

Anglo-Italian Designer Shows Flair for Hotel Business

By Yekaterina Dranitsyna

STAFF WRITER

A person will always create a better interior for a home or a business if he takes care of the design himself, says Adriano Leto. After all, "you are the person who will use it," he said.

However, this may be a little simpler for Leto, who co-owns and manages the Casa Leto mini-hotel with his wife Tatiana. The hotelier couple are both qualified interior designers with experience in restoring the interior of many London churches.

Casa Leto has developed as a family business, located near St. Isaac's Cathedral in a building that once served as the home of court composer Alibon Zircocman.

The Anglo-Italian Leto and his Russian wife happily engage in the battle of running the hotel, training employees and meeting the guests, since this is a hotel the style and staff of which they have modeled completely by themselves.

Keeping with the city's special atmosphere, the interior designers recreated the spirit of St. Petersburg's history inside the hotel's five rooms. Each room is named after a famous Italian architect: Trezzini, Rossi, Rastrelli, Quarenghi and Risoldi, reflecting the delicate touch of each master.

"We approach it very differently from most of hotels. We designed it as a sort of place that we would like to stay in," Leto said. "People feel the style of the city and they want to live in a place that reflects that style," Leto said.

Casa Leto's spacious rooms are filled with large mirrors, massive doors, antiques and heavy curtains. The decorated ceilings complete the hotel's traditional feel.

There will always be a demand for large hotels, but in the premium-class market many think that "small is beautiful," Leto said. He points to many large hotel chains that are looking to diversify into boutique hotels to cater to a public that wants an intimate luxury.

By the end of 2005, Casa Leto will expand to 10 rooms, by 2006 — 20 rooms. For now, Leto draws the line at that.

"I don't make small boxes to mas-



Adriano Leto brings a personal touch to his Casa Leto mini-hotel and has a staff selected for their warmth toward other people.

size income," Leto said. "We will add rooms, but still we will keep it small. That's the big idea. Some economies of scale damage the quality of service," he said.

The hotel has already attracted some attention from the foreign press. In May, The Telegraph, a U.K. daily, described Leto's "small, centrally located hotel [as having] many of the features you'd expect from a grand hotel, combined with the intimacy of a home."

Leto's friend of several years, Max Wolf, a co-owner of Moscow wiper-manufacturing firm, said that the "intimacy" had much to do with the designer's international influences.

"Casa Leto is a very customized hotel with a personal touch. It gives the impression of an Italian or German family home without destroying the interior," Wolf said.

At the moment there are about 500 mini-hotels in the city, mostly in the middle-class segment. Compared to large hotels, mini-hotels enjoy higher occupancy rates, partly due to high demand and limited supply, Bear real estate agency said.

The 4-star Casa Leto opened in December 2004. To acquire a floor at 34 Bobshaya Morskaya, Adriano had to buy out the former residents of the place, which at the time served as a commercial apartment.

The process dragged on for months and reconsecration took over a year since Leto had never run a hotel before.

Born in London, he says he had dreamed of running a hotel since he was six years old. His grandfather was an Italian ambassador and the house was always full of guests.

From an early age socializing and

creating an enjoyable place for people to meet interested him. "Creating a hotel is like designing a film with a set and actors," Leto said.

He even proposed letting out a seashore 12-room house to tenants, as the family only used it for two months of the year, but Leto's grandfather judged the idea as crazy.

Leto's chance to run a hotel had to wait many more years, and pass through numerous countries. Working as a photographer, then journalist, later English TV, Leto lived in Africa, South America, Italy and Pakistan.

On the way, Leto picked up managerial skills while running an art restoration company and working in advertising.

The skills proved particularly useful when it came to picking staff for Casa

Leto, given St. Petersburg's notorious lack of well-trained personnel in this sector.

To choose the right employees working at Casa Leto now, the hotelier couple went through 500 resumes and tried out 40 different people.

"We found out that people who stay with us — they are people who like others. Above all, we want human beings. We don't want professionally trained broad smiles," Leto said.

Many of the hotel's employees have an degrees and unusual life experiences. Leto says this brings the hotel "dimensions," adding that teachers, nurses and journalists often prove the most suitable as staff. Within 48 hours, Leto says he can tell if a new person will fit the hotel.

In a small hotel, the most important thing is to be flexible and ready to work in a broad set of roles, no matter how menial, he said. "I'm prepared to clean the toilet. I'm expecting everybody to do it as well," Leto said.

Exercising a western approach to management Leto involves employees in decision-making, encourages "initiative-based, intelligent thinking." Unfortunately, he notes, many in Russia are not ready to work in such a challenging environment.

Just as with the picking of staff, the hotel's owners try to select their guests. Leto says they have had few problems, but things such as smoking and loud behavior are not welcome.

Though it is a rare occurrence, Leto said the hotel reserves the right to ask guests to move out if they upset other visitors or do not respect the staff. However it happens very rarely, Adriano said.

"It's not us being elitist. It's not an upper-class club. It's as trying to make sure that everybody who comes here is comfortable," Leto said.

Wolf notes that the comfort extends not only to the visitors.

Adriano has an ability to give investors confidence and inspire employees to work just like he works. He's a man of his word. Combined with a great imagination that means a great deal," Wolf said.