

When Italy's Migrants Move In



Silvia Marchetti

Ozy August 27, 2015



Thousands of seaborne asylum-seekers and refugees have washed up on Italy's shores. Their reception? Not what you'd expect.

Samir K. likes to cook, while Massimo Guffanti prefers to eat. The former is 30; the latter, at 63, more than twice his age. Guffanti grew up here and teaches English to migrants. These days, he's roomies with one too. Samir, a Kurdish-Iranian refugee, paid around \$1,100 to [a human trafficker](#) and survived a perilous boat ride across the Aegean Sea just to get to this country. "I had an extra room," says Guffanti, "so I thought: Why not share it with someone who needs help?"

Meet Italy's odd couple.

Flick on the TV in Italy these days and it seems all you'll hear about is news of the latest landings of so-called "[boat people](#)." Desperate, broke and without a home, more than 100,000 refugees searching for a better life have washed up on Italian shores since the start of the year, the U.N. Refugee Agency reports, and more than 2,000 others [have died at sea](#). But a small yet significant number have been granted refugee status, or have it pending, and are now settling in with local Italian families under what's been dubbed the Rifugiati in Famiglia project, or "Migrants in the Family." Under the plan — the first of its kind — families are taking in these folks in four cities around the country, in what can be an interesting but also, no doubt, awkward cultural exchange.

Host families, some say, get refugees used to their new surroundings faster than if they stayed at a migration center.

The movement has been a small boon to Italian authorities, who've been increasingly overwhelmed by an influx of people seeking asylum throughout this region. This isn't just about opening up a cozy home, though. The goal is to make refugees ... what's the PC thing to say again? oh, right ... productive members of society, by helping them to learn Italian, find a gig and build a new life as they integrate into a society that often shuns them. And the refugees will have just nine months, or the length of the program, to do so before they get the boot from their host family. "We want to avoid that the refugee just sits around; he must be active in creating a future for himself," says Chiara Marchetti, who runs the Center for Immigration and Asylum, a Parma-based outfit that's helping to run this program.

Turning to host families, some say, gets refugees used to their new surroundings much faster than if they stayed at a migration center. "It's more natural and normal to live with an Italian family and within society," explains Marchetti. To make this happen, it helps that the government is shelling out \$330 per month to help families cover costs for lodging new migrant houseguests. Asylum-seekers are a tougher sell, since it can take more than two years to be recognized as a refugee, given bureaucratic procedures, says Marco Omizzolo, a migration expert who founded the Rome-based immigration

center In Migrazione, which is why in these cases the government gives around \$33 a day, or around \$1,000 a month. The Italian government doesn't pay for all this itself, of course — the European Union has allocated some €310 million (about \$350 million) to Italy to help out asylum seekers.

For Angela Pagani, it's not about the money. The teacher from Fidenza, a small town near Parma, already lives with three others in a villa, but says they all share a sense of civic responsibility — which is why she has decided to host a young refugee girl. Unlike how they're often depicted in local media, refugees are "normal people" who also need help, Pagani says. "They're not mere numbers or data."

Not everyone sees it this way, though, especially during these austere times in Italy. As more "boat people" arrive, their very presence has been spun into a business opportunity. And we're not talking about human traffickers. A major corruption scandal came to light in Rome after investigators arrested more than 40 people this spring, including politicians and business people, on allegations that they'd rigged public contracts to manage reception centers meant for migrants, to the tune of €20 million. At the same time, there have also been reports about attacks on migrants, including at a center in Rome that housed unaccompanied minors who fled North Africa by boat.

While the new approach won't always produce a perfect match, it's worked wonders for Samir, who landed here a few years ago but has lived with his roomie for only three months. The setup has helped Samir pick up the local language more quickly, and now that he's got a job as a part-time butcher, he might apply for Italian citizenship — even though his brother, sister and parents are all back in Iran. "I miss them," Samir says, "but mine was an independent choice. Now I just want to forget my past."

