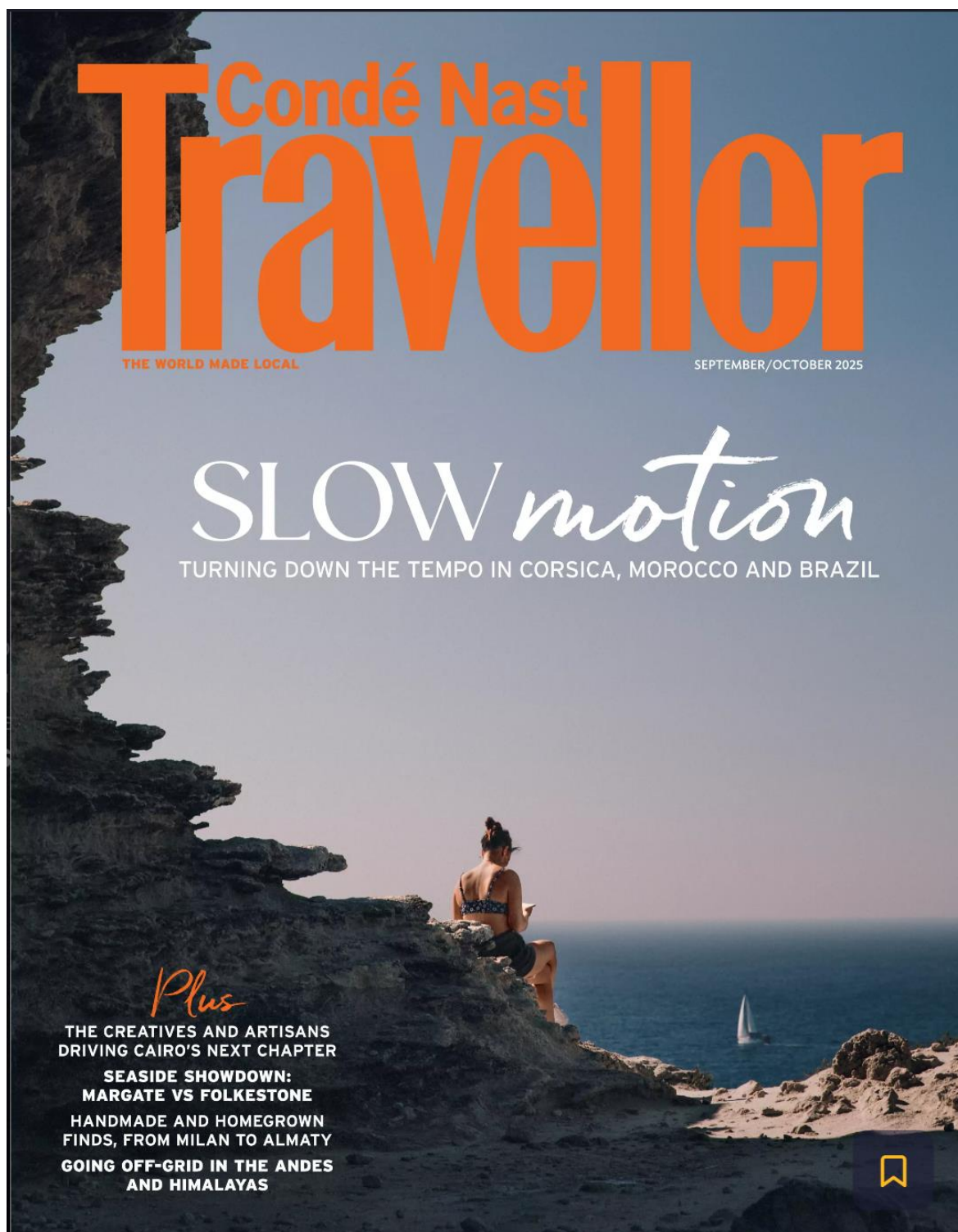


Client: Lungarno Collection, Portrait Milano

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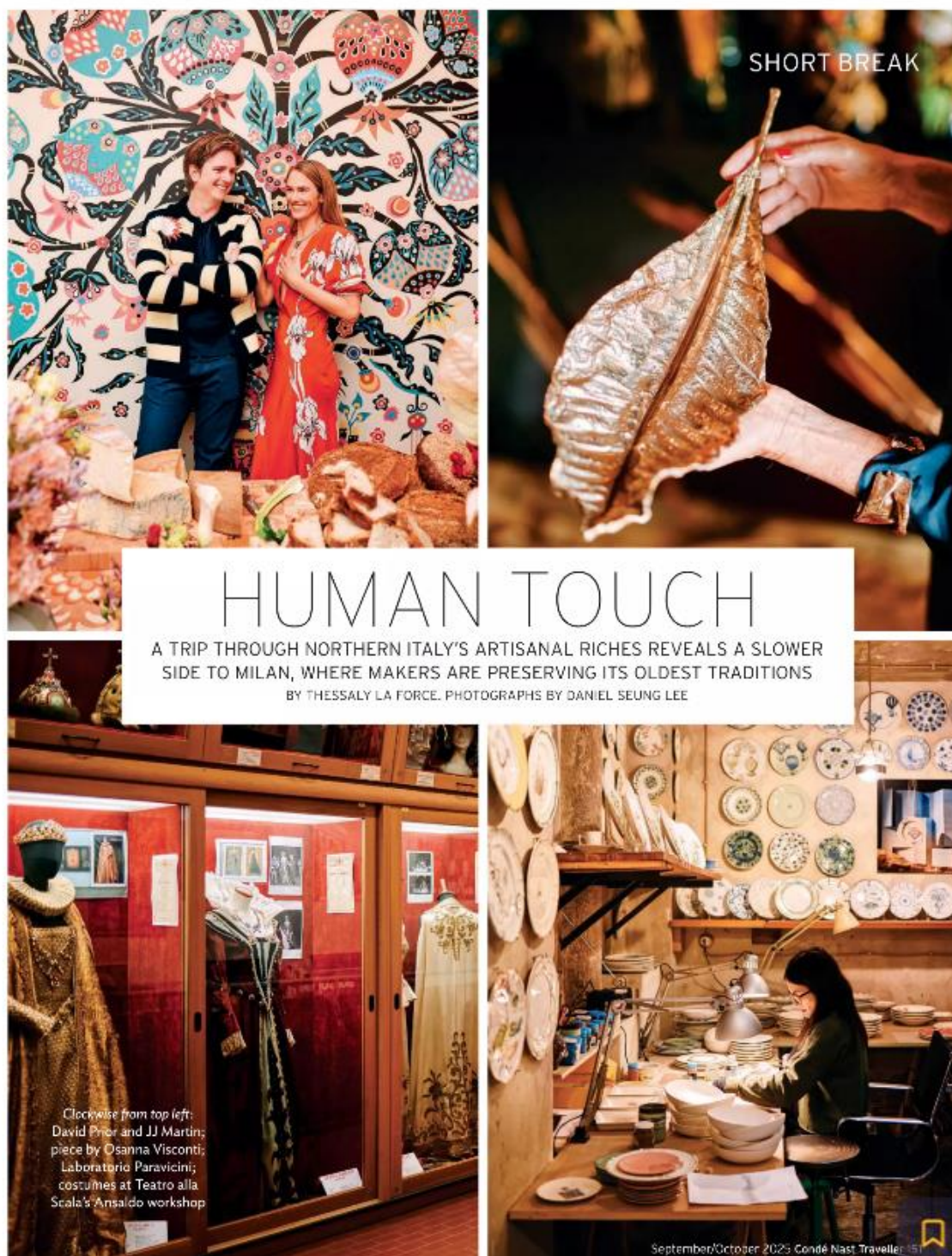
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SHORT BREAK

IN AN AGE IN WHICH THE WORD “fast” commonly modifies fashion and food, it’s more important than ever to preserve time-honoured approaches. It’s a thought that strikes me repeatedly as I journey across Northern Italy with Prior, an experiential travel company whose itineraries are designed to tell stories about the craftspeople who keep local heritage alive. “We want to spotlight living cultures passed down by generations, and their stewards,” says cofounder David Prior. He has named this trip *Fatto a Mano*, or “handmade”. It seeks to connect travellers to makers: in Italy that means set designers, bronze workers, glass-blowers and winemakers. “Music, food, design,” says Prior. “They are the essence of culture, which makes them the essence of place.” Introducing people to these increasingly endangered traditions helps raise awareness about the need to protect them, he hopes.

Over six days we travel through Genoa, meeting the chocolatiers at Romanengo 1780 and receiving a tutorial in pesto making at Il Genovese. There are opportunities to drink Barolo with producers Luisa Sala and Lara Rocchetti in