



Stefano Ricci at the Pitti Palace in Florence; the Sarastar superyacht with interiors by Stefano Ricci



Stefano Ricci lights up a cigarette and sinks into a sofa on the top deck of his friend's opulent superyacht as it glides silently across the Mediterranean off the coast of Tuscany. Opera legend Pavarotti fills the air with *O sole mio* and a stylishly dressed Ricci is making himself comfortable when he spots a waiter passing by in a crisp white uniform. "Excuse me, could we have two Bloody Marys?"

It's not quite noon on a laidback summer's day and we are headed for Montecristo, the uninhabited island made famous in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century French novel, and featured in Ricci's spectacular 2019 spring-summer menswear campaign that celebrates man's connection with the sea. A few minutes ago guests were mingling with models sporting creamy double-breasted jackets and sand-coloured summer suits on the custom-made megayacht, whose furnishings were all made by the brand.

Our conversation weaves through Ricci's friendships with Nelson Mandela and Prince Rainier of Monaco, his lifelong passion for hunting and his resemblance to the father of communism, Karl Marx. "If I go to a restaurant in Moscow, people look at me. It's very funny!"

Finally the 68-year-old Italian designer focuses on how he started with a handful of ties as a young man in Florence and from his family home built a worldwide empire that now spans menswear, leather goods, jewellery, fragrances, homewares and even wine. "I decided to get into the clothing business because I love textiles," Ricci says. "I design my collection, I produce my materials. Now I'm investing in the future of the company, investing in the future of my kids."

The enterprising designer founded Stefano Ricci with his wife, Claudia, in Florence in 1972. Two years later he made his debut at the Pitti Uomo fashion show in the Tuscan capital. His innovative tie collection was snapped up by Neiman Marcus and Harrods. The business took off and menswear, knitwear, shoes and sportswear were soon added.

"I am not a stylist, I am a designer," Ricci says. "I started with ties when I was still at university and then I was asked by a client to make shirts. Now I have 45 ladies who make shirts in my factory and a lot of the shirts are also custom-made." Today the Italian luxury brand has 62 brand stores and 19 shop-in-shops around the world including the exclusive Harrolds store in Australia. The family stores stretch from Rodeo Drive to Tbilisi and there are new stores opening in Miami and New Delhi before the end of the year.

Apart from its quality tailored clothing and exclusive leather goods, Stefano Ricci designs and creates its own fabrics and uses goldsmiths and other craftsmen to produce cufflinks and precious buckles, using gold, diamonds, sapphires and other gemstones.

Stefano Ricci's approach to excellence seems to be working. Global sales rose 13 per cent to nearly €144 million (\$227m) last year. Quality materials and workmanship combined with a generous dose of Italian savoir faire seems to be attracting old and new clients.

"It is not just a fine cloth that makes the difference, it has to be properly cut and properly tailored and even the shirt needs to be tailored," says Ricci. "You have to feel comfortable, it's not easy."

Stefano Ricci opened his first store not in Italy, but in Shanghai, becoming established in China well ahead of his competitors. "I saw the energy in the eyes of those people," he says. "They had a vision of the future and that was the difference between that country and the others."

The brand has since opened five stores in Italy, the flagship inside a 16<sup>th</sup>-century building in the centre of

# HIGH LIFE

HE MAY LOOK A LITTLE LIKE KARL MARX, BUT THE RESEMBLANCE STOPS AT THE BEARD. STEFANO RICCI DESIGNS SOME TRULY OPULENT MENSWEAR AND HOMEWARES – EVEN CHILDREN'S CLOTHING – AND HAS A LIFESTYLE TO MATCH.

STORY JOSEPHINE MCKENNA ■ PORTRAIT MASSIMO SESTINI



Looks from Stefano Ricci's spring/summer 2019 collection

Florence. It is a tribute to the city's cultural heritage. Lined with frieze paintings, the vast space features plush armchairs made of Australian crocodile skin and is overflowing with jackets, suits, ties and accessories. "When a client comes into my store I want them to experience emotion," says Ricci. "They are not buying suits because they want more suits. It's more about 'how can I live without having that suit? That jacket? Or those pants?' That is the secret."

