

I'm encouraged by the number of people who express interest in learning more about the work that is quietly being done to support migrants in Italy. Last week, Lutherans were in Rome for their annual synod and some of their number wanted to take time out on Sunday afternoon to see Rome from a migrant perspective.

Researching diverse local projects in preparation for the Lutheran visit was a humbling experience. Not for the first time, I was struck by the incredible generosity of the ordinary people who regularly give up time and devote their talents to improving life for those who cannot do it by themselves.

Projects range from meeting the most basic needs to integrating and preparing migrants for employment. At one end of the scale lies Baobab Experience: <https://baobabexperience.org/>. Baobab is run entirely by volunteers co-ordinated by Andrea Costa, a stained glass artist who was moved to act by the homeless migrants he saw on the street from the window of his mother's apartment. Andrea considers it shameful that Italy's capital city does not have emergency accommodation for those who arrive but, for whatever reason, are not "in the system". Currently operating from an abandoned car park next to a field near Tiburtina station, around two hundred migrants occupy tents donated by local churches, charities and individuals. The *ad hoc* camp offers shelter, food, medical care and, above all, a welcome to those who would otherwise be homeless. Inhabitants include males, females, small children and unaccompanied minors, the majority of whom have transited through Libya. Volunteer doctors who come to the camp report that around 93% exhibit signs of torture, abuse and trauma. Baobab cannot wave a magic wand but seeks to restore a sense of dignity. Volunteers come to converse and to take people out for the day: offering fragments of normality where normality may not have existed for months or even years. Baobab has been evicted from other sites since it sprang into life in 2016, the authorities having confiscated every tent and piece of equipment each time an eviction has taken place. Yet Andrea has vowed that as long as there are people in need, the camp will survive. "We are all in the same boat" announces a banner on the fence which surrounds the camp. Solidarity is not in short supply here.



On the other side of Rome is Gustamundo, a non-profit organisation which uses cooking to facilitate social integration and vocational training: <https://www.gustamundo.it/>. Working in tandem with local refugee reception centres, the restaurant harnesses the talents of former chefs and would-be chefs who wish to carve

out a culinary career in their adopted country. Evenings at the restaurant are dedicated to the cuisine of a chosen country. It's an opportunity not only for the chefs to showcase their skills to customers paying a fixed price but also for them to tell their stories. A proportion of the profit is returned to the reception centre hosting them; another element helps to fund vocational training for the trainee chefs. Gustamundo also provides catering services and is in the process teaching the trainees how to run a business. The atmosphere in the restaurant is warm and welcoming. There is a happy sense of purpose – and the food is excellent!



Right in the heart of “tourist Rome” some rather unusual tours are taking place: <https://echis.org/en/guide-invisibili-soundwalks-with-new-citizens/>. The “Guide Invisibili” are migrant guides who invite tourists to see Rome through a different prism. These “soundwalks” are the culmination of the RifugiART project, a series of storytelling workshops run by Echis and Laboratorio 53, during which migrants were invited to offer their stories and ideas centered around specific areas of Rome. Their stories, told in English or Italian, have been condensed and now form the basis of two tours, one beginning at the Spanish steps, the other at Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II. The tours are a welcome break from the standard tourist fare, thoughtfully created and, again, providing a direct benefit to those prepared to engage with the project.

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These projects represent only a fraction of those operating in Rome, something which is in itself inspiring. In an ideal world, there would be no need for such projects. However, we are not living in an ideal world. Whilst that is so, it strikes me that there is something defiantly optimistic about the determination of those involved to work to improve conditions for those in greatest need – and that, in re-connecting with our humanity, there is a direct benefit to everyone involved.