

In Austria, a hotel where refugees are the hosts

by [Sara Miller Llana](#)

January 26, 2016

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) It is less than a year old, but the reviews for this bright, stylish hotel in Vienna on TripAdvisor are glowing. “Modern, retro, cozy,” reads a recent one. “Trendy hotel” or “hipster and great,” report other guests.

But few reviewers note who is running the Magdas Hotel: those seeking refuge in Europe.

In fact according to the staff’s count, only 50 percent of guests realize that this is a social experiment, in which two thirds of the staff have received asylum. And that is exactly how they want it.

“The whole idea was to show that refugees want to work, that they can work, and that there is nothing to be afraid of,” said Sebastiaan de Vos, the manager of the Magdas Hotel.

Integrating refugees across the 28-member European Union is key to whether this massive flow of humanity is a boon to aging societies across the continent—or whether it ultimately tears it apart. It is a huge challenge. There is a lack of language skills, education, and trust among local employers. Not to mention the trauma that refugees carry in their escape from war, terrorism, and injustice, many losing family members along the way.

The idea behind Magdas, which is a project run by Caritas, the Catholic social charity, is to give them a chance.

“Refugees arrive and they are hopeless and clueless,” said Uma Nmecha Eke, from Nigeria, a pastor who came here in 2011 as part of a family reunification program, and who now washes dishes. “This platform allows them to set goals.”

The benefits are obvious to a man like Ahmadzia Rasuli, an Afghan who grew up in Iran and fled in 2001. He had to wait for seven years before his asylum application

was approved in Austria. And he faced long stints of unemployment before finding this job, which he said he really likes and wants to keep.

De Vos spends more on training than he would managing a staff of tourism professionals, he said. "It is possible, but it's quite difficult. It takes time."

It can't solve all the bureaucratic problems either. Those waiting for their asylum applications to be heard, including the vast majority who arrived in the refugee flow this summer and fall, can't legally work. Most of the refugees working at Magdas have been in Austria for several years.

And yet seeing the progress is gratifying, de Vos said. He recalled how Rasuli had no idea what to do the first day he started in the kitchen. Now he easily takes command of pots and pans ahead of the bustling breakfast service each morning.

The hotel counts 16 nationalities and 20 languages among the staff—and many novel and creative ideas of what hospitality means.

Sunlight filters through pink, yellow, and blue windows, decorating the halls of the 88-room hotel that was a former nursing home. This is no cookie cutter accommodation.

When the staff ran out of money to furnish rooms, they took apart old armoires and made new desks and benches. They cut up old wooden chairs and fused them to walls to make night stands. When they asked local businesses for donations, they got luggage racks from the national train company that they installed above coat racks in the rooms. Art students at the academy next door helped them along the way. A troop of knitters made lamp shades.

Luxury rooms go for 120 euros, basic ones for half of that. Two thirds of rooms have balconies. Many look onto Vienna's famed Ferris wheel, the Riesenrad.

Opened with a 1.5 million-euro (\$1.63 million) loan from Caritas Vienna, the goal is for the hotel to pay it back within five years and be self-running. So far their occupancy rate has been about 60 percent.

The kinds of people that come here knowing about the concept often add value to the multicultural, open feel the hotel says it is about, but the staff care more that residents choose the spot for its "vibe," its "good location," and its "great value."

“We don’t want people to stay here just to do good in the world, we want to go farther,” said Sarah Barci, in charge of marketing and sales.

After all, she said, that’s the best path to a future Magdas Amsterdam or Magdas Berlin.