

THE ULTIMATE

ITALY

TRAVEL GUIDE



TWENTY REGIONS • FOOD & WINE •
TRACING YOUR ROOTS

2026 EDITION • FULLY RESEARCHED
FROM [LOVETOVISITITALY.COM](https://www.lovetovisititaly.com)

The Ultimate Italy Travel Guide — 2026 Edition

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IN THIS GUIDE

Contents

1 • Before you go

EES & ETIAS · money · insurance · when to visit · packing

3 • Getting there & around

Airports · the train network · driving & ZTL zones · ferries

5 • Florence & Tuscany

The Renaissance city, Siena, Val d'Orcia and Chianti

7 • Milan & the Italian Lakes

Design, the Last Supper, Como, Garda and Maggiore

9 • Puglia & the deep south

Trulli, baroque Lecce, Matera and the two seas

11 • Sardinia

Caribbean water, nuraghi, and the empty interior

2 • Italy at a glance

Facts · the twenty regions · language · etiquette

4 • Rome

The ancient city, the Vatican, and the Rome between them

6 • Venice & the Veneto

The lagoon city, Verona, Padua and the Prosecco hills

8 • Naples, Pompeii & the Amalfi Coast

Italy's loudest city, its buried one, and the coast road

10 • Sicily

Greek temples, Etna, Palermo's markets, Taormina

12 • The Dolomites & the Alpine north

Pale peaks, mountain huts, and Italy's German half

13 · Cinque Terre & Liguria

Five villages, Portofino, Genoa and pesto's homeland

15 · Umbria & Le Marche

Assisi, Orvieto, hill towns and the quiet Adriatic

17 · How Italians eat

The meal, the rules, and region-by-region specialities

19 · Wine

The regions, the labels, and how to order without fear

21 · Tracing your Italian roots

Antenati, the comune, records — and visiting your town

23 · Hidden gems & borghi

Twenty-five villages and towns most visitors never reach

25 · A year in Italy

Month by month: weather, festivals, crowds, prices

14 · Bologna & Emilia-Romagna

Italy's kitchen: parmigiano, prosciutto, balsamic, ragù

16 · Road-trip itineraries

Tuscany in 7 days · Rome to Lecce · the 14-day Grand Tour

18 · Pasta, pizza & the classics

Shapes and their sauces, and the dishes worth ordering

20 · Coffee & the Italian bar

What to order, when, and how much to pay

22 · Art & architecture

Etruscan to baroque — how to look, and what to skip

24 · Beaches & the islands

Where to swim, region by region, plus the smaller isles

26 · Where to stay

Agriturismi, palazzo hotels, masserie, city apartments

27 · Artisan crafts & shopping

Leather, ceramics, Murano glass — and spotting fakes

29 · The regions in full

All twenty regions: known for, don't miss, local secret

31 · Day trips from the big cities

Escapes by train from the four big bases

33 · Practical A–Z

Everything else, alphabetically

28 · Language & glossary

Pronunciation, the phrases that matter, menu Italian

30 · The great cities on foot

Seven self-guided walks in Rome, Florence and Venice

32 · Ten dishes to take home

The classic recipes, as Italians cook them

34 · Essentials & links

Emergency numbers · tipping · websites

PART ONE

Before you go

Europe's entry rules changed in 2026, and Italy's most popular sights now sell out weeks ahead. Read this part even if you've been before.

Passports, visas & the new border system

Italy is in the EU and the Schengen Area. Citizens of the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Japan and many other countries need **no visa** for stays of up to **90 days in any 180-day period** — a rolling limit that counts every day spent anywhere in Schengen, not just Italy. Your passport must be valid for at least three months beyond your planned departure and issued within the last ten years.

NEW FOR 2026 — EES BIOMETRIC BORDERS

The EU's **Entry/Exit System (EES)** has been fully operational since **10 April 2026**, and it replaces the passport stamp. On arrival at Rome, Milan or any other Schengen entry point, your **photograph and fingerprints** are taken and a digital record tracks your 90-day allowance automatically. It costs nothing and needs no application — but budget extra time at passport control, especially in the first year and at peak hours. Your data is held for three years, so subsequent entries are quicker. EES applies only at the Schengen *external* border: fly Rome to Paris and nobody checks you at all.

COMING NEXT — ETIAS

ETIAS is the EU's forthcoming travel authorisation, the European cousin of America's ESTA: an online form, **€20**, linked to your passport and valid three years (free for under-18s and over-70s). One authorisation covers all 30 participating countries. It is **not yet in force** — the European Commission has it scheduled for the last quarter of 2026, followed by a six-month transition during which travellers without one will still be admitted. Timelines have slipped repeatedly, so **check the official site — travel-europe.europa.eu — a month before you fly**, or our entry-requirements page at **lovetovisititaly.com**, which we update as the rules move, and apply only there. Third-party sites charge large markups for a form you can complete yourself in ten minutes.

Money

Italy uses the **euro (€)**. Cards are accepted almost everywhere and contactless is standard — but Italy is more cash-friendly than northern Europe, and you'll want **€50–100 in small notes** for market stalls, village bars, church donations, beach loungers and the occasional trattoria that has "a problem with the machine". ATMs (*bancomat*) are everywhere; use bank-branded machines rather than the independent ones in tourist areas, which charge more. When a terminal offers to bill you in dollars or pounds, always **choose euro**.

Two Italian quirks worth knowing. Nearly every restaurant charges **coperto** — a per-person cover charge of €1.50–4, printed on the menu; it is not a scam and not a tip. And most towns levy a **tassa di soggiorno** (tourist tax) of roughly €1–10 per person per night, often collected in cash at check-out and rarely included in the online price.

Travel insurance & health

A comprehensive policy runs about **4–8% of your trip cost** and covers cancellation, medical care and baggage. Buy it soon after paying for flights, since that's when cancellation cover begins. Check what you already hold — many credit cards and home policies include travel cover — and read the exclusions on pre-existing conditions and operator insolvency. EU visitors should carry a **European Health Insurance Card (EHIC/GHIC)**. Italian pharmacies (*farmacia*, green cross) are excellent and pharmacists can treat minor complaints without a doctor; every town posts a rota for the night pharmacy (*farmacia di turno*).

When to visit

Italy has no bad season, only badly matched ones. **Late April to mid-June** and **September to mid-October** are the sweet spots: warm, long days, everything open, and the light that made the country famous. **July and August** are hot — 35°C and above in Rome, Florence and the south — expensive, and crowded; worse, in **August** Italians go on holiday themselves, so city restaurants and shops close for two or three weeks while the coast fills up. **November to March** is the connoisseur's Italy: empty museums, cheap flights, truffle and citrus season,

Carnival, and cities like Rome and Naples at their most livable. Winter closes some coastal and Alpine-valley businesses and the Dolomites switch to ski mode.

BOOK THESE BEFORE YOU BOOK ANYTHING ELSE

Italy's headline sights now run on **timed tickets that genuinely sell out**. Reserve as soon as your dates are fixed: the **Colosseum** and its Palatine/Forum combination (release date-limited, often gone weeks ahead), the **Vatican Museums & Sistine Chapel**, the **Uffizi** and **Accademia** in Florence, the **Last Supper** in Milan (a handful of 15-minute slots a day — book two to three months out), the **Borghese Gallery** in Rome, **Pompeii** in high season, and any high-speed train you need at a particular hour. Everything else in Italy can be improvised. We keep current booking links for all of these at **lovetovisititaly.com**.

