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A view of the Papal Palace in Castel Gandolfo, some 30 kilometers southeast of Rome May 29, 2021. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini, file)

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Pope Leo XIV visited the papal summer palace south of Rome on May 29 as questions swirled whether he will use it himself to escape the heat or follow in Pope Francis' footsteps and keep the hilltop estate as a museum and environmental center.

Leo paid a visit to the Borgo Laudato Si, an educational sustainability project that grew out of Francis' 2015 environmental encyclical "Praised Be," the Vatican said. The center is located in the gardens of the Vatican's Castel Gandolfo property on Lake Alban in the hills south of Rome.

Pope Urban VIII built the palace on the northern end of town in 1624, to give popes an escape from the sweltering Roman summers. It was enlarged over succeeding pontificates to its present size of 55 hectares (136 acres), which is actually bigger than Vatican City itself.

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Popes past used it regularly in summer, and Pope Benedict XVI famously closed out his papacy in the estate on Feb. 28, 2013. But Francis, a homebody who never took a proper vacation during his 12-year pontificate, decided to remain in Rome in summer.

In 2014 he decided to open Castel Gandolfo's gardens to the public, and later turned part of the palazzo itself into a museum, in part to help offset the economic downturn the town experienced with no popes holding weekly Sunday prayers there in summer.

Leo, a former missionary priest who spent the bulk of his priesthood in Peru, hasn't said where he will live full-time in Rome, much less whether he will use the palace as a summer getaway.

The sustainability project, which is open to the public, has taken over operations of the working farm in the gardens of the estate, which includes 20 hectares (50 acres) of agricultural and farming land, greenhouses and service buildings. The farm, which provides dairy and fresh produce to the Vatican, aims to create a "circular economy" in keeping with the call of Francis' encyclical to better care for God's creation.