

‘Our host was an actress, her husband a charmer...’

Cities are hectic places these days, where the natives themselves often feel lost among strangers. To create some calm and sense of place I always

retreat to B&Bs. The owner’s suggestions can be invaluable: where to dine, how to avoid the crowds, where to find that ancient Roman fish market.

Our Roman B&B looked down on a tiny piazza in Rome’s Trastevere district. Our host was a beautiful actress, her husband a charmer. We dawdled over coffee, drank their sweet after-dinner wine, and followed their suggestions. We never clashed with those crowds of strangers, only with the two other people waiting to spy the Vatican dome late at night through a keyhole. I will keep it a secret for my host to reveal to others.

Baroquely beautiful Lecce, one of the delights of Puglia, was another place that might have been confusing for a one-night visit. Our host was there to guide us through the thicket of surprises. Our 20ft high bedroom, decorated with old murals and modern art, immersed us in the grandeur of the town. No hotel could have competed for informal splendour. We lived like princes.

Naples, too, was made easier by our urbane host. He lent me his richly stocked library – and a bicycle. The hectic streets stretch between palaces of ravishing antiquity and museums awash with Roman artefacts; confusion lies in wait for the uninformed visitor. Not only did we have a friendly guide, but we had Paulo’s perspective on a complex and exciting city.

Italy has too much history and beauty to bear on your own; you

need support from Italians who want to look after you – and they are often such fun. Better still, staying with them ensures that your money stays there and circulates in the community. So here is my selection of 20 of the best city B&Bs in Italy.

Prices are for double room with breakfast included.

IIL GIARDINO DI BALLARO, PALERMO

In a Sicilian city awash with grand palazzi and baroque churches are the renovated stables of the Palazzo di Federico. Annalisa and her daughter’s passion for decoration shows in every detail. The building stands on a narrow street in the heart of ancient Ballarò, close to Palermo’s oldest market and cathedral. This family’s home is yours to enjoy, from the roaring fire in low season to the courtyard garden where outstanding breakfasts are served among citrus trees and palms: the dreamiest B&B.

☐ **From €120 (£104) per night (0039 0912 12215; sawdays.co.uk/ilgiardino.diballaro).**

2CASA CUSENI, TAORMINA

This villa with views of Mount Etna over the rooftops of Taormina oozes history. Over the years it has played host to many great literary giants and artists – Tennessee Williams, Bertrand Russell, Dali and Picasso, who gives his name to the main suite, were all guests of its aristocratic English owners. Guests enter a library/reception area, and the five

light-flooded bedrooms are all upstairs; the two in the towers have huge terraces and spectacular vistas; all have antique furnishings, watercolours on pastel walls and brand-new beds. Each morning breakfast – fresh fruits, homemade cakes and breads – is laid out on the top floor as you gaze out over the Bay of Naxos and plan your day touring Sicily.

□ **From €150 per night (0039 0942 28725; sawdays.co.uk/casacusenì).**

3 ROOF BAROCCO SUITE, LECCE

Lecce, the “Florence of the South”, is an architectural treasure. Each apartment at Roof Barocco suite has its own

terrace – flower-filled oases on which to laze and gaze at the wonders of the city. Peaceful rooms are traditionally furnished with a few modern touches, bathrooms are spotless, little kitchens have welcome hampers. Breakfast – a treat – is left at the door in a basket: freshly squeezed juice, a tin of warm croissants, a little glass pot of yogurt and fruits and jams from Elisabetta’s country house. Just wonderful.

□ **From €90 per night (0039 331 7585 656; sawdays.co.uk/roofbaroccosuite).**

4 PALAZZO BREGANTE, MONOPOLI

This exquisite 17th-century B&B is set in a sun-blached fishing town just down the coast from Bari, in Puglia. Deep in its winding, cobbled streets, you step through a painted arch and a door within a door, up marble stairs worn shiny over centuries... and you’re in a beautifully restored palazzo. Five soothing bedrooms have restored furniture, fluffy towels, balconies; the two upper rooms, reached by courtyard stairs lined with orchids and vases, can join to make a family apartment. Between Bari and the Roman road to Brindisi, on a coastline of sandy bays and fishing villages, Monopoli is one of Puglia’s seaside treasures – and the palazzo a gem within it.

