

# Get Thee to a Nunnery... IN ROME

My fascination with nuns began early on. Growing up in the '60s, there was inspiration everywhere — from Julie Andrews romping through the Alps, Sally Field flying through the air, to my own beloved Catechism teachers.

Whenever I'm in Rome, I get a thrill out of seeing these "Brides of Jesus" on the streets eating *gelato*, jostling along with me on crowded buses, and once even at an underwear shop near the *Campo de' Fiori* buying panties.

In the Eternal City and all over Italy, convents open their doors to guests, at a bargain compared to hotels. Last winter and spring I made it my mission to stay at a few in Rome to get a Holy Digs experience.

## Intercontinental Hotel De La Ville

Starting off at this 5-star when I'm telling a convent story might seem like

breaking the Ninth "Thou Shalt Not Lie"

Commandment. But to me, it's only a venial sin, as this *was* actually a convent from 1600 to 1800. You can still see some parts of the original building — gleaming white marble stairs and the chapel (now a beautiful dining room) — that conjures up images of sisters chanting *Ave Marias*.



De La Ville

I confess I needed pampering after my flight, and the big tub in the gorgeous ivory and rose travertine bathroom was perfect for that, along with the

*continued on page 2*



*"The simple atmosphere is calming after run  
I don't even mind the 11*

comfy king-sized bed, and pretty turquoise-and-gold draperied room.

It's as quiet as a convent — hard to believe I'm right off the street from the Spanish Steps where *vespas* roar and throngs of tourists mill about. The only sound in my room is the comforting faint hum of hotel heating system and a courtyard fountain that my terrace overlooks. Yes, I have a terrace, surrounded by geraniums and a *terra cotta* angel.

After a lavish breakfast in the Baroque dining room — where I go elbow-to-elbow at the buffet with American families, Japanese businessmen and chic Italians — I meet *Giuseppe Vanvitelli*, the handsome hotel manager, who fills me in on De La Ville history.

"After the nuns left," he tells me, "bishops moved in, then a noble family took it over." Leaning in closer he says, "Then it became a *casa di tolleranza*, the whole neighborhood was not good." I smile, thinking you gotta hand it to the Italians for calling a "house of tolerance" what Americans refer to as a "house of ill repute." In 1924 it became this hotel, designed by a Hungarian, *Jozef Vago*.

Upstairs, Vanvitelli shows me impressive suites, including one that Leonard Bernstein used to stay in, that retains his polished white grand piano and has a fantastic terrace. The Junior Suite is my favorite.

"Perfect for honeymooners," he says, pointing out how the bed is situated for an amazing view: *Piazza Venezia* to the left and Saint Peter's to the right.

I wonder if this heavenly panorama left the nuns, bishops and ladies of the evening from centuries ago as

awestruck as I feel right now.

### Fraterna Domus

The smell of holy water hits me the moment I'm buzzed into *Fraterna Domus*, which sits just a few blocks from *Piazza Navona*. A slim woman in her 50's, with pixie hair cut, navy blue sweater and skirt introduces herself as Sister Milena.

"Where's your habit?" I want to ask, but hold back and get the scoop later from Sister Cecilia, the youngest of the four nuns who live here.



All photos by Susan Van Allen

Fraterna Domus

"We're an order founded in 1967, after Vatican II, here to help the poor," she tells me. "We are not different from the people we help, so we don't dress differently from them."

Sister Cecilia becomes my favorite of this down-to-earth quartet. They're all the types you'd expect any minute to pull out a guitar and start strumming "*Dominique*," though instead they keep busy running out to do their charity work, mopping the convent floors and cleaning the guest rooms.

The building was formerly used for offices, apartments and artisan workshops until the sisters moved in. Now polished pine tables and wood block paintings of saints and Madonnas in bold primary colors decorate the lobby.

My basement room is about the size of my De La Ville bathroom and as stark as I'd imagine a nun's cell to be, with an IKEA-style closet and twin bed. Over my desk there's a friendly looking Jesus, with long flowing hair, moustache and goatee.

The closet-sized bathroom is one of those old fashioned set-ups where there's no shower separation — water drains into the slanted floor and there's also a gizmo I've never seen before: a spigot sticking out from the toilet, so it can double as a bidet.

