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TRAVEL

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Bed-and-breakfast, Italian style

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BOLOGNA, ITALY —

Even our cab driver, slowing down at the curb, isn't sure of the address here in the center of historic Bologna. He frowns impatiently, anxious to be picking up another fare, but sees only the busy intersection, a row of nondescript office buildings and a plain brown door.

He squints, then takes off his sunglasses. "There, you see?" he says finally, pointing at a number on the door. "Is that it?"

"Where?" we say, unwilling to be dumped on the sidewalk with our luggage until we're sure this unlikely looking corner is our destination, the Bijoux di Penelope bed-and-breakfast.

Five minutes later we step out of a tiny elevator into a dimly lit hallway where the owner, Penelope Venturi, is waiting, brown hair falling over her shoulders. Welcoming us, she opens the inner door into a sunlit apartment with four bedrooms and a kitchen stocked with food.

One of the bedrooms, the white and red "rubino," (ruby) room, with a balcony looking over

Bologna's red-tiled rooftops, will be our home for the next few days. It's bright, it's private and it's secluded. But this B&B, Italian style, is not your father's hotel.

Back in the day, travelers who could afford tours of Europe's historic cities booked rooms in a better hotel with bell boys to tote the luggage, daily maid service and a restaurant and bar. But in today's Internet-connected world, nothing says "tourism is king" like the myriad lodging options that have been revolutionizing where we go and with whom we bed down for the night.

Ask a Facebook "friend" for hotel recommendations - as I did - and prepare to be overwhelmed by suggestions from everyone who reads your posts. Never, it seems, have there been so many willing homeowners eager to rent you a room. Hotels, accustomed to competing with each other, now have to contend with the new kids on the block, Airbnb, Vacation Homes for Rent by Owner, Home Exchanges and B&B associations. And for something really different, there are restored French chateaus, Moroccan palaces, all-inclusive destination resorts, dude ranches, tent camping (glamping if it's deluxe), ice hotels, RV rentals and tree houses.

It all began with B&Bs, the 20th century version of the long-ago wayside inn, where travelers stabled their horses - or their camels - and shared a bed with a stranger. Contemporary B&B owners, who did the same thing but in style, made it acceptable to rent a room from a perfect stranger.

The Bijoux di Penelope isn't Bologna's only B&B," said Denise Clarke, a spokeswoman for B&B associations in Europe. "Believe it or not, there are 1,100 B&Bs in Italy, 37 of them in Bologna alone. And they come in all price ranges and styles."

It was easy to plan a trip to Italy, when all I had to do was to go to each lodging group's site and compare the information that each room renter had provided. This included photos of the room, the general location, a map, the address, the owner's name and a short bio. Some owners provided information on parking, distance from bus stops and subways, the best museums, current exhibitions and recommended outings.

Reading them was an eye opener.

One owner, apparently renting his grown son's vacated bedroom (still decorated with sports posters), promised a casual atmosphere and free use of the living room. Another couple said they were hoping to buy the condo they were renting, and in the meantime were repurposing the den to save for the down payment.

As I went from one lodging site to the next, I saw that many owners had listed their rooms on multiple sites. Even small hotels did it, sometimes advertising just a room, then entering a similar posting on Airbnb as a "Guest House." One of the cottages I looked at was posted both on Airbnb and on the Vacation Rental by Homeowner site, as if the owner couldn't decide which was a better option.

My next door neighbor at home, who lives on a large lot with a home and a cottage in the rear, decided to join Airbnb. Investing thousands building decks and updating the bathroom and kitchen, he listed it on Airbnb at \$250 a night, two-night minimum. But after a year spent changing sheets and cleaning bathrooms, he was done playing maid. Now he rents the cottage by word of mouth only, at \$6,500 per month.

The biggest risk in booking with a private owner is that you can't see what you're getting. Any room can be temporarily staged for a photo shoot by adding bowls of fresh flowers, grandma's antique quilts and oil paintings. The room we booked in Rome, listed on Airbnb and on its own site, looked smart in the photos. Affordable, it was a three-bedroom apartment located on a prime street near the Via Veneto and the Piazza Barberini. But our room was so tiny that the bed and a small TV took up most of the floor space. We couldn't open our suitcases without putting them on the bed. The air conditioning - advertised but not delivered - didn't work, though the July temperatures were 90 outside, and hotter inside. We never met the owner, who repeatedly promised to repair the air conditioning; the on-site "host" was a recently arrived Filipino immigrant with limited English. The "breakfast" was a pot of tea, powdered orange juice and dry rolls.

In contrast, the Bijoux di Penelope, in Bologna, a member of the B&B association in Italy, made our stay in Bologna a delight. Venturi, who had greeted us in person, recommended restaurants, gave us her direct phone number and provided brochures and a city map. She pointed the way to the city center, showed us where the bus stop was and suggested her favorite cheese shop. Without her advice, we might have missed many of Bologna's oldest and most beautiful churches and the university - said to be Europe's oldest.

The outdoor market and the cheese and bakeries nearby, revealed why Italy's local produce is among Europe's best.

"When we first looked at the photos Venturi posted on the website, we got the wrong impression. The Ruby room, decorated with red and white lace cushions and red bric-a-brac, looked like a young girl's room. But when we met Penelope, who explained that she was a gemologist, we realized that she themed her rooms after her favorite gems: red for rubies, blue for sapphires and green for emeralds.

"Making the Bijoux more beautiful is my hobby, my passion," she told us.

Our room was one of three third-floor bedrooms sharing two baths and a full kitchen with a table and four chairs. The bedroom was big enough for a dresser, two bookcases, an upholstered chaise lounge, and two bedside tables. Venturi didn't cook breakfast, but she provided a refrigerator full of healthy food, from eggs and sweet rolls to yogurt and fruit.

The best feature was the windows, on two sides and with a sliding door to a balcony overlooking one of the few places where Bologna's ancient river is visible above ground. Sitting outside we could see over the rooftops to the city's two towers, and directly across the way into lush roof

gardens and open balconies. It was quiet and peaceful, a slice of what it might be like to spend two weeks in Bologna. Or even three.

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In Italy, go to www.bedandbreakfast.com to see all of the rentals available throughout Italy. For Airbnb throughout the world, go to www.airbnb.com. For vacation homes rented by their owners, see www.vrbo.com.

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