village, locals dress up in traditional costumes and flag throwers from across the region showcase their flair.



Imagine how memorable the party would be if Seborga achieves independence, a feat Nina appreciates seems little more than a fantasy. Yet, she has also seen enough in the last few years to believe in the fairy tale. "No one thought Brexit would happen, did they?" she says. "Nothing is impossible."

principatodiseborga.com

✈️ Wizz Air flies to Nice