□ **From €110 per night (0039 080 887 6983; sawdays.co.uk/palazzobregante).**

5 ATTICO PARTENOPEO, NAPLES

Enjoy rooftop feasts of organic fruits, Amalfi jams and Neapolitan pastries as you overlook the shopping domes of Galleria Umberto I. Base yourself here, up on the fifth floor (there’s a lift) of

one of the classiest streets of Naples, and you’re within walking distance of everything: the Royal Palace, the Opera, the Castel, and the stunning modern metro Toledo. Owner Stefania is a delightful host with a passion for her city, happy to advise you from breakfast until 4pm. You could explore the teeming streets of the Spanish Quarter, track down the best pizzas in Naples (Da Sorbillo is minutes away), or stroll down to the Porto Beverello and catch a ferry to Capri.

□ **From €65 per night (sawdays.co.uk/atticopartenopeo).**

6 ADELINA GUESTHOUSE, ROME

Right by the Colosseum, in one of Rome’s largest squares where pieces of the ancient city are scattered on all sides, is this newly restored, well-organised apartment. Here you’ll find a delightful combination of youth, dedication and family tradition with a fresh sense of hospitality and great sensitivity to travellers’ needs.

Breakfast is brought to you in your room – at a time that suits you. The magnificent Basilica of St John Lateran, Rome’s first church, is just around the corner. On Sunday, hire a bike and ride the lovely Appian Way.

□ **From €90 per night (0039 338 984 7330; sawdays.co.uk/adelinaguesthouse).**

7 MY NAVONA, ROME

The best view from this peachy, classic 18th-century palazzo is from the smallest room facing the beautiful

Bramante church. Your gracious, knowledgeable hosts couldn’t be more helpful. Their third-floor

guest rooms are in two adjacent apartments, each with a foyer sitting area. You breakfast royally in your room, from a large trolley with porcelain cups, cake, toast, homemade jams, yogurt and cereal. Visit Rome's other highlights then return to lose yourself in the throb of fascinating, twisting streets of this colourful, characterful neighbourhood. Beware the urge to stay for weeks.

□ From €120 per night (0039 334 6034 288; sawdays.co.uk/mynavona).

8 1865 RESIDENZA D'EPOCA, FLORENCE

Named after the era when the city was Italy's capital, this *residenza* is Florence at its best – authentic, graceful, and uncompromisingly chic. Michel and Cinzia, the owners, have combined the elegance of 19th-century Florence with the comforts of 21st-century living. The five bedrooms are named after writers who visited the city in the 1800s – Dostoevsky and Henry James among others – adding to the B&B's quietly cultural air. There are bits that take you by surprise, too – like the breakfast room with walls dressed in ruby red fabric. Open the windows for the green views and birdsong of the beautiful Wilson-Gattai gardens.

□ From €135 per night (0039 055 2340 586; sawdays.co.uk/1865residenzadepoca).

9 LA STANZE DI SANTA CROCE, FLORENCE

A great find, this very old “*terratetto*”, nestled between its neighbours on a small street off the Piazza Santa Croce, is perfect for those who want to stay in the historic centre. There's attention to detail at every turn; everything has been thought through beautifully. The four elegant rooms, one with a

four-poster, aren't large but are beautifully presented, each named after famous Florentine bells, each with its own refined identity; they provide sanctuary from the heat of the city, while the jasmine-garlanded breakfast terrace is the perfect place from which to enjoy Mariangela's exceptional baking. Your charming host runs her own highly acclaimed Tuscan cookery courses, so make sure you book a lesson during your stay.

□ From €145 per night (0039 347 2593 010; sawdays.co.uk/lastanzedisantacroce).

