

Getting to Know Seborga's German Grace Kelly

After earning her MBA in Monaco, Nina Menegatto just wanted a quainter lifestyle and a nice garden. But things took a fairytale turn when she moved to Seborga and was elected the village's first princess.

By Eric Millman

Just 20 miles from Monte Carlo, overlooking the Italian Riviera, Seborga, like its neighboring villages of Apricale and Perinaldo, is cut into the rock, coiled in cobblestone and mosaic, and tinged with a hint of sea air. The meandering alleyways, which all eventually lead to the show-stopping Baroque Church of San Martino, are almost eerily devoid of the busloads of crowds found in the town's more famous counterparts. Seborga is one of the 27 "Most Beautiful Villages in Italy" found in Liguria, and hardly the only one that looks like the setting of a fairytale. Yet what sets the tiny hill town apart — alluded to in the local guard booth coated in Savoy blue and white, and in the golden crown painted on the asphalt as one approaches town — is that in the eyes of its residents, Seborga isn't part of Italy at all.

Owing to a legal loophole rooted in centuries of historical upheaval, the Principality of Seborga has long been steadfast in its claims of independence. Once part of the Holy Roman Empire under the rule of the Counts of Ventimiglia, Seborga was so named for its origins as the *Castrum de Sepulchro* ("fortress of the interred"), the place where the Counts were buried. Seborga was then donated to the cistercian monks of Lérins Abbey

from the nearby French island of Saint-Honorat (these very monks, according to lore, helped ordain the first nine Knights Templar in Seborga, marking their final point of departure before venturing to Jerusalem in the midst of the First Crusade).

By 1729, the monks sold Seborga to the Savoy King of Sardinia, whose territories would later be included in the 1861 unification of Italy. Yet after examining various historical documents found largely in Turin's State Archives, journalist-turned-horticulturist Giorgio Carbone claimed that this sale was never officially registered, meaning that Seborga was never legally annexed under the Italian flag.

Despite Italy's claims to the contrary, Carbone managed to convince other villagers of their national birthright, and the *seborghini* would subsequently crown their new leader "His Tremendousness Prince Giorgio I" on May 14, 1963. After ruling the new principality for just under five decades, however, His Tremendousness succumbed to illness in 2009 at 73.

A decade later, on November 10, 2019, Nina Menegatto (née Döbler), was elected the first Princess of Seborga with a vote of 122 to 69.



We spoke with HSH Nina, Princess of Seborga, about the ups and downs of her fairytale past and present, and her vision for Seborga's future.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Eric Millman: Tell us your backstory.

Nina Menegatto: I'm German. I studied in Switzerland, then I went to Monaco for [an MBA in marketing]. And because my ex-husband, Marcello, and I were living in Monaco and we love animals, we started looking for a place outside of Monaco where we could have a garden. We found a really beautiful piece of land in Seborga, and we fell in love with the village. I didn't know anything about it, to be honest.



EM: How did you and Marcello get involved in Seborga's politics?

NM: [The more often we went] to the village, the better we got to know it. There was this building in the main square which was totally ruined. So my ex-husband said, "Well, why don't we buy it and redo it?" So [in 2005] we renovated the whole building. The people, including Prince Giorgio, loved that [we gave something to the village] without wanting anything in return. We met Prince Giorgio, and he was wonderful, down-to-earth, and spoke perfect German. He was already ill, and he and others started asking, "Would Marcello be interested in becoming a prince?"



EM: And from Prince Marcello to Princess Nina?

NM: During the government of Marcello, I was elected Minister of Foreign Affairs. But, I have to add, by the population – not by him – because that would have been far too easy. The people thought I would be a great candidate because I speak foreign languages fluently, I'm quite open-minded, and I have studied abroad. I was the perfect candidate for it, so I accepted the position. And then life does take unexpected turns. I had my personal crisis: I got separated from Marcello, and he abdicated as a prince. I love Seborga, but I wanted to be in the background.

EM: And yet in 2019, you ran against Prince Giorgio's daughter, Laura de Bisceglie...

NM: ...which was absolutely incredible because for the first time in history, ever, we were two women as candidates. Seborga was always ruled by men. And that's because if you look back at the history, it was ruled by monks, and they couldn't have children. [The position is] not by blood, it's by election.

EM: Are you on good terms with Laura? What's it like living in the same small town?

NM: At the beginning, it was quite disappointing for her, but now we are on the best terms. She has a really beautiful souvenir shop, and she knows the history inside out. If tourists come to see her, she [shares our history]. She's absolutely a big asset for Seborga. We all stand for the same cause. We all believe in Seborga; let's make it great again.

EM: As an American, I can't help but note that last choice of words...

NM: [Laughs] I shouldn't have said it like that, maybe.

