

Night with the nuns a tourist hit thanks to Emily in Paris

The hit Netflix series has moved to Rome and one character's stay in a convent guesthouse has highlighted the benefits of these well-located, cheaper rooms



Francisca Garcia Zafra, mother superior at the San Giuseppe della Montagna convent and guesthouse

STEPHANIE GENGOTTI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

[Share](#)

[Save](#)

It has been blamed for flooding the French capital with its fans, filling cafés with Instagrammers and turning Montmartre into a sea of selfie sticks. Now the hit Netflix show *Emily in Paris* is coming for the nuns.

The latest series, which came out last month, saw the show's protagonist move to Rome. As other characters checked into five-star hotels in the city, savvy Frenchman Luc bedded down with nuns on the Aventine Hill. It was, he crowed triumphantly, "a really good rate and very central".

Luc's convent was fictional, but he had landed on a real-life travel hack. For tourists on a budget, Italy's nearly 3,000-strong collection of religious properties with rooms can't be beaten — and more than six million people stay in them every year.



Zafra and Mother Mariagrazia

STEPHANIE GENGOTTI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

On Wednesday, I watched the sunset flush the Vatican walls from my room at San Giuseppe della Montagna, a convent guesthouse, then nipped across to the [Sistine Chapel](#) before dinner. When you're sleeping three minutes away, it would be a sin not to.

San Giuseppe della Montagna is a *casa per ferie*, a “house for holidays”, the official name for guesthouses belonging to religious orders. Of the 2,940 in Italy, 518 are in Lazio, the region around Rome, according to the booking portal Ospitalità Religiosa. This is because every religious order needed a headquarters near the Vatican, said Fabio Rocchi, the president of the non-profit Associazione Ospitalità Religiosa Italiana, which runs the website on a voluntary basis.

Congregations would buy large Roman villas to house visiting members and trainees who came to study in Rome. But as vocations fall, many rooms now lie empty.

By renting them out to the public, at rates far below what hotels charge, congregations cover their overheads, Rocchi said — and bankroll charity projects around the world. “It keeps the wolf from the door,” he said. “If I stay with nuns in Rome, I fund a charity without knowing. I pay less than I would have, but still do a good deed.”

With church attendance dropping, it's also a way for nuns and monks to meet the public, he said, although they avoid proselytising. “We did a survey asking if guests are of a different religion or atheist, would you take them, and all the Rome properties said it's no problem,” he said. “They know people come to see the city.”