While Stefano still loves to design and make suggestions on lines and colours, these days he is handing over more of the day-to-day responsibility to his two sons, Niccolo, the CEO, and Filippo, the creative director, who want to build on the brand's base and take the company in new directions.

"My dad is a visionary," says 41-year-old Niccolo Ricci. "The mission for me and my brother is to try and maximise the time and energy he has invested to take the company to the next level." The brothers hope to realise their dreams in a 9000sqm manufacturing complex in the leafy hills of Fiesole outside Florence, where their designers, artisans and seamstresses can take a break from their rigorous working day to glance at the trees through floor-to-ceiling windows.

"I found this in the middle of the woods, I wanted our staff to work in a beautiful environment," says Niccolo. "This was done not only to support our growth but to have growth with our standards of quality."

There are a few surprises inside the company's modern headquarters, such as the family's vintage car collection – which includes a rare 1932 Aston Martin Le Mans – and a Nile crocodile that Ricci Sr killed on one of his hunting expeditions.

Before heading down to the production floor, Filippo explains how the brand is evolving from a luxury clothing company to a global lifestyle brand that is catching the attention of a new generation. There is even a junior collection for children.

"Our goal is to target a much younger crowd, a much younger audience. As we grow we want our clients to grow with us," says Filippo, who is only 35. "Before Niccolo and I became involved the age range of our customer was over 45. Now we are working on a customer base which is 10 years younger than that. Some have seen their fathers wearing Stefano Ricci."

Filippo sweeps through the design department where a new season of children's leather jackets, windbreakers, jeans and jackets are lined up on a rack.

**“We used to have nuns making our ties but the head nun said to us ‘It’s getting too much, we have to pray’.”**

A child's crocodile skin jacket can retail for €30,000 but if a father and son end up with one each the bill can top €150,000. "We sell a lot more even though the mother may be doing the shopping," says Filippo with a smile.

Downstairs, rolls of fine cotton, cashmere and silk spill across large cutting tables on the production floor. Each collection includes roughly 80 designs per season and between 12 and 16 colour combinations often drawn from Stefano Ricci's rich archive. All the fabrics are made from original designs and hand printed. "We still sew all the ties by hand," says Filippo. "We used to have nuns making our ties but the head nun said to us 'It's getting too much, we have to pray'."

In one department seamstresses huddle over their machines, in another a lone silversmith makes decorative bowls and master goldsmiths produce buckles and cufflinks in the tradition of the Florentine artisans. The artisans recently added gold and diamonds to limited-edition crocodile handbags and created six ties with 100 diamonds embedded in the fabric. Elton John and a former Russian president are said to be among those who paid €65,000 to take one home. Every product with a Stefano Ricci label has a microchip embedded to guarantee its authenticity.

Past rows of suits and jackets in the despatch department is the crocodile room where skins in many shades are ready to be shaped into some of Stefano Ricci's most expensive items. "Feel how soft this is," says Filippo handing over a vibrant red skin. "We dye it every season so it is a big investment. They say the crocs hurt more when they are dead than alive if you don't clear your inventory."

Stefano Ricci uses between 15,000 and 20,000 crocodile skins a year for jackets, belts, shoes and furnishings. Many of the skins come from their own farms in the Northern Territory and Queensland.

A decade ago, the luxury brand moved into homewares, releasing porcelain and crystal dinner services, silverware, luxury linens and leather home accessories. In 2010 it acquired the Antico Setificio Fiorentino, an historic silk mill that has been producing fabrics for the noble families of Florence since 1786.

Inside the textile atelier, master weavers draw on a centuries-old archive before working wooden looms to create classic damask and silks that have made their way into grand hotels, homes and yachts. Even the Kremlin came calling and asked Stefano Ricci to refurbish its rich red silk velvet furnishings.

The brand has also contributed to Florence's cultural life, donating new lighting to the Loggia dei Lanzi and the Ponte Vecchio and staging a fashion show in the Uffizi and a spectacle on the Arno River with the world-famous tenor Andrea Bocelli.

Neither Ricci nor his sons have been to Australia yet but they see potential to develop their partnership with Harrolds in the future. "We have a great partnership with Harrolds, they really know how to treat the brand in the proper way," says Niccolo. "We would like to sit down with them and see if there are some opportunities to open either shop-in-shops with them or a mono brand boutique with them in Australia." **W**