The simple atmosphere is calming after running around the curvy Baroque splendors of the neighborhood. I don't even mind the 11 p.m. curfew. I bring a bottle of wine back to my room and stay up late writing and sipping from a paper cup, feeling a twinge of naughtiness: *Will one of*

*the sisters knock on my door and bust me for drinking?* Outside my tiny alley-level window, *signorine* in high heels clickety-clack by — their breathy exchanges with their boyfriends adds a spicy touch.

In the lower level dining rooms at lunch and dinner, the place comes vividly alive. The nuns become waitresses, zig-zagging among the wooden tables, happily dishing out pasta and stews from big steaming bowls, handing out pitchers of wine and baskets of apples and tangerines for dessert. The food, prepared by Chef/Sister Rafaella, is great — flavorful and hearty like the best of Rome's simple trattorias.

I reserve ahead to take all my meals here, blending in with the mostly Italian guests — an enthusiastic group of fifth graders on a class trip from *Liguria*, a judge from Milan who checks



*"When they are at Rome, they do there*



ning around the curvy Baroque splendors of the neighborhood.  
p.m. curfew."

in a couple times a month when she has business in Rome. We all bask in the sister's maternal attention.

"We come here when I'm too tired to cook," a *signora* who lives nearby tells me. Sister Cecilia chimes in with, "The *Borghesi* are our neighbors too — they eat here all the time. Cardinal Ratzinger ate here twice before he became Pope!"

Check out is at the ridiculous time of 9:30 a.m. I stand before Sister Milena, who asks, "How many nights did you stay and how many meals did you eat?" Does she think I'd lie to a nun? Didn't she see me at mass this morning? I was the only non-nun at the attached *Santa Lucia della Tinta* church, named "Tinta" for the dyers who once lived in this quarter. It's a dusky Baroque place, renovated in the 17th century, with dramatic paintings of Madonnas and Saint Lucy.

I answer Sister Milena honestly, and she nods in approval, just like Sister Ann did in Catechism class when I gave the right response to a confirmation question. Except instead of giving me a gold star, Sister Milena smiles and hands me my bill.

### Casa di Santa Francesca Romana

There's not a nun in sight at this guest house on a quiet pedestrian street in Trastevere, one of my favorite old Roman neighborhoods. The fashionable young signora at reception tells me it's an *Istituto per Spirituali Esercizi* — a training place for priests. Somber paintings of Popes and cardinals fill the shiny marble-floored salons and hallways, giving the place a holy vibe and again the simplicity brings on a calm sensation.

The building was a 14th-century palazzo, where *Francesca Buzza* moved in as



Santa Francesca Romana

a 12-year-old bride. She dedicated her life to charitable deeds — caring for the sick and performing miracles — becoming so beloved by the locals she was named "Romana." She died here and in 1608 was canonized as the co-patron saint of Rome.

My room has a 3-star look, spacious with modern furnishings and a white-tiled bathroom with shower. The best feature is a big shuttered window that opens to a view of a neighbor's rooftop garden — lemon trees, palms and bougainvillea hanging above a narrow cobblestone street.

The breakfast room is cheerful, full of German, Danish and American tourists studying guidebooks and grazing an abundant buffet of cereals, cakes, breads, cheese, yogurt and cured meats. There's an inner courtyard on the ground floor a few steps away, with a fountain and tables where morning *cappuccino* can be enjoyed in warmer months.

Since there's no curfew, I can hang out late with friends at *La Fraschetta*, one of my favorite nearby restaurants. Topsy from wine and housemade *amaro*, I stumble in after midnight, avoiding the gaze from the lobby portrait of Pope John Paul II as I wait for an elevator.

### Casa Santa Brigida

Craving nuns, I make a lunch reservation at *Casa Santa Brigida*, probably the best known of Rome's convent hotels, which sits in a great location off *Piazza Farnese*.

The sisters here win hands down for the best outfits: crisp gray robes, black and white wimples adorned with red studs. They're a Swedish order, founded by Saint Bridget (called "the Mystic of the North"), who lived and died here in the 14th century. The downstairs rooms are richly appointed with dark wood antiques and oriental rugs.

The most *simpatica* dark-eyed nun who welcomes me says unfortunately I can't have a look at the rooftop, it's

*continued on page 6*

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as they see done." —Robert Burton

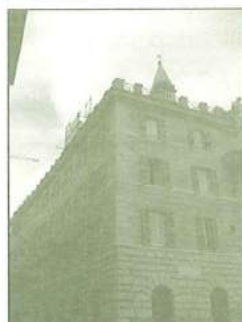


under repair. (I'd heard from friends who've stayed here that the upstairs terrace and rooms are beautiful). And *la suora* can't show me any rooms either, they're all booked. Even in off-season February, this place needs to be reserved far in advance.