What to pack

Italy is a walking country with cobbles, hills and a dress code that is more attentive than most visitors expect. Pack fewer, better clothes — Italians dress simply but well, and nobody outside a beach town wears athletic kit to dinner.

NEVER LEAVES YOUR SIDE

- Passport (+ ETIAS once required)
- Cards and €50–100 cash
- Prescriptions & medicines
- Booking confirmations & QR codes
- Insurance documents

CLOTHES THAT WORK HERE

- Comfortable, smart walking shoes — cobbles punish sandals
- Shoulders and knees covered for churches (a light scarf solves it)
- Linen and cotton layers, May–Sept
- A warm layer for evenings and hill towns
- Sun hat and real sunglasses

TECH & PRACTICAL

- Type L/F plug adapter (230 V)
- Refillable water bottle — public fountains are safe and everywhere
- Power bank
- Offline maps and rail app downloaded
- A day bag that closes properly

PART TWO

Italy at a glance

A country younger than the United States, made of twenty regions that still think of themselves as small nations — which is exactly why one trip is never enough.

59m

people — with some 80 million of Italian descent worldwide

20

regions, 107 provinces, and about 7,900 comuni

No.1

in the world for UNESCO World Heritage sites — around sixty of them

1861

the year Italy became one country — Rome joined in 1870

The shape of the country

Italy is a 1,200-km boot with the Alps across the top, the Apennines down the spine, and 7,600 km of coastline either side. Practically, it divides into three: the wealthy, industrial **north** (Milan, Turin, Venice, the lakes and the Dolomites); the **centre** of hill towns and art cities (Tuscany, Umbria, Rome); and the hotter, poorer, more emphatic **south** or *Mezzogiorno* (Naples, Puglia, Calabria, Sicily) — where most emigrants to America came from, and where the food, dialects and welcome

are strongest. Two islands, **Sicily** and **Sardinia**, are worlds of their own. Two sovereign states sit inside the borders: **Vatican City** and **San Marino**.

Worth knowing before you arrive

- **Italy is a young country with a long past.** Unification came only in 1861; before it, the peninsula was kingdoms, duchies, papal states and republics. That's why every region has its own dialect, cuisine, architecture and civic pride — and why an Italian will tell you they're Sicilian or Venetian first.
- **The Roman Empire's fingerprints are everywhere**, and not only in Rome: aqueducts in Puglia, an intact temple in Assisi, a whole buried city at Pompeii, and arenas in Verona and Lecce still hosting audiences.
- **Italy has more UNESCO World Heritage sites than anywhere on earth** — around sixty, narrowly ahead of China — and by some estimates around half of the world's catalogued art treasures sit within its borders.
- **The pasta is regional, not national.** Ordering carbonara in Bologna or ragù in Rome marks you out; eating what the region does best is the single easiest upgrade to any Italian trip.
- **Espresso is drunk standing at the bar**, in a minute, for about €1.20. Sit at a table and the same coffee can cost three times as much — legitimately, because you're renting the chair.

- **Riposo is real.** In smaller towns and the south, shops close from roughly 1pm to 4pm and reopen into the evening. Plan sightseeing, not shopping, for the early afternoon.
- **The number of Italian-Americans is staggering** — around 17 million in the United States alone, most descended from the four million who left between 1880 and 1920. If your surname ends in a vowel, there is very likely a comune waiting to show you its register.

Etiquette that actually matters

Greet before you ask. Walking into a shop, bar or office and launching into a question is the commonest visitor mistake; *buongiorno* (until mid-afternoon) or *buonasera* (after) transforms the response you get. Use *lei* — the formal you — with anyone older or in any official setting.

Dress for churches: shoulders and knees covered, hats off, no beachwear. St Peter's and the Duomo turn people away daily. **At the table:** no parmesan on fish pasta, no cappuccino after lunch, bread is for the sauce not the starter, and dinner starts at 8pm at the earliest — a restaurant serving at 6.30 is serving tourists. **Tipping** is modest: service is usually included, so round up or leave a couple of euro for genuinely good service. And **don't rush a meal** — the bill comes when you ask for it (*il conto, per favore*), never before.

PART THREE

Getting there & around

Italy has one of the best high-speed rail networks in the world and some of the most confusing driving rules in Europe. Knowing when to take the train and when to take the car is the whole game.

Airports

Rome Fiumicino (FCO) is the main long-haul gateway: the **Leonardo Express** runs non-stop to Termini station in 32 minutes (about €14), or regional trains reach Trastevere and Ostiense for less. **Milan Malpensa (MXP)** serves the north, with the Malpensa Express to Cadorna or Centrale in under an hour. Also useful: **Venice Marco Polo (VCE)** — reach the city by Alilaguna boat or bus to Piazzale Roma; **Naples (NAP)**, whose Alibus reaches the centre in 20 minutes; **Bologna (BLQ)** with its Marconi Express monorail; plus **Pisa, Florence, Bari, Catania, Palermo** and **Cagliari**. Two planning notes: open-jaw tickets (into Milan, out of Naples) usually cost no more and save a day of backtracking, and low-cost carriers often use distant airports — Bergamo is "Milan", Ciampino is "Rome".

Trains — usually the right answer

Italy's high-speed network is superb, and city-centre to city-centre it beats flying comfortably: **Rome–Florence in 1h32, Rome–Naples in 1h10, Milan–Rome in about 3 hours, Milan–Venice in 2h15**. Two operators compete on the same lines — state-run **Trenitalia** (Frecciarossa) and private **Italo** — which keeps fares honest. Book in advance for the cheap non-

refundable fares; walk-up prices can be triple. Below the fast lines sit **Intercity** and slow, cheap **Regionale** trains that reach the hill towns and the coast, cost a few euro, and can't be booked ahead.

Two rules that catch visitors: **paper regional tickets must be validated** in the green-and-white machine on the platform before boarding, or you risk a fine; and high-speed tickets are for a **specific train and seat**, so a missed departure means a new ticket. Download the Trenitalia and Italo apps — both sell mobile tickets and show live platform changes, which are frequent.

Driving — and the ZTL trap

Rent a car for the countryside — Tuscany, Umbria, Puglia, Sicily, the Dolomites — and never for the cities, where parking is scarce, expensive and often illegal in ways you won't notice until the fines arrive. Italy drives on the right. Speed limits are 130 km/h on the *autostrada*, 110 on dual carriageways, 90 on main roads, 50 in towns, and cameras (*tutor* systems that average your speed over a stretch) are widespread.

TWO THINGS THAT COST VISITORS REAL MONEY

ZTL — Zona a Traffico Limitato. Almost every historic centre is closed to non-resident cars during posted hours, enforced by camera. There is no barrier and no warning beyond a white circular sign with a red border reading *Zona Traffico Limitato*; drive past it and a fine of €80–350 reaches you months later, plus your rental company's admin fee. **Park outside the walls and walk in** — and if your hotel is inside a ZTL, give them your plate *before* you arrive so they can register it.

The International Driving Permit. Licences from the USA, Canada and Australia are valid in Italy only when accompanied by an **IDP** — a \$20 document you must obtain at home before you travel (AAA in the States, in about 15 minutes). Police checks do ask, rental desks increasingly do too, and insurance can be voided without it. EU and UK licences need nothing.

Also worth knowing: **autostrada tolls** are real money (Milan–Rome is roughly €45) — take a ticket entering, pay leaving, and use the white or blue lanes, never the yellow Telepass ones. Fuel is expensive; *servito* pumps cost more than *fai da te* self-service. Parking lines have meaning: **white is free, blue is paid, yellow is residents only**. And book automatics early — Italy is a manual-transmission country.