10 RELAIS VILLA ANTEA, FLORENCE

This peaceful 1900s villa is a 15-minute walk from Piazza San Marco – and has parking. Off a leafy residential square, close to restaurants, antique shops, botanic gardens and a Russian Orthodox church, Villa Antea is a friendly Italian-family concern, a lovely little find. Enjoy continental breakfast with fruits – and perhaps homemade *bomboloni* (mini doughnuts) – served at tiny round tables in the elegant dining room. Up the white stone stairs are big, airy bedrooms

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**SEE NAPLES
AND SIGH**

Enjoy hectic
streets and
ravishing
antiquity





**IT'S PLUSH
HERE**

Relais Villa
Antea, main;
Palazzo
Bregante, inset

with tall windows and time-worn parquet, lavish silken drapes in yellows and greens, net curtains, pristine covers and walk-in wardrobes. Through the side gate is a courtyard shaded by horse chestnut trees; a further pebbled courtyard makes a tranquil spot for an aperitivo before a night out.

□ **From €100 per night (0039 055 484 106; sawdays.co.uk/relaisvilliantea).**

11 PARADISO NUMERO 4, SIENA

This is a perfect spot for exploring art, architecture and food, close to Siena's historical centre, public transport links and the Via Francigena for long-distance hikers too. Two rooms can be let together, sharing a bathroom; the other two are en suite with smart little bathrooms, making the most of limited space. An adorable glassed-in veranda is just wide enough for two guests to enjoy a drink, tucked in between red-tiled roofs; the white-painted breakfast room is welcoming with a big communal table.

Serene Paola puts her heart and soul into breakfast, all locally sourced and homemade – she's passionate about the environment, responsible living and tourism, so the flat's furniture is a mix of antique and recycled, she avoids waste, and there's a wonderful mix of vintage linens.

□ **From €80 per night (0039 334 3180 611; sawdays.co.uk/paradisonumero4).**

12 ARENA DI LUCCA, LUCCA

Lucca's amphitheatre was constructed on Roman remains and, for two centuries, houses were built organically into its ancient walls. The

first storey of three such houses comprises this small B&B (woven into one, they make an irresistible whole). If the position is special, then the place itself is even more so, thanks to the generosity and graciousness of your hosts, Alex and Livia, who go out of their way to make your stay perfect. All is warm, elegant and cosy inside; original terracotta floor tiles beautifully waxed, pictures prettily hung, chunky ceiling beams. Stay a week; for history, beauty, music, churches, and the lovely seaside from Cinque Terre to the Maremma.

□ **From €100 per night (0039 339 678 6299; sawdays.co.uk/arenadilucca).**

13 CIMA ROSA, VENICE

In magical Venice, take a water taxi to this 15th century palazzo which overlooks the Grand Canal and oozes all the elegance a stylist could wish for. Owners Brittany and Danielle, architects and interior designers both, have poured energy and love into this project and have an eye for the sublime. Deeply satisfying bedrooms have dark chocolate tones and cool turquoises, perfectly set off by polished marble tiles and original parquet, exposed beams and well-chosen antiques. One has a bath tub to disappear into, another a renovated wash basin from the 1700s; all have inspirational views across the canal where the palazzos are lit up at night. It's romantic, hugely welcoming – and you can live like the “donne nobile” before you.

□ **From €190 per night (0039 041 099 5271; sawdays.co.uk/cimarosa).**

14 LA VILLEGGIATURA, VENICE

Here, you are right at the centre of Venice's bustling heart, yet Francesca's palazzo guest rooms are both peaceful and elegant. Find antiques, bold frescoes and pretty glass lamps; Persian rugs on parquet floors and warm-coloured fabrics; fridges, safes and silk kimonos. Sink into beds with memory foam mattresses and fine linen, the headboards carved and draped.

Bathrooms too are luxurious, tiled and modern. Kind Barbara and Sunil look after you well with breakfasts of local pastries, jams and fruits. Eat either in your room or admire the view of the San Cassiano Church tower from the bright breakfast room.

☐ **From €85 per night. (0039 041 5244 673; sawdays.co.uk/ lavilleggiatura).**

15 BLOOM & SETTIMO CIELO GUEST HOUSE, VENICE

In the heart of Venice, yet not overwhelmed by tourists, is this perfectly restored house and *residenza*. Spacious, light and modern, it has magical views and fine antiques. Enjoy a glass of prosecco from your own fridge and step out on the rooftop terrace, a privileged spot with a panoramic view, magically lit at night. Bedrooms are spacious and packed with antiques, buffet breakfasts are elegant and the Chiesa San Vidal is three minutes away – a peerless setting for Vivaldi.

