



The Pope's Room,
with frescoes by
Baroque painter
Francesco Allegri.

Papal Privileges After a no-expense-spared restoration, a 17th-century pope's secret love nest has become Rome's most exquisite new lodging.



From top: The apartment's salon, with a bedroom suite in the background; a hot tub surrounded by a mosaic of more than 300,000 handmade tiles.

POPE INNOCENT X, whenever he visited his mistress, Olimpia Maidalchini, in the second-floor apartment he kept for her next to the church of Sant'Agnese in Agone, on the Piazza Navona, rode up the building's spiral ramp on a white donkey. Or so the story goes. The ramp is still there but no donkey—yet the spirit of idiosyncratic grandeur is still very much present in the 17th-century apartment, now named the Holy Deer San Lorenzo City Lodge and restored to become one of Rome's most singular places to stay: an opulent two-suite residence with better-than-a-hotel services in an unbeatable location.

The owners, Giorgia and Stefano Barbini, bought the rambling space in 2017, after its then-owner had begun and abandoned a renovation. The couple worked in the fashion business for decades (Giorgia is the granddaughter of the founder of Brioni), so they are fluent in good taste and expert design. They finished the apartment with just enough reverence for its original elements—most notably the frescoed ceilings—but also plenty of modern design ideas. Marble and brocade mix with minimalist furnishings in plush tones of gold, pewter, and crimson. There's wit and an imaginativeness that plays against the pomp, as in a room decorated in Brioniesque tweeds and a salon with a high-tech player piano (ask for a mind-blowing demonstration). The Pope's Room—the real showstopper in the place—contains a whirlpool installed in the Sant'Agnese's bell tower. And the second bedroom actually juts out into the church next door—go inside the nave, look up at a spot in the transept, and know with a sense of true decadence that just behind the wall is your bathroom.

It turns out the Barbinis are just as good at the service element. Holy Deer's majordomo, Gustavo Visentini, tends to all matters with warmth and precision, whether it's morning coffee or a private excursion around Rome.

This is actually the couple's third hospitality project. Their first, the White Deer, a mountain lodge in San Lorenzo, Italy, was their personal retreat until, as Stefano says, "we decided to change our life," step away from the fashion industry, and convert the house into a luxury vacation rental. This was followed by *Blue Deer*, a custom-built catamaran that sleeps eight and sails along the Italian coast in summer. While staying at Holy Deer, I got the feeling that the Barbinis think of all their properties as their homes, deserving of meticulous care. Almost every detail has a backstory. I became fixated on the matte-black terra-cotta floor tiles; Stefano had found seemingly the only producer in Italy who makes them. The most comfortable mattress I've ever slept on came from a tiny company called b-beds that makes only a handful a year. The bed plinth in the Pope's Room is a marvel: It depicts wood in bronze, made using a reverse casting technique. Stefano knows a guy who knows a guy who can make the most amazing version of just about anything. Lying upon one masterpiece and looking up at another, it's easy to think you might just be a pope yourself, or his mistress. *\$11,360 per night; sanlorenzolodges.com.*—Jeffries Blackerby

