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VISA: TAKE THE WORRY OUT OF TRAVEL



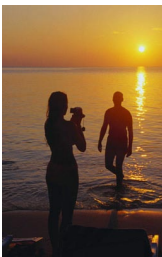
Visa Prepaid: For ultimate control, save up and pay for your holiday in advance with a Visa Prepaid card. Accepted everywhere Visa Credit and Debit cards are, you can load up a card in the currency of the country you're travelling to so you're holiday money will not get hit by exchange rate fluctuations and unexpected fees. Plus you have the flexibility to top it up while you're away, and if you lose it you have the security of a back-up card linked to the same funds..

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Destination Italy

The land that gave us Roman efficiency and Renaissance aesthetics is one of the single greatest repositories of sensorial pleasures on the face of the earth. From art to food, from stunning and varied countryside to flamboyant fashion, Italy has it all.

The *bel paese* (beautiful country) also has its fair share of dark spots. Centuries of the stubborn individualism that long made such city-states as Florence, Milan and Venice great, went hand in hand with incessant internecine squabbling, division and chronic mutual distrust that ultimately left Italy in a mess. Unity in the 19th century and a roller-coaster ride since then have elevated the country to Europe's fourth-biggest economy, but one that is riddled with problems.

Since the boom years of the 1960s, Italy has been plagued by terrorism, widespread corruption, the long hand of Mafia crime and frequently unstable or paralysed government – some of whose leading lights have often seemed more intent on personal aggrandisement than the country's welfare.

Today, an air of tension and frustration pervades the country. After five years of razzle-dazzle government by media empire entrepreneur Silvio Berlusconi, Italians looked, albeit with some scepticism, to centre-left coalition leader Romano Prodi, in power since 2006, to drag Italy out of its moral and economic morass. His biggest contribution to the country may be his decision to step aside at the end of his mandate to make way for a new combined centre-left force. In April 2007, the former communist party, the Democratici di Sinistra (DS), and centre-left Margherita formation agreed to merge as a single, moderate leftist party, the Partito Democratico.

Whether it will work is a moot point, as the various components of the left squabble endlessly among themselves. Indeed, Prodi's fragile coalition has looked on the verge of collapse several times. Issues as diverse as maintaining army units in Afghanistan, modifying property taxes and debating the possibility of legalising de facto gay marriage (an issue that has provoked outrage not only from Pope Benedict XVI and the right, but also from elements of the centre left), keep the coalition at boiling point.

Prodi and co have their hands full. On the economic front, growth hit 1.7% in 2006, a much better result than the near-zero figures of previous years. But Italy's historic problem of massive public spending debt (more than 105% of GNP) continues to sap the economy's strength. The generous public pension system is crying out for reform, but every attempt so far has met with determined opposition from trade unions.

Prodi's conflict of interest bill, if it gets off the ground, would oblige Berlusconi, should he ever be re-elected, to place the running of his TV empire into the hands of neutral administration (along the lines of blind trust legislation in the USA). Berlusconi naturally denounced the bill as bordering on a 'coup d'état' against himself. Having swept to victory in Sicilian regional and municipal elections in May 2007, and further municipal victories all over the country in June, Berlusconi was cock-a-hoop, predicting a swift return to power. He was definitely having a good run, having been cleared for the umpteenth time of corruption charges before Milan courts and seen his football team, AC Milan, defeat Liverpool to win the 2007 Champions League.

FAST FACTS

Population: 58.8 million

Area: 301,230 sq km

GDP: €1475 billion
(€25,085 per head)

GDP growth: 2.3%

Tourism contribution
to GDP: 11.5%

Inflation: 1.7%

Unemployment rate:
6.7% (10-13.5% in
the south)

Average life expectancy:
77.6 years (men), 83.2
years (women)

Highest point: Mont
Blanc (Monte Bianco)
at 4807m

Coffee consumption:
Italians drink 600 cups
per head a year,
according to one study!

'a group of the nation's senators made a formal request to have a gelateria installed in their canteen'

Unlike Berlusconi, Prodi is no great fan of the game and less still of the shenanigans that have long plagued the sport. Italy may have won the World Cup in Germany in 2006, but Italian *calcio* (football) is in a woeful state.

For years, the high-flying teams in Serie A, the premiership league, have been suspected of match-rigging and bribing referees. In 2006, police investigations finally blew the lid on this situation. Turin's champion team Juventus was stripped of its 2005 and 2006 championship titles, relegated to Serie B (second division) and docked competition points for the 2006–07 season. Four other teams (including AC Milan) were also docked points. Juventus supporters growled that AC Milan had received especially lenient treatment.

Stadium violence, which in early 2007 claimed the life of a policeman after a game in Catania (Sicily), is the other ugly face of *calcio*. Most clubs have long failed to comply with stadium security regulations. And they were quick to lament the Prodi government's tough reaction. From February '07 games held in stadiums not in line with security regulations were played without spectators. Measures against violent fans were also tightened.

In early 2007, an old nightmare resurfaced when police arrested 15 people suspected of planning terrorist acts in the name of the left-wing Brigade Rosse (Red Brigades), which together with extreme right-wing groups left a trail of blood in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s. The Red Brigades had been thought long extinct.