In the dining room, I sit facing a long table that gets filled up with handsome young men. It turns out they're the rooftop workers. Some have that Fabio ponytail from the *Sopranos* style going on, that I find quite attractive. I feel lucky to have stopped by on the day these men are treated to a special lunch, complete with the portly, formidable Mother



Casa Santa Brigida



Superior giving them a heartfelt *grazie* toast.

Like Fraterna Domus but with more formality, the nuns serve us family-style: a simple pasta with tomato sauce, grilled beef, spinach, vanilla gelato for dessert. Honestly it's bland compared to Domus, and with so

many great restaurants right out the door off the Campo de' Fiori, I'm kicking myself for spending 20€ here. But then again those rooftop workers are so good on the eyes... *Is it sinful to have such thoughts in a convent?*

## Santa Sofia

Finally, I'm staying where I get buzzed in by a nun in a habit — Alleluia! Sister Tiziana, dressed all in white, speaks in a chirpy whisper. Her Italian accent sounds foreign and I find out these nuns are Ukranian — a Russian Orthodox order. The five of them all wear gold wire-rimmed glasses and float around in soft sandals, going about their business with a reserved, humble style. I gather from flyers laying around that they run counseling programs to help immigrant women who are new to Rome get set up with respectable jobs and stay out of trouble.

It's good to be in this *Monti* neighborhood, just a few blocks from the *Colosseum*, that's surprisingly not overrun by tourists. The convent sits on a square with a fountain where old women with thinning hair gossip while boys kick soccer balls around.

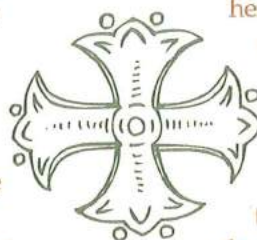
There's a cafe in the center of it, a grocery store, *gelateria* and restaurant. Real Roman life.

The hallways and lobby areas here are decorated with Russian religious art — fancy chalices in dark wood cabinets, large intricate paintings of bearded saints. My fellow guests are a group of German senior citizens. On my way to my room I pass a hunchbacked *Herr* with his pants belted up to his chest, being helped along by a large *Frau* in a flowery spring shift.

A sweet Madonna painting sits over the desk in my rectangle of a room. There's a twin bed and tiny bathroom with shower. It smells faintly of disinfectant, cleaned every day by Russian women who I see scrubbing all morning long. I leave the window open at night and get lulled to sleep by a steady, soft snore from a neighbor's room — from the *Frau* or *Herr*, I wonder?

I won't mince words about the food here: pitiful. Lunch and dinner are served buffet-style: a crock pot of straight-from-a-can vegetable soup, gray roast beef, a colander of *spaghetti* with a bowl of lukewarm *ragu* placed to its side. The bread's good and the nuns keep things in order, handing out pitchers of wine, pointing with smiles to direct me to bus my table. At breakfast, a metal pitcher of hot water and an envelope of *Nescafé* are set before me along with a plastic jug of something that tastes like *Tang*.

This is shocking for Rome, but then again it's not run by Italians. The restaurants in the neighborhood well make up for Santa Sofia's culinary flaw — there's a great cafe steps away and loads of reasonably priced trattorias neaby where Roman classics are served. I fill up on *cacio e pepe* at



## SOME FACTS ABOUT STAYING IN ROMAN CONVENTS:

- A list of Rome convents can be found on the American Church in Rome's *Santa Susanna* web-site ([www.santasusanna.org](http://www.santasusanna.org) — click on "Coming To Rome").
- It's best to send e-mail inquiries, as the nuns who answer the phones often don't speak English. Also replies could take a few days. That said, I got a kick out of their responses with lines like, "we inform actually we have a place," or signed off with "*Dio Le Benedica!*"
- Francesca Romana and Santa Sofia requested me to send a *banconota* for confirmation, but as that would add costs, I sweet e-mailed them back that it was "*impossible*" and they let it slide.
- All accept cash only and most have a nightly curfew of 11 p.m. or midnight.



where old women thinning hair gossip while boys kick soccer balls around."

*Taverna Romana*, getting home in time for my midnight curfew.

