

# Life on Rome's ring road

Nicolo Bassetti walked 300km and talked to more than 200 people for experimental documentary *Sacro GRA*

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**T**he GRA, or Grande Raccordo Anulare, is a 68.2km ring road encircling Rome.

In the words of Nicolo Bassetti, one of the creators of the experimental documentary *Sacro GRA* (literally "Sacred GRA"), it is a zone that its millions of users spend some parts of their day on, but take no notice of.

"On the GRA, you go very fast, without seeing

anything," he tells Life! on the telephone from Rome. The 52-year-old artist and screenwriter describes himself as an urban explorer whose job is to restore "sites which have lost their identity and memory".

So when he moved to Rome in 2001, he was drawn to the GRA as a place that was "a kind of modern Great Wall circling the Eternal City, Rome, and I allowed myself to be carried along by the tide of urban transformation".

He began walking the "GRA lands" in the hope of finding material for a multimedia project. One of its offshoots is the film *Sacro GRA* (the others are a book and a photography exhibition), winner of the Golden Lion at last year's Venice International Film Festival, the first documentary in the event's 70-year history to win its highest award. It was directed by Gianfranco Rosi, working with Bassetti and other members of the creative team, including writer Sabo Matteucci.



Characters in *Sacro GRA* were found by director Gianfranco Rosi (far left) and one of the film's creators Nicolo Bassetti (left).

The documentary is part of the programme at this year's Italian Film Festival in Singapore, now in its 11th year. For the first time, it will focus on films from the Venice International Film Festival, featuring more than 10 works screened at last year's edition. Bassetti will be here to introduce *Sacro GRA* before its screening on April 3 at The Cathay Cineplex.

The 90-minute film, free of text commentary or voiceover, tracks several people who work or live close to the GRA: a paramedic attending to motorists injured in accidents on the highway; a botanist tracking weevil infestation in the palm plantations; a former prince whose palatial home is rented to film crews and children's parties; a pair of prostitutes plying their trade in a van by the side of the road; an eel fisherman who lives in a houseboat on the Tiber; and a down-at-heels nobleman forced to live with his daughter in a tiny apartment.

The telling details of their lives are revealed slowly and without judgment, giving the viewer room to decide what to take in and how to process the information.

Bassetti says the film's spirit is shaped partly by the 1972 influential novel *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino, a description of Marco Polo's travels in the lands of Kublai Khan that views cities as places defined by the minds of its inhabitants as much as, or even more than, they are by urban planning and architecture.

"When you are driving, you see nothing. I found the people by walking slowly... driving on the GRA is a kind of censorship of the city of Rome," he says.

Rosetti estimates he walked 300km in four years of research and photography, and travelled about 1,500km in a camper van around the GRA. He found a few of the characters shown in the film, while others were found by Rosi.

Bassetti and the team interviewed more than 200 people, he estimates, getting to know them, winnowing them down to a smaller group and then gaining their trust so that a writer, photographer and videographer could enter their homes, cars and boats. The process of getting to know people so that they would let their guard down included helping them run errands.

"We spent a lot of time with them without the camera, living with them, taking them to the hospital and the supermarket to get a pizza. Then Gianfranco would find a moment to ask them if they would participate on camera. Some said yes, some said no. It took us more than two years to get it all done, but that is the quality of Gianfranco's work."

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## Three films to catch at the fest

### LA DOLCE VITA (PG)

**When:** April 4, 8pm

**Where:** National Museum of Singapore

**What:** Think Rome and director Federico Fellini and this 1960 classic comes to mind. Posters of this comedy-drama have adorned too many student walls to count. Winner of the Palme d'Or in Cannes and an Oscar for Best Costume, this work has become a symbol for a time period (the Swinging Sixties), a place (Rome) and a laissez-faire attitude to life. It follows the life of gossip columnist Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni) as he wines and dines his way across the city over a stretch of a few days. This is a high-definition, digitally restored and remastered copy.