Another plague, organised crime, remains an open wound. In recent years, more blood has flown in the streets of Naples than anywhere else in Italy. Since 2004, around 100 people a year (the toll in the province of Naples alone in 2006 was 95) have died in gang warfare as rival clans of the Camorra cut each other up. Calls to send in the army seem more an expression of political impotence than a serious move to rescue a city from itself. The killings appear to be a sign of the collapse of any central authority in the gangs. Quite the opposite has happened in Calabria, where 'ndrangheta (the local Mafia) has become less violent but, according to police, infinitely richer and stronger on trade in Colombian cocaine, prostitution and construction rackets. Some reports suggest their business now extends to Milan.

Amid such sombre news, the capture of Sicilian mafia boss Bernardo Provenzano in April 2006 brought a rare ray of hope to what often seems a hopeless struggle.

With such a complex political panorama, it is perhaps not surprising that a group of the nation's senators made a formal request to have a gelateria installed in their canteen! After all, they are already treated to wine-tasting courses. Italy's parliamentarians are among the best paid in Europe, with generous benefits, conditions and pension arrangements, but they sure can be hard to please. Small wonder that Italians are sceptical about their politicians.

Getting Started

You could keep visiting Italy for the rest of your life and still not exhaust all it has to offer. It's a treasure chest of art, a living tableau of human history, a culinary delight and a natural wonder with everything from craggy mountains and glistening glaciers to sparkling seas and golden beaches.

WHEN TO GO

The immediate response is 'any time'! On a more serious note, the best period is April to June. The weather then is sunny without being stifling, the countryside bursts with spring flowers, and the flood of summer tourism, largely dictated by school holidays, has yet to crash over the peninsula. Most Italians hit the road in July and August, so those two months – in which prices soar, tempers flare and the country broils – are best avoided.

The vision of Italy as the land of eternal Mediterranean sunshine is a trifle distorted. In the Alps, winters are long and severe. First snowfalls usually occur in November and freak falls in June are not unusual. The ski season is high season in the Alps. Those mountains shield Lombardy from the extremes of the northern European winter, but cloud and rain are common – Milan comes close to being Italy's London.

Florence's position, nestled in a valley surrounded by hills, creates ovenlike conditions in summer. Rome experiences hot summers and mild winters. That tendency continues in the south: in Sicily and Sardinia you can expect very mild winters and long hot summers (a dip in the sea is possible from Easter to October).

Italy's calendar of religious, local and national festivals, along with cultural events, is busy year-round but bulges with possibility from Easter to September; see p24 for more information.

COSTS & MONEY

Italy isn't cheap, although compared with the UK and northern Europe the situation is not so bad. What you spend on accommodation (your single greatest expense) will depend on various factors, such as location (Turin is pricier than Taranto), season (August is crazy on the coast), the degree of comfort, and luck. At the bottom end you will pay €14 to €20 at youth hostels, where meals generally cost €9.50. The cheapest *pensione* (small hotel) is unlikely to cost less than €25 for a basic single or €40 for a double anywhere from Pisa to Palermo. You can stumble across comfortable rooms with their own bathroom from €50 to €80. Midrange hotels in the more expensive places such as Rome, Florence and Venice can easily cost from €80 to €150 for singles or €120 to €200 for doubles. In this guide, we provide (where appropriate) an approximate range of prices you can expect to pay for rooms at the upper price range in low and high seasons.

Eating out is just as variable. In Venice and Milan you tend to pay a lot (and sometimes get little in return), while tourist magnets such as Florence and Rome offer surprisingly affordable options. On average you should reckon on at least €20 to €50 for a meal (two courses, dessert and house wine), although you can still find basic set lunch menus for €10 to €15.

A backpacker sticking religiously to youth hostels, snacking at midday and travelling slowly could scrape by on €40 to €50 per day. Your average midrange daily budget, including a sandwich for lunch and a simple dinner, as well as budgeting for a couple of sights and travel, might come to anything from €100 to €150 a day.

See Climate Charts (p855) for more information.

HOW MUCH?

Coffee at the bar €0.90-1

Bowl of pasta *al pesto* €6-10

Gelato €1-2

Local newspaper €0.90

Foreign newspaper €1.50-3

City bus/tram ride €1

10-minute taxi ride €8-10

Public transport is reasonably priced, but car hire (p877) is expensive (as is petrol) and is probably best arranged before leaving home. On trains (p878) you can save money by travelling on the slower *regionale* (local) trains.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Reams have been written on Italy and it seems like everyone's been at it, from DH Lawrence to Hermann Hesse, from Charles Dickens to Henry James. Much has also been penned in more recent times giving lucid insight into all aspects of the country. For books on Italian history and society, see p62.

An Italian Education (Tim Parks) Parks takes a witty and observant look at the society around him as he watches his children navigate the Italian school system. In an earlier work, *Italian Neighbours*, he viewed a wider panorama, observing everything from Catholicism to racism.

The Dark Heart of Italy (Tobias Jones) Jones crisscrosses the country and attempts to come to grips with everything from football corruption to Berlusconi. And while he certainly throws light on the darker sides of Italian public life, Jones cannot but admire the passion for life in this complex land.

Falling Palace (Dan Hofstadter) In part a story of one man chasing the love of an elusive Neapolitan beauty, this engaging volume also provides a personal portrait of Naples, warts and all.

Francesco's Italy (Francesco da Mosto) You've seen the BBC series, now buy the Beeb's coffee-table book. The affable Venetian takes you on a personal spin around the peninsula in photos and words.