The morning church bells ring endlessly, not at all corresponding to the 7 a.m. hour. I run down to the *Santa Maria ai Monti* church to join the nuns. It's been reconfigured to Orthodox style with an ornate stained-glass screen at the altar. A burly red-haired priest presides, making the Sign of the Cross the opposite way from the Roman Catholic tradition (from right to left) — which gives me a weird

brain sensation, like patting my head and rubbing my stomach. A bite of thick bread is dipped in wine and offered to me on a golden spoon for communion.

As the service ends, the nuns, who've been so quiet, raise their voices in a perfectly harmonized holy chant. It reverberates against the stone walls, sending a calm sensation through me. Again, I feel that simple comfort that came seamlessly with these convent stays. It goes down deep, connecting

me with the fascination nuns gave me as a kid and the rich tradition of Catholicism.

I'm not renouncing 5-star luxury, but the list of guest convents all over Italy is a long and enticing one. After this blissful initiation, I can see myself mixing things up and checking into Holy Digs once in a while.

—Susan Van Allen

*Susan Van Allen wrote about the secret corners of the Veneto in the July/August issue of Dream of Italy.*

## THE DETAILS

### Intercontinental Hotel de la Ville

Via Sistina, 69  
(39) 06 67331  
(800) 327-0200

[www.intercontinental.com](http://www.intercontinental.com)

**Rates:** Start at \$460 for standard doubles, \$700 for suites, including breakfast.

### Fraterna Domus

Via Monte Brianzo, 62  
(39) 06 68802727  
[domusrm@tin.it](mailto:domusrm@tin.it)

**Rates:** 50€ per night for a single, 70€ for a double, including breakfast. Curfew is at 11 p.m. Dinner and lunch (with wine) is 13€ Restaurant closed Thursday. Even if you're not staying here, you can reserve a table for lunch or dinner.

Good neighborhood restaurant:

### L'Osteria de Memmo

Via dei Soldati, 22-23  
(39) 06 68135277  
[www.osteriadememmoisantori.it](http://www.osteriadememmoisantori.it)  
Closed Sunday

### Casa di Santa Francesca Romana

Via dei Vascellari 61  
(39) 06 5812125  
[www.sfromana.it](http://www.sfromana.it)

**Rates:** 77€ for a single to 170€ for a quadruple, including breakfast.  
No curfew

Good neighborhood restaurant:

### La Fraschetta

Via S. Francesco a Ripa, 134  
(39) 06 5816012  
[www.lafraschetta.com](http://www.lafraschetta.com)  
Closed Sunday

### Casa di Santa Brigida

Piazza Farnese, 96  
(39) 066 8892596  
[piazzafarnese@brigidine.org](mailto:piazzafarnese@brigidine.org)  
**Rates:** 95€ for a single, 105€ for a double, breakfast included.

### Santa Sofia

Piazza Madonna dei Monti, 3  
(39) 06 485-778  
[santasofia@tiscalinet.it](mailto:santasofia@tiscalinet.it)  
**Rates:** 42€ for a single, 67€ for a double, breakfast included.  
Curfew: Midnight  
Lunch or dinner: 15€ with wine

Good neighborhood restaurant:

### Taverna Romana

Via Madonna dei Monti, 79  
(39) 06 4745325  
Closed Tuesday



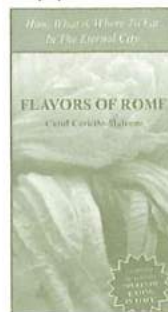
1 € = \$1.39 at press time

## DON'T GO TO ROME WITHOUT THIS BOOK!

*Flavors of Rome: How, What & Where To Eat In The Eternal City* is a hot-off-the-presses paperback that guides travelers to "do as the Romans do" — that is eat well and steer clear of tourist traps. American author *Carol Coviello-Malzone* has lived part-time in an apartment overlooking the Campo de' Fiori for 15 years, thoroughly immersing herself in the city's culinary culture.

Included are reviews of 39 of her favorite restaurants, and for travelers eating anywhere in Italy, there's a glossary to help translate menus, and a most informative "Rules of Eating" chapter where she covers everything from the basics — "If you ask for a latte, you'll get a glass of milk" to "If you see an \* next to a menu item, that means ingredients have been frozen, so it's better to order something else." The slim volume (sells for \$11.95) easily fits in a purse or jacket pocket — a must-carry for visitors looking to be savvy about eating well in Rome and beyond. For more information, call (813) 221-8030 or visit [www.flavorsofrome.com](http://www.flavorsofrome.com)

—Susan Van Allen



ice for monasteries and convents in Italy.