Buses, ferries & city transport

Where the trains don't go — inland Sicily, the Amalfi Coast, remote Puglia — **regional buses** do, cheaply, on timetables that thin out drastically on Sundays; buy tickets at the tobacconist (*tabaccheria*) before boarding. On the Amalfi Coast the SITA bus and the seasonal **ferries** from Sorrento, Positano and Amalfi are far more pleasant than driving that road. Ferries also serve Sicily (from Naples, Villa San Giovanni and Genoa), Sardinia (Civitavecchia, Livorno, Genoa), and the smaller islands — book car spaces well ahead in summer. In the cities, buy metro and bus tickets before you board, validate on entry, and remember that Venice runs on the **vaporetto**, where a multi-day travel card almost always beats singles.

PART FOUR

Rome

Three thousand years of continuous city, layered on top of itself. Give it four days minimum, book the big three before anything else, and accept that you cannot see it all.



The ancient city

- **The Colosseum** — the largest amphitheatre ever built, opened in AD 80 for 50,000 spectators. Timed tickets, sold in limited daily releases; the extra-cost **arena floor and underground** tours are the ones worth chasing. Your ticket includes the Forum and Palatine, valid across 24 hours.
- **The Roman Forum & Palatine Hill** — the political and religious heart of the empire, and the hill where emperors lived. Go early or late; there is no shade. Read a paragraph on

each ruin before you enter or it becomes a field of stones.

- **The Pantheon** — the best-preserved building of ancient Rome, its unreinforced concrete dome still the largest in the world after nineteen centuries, with an open oculus and Raphael's tomb inside. Now ticketed; book ahead.
- **Trajan's Markets & the Imperial Fora** — the quieter, better-explained half of the ancient centre, with a museum that finally makes the layout make sense.
- **The Baths of Caracalla** and the **Appian Way** — vast, empty, atmospheric; the Appia's catacombs and tomb-lined road make a fine half-day by bike.
- **Ostia Antica** — a whole Roman port town, better preserved than most of Pompeii and 40 minutes by train. Rome's single most underrated day.

The Vatican

St Peter's Basilica is free but the security queue is long — arrive at opening or late afternoon, and climb the **dome** (551 steps, or a lift then 320) for the finest view in Rome. The **Vatican Museums** end at the **Sistine Chapel** after nearly seven kilometres of galleries: book a timed slot, consider an early-entry or evening tour, and if you're short on stamina walk briskly to the Raphael Rooms and the Chapel first. Don't miss the **Castel Sant'Angelo** across the river — Hadrian's mausoleum turned papal fortress, with the passetto escape corridor and a rooftop bar view.

The Rome in between

The city's real pleasure is the walking between monuments. Link the **Spanish Steps**, **Trevi Fountain** (throw the coin over your left shoulder with your right hand) and **Piazza Navona** in an easy morning. Then find the quieter Rome: the **Borghese Gallery** in its park, with Bernini sculptures that seem to breathe (strictly timed two-hour slots, book weeks ahead); **Trastevere's** ivy-hung lanes and Santa Maria's gold mosaics; the **Jewish Ghetto** for fried artichokes and two thousand years of history; **Campo de' Fiori's** morning market; the keyhole view of St Peter's on the **Aventine**; and **Basilica di San Clemente**, where you descend through a medieval church to a 4th-century one to a Mithraic temple — the layer cake of Rome in a single building.

Eating in Rome: the four pastas are *carbonara* (egg, pecorino, guanciale, pepper — never cream), *cacio e pepe*, *amatriciana* and *gricia*. Add *carciofi alla giudia*, *supplì*, and pizza al taglio by weight for lunch. Eat in Testaccio, Trastevere's back streets, Monti or Pigneto, not on a piazza with a photo menu.

PART FIVE

Florence & Tuscany

The city where the Renaissance began, in a region built for slow driving. Three days in Florence, then get out into the hills — that's the trip.



Florence

- **The Duomo complex** — Brunelleschi's dome was the engineering miracle of its age and still dominates the skyline. Climbing it (463 steps, reserved slot required) is the classic; Giotto's **campanile** next door is slightly easier and gives you the dome *in* the view. One ticket covers dome, tower, baptistery and museum.

- **The Uffizi** — Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*, Leonardo, Caravaggio, Titian. Timed entry, essential to book. Go late in the day if you can.
- **The Accademia** — Michelangelo's *David*, and it does deserve the queue; the unfinished *Prisoners* lining the approach are the surprise.
- **Ponte Vecchio & the Oltrarno** — cross the goldsmiths' bridge into the artisan quarter for leather, marbled paper and better-value dinner; **Palazzo Pitti** and the **Boboli Gardens** are on that side too.
- **Santa Croce & the Bargello** — the tombs of Michelangelo, Galileo and Machiavelli in one church; Donatello's sculpture in a quiet museum most visitors skip.
- **Piazzale Michelangelo** at sunset for the postcard, or the climb to **San Miniato al Monte** just above it, where the Gregorian chant is free and the crowd thins.

Tuscany beyond Florence

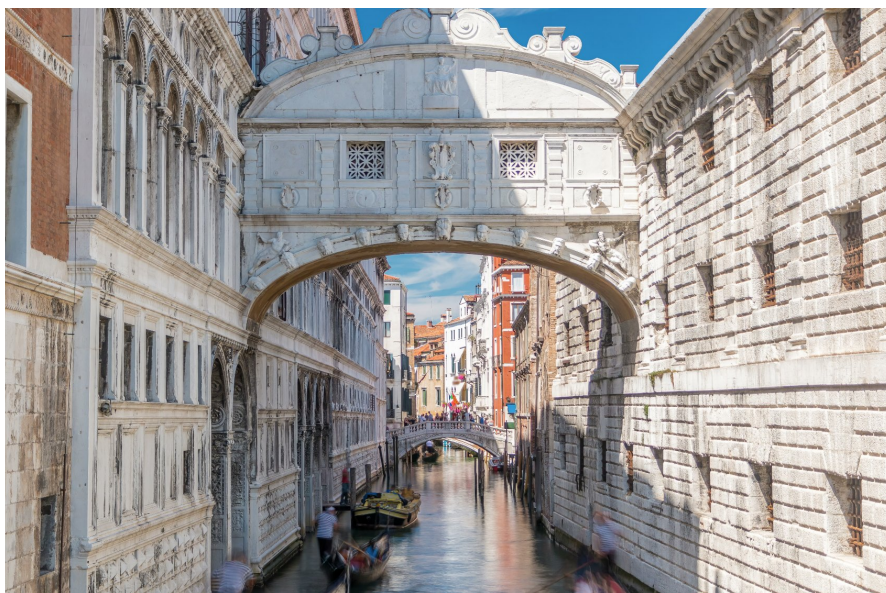
Siena is the great rival city and, for many, the more beautiful: a shell-shaped piazza where the bareback **Palio** is run each July and August, and a striped cathedral of astonishing intensity. **San Gimignano's** fourteen surviving towers and **Volterra's** Etruscan walls handle the middle of the region. South lies the **Val d'Orcia** — the landscape on every Italy calendar, with cypress avenues, **Pienza** (Renaissance town planning and pecorino), **Montalcino** (Brunello), **Montepulciano** (Vino Nobile) and the hot springs at **Bagno Vignoni** and free-to-use **Saturnia**. West, **Pisa's** leaning tower deserves its two hours; **Lucca's** intact Renaissance walls

are the loveliest cycle ride in Italy. And between Florence and Siena, **Chianti's** SS222 wine road is the drive people imagine when they imagine Tuscany.