Heel to Toe: Encounter in the South of Italy (Charles Lister) Lister explores the glory and sadness of the south in his trip aboard a clapped-out moped.

Midnight in Sicily (Peter Robb) As much a love ode to the wonders of Italian cooking and lifestyle, this book is also a fine introduction to the black mysteries of organised crime in Italy.

Rambling on the Road to Rome (Peter Francis Browne) Browne follows, on foot, the road taken a century ago by Hilaire Belloc from Toul (France) to Rome and recounted in Belloc's *A Path to Rome*.

The Stones of Florence & Venice Observed (Mary McCarthy) With deceptive ease and flowing prose, McCarthy opens up all sorts of views on these two *città d'arte* (cities of art).

The Story of San Michele (Axel Munthe) A classic of travel writing of another era, Munthe's tales from Capri predate modern tourism and provide a rare insight into what this island was once like.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Apart from kicking off with the websites listed below, a little time surfing local blogs can sometimes turn up all sorts of local and quirky information.

Delicious Italy (www.deliciousitaly.com) Here's where to find that cooking course in Venice, learn about *mozzarella di bufala* (buffalo milk cheese) and immerse yourself in Italy's fabulous food and wine.

Ente Nazionale Italiano per il Turismo (www.enit.it) The Italian national tourist body's website has everything from local tourist office addresses to gallery and museum details.

Italia Mia (www.italiamia.com) The best thing about this site is its mass of links. Click on art and, as well as a list of artists' biographies, you get links to museums and galleries. Elsewhere you can explore everything from Italian cinema to genealogy.

Italian Movie Trips (www.italian-movie-trips.com) Film buffs can check locations used across the country for a plethora of films.

Italiansrus.com (www.italiansrus.com) A mixed bag with anything from potted biographies (and links) of Old Masters and milestone architects to classic recipes.

'Reams have been written on Italy'

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Valid travel insurance (p860).
- Your ID card or passport and visa if required (p866).
- A driving licence and car documents if driving, along with appropriate car insurance (p877).
- A set of smart casual clothes: T-shirts, shorts and dusty sandals don't cut the mustard in bars and restaurants in fashion-conscious Italy.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Since our inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged our readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and enjoy the magic independent travel affords. International travel is growing at a jaw-dropping rate, and we still firmly believe in the benefits it can bring – but, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on both the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

On the grand scale of things, a single trip might not seem particularly environmentally significant, but consider tourism's worldwide context: each year there are some 700 million holidays, a figure that is expected to grow to one billion by 2010. Most Mediterranean countries suffer from the over-development of tourism to some degree, especially in coastal areas, and Italy is no exception.

So what can you do to limit your environmental footprint? For a start you might consider a low-emission form of transport. Train travel in Italy, especially between the major city centres, is easy and affordable. There are also numerous InterRail and Eurail passes available, and InterRail has now introduced a single-country ticket which is worth considering if you're planning a big itinerary. Likewise, there is a comprehensive network of coaches running the length and breadth of the country and in many cases this is the preferred mode of transport for many Italians. For more information on train and bus travel see the Transport chapter (p868).

On the ground look out for ecofriendly places to stay, Italy has a good network of *agriturismo* (farm stay accommodation). Locally run tours, markets and courses are another good way to engage with the country and these are recommended throughout this guide.

'Train travel in Italy is easy and affordable'

Carbon Offset Schemes

Aviation is the fastest growing contributor to climate change. Yet it's not exclusively bad; mile for mile, the amount of carbon dioxide emitted for one person driving a car is about as much as that for one per passenger on a plane. However, the problem with flying is not only the carbon (and other greenhouse gases, such as water vapour) emitted, but at high altitude these have a greater effect on climate change.

Most forms of transport emit carbon dioxide to some degree and carbon offset schemes enable you to calculate your emissions so that you can invest in renewable energy schemes and reforestation projects that will reduce the emission of an equivalent amount of carbon dioxide. Some schemes focus just on emissions caused by flights, while others help you work out emissions from specific train, car and ferry journeys to enable you to offset your journeys whatever mode of transport used.

Getting Around

Getting around on a local level can be a mixed experience in Italy. In cities such as Rome and Palermo public transport is efficient and good value, although it can be terribly oversubscribed during peak hours. More recently a number of city centres have been closed to traffic, and in the south restrictions on traffic apply during the summer months. This makes city centres a great deal more pleasant and has had a noticeable affect on pollution.

Madly buzzing scooters, however, remain a firm fixture on the Italian city centre and although comparatively they don't have a particularly high carbon footprint (roughly half that of a Smartcar), the number of them and the noise do contribute to urban pollution and they're obviously a lot less environmentally friendly than a bicycle.



TOP PICKS

MUST-SEE ITALIAN MOVIES

Before you start your real trip, why not embark on a celluloid adventure through Italy with some of the following classics, new and old? See p64 for reviews.

- *Il postino* (1994) Director: Michael Radford
- *La dolce vita* (1960) Director: Federico Fellini
- *Il gattopardo* (1963) Director: Luchino Visconti
- *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) Director: Vittorio de Sica
- *La vita è bella* (1997) Director: Roberto Benigni
- *Roma città aperta* (1945) Director: Roberto Rossellini
- *Mamma roma* (1962) Director: Pier Paolo Pasolini
- *Nuovo cinema paradiso* (1988) Director: Giuseppe Tornatore
- *Pane e tulipani* (2000) Director: Silvio Sordani
- *Totò, peppino, e... la malafemmina* (1956) Director: Camillo Mastrocinque

TOP READS

Before the advent of cinema, writers conveyed the sights, feelings and sensibilities of Italians and their world in print. The following are just the tip of the literary iceberg. See p62 for reviews.