EM: Italy maintains its own mayor in Seborga, and still refuses to acknowledge your independence. How are relations with the Italian government today?

NM: I would say it's quite awkward. We respect each other, obviously. We wouldn't do anything to harm Italy. We are inside Italian territory, and we do live under Italian laws at the moment.

I'm not as crazy as Prince Giorgio, who would just lock the border and lock anyone up, or he wouldn't pay the VAT to Italy and stuff like that. I also have a daughter, so I can't be getting arrested from one day to the next.



They don't really know how to handle us, but as long as we do everything by the law, it's fine. Our [license] plates, for example: We are allowed to [use our own], but they have to be detached 20 centimeters from the Italian plates. We have our own ID cards, we have our own currency, we have our own little life in Seborga.

EM: What nationality would residents say they are?

NM: They would say, "I'm Italian and I'm *seborghino/a*." We have dual nationality, basically. And there are about, well — accounting for people who have passed away recently — maybe 280 of us, or about 2,000 inhabitants in the summer who have holiday houses. And literally, I would say 80%, maybe even 90% believe in the story of the Principality because it's a part of our history. It's a fact. And we are proud. And if you go through the village, you see lots of flags of the Principality, and you see the Italian flag in the town hall.

We're [also] not the only ones. There's the Vatican, San Marino, we have our neighbor, Monaco...it's our aim to be independent, and it's obviously hard work. We don't know if it will happen from today to tomorrow, which it likely will not, but nothing is impossible.

EM: Beyond all of that, what distinguishes Seborga? As in, why visit?

NM: We call ourselves the mimosa capital.



Prince Giorgio's former home, Seborga

We export millions of euros' worth of mimosa flowers. [The village is practically empty in February] because everyone is harvesting the mimosa for the International Women's Day on the eighth of March. Olive oil is also a very big thing in Seborga; agriculture is the main source of income, then tourism. In July and in August, every Thursday and every Saturday, we have village parties with traditional dances, and local food, like rabbit, is our specialty. Or goat, or boar, and obviously *pasta al pesto*.

Then we have our National Day, which is on August 20, and it's a big event. We usually get up to 2,000 people coming to Seborga. I used to come in a horse-drawn carriage. Now, I don't have horses anymore, so I come in a classic car and I wave like the queen. We have traditional costumes. There's a little show where our flags are thrown, and our representatives from all over the world [join us].

EM: Outside of the festivals, what are some of the day-to-day responsibilities for you as Princess, and what are your goals?

NM: I have my little daughter. She's turning five soon and goes to school in Monaco. Seborga is a big part of my life, and I spend lots of time on it, but it's not a paid position. We are all volunteers in the Principality. Whatever

we do, we do because we believe in the country, in our place. I do spend a lot of time on the computer, talking to the press and maintaining relationships with all the foreign representatives [from 11 different countries].

We're also working on [building a large-scale hotel and spa], which unfortunately takes forever because there was Covid, then we had the war in Russia, and then Israel. It's my dream to see that project fulfilled, and I hope this happens before I get too old. And yes, I also have other activities. Seborga doesn't [put food on the table].

[As for goals], independence is number one. Then, yes, the hotel plays a big role because it will give lots of work to the people, which would help the younger generation stay. We have lots of B&Bs, lots of tourists who come by bicycle or on hikes, which is great, but I think a hotel would just [increase] this much more. It'll be about 80 rooms, so you'd have double the employees, and the whole village would come to life.

EM: How would independence directly benefit Seborga?

NM: It would benefit not just Seborga, but the whole region, because it would give work, even to the surrounding villages. It would attract more tourism. It would just make the whole area bloom.

EM: Why should we take all of this seriously?

NM: At the beginning, I also found the story [of Seborga's independence to be] funny. So if people laugh about it at first, I understand. But read into the history, read the facts. I mean, prove to us why Seborga is part of Italy. There was [a recent court case involving unpaid rent in Seborga] and the Italian judge said, herself, "This is not under our jurisdiction because Seborga isn't part of Italy." There are other documents which say that Seborga isn't part of Italy. If you look at the Vienna Treaty, Seborga doesn't appear. So show us the sales contract at the time from the Savoy and the Monks. Where is it? It hasn't been paid, it hasn't been stamped. So it's not approved. It's not valid. We are a Principality. It's a fact that dates back to 954.

EM: You'll be up for reelection in 2026. Is this something that you'd like to continue doing beyond then?

NM: I had a great life before, and I will probably have a great life after. But I love the village. It's like my family. I believe in what we're doing; it's my second home. So let's see. If the people still believe in me, I will surely be here.

IF YOU GO

To reach Seborga, take the Bordighera exit on the Autostrada dei Fiori A10. Continue on the SP57 toward Sasso di Bordighera and Seborga.