Langhe and go truffle hunting through hazelnut groves alongside the growers of Piedmont. In Venice we visit legendary glass factory Laguna B, founded by French Italian aristocrat Marie Brandolini in 1994 and a cult favourite among the stylish set, and marvel at the unparalleled dimensionality and depth to the hand-woven fabric turned out by the looms at Tessitura Luigi Bevilacqua, a textiles company dating from 1499.

But it’s in Milan that I uncover some of Northern Italy’s more curious crafts, in the workshops and backrooms of the artisans keeping them alive. As the rain slants downward, Prior and I arrive in the

“MUSIC, FOOD AND DESIGN ARE THE ESSENCE OF CULTURE, WHICH MAKES THEM THE ESSENCE OF PLACE”

industrial neighbourhood of Zona Solari. Even on a wet, overcast day, Milan is glamorous, its beauty opulent and cosmopolitan. We duck into the entrance of Ansaldo, the workshops for the opera house Teatro alla Scala. Inside, 150 craftspeople oversee the set design, construction, sculpture, carpentry, mechanics and costumes for every production. Initially I have difficulty seeing the magic of one of the world’s oldest opera houses in this draughty, cavernous converted train factory, which couldn’t feel further removed from Teatro alla Scala’s gilded ceilings and dramatic red-velvet booths. But it doesn’t take long to discover Ansaldo’s treasures.