- *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ Stopped at Eboli; 1947) Carlo Levi
- *Il gattopardo* (The Leopard; 1958) Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa
- *I promessi sposi* (The Betrothed; 1827) Alessandro Manzoni
- *Il barone rampante* (The Baron in the Trees; 1957) Italo Calvino
- *Il nome della rosa* (The Name of the Rose; 1980) Umberto Eco
- *Il giorno della civetta* (The Day of the Owl; 1961) Leonardo Sciascia
- *La romana* (The Woman of Rome; 1947) Alberto Moravia
- *La storia* (History; 1974) Elsa Morante
- *Se questo è un uomo* (If This Is a Man; 1947) Primo Levi
- *Il re di girgenti* (The King of Girgenti; 2001) by Andrea Camilleri

TOP RURAL RETREATS

Staying in an *agriturismo* (p851), usually a working farm adapted to host travellers, can be the most relaxing and satisfying way to experience a taste of the real, 'slow' Italy. Here we suggest some great places to do so throughout the country.

- **Donalegge al Castellazzo** (p753; Sicily)
- **Agriturismo Rena** (p841; Sardinia)
- **Agriturismo La Tore** (p661; Campania)
- **Agritur Fior di Bosco** (p317; Trentino-Alto Adige)
- **Agriturismo Il Cucchiaio di Legno** (p286; Piedmont)
- **Agriturismo Gelindo dei Magredi** (p404; Friuli-Venezia Giulia)
- **Azienda Agrituristiche Sant'Anna** (p387; the Veneto)
- **Locanda della Valle Nuova** (p593; Umbria)
- **Agriturismo San Lorenzo** (p532; www.agriturismosanlorenzo.it; 3km outside Volterra on the road to Siena, Tuscany)
- **Barbialla Nuova Fattoria** (p494; Tuscany)

On a positive note, in smaller cities such as Florence, Bologna and Lecce, cycling is very popular, and in some of the more eco-savvy cities like Ravenna or Galatina in Puglia you can even pick up free bikes at the tourist office. Increasing awareness of eco-issues has also prompted a greater number of hotels to offer guests the use of bikes free of charge. For more information see the Getting Around sections in the regional chapters.

Accommodation

An increasing number of tourism businesses are now looking to cash in on the buoyant green euro, so it can be difficult to identify genuinely green options. Look out for some of the telltale signs of a genuine commitment to the environment. The eco-labelling scheme Legambiente Turismo (www.legambienteturismo.it) has certified nearly 200 hotels, judging them on their use of water and energy resources and reduced waste production, and whether they offer good local cuisine and organic breakfasts. There's also an increasing number of family-run B&Bs and *agriturismo* (p851).

Slow Food

One of the best ways to help local economies is to shop locally. In Italy this isn't difficult, given that it is the home of the Slow Food Movement (www.slowfood.com; see box on p234) and the many excellent local markets, farm restaurants, and seasonal, organic food available throughout the country. The guidebook *Osterie d'Italia* is an excellent source of information and in 2007 Slow Food opened its very first supermarket, Eataly (www.eatalytorino.it; p219), in Turin, which gives local producers direct access to consumers for the first time.

'it is the
home of the
Slow Food
Movement'

Responsible Travel Information

Agriturismi (www.agriturismi.it) Online guide to farm accommodation.

Alta Quota (www.altaquota.it) Treks and mountain climbs that only Italians know about.

Fondo Per L'Ambiente Italiano (www.fondoambiente.it) Italian equivalent of the National Trust, which restores historic houses and gardens and opens them up to the public.

Legambiente Turismo (www.legambienteturismo.it) Look for the 'Green Swan' eco-label that flags up genuinely ecofriendly places to stay.

Save Our Snow (www.saveoursnow.com) Use the searchable directory to find out what, if anything, ski resorts are doing to green up their act.

Travel Foundation (www.thetravelfoundation.org.uk) The UK-based sustainable tourism charity provides tips on how to travel more responsibly.

CARBON COMPARISON TABLE

This table gives the carbon emissions for different modes of transport, in kg per person. The figures have been provided by Pure (www.puretrust.org.uk).

Route	Distance	Plane	Car*	Train	Coach	Ferry	Car Ferry**
London–Milan	1876	281	338	112	5	-	-
London–Rome	2892	434	520	174	8	-	-
Geneva–Milan	428	64	77	26	0.1	-	-
Greece/Patras–Bari	1040	15	18	60	0.3	4.9	93.6

*based on one person driving in a standard petrol-engine car; **passenger with a two-door, small petrol-engine car

Events Calendar

FEBRUARY–APRIL

FESTA DI SANT'AGATA 3-5 Feb
Hysterical celebrations (p781) where one million Catanians and tourists follow a silver reliquary bust of the saint covered in marvellous jewels.

SAGRA DEL MANDORLO IN FIORE 1st Sun in Feb
The Festival of the Almond Blossoms; a folk festival (p799) in Agrigento with open-air performances of drama and music.