PART SIX

Venice & the Veneto

A city built on wooden piles in a lagoon, and a region of walled towns and vineyards behind it. Stay the night — Venice belongs to those who see it after the day-trippers leave.



Venice

Piazza San Marco holds the essentials: the **Basilica**, its interior a cave of gold Byzantine mosaic (book a slot; the Pala d'Oro and the loggia horses are worth the small extra), the **Doge's Palace** with its Bridge of Sighs and prisons, and the **campanile** for the lagoon view. Then leave the square. Ride **vaporetto line 1** the length of the Grand Canal at dusk for the cheapest great experience in Italy; cross on a **traghetto** gondola ferry for €2 rather than paying €90 for the serenade. See the **Rialto market**

before 9am, get properly lost in **Cannaregio** and **Dorsoduro**, and find the spiral staircase at **Palazzo Contarini del Bovolo**. For art, the **Accademia** for Venetian masters and the **Peggy Guggenheim Collection** for the twentieth century. In the lagoon: **Murano** for glass, **Burano** for painted houses and lace, and quiet **Torcello**, where the whole thing began.

THE VENICE ACCESS FEE — CHECK BEFORE YOU GO

Venice has been trialling a **day-tripper access fee** for the historic centre: in 2026 it applied on 60 dates between 3 April and 26 July, from 8.30am to 4pm, at **€5 booked four or more days ahead and €10 thereafter**, for visitors aged 14 and over. Anyone **staying the night** in the municipality was exempt from the charge but still had to register for a free QR code, and the lagoon islands were never included. The trial **ended on 27 July 2026** and the city has not yet confirmed the scheme for 2027 — so check **cda.veneziaunica.it** — or our Venice page at **lovetovisititaly.com** — once your dates are set. Note that this is entirely separate from the hotel tourist tax, which you pay regardless.

The Veneto

Verona is the region's other great city: a Roman arena that still stages summer opera to 15,000 people, a handsome piazza, and a Juliet balcony that is entirely invented and entirely thronged. **Padua** holds Giotto's **Scrovegni Chapel** — one of the supreme works of European painting, in strictly timed 15-minute slots —

plus Europe's oldest botanical garden and a vast pilgrim basilica. **Vicenza** is Palladio's city, the source of half the world's neoclassical architecture. North, the **Prosecco hills** around Valdobbiadene are a UNESCO landscape of vertiginous vines, and **Asolo** and **Bassano del Grappa** make lovely bases. The Dolomites (Part Twelve) begin two hours from Venice.

PART SEVEN

Milan & the Italian Lakes

Italy's working capital, and the mountain lakes an hour north of it that Europe has holidayed on since the Romans.

Milan

Milan is the least "Italian" of the great cities and the most modern — fashion, design, finance and aperitivo. Two days is right. The **Duomo** is the third-largest church in the world, a forest of marble pinnacles; the **rooftop terraces** are the visit, so buy the lift ticket and walk among the spires. Alongside sits the **Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II**, the world's most beautiful shopping arcade. Book **Leonardo's *Last Supper*** at Santa Maria delle Grazie the moment your dates are firm — 15-minute slots, tiny capacity, gone months ahead. Add **La Scala**, the **Sforza Castle** and its Michelangelo *Rondanini Pietà*, the **Brera** gallery and quarter, and the **Navigli** canals for the 6pm aperitivo, which in Milan comes with enough food to be dinner. Design pilgrims should time a visit for the April **Salone del Mobile**.

The lakes

Lake Como is the glamorous one — a Y of steep wooded shore, villa gardens (Balbianello, Carlotta, Melzi) and pastel villages. Base in **Varenna** or **Bellagio** rather than Como town, and travel by **ferry**, not car: the lakeside road is narrow, slow and lined with tunnels. **Lake Garda** is bigger, warmer and better for families: **Sirmione's** castle and Roman ruins in the south, lemon-terraced **Limone** and windsurfing **Riva** in the mountainous north, plus

Gardaland for the children and Verona forty minutes away. **Lake Maggiore** is the quiet, elegant alternative, its **Borronean Islands** — a baroque palace on one, a fishing village on another — reachable from Stresa in ten minutes. **Lake Orta**, smaller still, is the one Italians keep for themselves.

PART EIGHT

Naples, Pompeii & the Amalfi Coast

The most intense city in Italy, the best-preserved Roman one, and the most beautiful road. All within an hour of each other, under a live volcano.



Naples

Loud, theatrical, unpolished and completely compelling — and the birthplace of pizza, which here means a soft, blistered, folded thing eaten in ten minutes for about €6. Don't skip it for the coast. The **Museo Archeologico Nazionale** holds everything valuable ever dug out of Pompeii and is the essential preparation for visiting the site. Walk **Spaccanapoli**, the dead-straight Greek street that halves the old city; see the **Veiled**

Christ at the Cappella Sansevero, a marble carving nobody quite believes; descend into **Napoli Sotterranea**; ride the funicular to **Vomero** for the bay view. It's safe with ordinary city sense: watch bags, don't flash valuables, and cross the road with confidence because hesitation confuses the traffic.

Pompeii, Herculaneum & Vesuvius

Pompeii is enormous — 44 hectares of streets, houses, bakeries, brothels and frescoes buried by Vesuvius in AD 79. Arrive at opening, bring water and a hat (there is almost no shade), pick six or seven specific houses rather than wandering, and consider a guide. **Herculaneum** is the smarter half-day for many: smaller, richer, with wooden beams and upper floors intact and a fraction of the crowds. Then climb **Vesuvius** itself — a shuttle to 1,000 m and a 30-minute walk to the crater rim, with the whole Bay of Naples below. Add **Paestum**, an hour south, where three Greek temples stand in a field, better preserved than almost anything in Greece.

The Amalfi Coast, Sorrento & Capri

The **SS163** between Sorrento and Salerno is one of the world's great drives and a genuinely demanding one: 50 km of blind hairpins with buses coming the other way, almost nowhere to park, and summer traffic that turns an hour into three. **Our advice: don't drive it in July or August.** Base yourself in one town and use the **SITA buses and ferries** instead — the sea approach to Positano is better than any parking space. **Positano** is the vertical postcard, **Amalfi** has the great striped cathedral, **Ravello** sits high above with the finest gardens and terrace view

on the coast, and quieter **Praiano** or **Atrani** make better-value bases. Walk the **Path of the Gods** from Bomerano for the coast from above. **Sorrento** is the practical hub — train from Naples, ferries everywhere. Offshore, **Capri** repays an overnight stay: the day boats leave by 5pm and the island becomes a different, quieter place, with the chairlift up Monte Solaro and Anacapri's lanes to yourself.

PART NINE

Puglia & the deep south

The heel of the boot: whitewashed towns, conical stone huts, baroque cities, two seas and the best-value food in Italy. This is where a second Italian trip should go.



Alberobello is the icon: 1,500 *trulli*, drystone cottages with conical roofs, a UNESCO site you can sleep inside. It's busy by day, magical at breakfast. Around it the **Valle d'Itria** holds whitewashed **Locorotondo**, **Cisternino** and **Martina Franca**, plus *masserie* — fortified farmhouses turned into some of Italy's loveliest hotels. On the Adriatic, **Polignano a Mare** perches over a cliff cove, and **Monopoli's** harbour is the better dinner. **Lecce**, the "Florence of the South", is carved head to foot in soft golden limestone — its baroque churches are wild, its Roman

amphitheatre sits in the main square, and it is the natural base for the **Salento** peninsula, where **Otranto**, **Gallipoli** and beaches like Punta Prosciutto meet water the colour of the Caribbean. In the north, the **Gargano** promontory adds forest, cliffs and the Tremiti islands, and **Trani's** cathedral stands right on the sea.

