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The expert selection Boutique city retreats in Italy

Alastair Sawday is the author of numerous guides to small, characterful places to stay. Here he picks four hidden gems in popular city destinations from his newly published guide to Italy.

Relais Teatro Argentina, Rome

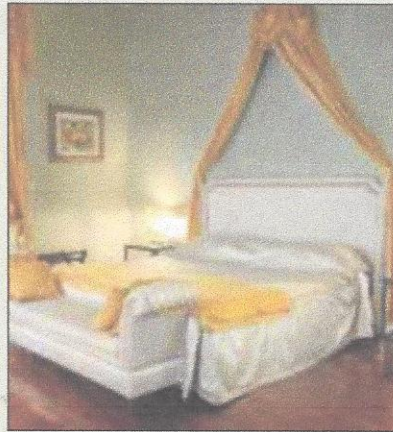
Combining five-star service with family charm and the elegance of a vintage palazzo, this six-room hotel offers the best of all worlds in central Rome. It is only steps from Largo di Torre Argentina's ruined temples and an easy walk from the Campo de' Fiori. Ring the bell at the imposing doorway and ascend the marble stairs to the warm red reception. Gilt-framed mirrors and chandeliers give a taste of what's to come in the palatial rooms: king-size beds, parquet floors, antique tables, long draped curtains and gleaming windows. There's no bar or lounge but you can take a drink out to the terrace overlooking Rome's rooftops. *Doubles from €140; relaisteatroargentina.com*

Relais Villa Antea, Florence Off a leafy residential square 15 minutes' walk from Piazza San Marco, this peaceful 1900s villa is a lovely little find. The six bedrooms have tall windows, parquet floors, lavish silken drapes and vast bathrooms. A pebbled courtyard makes a tranquil spot for an *aperitivo* before a night on the town. *Doubles from €100; villaantea.com*

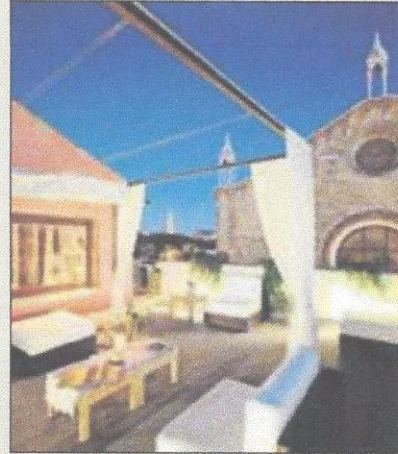
Bloom & Settimo Cielo, Venice In the heart of Venice yet not overwhelmed by tourists, this small guesthouse has panoramic views and fine antiques. There are six light-filled bedrooms on the second and third floors; on the fourth is the sitting room – with books, guide books and your own prosecco in the fridge – from which you can step out on to the rooftop terrace. *Doubles from €118; bloom-venice.com*

Al Battistero d'Oro, Parma This grand yellow palazzo lies off a tranquil square tucked behind the Duomo. A family home, it has just two elegant bedrooms for guests: beds are handsome, pillows plump, lighting is excellent and discreet, and mini safes, fridges, WiFi, satellite TV, fluffy towels and beautiful toiletries are *de rigueur*. And then there's history-rich Parma, with its wine bars, delis, trattorias and passion for gastronomy, and the Teatro Regio, one of the great homes of Italian opera. *Doubles from €90; albattisterodoro.com*

'Special Places to Stay: Italy' is published by Alastair Sawday at **£15.99; sawdays.co.uk**



Relais Villa Antea in Florence



The rooftop terrace at Bloom, Venice