CARNEVALE
During the period before Ash Wednesday, many towns stage carnivals and enjoy their last opportunity to indulge before Lent. The carnival held in Venice (p358) is the most famous.

SA SARTIGLIA Sun & Tue before Lent
The highlight of carnival celebrations (p827) at Oristano. It involves a medieval tournament of horsemen in masquerade.

SETTIMANA SANTA
Notable processions take place in Taranto (Puglia; p710), Chieti (Abruzzo; p612) and Trapani (Sicily; p805) during Holy Week. On Good Friday the pope leads a candlelit procession to the Colosseum and on Easter Sunday he gives his blessing.

SCOPPIO DEL CARRO Easter Sun
Fireworks are exploded in Piazza del Duomo in Florence (p479) – a tradition dating to the crusades.

MAY

FESTA DI SANT'EFISIO 1 May
An effigy of Sardinia's patron saint is paraded around Cagliari on a bullock-drawn carriage amid a colourful procession (p819).

FESTA DI SAN NICOLA around 7-9 May
A procession in Bari (p692) follows a statue of the saint for a ceremony out at sea.

PROCESSIONE DEI SERPARI 1st Thu in May
Held at Cocullo (p609), a statue of St Dominic is draped with live snakes and carried in the Snake-Charmers' Procession.

FESTA DI SAN GENNARO 1st Sun in May, 19 Sep & 16 Dec
The faithful gather in Naples' cathedral to wait for the blood of San Gennaro to liquefy (p629).

CORSA DEI CERI 15 May
Three teams, each carrying a *cerò* (massive wooden pillar, bearing the statue of a rival saint) race through Gubbio's streets in commemoration of Sant'Ubaldo, the city's patron saint (p573).

CAVALCATA SARDA 2nd-last Sun in May
Hundreds of Sardinians wearing colourful traditional costume gather at Sassari (p836) to mark a victory over the Saracens in the year 1000.

PALIO DELLA BALESTRA last Sun in May
The Crossbow Contest (p573) is held in Gubbio. The men of Gubbio and Sansepolcro dress in medieval costume and use antique weapons.

CICLO DI SPETTACOLI CLASSICI mid-May–mid-Jun
The Festival of Greek Theatre (p791) brings the stones of Syracuse's ancient 5th-century-BC amphitheatre back to life.

JUNE

GIOCO DEL PONTE last Sun in Jun
Two groups in medieval costume contend for the Ponte di Mezzo in Pisa in the Bridge Game (p509).

INFIORATA 21 Jun
To celebrate Corpus Domini, some towns (including Bolsena and Genzano near Rome, Spello in Umbria and Noto in Sicily) decorate a street with colourful designs made with flower petals.

FESTA DI SAN GIOVANNI 24 Jun
Celebrated with the lively Calcio Storico (p479), a series of medieval football-style matches played on Florence's Piazza di Santa Croce.

FESTIVAL DEI DUE MONDI late Jun–mid-Jul
The Festival of the Two Worlds (p576) is an international arts event held in Spoleto, featuring music, theatre, dance and art.

PALIO DELLE QUATTRO ANTICHE REPUBBLICHE MARINARE

The Regatta of the Four Ancient Maritime Republics involves a procession and boat race between the four maritime rivals: Pisa, Venice, Amalfi and Genoa. The event rotates between the towns: Genoa in 2008, Amalfi in 2009, Pisa in 2010 and Venice in 2011. Although usually held in June, it has been delayed as late as September.

JULY

IL PALIO 2 Jul

A dangerous bareback horse race (p523) around the piazza in Siena, preceded by a parade in traditional costume.

ARDIA 6 & 7 Jul

More dangerous than Il Palio, this chaotic horse race (accompanied by gunshots; p830) at Sedilo celebrates the victory of the Roman Emperor Constantine over Maxentius in AD 312.

QUINTANA 2nd Sat in Jul & 1st Sun in Aug

A parade (p599) of hundreds of people in 15th-century costume, followed by a jousting tournament, is held at Ascoli Piceno.

FESTA DEL REDENTORE 3rd weekend in Jul

One of Venice's most popular festivities (p358), marked with a fireworks display over the Bacino di San Marco. A pontoon bridge is built to connect the Chiesa del Redentore on the Giudecca with the rest of Venice.

TAORMINA ARTE Jul & Aug

Films, theatre and concerts (p779) from an impressive list of international names make Taormina the summer star of Sicily.

AUGUST

I CANDELIERI 14 Aug

Town representatives in Sassari dress in medieval costume and carry huge wooden 'candlesticks' through the town (p836).

IL PALIO 16 Aug

A repeat of the famous horse race (p523) is held in Siena.

FESTA DEL REDENTORE 28 & 29 Aug

Held in Nuoro, this folk festival (p844) is attended by thousands of people, dressed in traditional costume, from all over the island.

VENICE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

late Aug or early Sep

The Mostra del Cinema di Venezia (p358) is held at the Lido, with the festival attracting the international film glitterati.

SEPTEMBER

PALIO DELLA BALESTRA 1st Sun in Sep

Sansepolcro in Tuscany hosts a rematch (p573) with crossbow sharpshooters from Gubbio.

REGATA STORICA 1st Sun in Sep

A Historic Regatta (p358) of boats in period dress followed by gondola and other boat races along the Grand Canal in Venice.