One hour inland, in Basilicata, is **Matera** — the *sassi*, a honeycomb of cave dwellings inhabited for 9,000 years, evacuated in the 1950s as a national shame and now a UNESCO site full of cave hotels and restaurants. It is one of the most extraordinary places in Europe. Further south, **Calabria** gives you Tropea's cliff beaches and the Aspromonte mountains, and remains one of Italy's genuinely undiscovered corners. Eat here: *orecchiette* with turnip tops, *burrata* from Andria, *focaccia barese*, raw seafood, and Primitivo by the carafe.

PART TEN

Sicily

Not an Italian island so much as a Mediterranean crossroads — Greek, Arab, Norman, Spanish and Italian in turn, with Europe's most active volcano in the middle. Give it ten days.



Palermo is the great chaotic capital: Arab-Norman churches with gold mosaics and red domes, the astonishing **Cappella Palatina**, and street markets — Ballarò, Capo — where you eat standing up. Nearby **Monreale's** cathedral is covered in six thousand square metres of mosaic and is unmissable. West lie **Segesta's** lone hilltop temple, hilltop **Erice**, the salt pans of **Trapani** and the Zingaro nature reserve.

On the south coast, the **Valley of the Temples** at Agrigento is the finest group of Greek temples anywhere, and the Scala dei Turchi's white cliff sits nearby. Inland, the **Villa Romana del Casale** at Piazza Armerina holds the best Roman mosaics in the world. The southeast is baroque country: **Noto**, **Modica** (chocolate made the Aztec way) and **Ragusa Ibla**, all rebuilt in golden stone after the 1693 earthquake, plus **Siracusa**, once a rival to Athens, with its Greek theatre and the island of **Ortigia**. On the east coast, **Taormina** gives you a Greek theatre framing **Etna**, which you can climb by cable car and jeep or circle on the little Circumetnea railway. Offshore, the **Aeolian Islands** — Lipari, Salina and the permanently erupting **Stromboli** — are a week in themselves. Eat: *arancine*, *pasta alla Norma*, *caponata*, sardines with pine nuts, *cannoli*, granita with brioche for breakfast, and Nero d'Avola or Etna reds.

PART ELEVEN

Sardinia

Turquoise water that looks retouched, 7,000 stone towers nobody can fully explain, and an interior where the old Sardinia survives.

Sardinia's coast is the reason most people come, and it earns it. The **Costa Smeralda** in the northeast is the glossy end — Porto Cervo, superyachts, and genuinely spectacular coves. Better value and just as beautiful: the **Maddalena archipelago**, reachable by boat from Palau; **Villasimius** and Chia in the south; **Cala Goloritzé** and **Cala Mariolu** on the Gulf of Orosei, accessible only by boat or a serious hike; **Is Arutas** with its quartz-grain sand; and the pink beach on Budelli, which you may look at but no longer walk on. Note that Sardinia protects its beaches strictly — some now require pre-booked entry and daily caps, and taking sand or pebbles home is a criminal offence carrying real fines.

Then go inland, where hardly anyone does. The **nuraghi** — some 7,000 Bronze Age drystone towers, with **Su Nuraxi** at Barumini the UNESCO showpiece — belong to a civilisation we still barely understand. The **Barbagia** mountains hold shepherd villages, murals at Orgosolo, Europe's longest-lived population, and the autumn *Cortes Apertas* open-courtyard festivals. **Alghero** in the northwest is Catalan-speaking and walled; **Bosa** is a river town of coloured houses; **Cagliari**, the capital, has a hilltop citadel, flamingos in the lagoon and a city beach. Eat: *porceddu* suckling pig, *culurgiones*, bottarga, paper-thin *pane carasau*, pecorino

sardo and Cannonau wine. Ferries from Civitavecchia, Livorno and Genoa; flights to Olbia, Cagliari and Alghero. Give it 10–14 days and rent a car — the island is larger than most visitors expect.

PART TWELVE

The Dolomites & the Alpine north

Pale limestone towers that turn rose-pink at sunset, mountain huts serving dumplings and strudel, and a corner of Italy where the first language is German.



The **Dolomites** are a UNESCO World Heritage site and the most dramatic mountains in Italy — vertical grey-white walls above green pasture, glowing pink in the alpenglow the locals call *enrosadira*. This is **Alto Adige / Südtirol**, Austrian until 1919 and still bilingual: menus in German, villages called both Bressanone and Brixen, and speck and knödel alongside the pasta. It is also the best-organised mountain region in the country, with lifts,

marked trails and a network of *rifugi* — mountain huts where you can eat a three-course lunch at 2,400 m or sleep the night mid-hike.

The essentials

Tre Cime di Lavaredo — the three needles, on a 10 km loop that is the region's signature walk. Toll road to Rifugio Auronzo; arrive before 8am in summer.

Alpe di Siusi — Europe's largest high alpine meadow, lifts from Ortisei, gentle walking with the Sassolungo as backdrop.

Val di Funes & Santa Maddalena — the little church in the meadow beneath the Odle: the most photographed valley in the Alps.

Bolzano — the regional capital, arcaded and Austrian-feeling, and home to Ötzi the 5,300-year-old Iceman in the archaeology museum.

Lago di Braies — the emerald lake with the wooden boathouse. Now access-controlled in peak season; check the shuttle and car ban before driving up.

Seceda — the tilted ridge above Val Gardena: one cable car, one of Italy's greatest views.

Cortina d'Ampezzo — the grand old ski resort, host of the 2026 Winter Olympics alongside Milan, with the Cinque Torri and WWI open-air museum above.

The Great Dolomites Road — the SS48 from Bolzano to Cortina over the Pordoi and Falzarego passes; one of Europe's classic drives, closed or snowy November–May.

Practicalities

Two seasons, two countries. Mid-June to early October is hiking; December to April is skiing, with the 1,200-km **Dolomiti Superski** pass and the Sellaronda circuit. **May and November are closed season** — many lifts, hotels and huts shut entirely, so avoid those months here. Book *rifugi* weeks ahead for overnights, carry cash for the smaller ones, and take mountain weather seriously: afternoon thunderstorms are routine in summer. Bases: **Ortisei** or **Selva** in Val Gardena, **Corvara** in Alta Badia, **Cortina**, or **Dobbiaco** for the Tre Cime end. West, the **Aosta Valley** gives you Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn from Cervinia, and Roman ruins in Aosta itself; the **Skyway Monte Bianco** rotating cable car from Courmayeur is spectacular.

PART THIRTEEN

Cinque Terre & Liguria

Five villages stacked on cliffs, the Italian Riviera either side of them, and the region that invented pesto.



The **Cinque Terre** — Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore — are five fishing villages of stacked pastel houses on a terraced cliff coast, connected by a railway line that runs every 15 minutes and by footpaths that are the real reason to come. Buy the **Cinque Terre Card** (trails plus unlimited trains) at any station. The famous *Via dell'Amore* reopened in 2024 after a long closure; the Vernazza–Monterosso leg is the finest walking. **Vernazza** is the prettiest, **Monterosso** has the only real beach, **Manarola** gives the classic sunset shot from the Punta Bonfiglio path.

