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In Italy, a room for the soul

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Special to the Tribune

March 23, 2008

The room was clean and simple. White-washed stone walls enclosed the essential wooden furniture: a chair, a writing desk, two single beds and a dresser.

The view out the window was another matter. My wife, Laura, and I had a room in the **Istituto San Lodovico**, a convent in the hill-fortress town of Orvieto in central Italy. Its outer wall was part of the ancient fortifications, hundreds of feet above the valley that was lush with May's greening. The Umbrian countryside—olive groves, pastures, symmetrical rows of cypress trees—rolled away to the horizon.

That we found this room seemed something of a gift. We had arrived by train from Rome in the afternoon, my wife pulling her roller bag behind her and me toting a backpack. We'd had no reservations. The first religious hostel we stopped into seemed too big, too institutional. **San Lodovico**—smaller, older, more intimate—was just right. It became our comfortable and comforting home for five days.

We were in Italy on a three-week trip that was a tribute and a memorial to our daughter, Meghan, who died in a bus crash in Peru in May 2006. She was a perpetual adventurer, a fearless and joyful spirit, and she loved Italy. To honor her memory, we knew we had to be on the move; it's the way she would have wanted it.

But we also wanted some peace, some quiet and some room to think. We found all of these things staying at three religious hostels as we traveled across Italy.

Monastic accommodations are an ancient tradition among many Christian orders; hospitality toward strangers is written into the gospels, and many orders have made it a part of their practice. In today's Italy, it's also a way to bring in some extra money and to make use of empty chambers.

At **San Lodovico**, we befriended one of the nuns in the convent, who showed us the beautiful frescoes painted in niches and along hallways. It was her belief that Michelangelo himself had tested out some of his themes here, using the walls as his canvas. But in terms of the history of

the place, Michelangelo would have been a relatively recent visitor; the old city sits on a hill that's been occupied nearly 3,000 years.

We spent our days walking the town, eating in cafes and basking in the sunshine with the locals, who also seemed to be relishing the return of spring. We savored the chance to slow down, linger over meals and watch the world go by.

Our next stop was Assisi, which, compared with the low-key pleasures of Orvieto, was a religious theme park, overrun with tourists and packed with shops selling souvenirs that evoke the saint whose name is linked with the town. At times, that carnival was a little hard to reconcile with a gentle man named Francesco who wore ragged sack cloth, talked to animals and lived in abject poverty.

Again, we found a quiet place to observe the swirl of people and commerce. This time it was the convent Suore Francesanne Dei Sacri Cuori, where we spent two nights. And again, the cost was minimal, especially considering the sinking value of the dollar against the euro: We paid 35 euros a night (about \$50 then) for a room for two with a bathroom.

Our final convent stay was at the Santa Margherita Institute in Cortona, the Italian hill town featured in "Under the Tuscan Sun." We spent two nights. By chance, our full day in the beautiful stone fortress town coincided with a holiday, and the piazza was full of people strolling, talking, enjoying the sun. We ate our meals at sidewalk cafes in the piazza. At dinner, I ordered veal parmesan, which was served with a balsamic vinegar reduction. I was so enthusiastic about the meal that the waiter took me back into the kitchen to meet the chef. He showed me the tiny kitchen, and when the same order came in, he insisted that I watch as he and his wife made the dish in tandem; it was a pas de deux of knife, flame and pan that I won't forget.

In the village of Camprena in Tuscany, we visited the Monastero di Sant'Anna, the serene monastery where many scenes from "The English Patient" were filmed. We decided that should we return, we would put the hostel in this abbey at the top of our list.

The Italians seem to know how to slow down and savor life, to enjoy the day as it unfolds. We felt the spirit of our daughter in that joyful savoring of life, and in the way that Italians seemed to make the best of things, even when things weren't going smoothly.

When we were passing through the town of Gubbio, we took shelter from a sudden downpour in a small bistro, crowded for lunch.

We were enjoying our meal when we saw a man step under the awning. He tried to collapse his umbrella, but it wouldn't fold. Half in and half out of the pouring rain, he struggled and wrestled with it, getting more and more frustrated. Soon, everyone in the restaurant was watching this small drama.

Finally, he grimaced, cursed and snapped the umbrella in two, and then broke into helpless laughter, which then rippled through the crowd like happy thunder in the rain clouds.

PLANNING YOUR VISIT

With the dollar sinking against the euro, Italy's religious hostels have practical, as well as a spiritual, appeal. Most offer simple, clean rooms and a basic breakfast for 35 to 50 euros a night. (That's about \$55 to \$78 at recent exchange rates.)

For the most part we visited convents and monasteries, and chose places that suited us. One caveat: Many religious hostels require at least two-night stays. For more general information on finding and booking religious hostels in Italy, check out www.monasterystays.com.

CHOICE PICKS

If we had it to do over, the *Monastero di Sant'Anna* in the village of Camprena in Tuscany would be at the top of our list. Because many scenes in "The English Patient" were filmed in this spectacularly austere abbey, reservations are a good idea, and rooms are more expensive—65 euros (http://www.terretoscaneagency.it/sannast_ing.htm).

In Assisi, we stayed at a Franciscan convent—*Suore Francescane Dei Sacri Cuori*—which was at 12 Via Borgo Arentino. The rate was 35 euros with bath. For more information and options, check out www.assisi online.com.

In Cortona, we stayed at the *Santa Margherita Institute*, 15 Via Cesare Battisti, for 30 euros a night. For more information, go to www.cortonaweb.net.

Our favorite stay was at the *Istituto San Lodovico*, right on the Piazza Ranieri in the old city of Orvieto. It charged 35 euros for a double room with bath—amazing considering that the view from the window would beat just about any five-star hotel. Go to www.orvietoonline.com.

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