OCTOBER

SALONE INTERNAZIONALE DEL GUSTO

biennially every Oct

The home-grown anti-fast-food organisation, the Slow Food Movement, hosts this international sybarites' get-together (p220) in Turin in even-numbered years.

NOVEMBER

FESTA DELLA MADONNA DELLA SALUTE

21 Nov

A procession (p358) to the Chiesa di Santa Maria della Salute in Venice gives thanks for the city's deliverance from plague in 1630.

FESTA DI SANTA CECILIA

A series of concerts and exhibitions (p524) in Siena to honour the patron saint of musicians.

DECEMBER

NATALE

The weeks preceding Christmas are studded with religious events. Many churches set up nativity scenes known as *presepi* – Naples is especially famous for these.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

CLASSIC CITIES

Two Weeks / Rome to Milan

A two-week whistle-stop tour will allow you a good taste of the tried and tested, throwing in a couple of hasty side tours.

Start with three days in **Rome** (p87), home to St Peter's, the Sistine Chapel, the Colosseum and more. From there, push on to the Renaissance jewel of **Florence** (p460) for a mind-blowing display of art in the Uffizi and around town. Squeeze in day trips to medieval **Siena** (p518) and pretty **Pisa** (p506), with its leaning tower. After four days in Tuscany, you might stop briefly in **Bologna** (p413), with its graceful monuments, bustling boulevards and great food, before proceeding to **Venice** (p334). Spend three days exploring the city's picturesque waterways and absorbing centuries of artistic and architectural grandeur. Set off westward for a one-day stopover in historic **Verona** (p378), home to the majestic Roman Arena and the fictitious Romeo and Juliet. From there proceed to **Milan** (p251), the country's financial hub and blessed with Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and the chic Monte Napoleone shopping districts.

Rome to Milan, via Florence and Venice, is a breathtaking 935km trip that you can do in a couple of weeks, but which easily merits as much time as you can give it.



FROM TOP TO TAIL: THE GRAND TOUR **One Month / Milan to Palermo**

No longer the preserve of aristocratic young men, the Grand Tour is for anyone with time on their hands to make the most of a trip to Italy. Start in the north and work slowly south (or vice versa), taking in all the great (and some minor) attractions as you go.

A good starting point is the financial metropolis and shopping capital of Italy, **Milan** (p251), from where you can head north and east to the glittering **Lombard lakes** (p285), then on to elegant **Verona** (p378) and the unique lagoon city of **Venice** (p334). Take time to sample the architectural and culinary delights of **Bologna** (p413) before progressing to **Florence** (p460) for an art infusion. From there you could loop west to explore the Romanesque wonders of walled-in **Lucca** (p499) and **Pisa** (p506), of Leaning Tower fame. Swing southeast to experience the medieval splendour of **Siena** (p518) before continuing south to the equally enchanting Umbrian hill capital of **Perugia** (p548). From Perugia, let all roads lead you straight to **Rome** (p87) and discover the ancient city in all its glory before scampering on to **Naples** (p618), the chaotic metropolis of the south and one-time capital of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Don't miss the fascinating ruins of **Pompeii** (p653) and the precipitous cliff towns of the **Amalfi Coast** (p661) before setting off east across the bottom of the boot into Puglia to **Lecce** (p702), with its extravagant baroque palaces, and the wild **Penisola Salentina** (p706) coast. Alternatively, opt for the road along the Calabrian coast and the ferry across to the sizzling island of **Sicily** (p736), with its wealth of history, good food, stark landscapes, island hideaways, beautiful beaches and volcanic splendour. Wind up in **Palermo** (p740), the southern island's fascinating capital.

To complete the Grand Tour you'll need at least a month but you can extend it to as much time as you have available. Traverse a world of different cultures and a treasure chest of art along this 1720km trail from Milan to Palermo.



UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN

Two Weeks / Florence to Pitigliano

The beauty of Tuscany remains as vibrant as it is, perhaps, clichéd. On a meandering road trip from its capital, **Florence** (p460), the wonders of its *città d'arte* (cities of art), fortified towns and warm-coloured countryside unfold graciously before you, sweeping you up in a romantic rapture.

After three nights in Florence, embark on a northern sweep through **Prato** (p495) and **Pistoia** (p497) to wind up for the night in the lovely walled town of **Lucca** (p499). The slower-paced might want to stay a night in Pistoia too. From the Romanesque gems of Lucca, swing south to those of **Pisa** (p506), above all the singular Leaning Tower.

The light and colours seem to gain in warmth as you move south. Bypassing the port of Livorno, the road leads high up inland to the craggy Etruscan-Roman eyrie of **Volterra** (p529). Only a short drive east through picture-book rolling country lies **San Gimignano** (p526), spiked with medieval towers. Either makes a fine spot to stay overnight, or you could choose an *agriturismo* (farm stay) in the country surrounding San Gimignano.

Only a few kilometres east, the hills of **Il Chianti** (p516) greet you. One could spend days lost in this area, visiting towns like **Castellina** (p517) and **Radda in Chianti** (p518), before heading to the sublime **Siena** (p518) for a few nights. To the east lie **Arezzo** (p539) and **Cortona** (p543). The road continues south into Umbria and past the **Lago Trasimeno** (p561) before swinging west back into Tuscany for the hill towns of **Montepulciano** (p534), **Pienza** (p534) and **Montalcino** (p533). Visit the nearby **Abbazia di Sant'Antimo** (p534) before heading south to the wilder Etruscan land around **Pitigliano** (p537), whose houses seemingly sprout from soaring rock cliffs.