HOW TO VISIT WITHOUT HATING IT

The Cinque Terre receives millions of visitors on a footprint built for a few thousand. Three moves fix it: **come outside July–August** (May, June, September and October are ideal, and winter is empty and lovely); **stay the night** — in the villages or in nearby **Levanto** or **La Spezia** — since day-trippers and cruise groups dominate 10am–4pm; and **walk, don't just train-hop**. Do not attempt to drive: the villages are effectively car-free and parking is a punishing walk uphill.

Beyond the five: **Portovenere** and the island of Palmaria at the southern end are as beautiful and half as busy. North, the Riviera holds glamorous **Portofino**, the abbey of **San Fruttuoso** (reachable only by boat or footpath), **Santa Margherita** and **Camogli** — the most charming and least discovered of the lot. **Genoa**, the region's overlooked capital, has Europe's densest medieval centre, the UNESCO Palazzi dei Rolli, a superb aquarium and the best focaccia on earth. Eat: *pesto alla genovese* on trofie or trenette, *focaccia di Recco* with cheese, anchovies from Monterosso, and Vermentino.

PART FOURTEEN

Bologna & Emilia-Romagna

Italy's kitchen. Parmigiano, prosciutto di Parma, balsamic vinegar, mortadella, tortellini and ragù all come from a single fertile plain — and hardly any visitors stop here.

Bologna is the food capital and one of Italy's most likeable cities: 40 km of medieval porticoes (a UNESCO site), the leaning **Two Towers**, Europe's oldest university, and the **Quadrilatero** market lanes behind Piazza Maggiore where the delicatessens are a spectator sport. Climb the **Asinelli tower** or the San Petronio terrace, see the anatomical theatre at the Archiginnasio, and eat *tagliatelle al ragù* (never "spaghetti bolognese", which does not exist here), *tortellini in brodo*, mortadella and *gramigna con salsiccia*.

The food triangle

Parma — prosciutto and Parmigiano Reggiano; tour a dairy at dawn to watch the wheels made, then a ham cellar. Also a pink baptistery and Correggio frescoes.

Modena — traditional balsamic aged 12–25 years in attic barrels (tastings are free and revelatory), a UNESCO Romanesque cathedral, the Ferrari museums, and Osteria Francescana if you plan a year ahead.

Ravenna — eight UNESCO monuments of early Byzantine **mosaic**; the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia and San Vitale are among the greatest artworks in Europe, and almost nobody queues.

Rimini & the Romagna coast — Italy's big family beach strip, plus the tiny republic of **San Marino** on its crag half an hour inland.

Ferrara — a Renaissance walled city with a moated castle, cyclable ramparts, and no crowds at all.

Brisighella & the Apennine borghi — hill villages, olive oil and thermal baths in the quiet inland south of the region.

Emilia-Romagna is also the easiest region in Italy to visit by train — Bologna is the national rail hub, and Parma, Modena, Ferrara and Ravenna are all short hops. If you love food, build a whole week here and skip Tuscany.

PART FIFTEEN

Umbria & Le Marche

Tuscany's quieter neighbours: the same hill towns, olive groves and Renaissance art, at two-thirds the price and a fraction of the crowds.



Umbria is the green heart of Italy and the only region touching neither sea nor border. **Assisi** is its centre of gravity: the **Basilica of St Francis** holds Giotto's fresco cycle of the saint's life, one of the turning points in Western art, and the town above it is pink stone and pilgrimage. **Orvieto** sits on a volcanic plug with a cathedral facade like a jewelled screen, a deep Etruscan well and a tunnelled city underneath. **Perugia** is the lively student capital with a chocolate festival and a jazz one; **Spoletto** has a Roman theatre and a photogenic aqueduct bridge; **Gubbio**

is severe and medieval; **Spello** carpets its streets with flowers each June. For landscape, the **Piano Grande** at Castelluccio erupts into wildflower bloom in late June, and **Lake Trasimeno** offers swimming and islands. Eat: black truffles from Norcia, its famous cured pork, *strangozzi* pasta, lentils from Castelluccio, and Sagrantino wine from Montefalco.

Le Marche, over the mountains on the Adriatic, is the region Italians name when asked where the undiscovered Italy is.

Urbino is a perfect Renaissance hill city and the birthplace of Raphael, with a ducal palace that defined the courtly ideal. The **Frasassi Caves** are among Europe's largest; the **Sibillini** mountains offer serious walking; the **Conero** riviera near Ancona gives you white cliffs and pebble coves; and **Ascoli Piceno's** travertine piazza is one of the loveliest squares in the country. Nearby, straddling Lazio and Umbria, **Civita di Bagnoregio** — the "dying town" on an eroding pinnacle, reached by footbridge — is worth any detour.

PART SIXTEEN

Road-trip itineraries

Three routes that work. Italian distances are short but the roads are slow and the towns deserve time — plan fewer stops than you think you can manage.

Tuscany & Umbria in 7 days

Florence → Chianti → Siena → Val d'Orcia → Orvieto → Assisi →

Florence · ~450 km

Day	Base	The day
1–2	Florence	Duomo, Uffizi, Accademia, Oltrarno. No car — collect it on the morning of day 3.
3	Siena	The SS222 through Chianti with two wine stops, San Gimignano at lunch, into Siena for the Campo at dusk.
4	Montepulciano / Pienza	Siena's cathedral early, then the Val d'Orcia: Pienza's pecorino, Montalcino's Brunello, cypress roads all afternoon.
5	Orvieto	Bagno Vignoni's thermal square, the abbey of Sant'Antimo, then south to Orvieto's cathedral and underground city.
6	Assisi	Civita di Bagnoregio's footbridge en route, then Assisi — Giotto's basilica in late light, dinner on the hillside.
7	Florence	Perugia for a morning coffee and the Etruscan arch, then back to Florence to drop the car (2 hrs).

Rome to Lecce — the south in 7 days

Rome → Naples → Amalfi → Matera → Alberobello → Lecce ·

~700 km

Day	Base	The day
1	Naples	Train down from Rome (1h10), then the Archaeological Museum and a pizza at its source. No car yet.
2	Sorrento	Pompeii or Herculaneum in the morning, Vesuvius after lunch, ferry or train to Sorrento.
3	Amalfi Coast	Ferry to Positano and Amalfi, bus up to Ravello's gardens. Still no car — the coast is better without one.
4	Matera	Collect the car at Salerno. Paestum's Greek temples on the way, then across the mountains to Matera; the sassi at night.
5	Alberobello	Matera at sunrise, then into the Valle d'Itria: trulli, Locorotondo, a masseria for the night.
6	Lecce	Polignano a Mare for a cliff swim, Monopoli for lunch, into Lecce for baroque and an evening passeggiata.
7	Salento	Otranto and the Adriatic tip, or a Salento beach day, before flying out of Brindisi or Bari.

The Grand Tour — 14 days, north to south

*Milan → Lakes → Venice → Bologna → Florence → Tuscany
→ Rome → Naples · train-based, one car segment · open-jaw flights*

Days	Where	The plan
1–2	Milan	Duomo rooftop, the Last Supper (booked months ago), Navigli aperitivo.
3–4	Lake Como	Train to Varenna, two days of villas and ferries. No car needed.
5–6	Venice	Train across (about 3 hrs). Two nights so you get the city early and late.
7	Bologna	Two hours by train. Porticoes, towers, and the best meal of the trip.
8–9	Florence	The Renaissance core over two days; collect a car on the evening of day 9.
10–11	Tuscany	Chianti, Siena and the Val d'Orcia by car; drop it back in Florence or Chiusi.
12–13	Rome	High-speed down (1h32). Ancient city one day, Vatican and Trastevere the next.
14	Naples	An hour by train: museum, pizza, and fly home from Naples — or add three days for the coast.

