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Pope Leo XIV greets people as he arrives in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, July 6, 2025, after reciting the Angelus at the Vatican. The pope will stay in Castel Gandolfo for his customary retreat through July 20. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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CASTEL GANDOLFO, Italy — July 7, 2025

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After more than a decade without its most famous vacationer, the quiet town of Castel Gandolfo once again counts the pope among its summer residents.

Pope Leo XIV became the 16th pope to reside in the papal summer residence when he moved there July 6, following the recitation of the Angelus in St. Peter's Square.

"This afternoon, I will travel to Castel Gandolfo, where I intend to have a short period of rest," the pope told pilgrims gathered in the square. "I hope that everyone will be able to enjoy some vacation time in order to restore both body and spirit."

The tradition of popes escaping the summer heat of Rome for the cooler Alban Hills began with Pope Urban VIII in 1626. While Pope Benedict XVI spent nearly three months in the papal villa during the summer of 2012, his successor, Pope Francis, chose not to stay there, opting instead for his Vatican residence at the Domus Sanctae Marthae.

In 2016, Francis converted the papal property into a museum, opening the villa and gardens to the public.

That decision transformed the character of tourism in the town, said Marina Rossi, a local resident who has operated a mosaic workshop along the town's main drag for more than 30 years.

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"During the week there wasn't this flow of people," she told Catholic News Service July 1, since the popes only presented themselves publicly to pray the Angelus on Sundays. "Instead, by opening the palace and the pontifical villas, the type of tourism has changed," shifting from frugal pilgrims to paying visitors. As a result, "the last 12 years were good for us."

Still, she said, the return of a pope is "fantastic."

"It's an important showcase" for the town, Rossi said. "We're happy, yes."

Rossi, an artist, said she and others had considered creating a portrait of the pope, adding, "Yes, it's an idea we've had; right now, we are doing stuff a bit different, more simple, because making a portrait is not the most 'sell-able' right away."

Assunta Ferrini, who manages Sor Capanna, a restaurant right off the square at the foot of the papal palace, said the town has not lacked tourists in the pope's absence.

"The tourists came, many of them," she told CNS. "But to have a pope return is always an honor for the town, that he comes here to meet us."

At a local coffee shop, barista Stefano Carosi echoed that sentiment. "To have the pope here among us after so long is a beautiful thing," he said. "We've waited for it for so long."

Without the steady presence of Francis, he added, the town was "without that spark, that light, but now it seems like these 12 years have flown by and we hope that everything may return as before."

Read this next: Pope Leo XIV quietly goes on vacation. He is expected to take plenty of summer homework with him.