As soon as you venture out over the region's rolling hills, you know why Tuscany will forever be an Italophile's favourite haunt. This 600km route takes in many of the star locations of town and country and winds up in the lesser-known inland south.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

DISCOVERING PIEDMONT

One Week / Turin to Monte Rosa

Largely ignored in favour of seemingly more illustrious regions such as Tuscany and Umbria, Piedmont proffers a surprising palette of options for all tastes. **Turin** (p213), the regional capital, exudes a muted grandeur with its proud, elegant centre and charming riverside location. It offers all the delights of the big city, in marked contrast to the options beyond.

Head southwest for **Saluzzo** (p228), a pretty medieval town at the beginning of one of several enticing valleys that meander west into the French Alps – an option worth following if you love nature and have some extra time. East of Saluzzo you enter serious gastronome territory – the Langhe hills. The nerve centre of this prestigious wine-making area is **Alba** (p229), famed for its red wines and white truffles. With your own wheels you can explore the villages that give their names to some fine tipples and tasty meals, such as **Barolo** (p232) for noble reds or **Cherasco** (p230) for its gourmet snail dishes. To the north is Alba's medieval arch rival, **Asti** (p234), another wine centre (this time white). Still more reds are produced in the verdant **Monferrato** (p235) region to its north.

From here, shoot north along the A26 to **Lago d'Orta** (p285), one of the prettiest lakes in northern Italy. Think about an overnight stay in charming **Orta San Giulio** (p285). Fans of the Alps could then head west for **Varallo** (p248) and the Valsesia valley. At the valley's end you butt up against the Swiss Alps. You can opt for skiing or hiking in the shadow of the mighty **Monte Rosa** (p248), or white-water rafting along the Sesia (p248), before returning to Turin.



Time your Piedmont parade with seasonal whims: spring for hiking, winter for skiing or September for the wine, truffle and food festivals. This 480km round trip starting in the capital, Turin, could easily be extended to Alpine valleys and villages in the north and southwest.

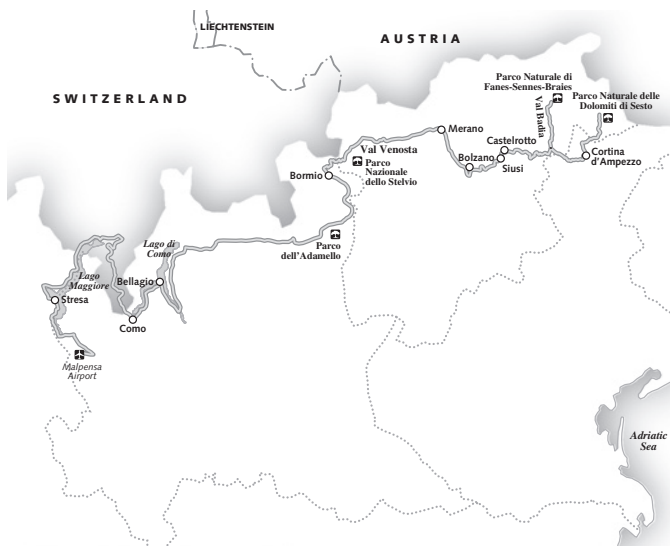
NORTHERN NATURE

Two Weeks / The Lakes to the Dolomites

A short drive northwest of Milan's Malpensa airport and you are on the edge of one of Italy's most serene scenes, **Lago Maggiore** (p286). With your own transport, you are ready to embark on a trail that skirts Italy's main centres in favour of its stunning natural beauty. Cyclists will clearly need to factor in more road time. Skirting the west flank of the lake, the trip will take you briefly into Switzerland (passport required) via **Stresa** (p286; you could stay a night here), before the road drops south again to **Como** (p290) on **Lago di Como** (p289). Sleep in **Bellagio** (p293). From the northern tip of the lake, head east to the **Parco dell'Adamello** (p297) and **Parco Nazionale dello Stelvio** (p326), both with plenty of walking trails and the latter with great skiing at **Bormio** (p326). You could follow the Val Venosta out of the park for a small town stop in **Merano** (p324). Southeast, **Bolzano** (p321) is another worthwhile city stopover with an Austrian feel to it that is typical in much of the Alto Adige.

From there, mountain roads spread north and east deep into the Dolomites, a dream in summer or winter. Head for the pretty villages of **Castelrotto** or **Siusi** in the **Alpe di Siusi** (p328) area and use them as bases for some inspiring Alpine walks. Further northeast are the popular **Val Badia** and **Parco Naturale di Fanes-Sennes-Braies** (p329). In the same area is the Sella Ronda (p320), a challenging four-valley ski route. Walking opportunities abound here and further east still, among the towering peaks of the **Parco Naturale delle Dolomiti di Sesto** (p331), while **Cortina d'Ampezzo** (p330) is where the beautiful snow folk show off in their winter leisure time.

Just north of Milan lies one of northern Italy's glittering lakes, Lago Maggiore. From here you can start a 565km meandering jaunt eastward around the lakes and into the mountains to enjoy national parks, hiking or snowy slopes, cheerful Alpine towns and hearty cooking.