PART SEVENTEEN

How Italians eat

The single biggest upgrade to any Italian trip is eating like a local — which is less about finding secret restaurants than understanding how the meal works.



The shape of a meal

A full Italian meal runs **antipasto** (cured meats, bruschetta, seafood), **primo** (pasta, risotto or soup), **secondo** (meat or fish, ordered separately from any side), **contorno** (the vegetable side), then **dolce**, coffee and possibly a *digestivo*. Nobody expects you to eat all of it. Two courses is completely normal — an antipasto and a primo, or a primo and a secondo. What is *not*

normal is ordering pasta as a side dish, asking to share one plate between two, or requesting substitutions; Italian menus are short because the kitchen does those things properly.

Where to eat, and what the names mean

Osteria — historically a wine shop with food; now usually simple, regional and good value.

Ristorante — more formal, longer menu, higher prices.

Tavola calda / rosticceria — counter food by weight; the best cheap lunch in Italy.

Agriturismo — a working farm serving its own produce, usually rural, often the best meal of a trip.

Trattoria — family-run, short handwritten menu, the heart of Italian eating.

Pizzeria — often evening-only, since wood ovens take hours to heat. In Naples, this is the main event.

Enoteca — wine bar with serious cheese and salumi; excellent for a light dinner.

Bar — coffee, pastries, sandwiches and spirits, all day. Not a pub.

The signals of a good place — and a bad one

Good signs: a short menu, in Italian, that changes with the season; a dining room with Italians in it; the day's specials on a chalkboard or recited by the owner; a house wine served in a carafe; a room that fills at 8.30pm, not 6.30. **Warning signs:** laminated photo menus in six languages, a man outside inviting

you in, "tourist menu" boards, and any restaurant with a direct view of a famous monument. The rule of thumb that has never failed: **walk three streets away from the sight you just visited.** Our regional food guides and family recipes are at lovetovisititaly.com.

Region by region — order the local thing

Rome & Lazio — carbonara, cacio e pepe, amatriciana, gricia, fried artichokes, saltimbocca.

Emilia-Romagna — tagliatelle al ragù, tortellini in brodo, parmigiano, prosciutto di Parma, balsamic, piadina.

Milan & Lombardy — risotto alla milanese, cotoletta, ossobuco, panettone, Gorgonzola.

Naples & Campania — pizza margherita, spaghetti alle vongole, mozzarella di bufala, sfogliatella, babà, limoncello.

Tuscany — bistecca alla fiorentina, ribollita, pappa al pomodoro, pici, wild boar ragù, cantucci with vin santo.

Venice & the Veneto — sarde in saor, risotto with seafood or radicchio, bigoli, cicchetti, tiramisù, polenta.

Liguria — pesto, focaccia, farinata, trofie, anchovies, stuffed vegetables.

Puglia — orecchiette con cime di rapa, burrata, focaccia barese, raw seafood, fava e cicoria.

Sicily — arancine, pasta alla Norma, caponata, swordfish, cannoli, cassata, granita and brioche.

Piedmont — white truffles, tajarin, vitello tonnato, bagna cauda, hazelnuts, Barolo.

Sardinia — porceddu, culurgiones, bottarga, pane carasau, seadas, pecorino sardo.

Alto Adige — speck, canederli (knödel), barley soup, apple strudel, Lagrein and Gewürztraminer.

PART EIGHTEEN

Pasta, pizza & the classics

There are some 350 named pasta shapes in Italy and each one exists because of a sauce. Here is what to order, and what the shape is telling you.

Shapes and their sauces

Shape	Where	Goes with
Spaghetti	Everywhere	Oil-based and light seafood sauces — vongole, aglio e olio, carbonara. Never a chunky ragù.
Tagliatelle	Emilia-Romagna	Slow-cooked meat ragù — the flat ribbon holds it. This is "bolognese".
Orecchiette	Puglia	Cime di rapa (turnip tops), tomato and ricotta — the ear shape traps greens.
Rigatoni / penne	Central Italy	Amatriciana, arrabbiata, baked dishes; the ridges and tube hold thick sauce.
Bucatini	Rome	Amatriciana above all — a hollow spaghetti that fills with sauce.
Trofie	Liguria	Pesto, with potato and green beans in the water. The twist grips the basil.
Pici	Tuscany	Hand-rolled thick strands with garlic tomato (all'aglione) or breadcrumbs.
Culurgiones	Sardinia	Potato-mint-pecorino parcels sealed like a wheat ear; butter and sage.
Casarecce / busiate	Sicily	Pesto alla trapanese, sardines and fennel, Norma.
Tortellini	Bologna	Meat-filled, served in capon broth — not in cream, ever.
Gnocchi	The north	Butter and sage, or gorgonzola. Potato, not pasta, but ordered like one.

Shape	Where	Goes with
Paccheri	Campania	Big tubes for seafood or genovese onion ragù.

Pizza — two schools

Neapolitan pizza is soft, wet in the middle, puffed at the rim, cooked in 90 seconds at 450°C, and eaten with a knife and fork or folded into a *libretto*. The two canonical orders are **marinara** (tomato, garlic, oregano, no cheese) and **margherita**. **Roman** pizza is the opposite — thin, crisp, cracker-like — and Rome also has **pizza al taglio**, sold by weight from a tray, which is the best cheap lunch in the city. Anything with pineapple on it is for tourists, and no Italian will pretend otherwise.

Gelato — how to tell real from industrial

Look for **muted colours** (real pistachio is dull khaki-brown, not neon green; banana is grey), **covered metal tins** rather than mountainous peaks under plastic domes, a **short seasonal flavour list**, and the words *produzione propria* or *artigianale*. Fruit flavours should be a *sorbetto*. Pay first, take the receipt to the counter, and expect €2.50–3.50 for two flavours in a small cup.

PART NINETEEN

Wine

Italy makes more wine than any other country, from over 500 native grape varieties. You do not need to learn them — you need to learn how to order.

The regions that matter

Piedmont — Barolo and **Barbaresco** from Nebbiolo: structured, age-worthy, expensive. Barbera and Dolcetto are the everyday joys. Base in Alba during the autumn truffle season.

Veneto — Prosecco from the Valdobbiadene hills, **Amarone** made from dried grapes, Soave, Valpolicella.

Campania — Aglianico (Taurasi), Fiano and Greco di Tufo: ancient vines, superb value.

Friuli & Alto Adige — Italy's best whites: Friulano, Ribolla Gialla, Pinot Grigio done properly, Gewürztraminer.

Tuscany — Chianti Classico (the black rooster seal), **Brunello di Montalcino**, **Vino Nobile di Montepulciano**, and the coastal "Super Tuscans" of Bolgheri. All Sangiovese at heart.

Sicily — Nero d'Avola, and the extraordinary high-altitude reds and whites from the slopes of **Etna**.

Puglia — Primitivo and Negroamaro: big, warm, generous and cheap.

Umbria & Le Marche — Sagrantino di Montefalco, and Verdicchio, the seafood white.