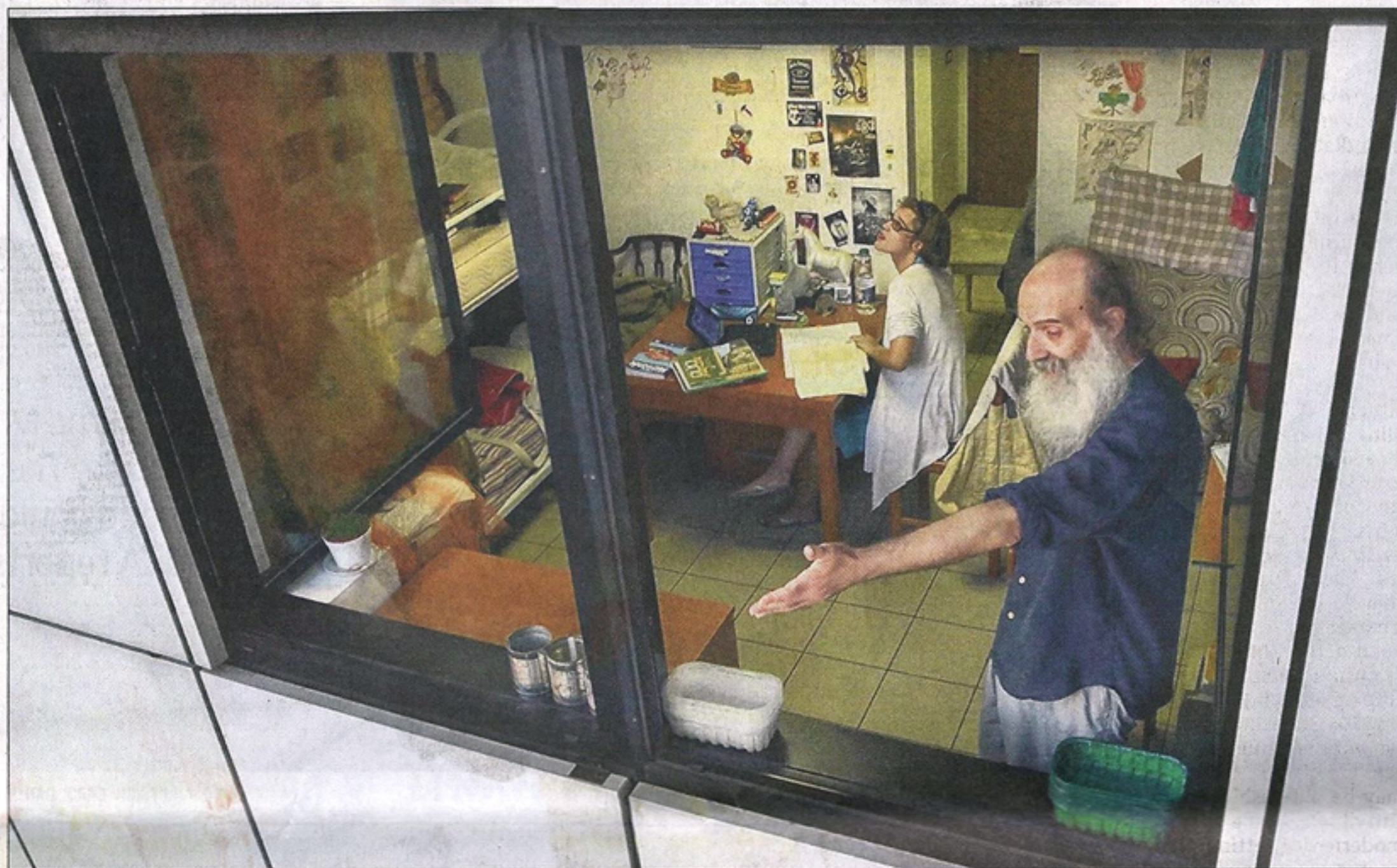
*La Dolce Vita*, which stars Anita Ekberg (above), won awards including the Palme d'Or in Cannes.

### TRAP STREET/SHUIYIN JIE (TBA)

**When:** April 5, 1pm

**Where:** National Museum Of Singapore

**What:** This romance-drama from China was selected for the Venice festival's Critics Week and sees Li (Lu Yulai, right) as the son of a party official who maps streets digitally for a living but who also doctors surveillance cameras as a lucrative sideline, especially for powerful families. His life – and his faith in digital surveillance – is turned upside down after he meets the alluring Guan (He Wenchao). Written and directed by Vivian Qu, this work received warm reviews.



### SACRO GRA (PG13)

**When:** April 3, 7pm

**Where:** The Cathay Cineplex

**What:** This work, winner of the Venice International Film Festival's highest award, the Golden Lion (and the first such win by a documentary in the festival's 70-year history), is not reportage in the traditional sense.

Over the two years of following its characters, director Gianfranco Rosi observed telling moments.

Then later, with gear and videographer around, Rosi would tell the person to recreate that moment.

In that sense, it is more akin to reality television than documentary.

Rosi, a lauded Italian documentary-maker, captures without comment tiny, telling moments of interaction between people – a prostitute singing opera to her friend, a princeling putting on finery to receive a visiting dignitary, an eel fisherman teaching Italian to his Ukrainian wife, strippers chatting before going on stage at a tiny roadside cafe. The moments captured are funny, sad and sweet and, from a sociological point of view, raw and revealing.

## Book it

### ITALIAN FILM FESTIVAL – SPECIAL VENICE EDITION

**When:** April 2 to 7  
**Where:** The Cathay Cineplex and the National Museum of Singapore

**Admission:** \$12 (go to tickets.cathay.com.sg/index.aspx for films screened at the Cathay cinemas and www.miticketplus.com for films screened at the National Museum)  
**Info:** Go to www.iicsingapore.esteri.it for full programme

*Sacro GRA* follows people who work or stay near a ring road around Rome, including a nobleman who has to live in a tiny apartment with his daughter (left). PHOTOS: ITALIAN FILM FESTIVAL, GUCCI