TAILORED TRIPS

TASTEBUDS ON TOUR

When fast food chains landed in Italy in the 1980s, indignant local foodies created Slow Food (p234). Now a worldwide organisation for the defence of good food and good practice using local products and tradition, Slow Food publishes an annual guide to Italy's eateries.

A trip to Italy's gastronomic heart – Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany and Umbria – is a must for sybarites.

Stock up your cupboards at Mercato delle Erbe in **Bologna** (p420) and complete your store with a bottle of the finest balsamic vinegar from **Modena** (p434). By now you'll be hungry so have your antipasto in one of the most famous of foodie towns, **Parma** (p429), home to Italy's best prosciutto and Parmesan.

For the *primo piatto* (first course) it's off to **Umbria** (p546) for some *umbricelli* pasta served with shaved truffles, or, if you're lucky, even the elusive *tartufo nero* (black truffle), from around **Norcia** (p577).

For the *secondo piatto* (second course), sample *bistecca alla fiorentina* (T-bone steak) from **Florence** (p485), or *porchetta*, suckling pig stuffed with its liver, wild fennel and rosemary, from **Perugia** (p548).

Wash it down with a glass of **Chianti** (p516) red or white from **Orvieto's** (p582) vineyards. Finish off with *panforte* (a flat, hard cake with candied fruits and nuts) from **Siena** (p518), or *cantucci e vin santo* (crisp almond biscuits dipped in dessert wine), another Tuscan favourite.



WORLD HERITAGE SITES

With its vast historical legacy, it's no surprise that Italy is home to 41 Unesco World Heritage Sites. They are a grand mix of natural and built, but the latter are in the majority. You'll need plenty of time to get around them all (visit <http://whc.unesco.org> for a comprehensive list), but if you prefer the past in more manageable doses, you could try the following selection of Italy's World Heritage best.

Start at the Roman resort town of **Tivoli** (p173) before pushing on to some of Tuscany's historic towns – take your pick from **Florence** (p460), **Siena** (p518), **San Gimignano** (p526), **Pisa** (p506) and **Pienza** (p534), as all their town centres are designated sites.

From Tuscany it's a short hop to **Modena's** (p423) fine Romanesque cathedral, **Ravenna's** (p449) stunning early-Christian and Byzantine mosaics and the splendid Renaissance city of **Ferrara** (p436).

Then turn your attention to **Urbino** (p590), one of Italy's best-preserved and most beautiful hill towns. Finally, finish in **Assisi** (p564), the picturesque home of St Francis, which attracts millions of tourists and pilgrims each year.



On the Road



DAMIEN SIMONIS

Coordinating Author

Flying over Venice by helicopter from the Lido makes the city seem like an architect's model. Below us the islands and lagoon channels look like a grand tableau of contemporary art, with tiny vessels leaving thin white wakes behind them. What a way to get 'on top' of the city!

ALISON BING Here I am on the border of Lazio and Tuscany, purchasing half a priest's house...no, really. My partner Marco's family is from the region, and this medieval town in truffile country immediately felt (and tasted) like home. We found and bought our place that afternoon.



DUNCAN GARWOOD

Early on a clear February morning in Comacchio, I'm squinting into the sun trying to make out a fishing boat in the distance. It was cold and the only noise I could hear was the occasional shout of a fisherman.



RICHARD HAMMOND It was the height of summer, but on this day I came across few other walkers while walking in the Dolomites. Just lots of well-marked trails, fresh air, spectacular views, as well as plenty of Mediterranean sun to dry my swimming gear after I'd taken a refreshing dip in a lake.



CATHERINE LE NEVEZ

When I head up into the Dolomites, my hiking boots aren't prepared for late-season snowfalls. Bundled in every layer I own, I hitch a snowmobile ride with a local, Yogi, who drives like a true Italian – the views would've been great if I'd been game to open my eyes!

ABIGAIL HOLE Reaching the summit of the scary roller-coaster road up to the huge statue of Christ (p712) above Maratea, we had a rare top-of-the-world feeling. Here I am with my son, who was the most excited of all.



ALEX LEVITON On the first even mild days of spring in Perugia, every café lining Corso Vannucci opens dozens of tables along Perugia's main thoroughfare in the historic centre. I'd been living in Perugia since mid-February, but the first week of April was the first time I'd been able to take advantage of this most agreeable of traditions.



LEIF PETTERSEN I consumed my eighth gelato in three days from Gelateria di Piazza (p529) in San Gimignano, with no regard for my dwindling sex appeal, just to ensure that no one would be eating freezer-burned gelato in my territory. This job made 'sacrifice the bod' take on a whole new meaning.



VIRGINIA MAXWELL I adore Rome, but after being in the city for a while I try to escape the crowds and head into the country. On this trip I emulated Emperor Hadrian, who regularly bunked off to his peaceful sculpture-strewn villa (p173) in Tivoli. After visiting, I knew exactly what the attraction was!



JOSEPHINE QUINTERO Oliena is a real stuck-in-a-time-warp kind of place. These ladies are dressed in their traditional black shawled garb to do their local shop.



NICOLA WILLIAMS I'd spent two days in the Uffizi, one in the Galleria dell'Accademia (half the time queueing), another in the Bargello, and begged a break. So I legged it to San Gimignano's Galleria Continua, one of Italy's top ground-breaking contemporary-art galleries. Daniel Buren's dazzling mirrored maze was just what I needed.