I am taken to a wide balcony overlooking the warehouse where hundreds of maquettes from past productions have been stored. Here’s Franco Zeffirelli’s *Aida* from 2006-2007; there’s the stage design for Piero Faggioni’s 1984 *Carmen*. I watch as people below paint three enormous panels for an upcoming show. Many of the maquettes are in decent condition, though some are dusty or torn. All are worlds unto themselves: enchanted forests, tropical oceans, ➤

Top right, clockwise from top left: vineyards in Piedmont; sculpture by Osanna Visconti; prop at Ansaldo; Genoese chocolates. Right: maquette at Ansaldo. Opposite, top left: Visconti at work. Opposite, top right, clockwise from top left: butcher in Milan; pieces by Visconti; Margherita and Benedetta Medici Di Marignano of Laboratorio Paravicini; Piedmont street. Opposite, bottom left, clockwise from top left: plates at JJ Martin’s party; Venetian velvet weaver; costume at Ansaldo; tour guide with map of Teatro alla Scala. Opposite, bottom right: room at Portrait Milano hotel



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grand palaces, ancient ruins. Each item is saved with the expectation that it will be used again, so preservation and restoration are of paramount importance.

We wander through another giant hangar of props where gnarled trees sit alongside Egyptian busts and Greek and Roman statuary, winding up in the costume department. Lined up on a rack, the tutus worn by the ballerinas in *The Nutcracker* are ready to be cleaned and patched. One of Maria Callas's dresses from *Don Carlo* in 1953-1954 is on display. Everything possesses a heightened sense of anticipation that comes with the drama of the stage: the orchestra quietly tuning its A, the hush of the audience as the curtain rises, the singers' first breaths.

Later we stop into the office of Osanna Visconti, a bronze worker and sculptor, in a centuries-old apartment building wreathed in ivy. Her dedication to entirely handmade pieces is a stirring contrast to fast-paced Milan. First she models them out of wax, the heat of her palms warming the material into forms. Then she shapes them into little clay moulds and makes the bronze fillings. "It's a technique that's been used for centuries," she says. "I wouldn't do it any other way." Her work isn't technically perfect: handprints are sometimes visible in the wax. But this proof of the human touch makes it even more beautiful.

It's a similar story at Laboratorio Paravicini, a haven for hand-painted art founded in the '90s by Costanza Paravicini, who now runs it with her three daughters. In their workshop, tucked away in a greenery-fringed courtyard in the city's historical centre, plates adorned with imagery, both fantastical and botanical – geometric swirls of bright-blue birds, Lewis Carroll-like mushrooms, steampunk hot-air balloons, zodiac constellations – hang from limewashed walls that give the impression of being inside a giant pot.

One evening, Prior arranges a dinner at the apartment of his friend JJ Martin, a maximalist fashion designer. We arrive to find salmon-pink walls, parquet covered with bright rugs and flower-printed wallpaper. I chat with Austrian designer Arthur Arbesser and Armani executive Alan Prada, who compare notes on their outfits and where they've dined recently. It's intimate and friendly, the kind of setting where culture, art and fashion mix effortlessly. In the kitchen, Giacomo Pavesi, chef at Osteria Fratelli Pavesi near the city of Piacenza, pushes out the food. The evening is a reminder that Milan, while a bastion of traditional Italian culture, is also the country's most forward-looking city.

Modernity has undeniably improved our lives in countless ways – but what have we lost? Even as Italy tries to keep pace with today's world, there are people protecting the country's traditions. Refreshingly, many of the artisans I've met are younger, ambassadors of a new generation carrying on crafts passed down from those who came before. Perhaps the most gratifying takeaway I leave Italy with is an understanding of how important it is to celebrate and preserve locality throughout the world, including back home. That might be the finest souvenir I could have hoped for. 🍷

BOOK IT Off-the-peg trips with Prior start at about £1,284. Bespoke experiences require an annual membership of around £2,000 and cost about £1,117 per person per day. The Fatto a Mano itinerary included stays at Genoa's Palazzo Durazzo Suites, Langhe apartment rental Mon Suite, the landmark Portrait Milano hotel and Hotel Flora in Venice; priorworld.com

Top row, from left: Al Botteggon bar in Venice; props at Ansaldo. Bottom row, far left, clockwise from top left: Portrait Milano; maquette at Ansaldo; Al Botteggon; Tessitura Luigi Bevilacqua. Bottom row, middle: David Prior. Bottom row, near left, clockwise from top left: Piedmont; Portrait Milano room; vases by Osanna Visconti; wine at Portrait Milano



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