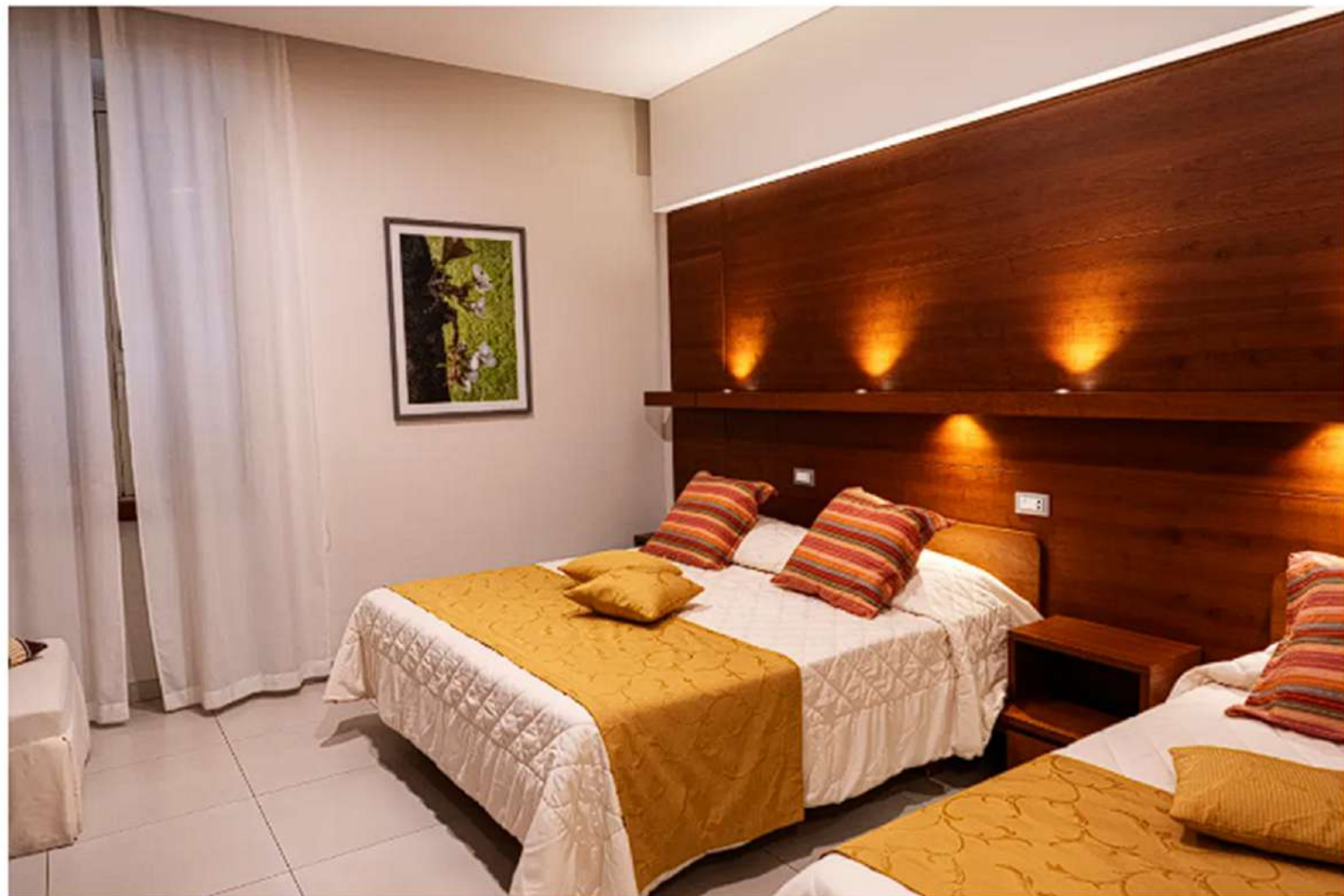
Julia Buckley on assignment

STEPHANIE GENGOTTI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

San Giuseppe della Montagna belongs to the Valencia-based congregation of San José de la Montaña, which was founded by the Blessed Petra of St Joseph in the late 1800s to care for the “abandoned”. In their elegant 19th-century villa outside the Vatican walls, the four resident nuns look after at-risk children.

Across the pretty courtyard, past kids’ bikes, plaques bearing religious quotes (“Open the door to Christ”), palms and a mandarin tree, is another villa, converted into a guesthouse in 1990. “Nobody is obliged to partake in the liturgy or prayers,” said mother superior Francisca Garcia Zafra. “We only give the timings to people who ask.”

Staying at San Giuseppe della Montagna may be cheap but it doesn't feel it. My single bed takes me back several decades, but the room is modern and comfortable, with a heater/air conditioner, ample wardrobe, and a large bathroom with an enormous walk-in shower.



A room at Villa Angelina

STEPHANIE GENGOTTI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

It's also spotless, a crucial selling point. Religious accommodation tends to be well-located, cheaper than hotels (doubles here cost £104), cleaner than hostels and rigorously safe. Some have a curfew, as Luc discovered in *Emily in Paris*, but guests at San Giuseppe della Montagna get keys so they can return late.

Prayer cards of the Blessed Petra sit on the reception desk, and a Jesus statuette stands beside the lift, but there's no crucifix behind the bed (it's discreetly over the door). The reception is staffed by lay people. "An American once asked where the gym was," said receptionist Elisabetta Ovidi. "But most people just want a clean room." Guests are mostly either budget travellers or devout Catholics, she said. When I visited the simple chapel in the nuns' villa, some guests from Hong Kong were praying.

I have also stayed a few times at Villa Angelina, outside central Rome on the Via Nomentana. The 19th-century villa is the headquarters of the Sisters of the Company of Mary, our Lady, which was founded in Bordeaux in 1607.

The guesthouse, which opened in 2018, offers 28 elegant bedrooms on the second floor, above the 11 resident nuns. It is staffed by lay people, managed by Federica Cenciotti, a dynamic 42-year-old who joined from the insurance trade. "When I arrived I said, 'Oh god, nuns! What am I going to do here?' But I had an idea of convent life that wasn't accurate. They're very open-minded and modern," she said. The nuns, who all have university degrees, come from various professional backgrounds. They follow their forward-thinking founder, Joan of Lestonnac, who opened 30 schools for girls during her lifetime.



"Oh god, nuns!" was Federica Cenciotti's reaction when she started work at a convent

STEPHANIE GENGOTTI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



The order swapped their habits for regular clothes in 1970, which means that the nuns aren't immediately recognisable, says Cenciotti. Since the guesthouse is also listed on Booking.com, guests might not even realise they're on holy ground. There's a church downstairs, between the reception and the lift, but the nuns prefer to use their smaller chapel upstairs.

On the walls hang photos taken by a sister, Maria Cristina Sanz Garcia, on her travels to the order's projects around the world. "They say, 'Why should we be fossilised behind a label?' You have to adapt to the times," said Cenciotti.

Villa Angelina's 24-hour reception organises airport transfers, in-room aperitivo and even breakfast in bed. While most religious guesthouses, including San Giuseppe della Montagna, have fixed tariffs, Cenciotti employs dynamic pricing, as hotels do, to maximise income that goes towards the order's worldwide schools, although rooms are almost always a good €100 below three-star hotels. And not many of those have a beautiful garden with towering pine trees.



Guests at the San Giuseppe della Montagna get keys so they can return later than some convents with a curfew

Cenciotti, who watches *Emily in Paris*, hopes the show will encourage more guests. “It made me smile,” she said of the convent episode. “It was a bit of a caricature, but it was cute. We are a hotel to all effects. There’s no curfew, anyone can enter, and all religions are welcomed.”

Although the show focused on Rome, nuns in other cities are prepared for an influx of tourists. “We want Americans,” said Rosamaria Falco, mother superior and manager of Domus Mariae Benessere in Syracuse, Sicily, which is run by the Ursuline Sisters of the Holy Family. “We’re thrilled when Americans come, they’re delightful. As soon as they see a nun, they want a photo.”



Emily in Paris, in Rome for season 5

Falco, 75, worked as a hotel receptionist before becoming a nun, and used her knowledge to convert her order’s 17th-century palazzo into accommodation in 2008, even adding a spa. “Our founder Angela Merici said, ‘Keep to the old way but live a new life,’” she said. “We live in a world that goes fast, and we try to meet new demands without losing our identity.”