



Review
Heavenly beds

GEOFF HISCOCK
1,240 words
20 November 2010
The Australian
AUSTLN
5 - Travel
4
English
Copyright 2010 News Ltd. All Rights Reserved

A monastery stay in Italy can be surprisingly comfortable and affordable

FROM the second-storey window of our Assisi accommodation, the soft blue hills of Umbria stretch to a hazy horizon. Above and below us is a panorama of olive groves, lush vegetation and the well-crafted medieval stone buildings that are the hallmarks of this World Heritage city, birthplace of St Francis and St Clare.

We are staying at the Cittadella Ospitalita, run by the lay group Pro Civitate Christiana, to try something different from an ordinary Italian hotel and perhaps better appreciate Assisi's enduring sense of serenity in the face of constant pressure from visitors.

Though its permanent population is less than 30,000, Assisi plays host to five million visitors a year and is second only to the Vatican as a religious destination in Italy. This is a city filled with artistic treasures, preserved in the great basilicas of St Francis and St Clare, in the cathedral of St Rufino and in the simple little Sanctuary of San Damiano (St Damian) where the Poor Clare Sisters lived in the 13th century and where St Francis -- patron saint of animals and nature -- wrote his Cantic of the Creatures.

A local public holiday to mark St Francis's feast day in early October sees Assisi awash with pilgrims, but by the time we check into the Cittadella (or Citadel) a week later the crowds have eased a little.

Our breakfast companions include a large group of mature-age students from France and a jolly Anglican priest who cheerfully confesses she fits right in because she is completely mad.

Not that the Cittadella exudes madness of any sort. Rebuilt and renovated after the 1997 earthquakes that damaged much of Assisi, the Cittadella today is a collection of sturdy pink-stone buildings that house a library, conference facilities, dining hall and a range of rooms for pilgrims and other travellers.

Adding to the ambience is a rooftop garden and an outdoor amphitheatre that contains contemporary sculpture and religious figures. Best of all is the view from our room, allowing us to appreciate Assisi's setting on the side of Mt Subasio. It makes a fine base as we prowl through the city's narrow streets and laneways, exploring its collection of churches that include the remnants of the Temple of Minerva, dating back to the Roman era.

The Anglican priest is researching the life of St Francis and urges us to take the walk from Assisi's Porta Nuova (New Gate) down through olive groves and fields to San Damiano. Despite a steady downpour and a steep uphill return, it proves an interesting expedition. The 13th-century buildings evoke the simplicity

and poverty that epitomised the lives of St Francis, St Clare and their followers.

Back in our room to dry off, there's just a slight stirring of guilt after seeing the austere conditions under which the Poor Clare Sisters lived. We have the luxury of a big, comfortable room with a good bathroom attached, all for the price of a three-star hotel room. But like the other monastery-type stays we have booked in Milan, Venice, Florence, Rome and La Spezia, Assisi's Cittadella is not perfect and will not suit travellers who need constant attention.

There's no coffee maker, no in-room fridge, no wi-fi, no room service, no maid to turn down the bed, no porter to carry bags, no doorman to hail a cab. Our breakfast (included in the tariff) is fine, but the dinner we

opt for on the first night is only average. We soon discover there's much better cuisine to be had outside in one of Assisi's many restaurants. Even our jovial Anglican priest sees some shortcomings: neither the food nor the library hours suit her. Next year, she tells us, she'll be staying elsewhere in Assisi.

Still, for Italian monastery-stay novices such as us, the Cittadella seems hard to beat. The location is central, the desk and dining staff are friendly, the ensuite room is clean and the price is right. Those are the constants of our monastery stays; the variables are room size, plumbing and food quality.

In Rome, for example, our stay at the Theatine Sisters Casa Mater Ecclesiae near the Vatican could not be better. Breakfast is served in a wonderful dining room that could easily grace a deluxe boutique hotel, each table carefully set to suit a particular room and its number of occupants.

Each place has its quirks. In Venice we stay at the CSD Foresteria Valdese, in the Palazzo Cavagnis, a large rambling building that was once a noble family home and dates back to the early 1700s. These days it is a guesthouse of the Waldensian and Methodist Church in Italy and hosts individuals and student groups of all ages. With its location, its frescoes, huge hallways and marble staircases, the palazzo reeks of Venetian atmosphere. The whole swirl of the city is just a few steps away.

Because it caters for student groups, the Foresteria has a couple of extra rules: no alcohol, an 11pm curfew and you're expected to stack your dishes away after breakfast. But that's no hardship.

In La Spezia, our base camp for the Cinque Terre and the other scenic marvels of the Ligurian coast, we find an almost Ikea-like modernity in the Istituto Madri Pie, a six-sided building that has a kindergarten in its lower level. Next to it is La Spezia's unusual cathedral-in-the-round, set high above the city centre and overlooking the harbour. The Istituto Madri Pie people wish us a comfortable stay and, with frequent bursts of heavy rain interrupting our schedule, comfort is the order of the day. Our Madri Pie room delivers perfectly. Italy may have saved its best for last.

We choose to book via Monastery Stays, which takes the hassle out of the process but adds 25 per cent to the cost. In essence, Monastery Stays has aggregated a large number of organisations offering accommodation, put together a user-friendly website and simplified the booking and payment process. Part of its service is a detailed set of instructions to reach each location, which is particularly worthwhile in the jumbled alleys of Venice. There's a two-night minimum stay at each establishment.

If you have patience, are flexible on dates and can write emails in Italian, then it's possible to do the bookings yourself. Some places require a substantial deposit in advance. Others won't take credit cards. Rates for our October trip for a double room with attached bathroom range from a low of E68 (\$93) a night in Assisi to E90 a night in La Spezia. Everywhere except Milan, a light breakfast is included.

If you can do without the trappings of a normal hotel, staying at a monastery in Italy can prove a comfortable, economical and interesting option. The doors are open to all and we encounter

no proselytising.

>> Checklist

Istituto La Casa, Milan: accoglienza@ist-lacasa.it. CSD Foresteria Valdese di Venezia, Venice: info@foresteriavenezia.it. Istituto Salesiano dell'Immacolata, Florence: ospitalita@salesianfirenze.it. Cittadella Ospitalita, Assisi: ospitalita@cittadella.org. Casa Mater Ecclesiae, Rome: sr.teatine@gmail.com. Casa Per Ferie, Istituto Madri Pie, La Spezia: laspezia@residenzamadripie.it.

* monasterystays.com

Document AUSTLN0020101119e6bk00046