

Travel

If you stand at the centre of the Piazza Navona in Rome, facing the concave façade of the 17th-century church of Sant'Agnese in Agone, and look just below the southernmost of the two towers that flank its cupola, you'll see a set of tall French doors opening on to a small columned balcony.

Behind these doors is not a section of the church interior, as the façade's configuration would suggest, but instead a set of monumental frescoed chambers that were designed as the private apartments of Innocent X – born Giovanni Battista Pamphilj – who served as pope from 1644 to 1655. Anecdotally – or apocryphally, or whatever qualifier befits a nice juicy piece of ecclesiastical Baroque gossip which, despite never having been proven entirely factual, has



equally never been entirely dismissed as false – this was also the love nest of Innocent and his purported mistress, Donna Olimpia Maidalchini, the ambitious noblewoman from Viterbo who was also his sister-in-law.

The history of three-and-a-half centuries ago may be vague in places but what's certifiably true today is that, in property terms, this apartment has to be among the most singular places in the Eternal City to lay one's head. Its interior boasts more than 350 sq metres of floor space, 17th-century frescoes by Francesco Allegrini, and an entrance reached via a rather fabulous ramped spiral passageway (up which it is said, Innocent rode a snow-white donkey). From the windows are views of the famous piazza that are arguably superior to those of any of the other palazzi lining it.

All it appears to be lacking to make it the best digs in Rome, in fact, is a terrace – an observation that seems to amuse Stefano and Giorgia Barbini, the apartment's owners, when I make it. The Barbini's own San Lorenzo Lodges, a mini-chain that includes White Deer, an exclusive-use chalet just outside San Lorenzo di Sebato in the Dolomites, and Blue Deer, a 22.5-metre catamaran that they charter between the Mediterranean and the Caribbean. This apartment, now christened Holy Deer, is the Barbini's third hospitality venture, the result of their belief that a "city lodge" completes an ideal Italian circuit for their guests.

When they first started scouting properties in Rome, a rooftop with 360-degree views was top of their list: "It turns out, though, that a lot of Roman rooftops are not especially scenic," Stefano Barbini told me two weeks ago, when I was among the first guests of Holy Deer. "They're often cluttered with satellites, or air conditioning units. Which is not the view we had in mind."

"Then one day our estate agent called and said, 'I've got something that might interest you. It's not a penthouse, but it's definitely worth looking at.' When we first saw the apartment, it hadn't been worked on in some time – it was pretty old," Barbini recalls. "But we were totally intrigued. The frescoes alone were amazing. And then we saw the view on to the piazza, essentially from inside the church of Sant'Agnese. And then the history; that convinced us."

Technically, the apartment is part of the Palazzo Pamphilj, the pope's family palace, rather than the adjoining church

Halfway to heaven

Rome | A former papal apartment overlooking the Piazza Navona has been reborn as what could be the Eternal City's most exclusive place to stay. *Maria Shollenbarger* was among its first guests



(which was built shortly afterwards by the same architects). The apartment sits off the gallery that connects them.

The Barbini and their design team at Milan-based FM Architettura d'Interni managed a total renovation in less than two years – a minor miracle, in a city that is a palimpsest of historical eras and their corresponding artefacts, even the smallest of which when discovered can halt a restoration project indefinitely. And the completed Holy Deer is a sight

Clockwise from main: the main bedroom; the apartment's balcony and façade of the church of Sant'Agnese in Agone; looking out at the same balcony San Lorenzo Lodges



to behold. The entrance hall doubles as a library lined with weighty tomes on either Roman history or 1960s and 1970s fashion (a nod to Giorgia Barbini's lineage: she is the granddaughter of Gaetano Savini, the founder of tailoring house Brioni, and a former fashion executive). Beyond is a music room, a living-entertainment room, an open-plan kitchen where a personal chef prepares meals, and two en suite bedrooms. One of them – formerly Innocent's personal chamber, with eight-metre-tall ceilings and the balcony on the Piazza – is furnished with a spectacular master bathroom whose round Jacuzzi-shower alcove is lined with some 365,000 fingernail-sized hand made tiles.

Such examples of what Italians call their *eccellenze* – the artisanal finishes, products, and skills that represent a sort of national best in class – are everywhere. The cool grey terracotta floor tiles found in several of the rooms, set in a neat herringbone pattern, were commissioned exclusively for the apartment to mimic the sacristy floors of Sant'Agnese below. The Barbini scoured central Italy for a producer who could make exactly what they wanted, finally identifying one in Viterbo – Fornace Sugaroni, in business

for more than 350 years, which produced these particular tiles utilising a method dating to the Etruscan era and only recently revived.

The base of the bed in the outrageously opulent master bedroom (perhaps the moment in the whole endeavour where the Barbini's vision moves over the top; but then, a pope did sleep here) features massive encasements of elm and brass. Various stone and richly veined marble finishes throughout the apartment represent those brought to ancient and Renaissance Rome as spoils of conquest or trade: from Egypt, Persia, Turkey, and beyond. (Amusingly, the thing Stefano Barbini and I share the most excitement about during my stay is not Italian, but Dutch: the gleaming vintage Berkel meat slicer sitting in one corner of the green marble-clad kitchen, from which glorious tissue-thin sheets of 36-month aged prosciutto di San Daniele issue with a single crank of the handle. Guests are encouraged to help themselves, though a full staff is on hand to see to all details if they're not inclined to prepare their own aperitivo).

In its aggregate, Holy Deer does actually inspire a bit of awe; and while it inevitably won't be to all tastes, it makes the intended impression as a genuine showcase for some of the finest Italian craftsmen and women working today. But Rome is a lot about access and introductions, and when you are asking €10,000 a night, as the Barbini are, a roster of private and personal experiences isn't an extra, it's *de rigueur*. I didn't have time to test the programme the Barbini have put together but their offerings look promising – from viewings of private contemporary art collections in noble palaces to cellar door visits to a list of running "buddies", who will lead jogs across the city on foot, with as much or little history injected as is the guest's wish.

Then again, it would be tempting to spend most of the day on that little balcony overlooking the beautiful piazza, balanced between past and present, the world at your feet.

Maria Shollenbarger was a guest of San Lorenzo Lodges (sanlorenzolodges.com)