☐ **From €139 per night (0039 340 1498 872; sawdays.co.uk/ bloomandsettimo).**

16 IL GIARDINO DI GIULIA, VENICE

This is a rare find: a 16th-century palazzetto which doesn't cost a fortune. Small and charming rather than grand and sumptuous, it oozes authenticity and a Venetian vibe. Plus it's off Santa Croce's tourist track, yet it is close to the station and Grand Canal. The narrow, shabby-chic exterior hides quirkily stylish rooms, which are a mix of vintage and modern furnishings beneath open rafters and whitewashed walls. Marco's home-made bread and fruit "crostate" are certainly not to be missed. Venetian-born Marco and architect Monica, who live on the top floor, are gentle and wonderfully knowledgeable, and they will direct their guests to the best bars, trattorias and authentic neighbourhoods. This is a slice of secret Venice.

☐ **From €70 per night (0039 328 4162 501; sawdays.co.uk/ ilgardinodigiulia).**

17 B&B DOMUS NOVA, VERONA

Stroll down the Via Mazzini, nod at Gucci and Bulgari. People-watch on the Piazza delle Erbe, where the crowds throng until 2am. Soak up grand opera beneath a starry summer sky at the Roman amphitheatre. And return to the warmth and classicism of the Domus Nova, in the car-free heart of Verona; it is wonderfully quiet. This is a grand family house that has been restored to its former splendour. The look is luxury hotel, the feel is B&B and the views are fabulous: on to the large and lovely Piazza dei Signori and its historic tower. Bedrooms, on the third and top floors, are spacious yet cosy and one has a balcony for overlooking the sites.

☐ **From €150 per night (sawdays.co.uk/domusnova).**

18 AL BATTISTERO D'ORO, PARMA

Tucked behind the Duomo off a tranquil square in a traffic-free zone is this grand two-storey yellow palazzo, Patrizia's home. Your host lives here with her family and gives guests two elegant bedrooms: a very private double "Duchessa", and a twin/double "Reina", close to the dining room.

☐ **From €80 per night (0039 338 4904 697; sawdays.co.uk/ albatbisterodoro).**

19 PALAZZO ARRIVABENE, MANTUA

Despite the grandness of this frescoed palazzo in historic, lake-bound Mantua, its owners Claudio and Luciana bring a warmth and friendliness to every stay. Each of the rooms, which are all en suite, and all on the second

floor (reached by stairs only), reflects a particular passion of a particular family member. “Camera 800” houses a beloved aunt’s paintings and prints alongside thick Persian rugs and gilt mirrors. Breakfast is served in two large salones that double as lounges for the rest of the day – and the first meal of the day is a huge feast which consists of brioches, fresh fruit and “sbrisolona” (a traditional crunchy tart).

□ From €120 per night (0039 0376 328 685; sawdays.co.uk/palazzoarrivabene).

20 DOLCEMELA, FERRARA

Hidden inside the city’s walls on a narrow cobbled street, the house is in a row of ancient dusky-pink brick buildings. Rooms (two on the ground floor, four upstairs) surround an inner shrub-filled courtyard, pretty in pink with a soothing marble and bronze fountain. Homely bedrooms, with open rafters, are traditionally furnished with darkly gleaming parquet flooring, solid wood beds and bright splashes of colour in the curtains and bedspreads. Breakfast is a feast of cakes and pastries and an array of cured meats, cheeses, fresh breads and fruit purées.

□ From €70 per night (0039 0532 769 624; sawdays.co.uk/dolcemela).

For more on these B&Bs, go to sawdays.co.uk. *Sawday’s Special Places to Stay: Italy* (£15.99) is available for £12.99 plus p&p from Telegraph Books (0844 871 1514; visit books.telegraph.co.uk).





LAID-BACK VACATION

The Cima Rosa's owners have poured love into their B&B, above, while Il Giardino di Ballaro, below, offers all the comforts of home





**DREAM
LOCATIONS**

A bedroom in 1865
Residenza D'Epoca,
above, and My
Navona, inset left



**UP ON
THE ROOF**

Take time out to
enjoy the views in
the sunshine at
Attico Partenopeo
in Naples