Reading a label and ordering well

DOCG and **DOC** mark controlled origin (DOCG is the stricter tier), **IGT** is looser and includes many excellent wines, **Riserva** means longer ageing, **Classico** means the historic heartland of the zone. *Vino della casa* — house wine, served in a quarter, half or litre carafe — is usually local, decent and costs €4–10; ordering it is normal, not cheap. In a restaurant the question that works is simply: "*Cosa mi consiglia della zona?*" — what do you recommend from around here. You will almost never be steered wrong.

Visiting wineries: Italian cellar doors are less drop-in than California's — **email or call a day or two ahead**, especially in Barolo and Montalcino. Expect €15–35 for a tasting, often with food, frequently with the owner. Note the **0.05% blood-alcohol limit** (0.0% for drivers licensed under three years) — that is roughly one small glass, so nominate a driver or book a tour.

PART TWENTY

Coffee & the Italian bar

The bar is Italy's social infrastructure: breakfast, coffee, sandwiches, aperitivo and gossip, all from one counter. Using it correctly takes five minutes to learn.

What to order

Caffè — an espresso. Say "un caffè", not "an espresso".

About €1.10–1.50 at the bar.

Macchiato — espresso "stained" with a drop of milk. Acceptable at any hour.

Marocchino — espresso, cocoa and milk foam in a small glass. Northern, delicious.

Caffè freddo / shakerato — cold espresso, sweetened, sometimes shaken with ice. Summer only.

Cappuccino — espresso with steamed milk. A breakfast drink; ordering one after lunch marks you instantly (but nobody will refuse you).

Caffè latte — milkier still, and a morning drink. Order "latte" alone and you may get a glass of milk.

Caffè corretto — espresso "corrected" with grappa or sambuca. Traditionally 8am, in winter, by builders.

Caffè d'orzo — barley coffee, caffeine-free and common; useful in the evening.

How the bar works

At most bars you either **pay at the till first** and take the receipt (*scontrino*) to the counter, or you order, drink and pay on the way out — watch what others do. Prices are legally posted, and there are usually **two of them**: *al banco* (standing at the counter) and *al tavolo* (seated, served). The seated price can be triple, and that is entirely legitimate — you are renting the table and the view. Standing at the counter with a caffè and a *cornetto* is the authentic Italian breakfast and costs about €2.50.

Aperitivo

Between roughly 6.30 and 8.30pm, a drink comes with food. Order a **spritz** (Aperol for sweeter, Campari for bitter, Select in Venice), a **negroni**, or a glass of local white, and olives, crisps and often a plate of snacks arrive with it. In Milan and Turin the *apericena* takes it further — a buffet substantial enough to replace dinner for €10–15. It is the best-value hour in Italy and the most sociable.

PART TWENTY-ONE

Tracing your Italian roots

Around 80 million people worldwide descend from Italian emigrants — some 17 million in the United States alone. If you are one of them, Italy is not a destination but a homecoming. Here is how to make the trip personal.



The story behind your surname

Between roughly **1880 and 1920**, **four million Italians left for the United States**, with millions more to Argentina, Brazil, Canada and Australia — the largest voluntary migration in modern history. Most came from the **Mezzogiorno**: Sicily, Campania, Calabria, Abruzzo, Basilicata and Puglia, driven by crop failure, phylloxera, cholera, earthquakes and a land system that left peasants with nothing. Whole villages emptied. This is

why so many Italian-American families trace to a specific small town rather than a city — and why that town, often still small, can usually find your family in its books.

How to research, step by step

1. Start at home. Collect names, approximate birth years, and above all the **town of origin** from family papers, naturalisation records, ship manifests and gravestones. Without the comune, research stalls; with it, everything opens.

3. Use Antenati. The Italian State Archives' free portal, **antenati.cultura.gov.it**, has digitised millions of civil registration records (births, marriages, deaths from about 1809 in the north and 1820s–1866 south, depending on region) as scanned images, browsable by province and comune.

2. Search the ship records. Ellis Island arrivals and the Castle Garden database are free and name the village of origin — often the single most valuable document you will find.

4. Then the parish. Before civil registration, the records are ecclesiastical — baptisms, marriages and burials kept by the parish priest, sometimes back to the 1500s. Write in Italian, be specific, enclose a donation.

5. Write to the comune. The *ufficio di stato civile* of the town hall holds civil records and will usually respond to a polite written request for an *estratto dell'atto di nascita*. Allow weeks, not days.

6. Consider a local researcher. For dialect handwriting, destroyed archives or complex lines, a paid genealogist in the province is money well spent — and can arrange archive access before you arrive.

ITALIAN CITIZENSHIP BY DESCENT — CHECK THE CURRENT RULES

For a century Italy recognised *jure sanguinis* citizenship with **no generational limit** — third, fourth, even fifth-generation descendants could claim through an unbroken Italian line. **That ended in 2025.** The Tajani Decree, converted into **Law 74/2025** and in force since 24 May 2025, imposes a **two-generation limit**: broadly, applicants born abroad now need an **Italian-born parent or grandparent** (with further conditions on that ancestor's citizenship), or a parent who lived in Italy for two consecutive years before their birth. Applications filed — or consular appointments confirmed — **before 27 March 2025** are assessed under the old rules. Italy's Constitutional Court **upheld the new limits on 12 March 2026**, so this is settled law, not a temporary measure. Great-grandparent claims, which drove decades of Italian-American applications, are now closed for new applicants. **If citizenship rather than a visit is your goal, take professional advice before spending a euro on documents:** consulates apply the rules differently, waiting lists run to years, and the residency route remains open to those who no longer qualify. Start at your nearest Italian consulate or with an Italian citizenship lawyer.

Visiting the town

This is the part that matters, and it rewards preparation. **Write ahead** — to the comune, the parish, or the local historical society — a short letter in Italian saying who you are, which

family you descend from, and when you hope to visit; small-town Italy takes this seriously and you may be met by the mayor.

Go to the cemetery, where Italian graves carry photographs and the family name will very likely repeat down a whole wall.

Visit the church your family was baptised in, and the piazza they left from. **Bring photographs** of the emigrant generation; nothing opens doors faster. And be prepared for the emotion of it — the village is usually smaller, poorer and more beautiful than the family story suggested, and standing in it is not like reading about it.

GO DEEPER WITH LOVE ITALY

Our heritage and ancestry library at **lovetovisititaly.com** covers surname origins, regional emigration history, records research and coat-of-arms traditions, plus guides to visiting your ancestral comune. Start there before you book, and build the route around your own name.

PART TWENTY-TWO

Art & architecture

Italy holds an estimated half of the world's art treasures, which is precisely the problem. A little structure turns museum fatigue into the best part of the trip.

Nine periods, in order

Etruscan (before 500 BC) — tomb paintings and terracotta at Tarquinia, Cerveteri and Rome's Villa Giulia. Older than Rome and much stranger.

Roman (200 BC–AD 400) — engineering as art: the Pantheon's dome, Pompeii's frescoes, aqueducts, roads, the Colosseum.

Romanesque (1000–1200) — heavy, round-arched, carved: Modena, Pisa's field of miracles, Puglia's cathedrals.

Greek (600–200 BC) — better preserved in Italy than in Greece: Paestum, Agrigento, Segesta, Siracusa.

Byzantine (500–1200) — gold mosaic: Ravenna above all, then Venice's San Marco and Sicily's Monreale and Cefalù.

Gothic (1200–1400) — Siena and Orvieto cathedrals, Milan's Duomo, and Giotto, who begins the shift to naturalism at Padua and Assisi.

Renaissance (1400–1520) — Florence invents it: Brunelleschi's dome, Botticelli, Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo; then Rome and Venice.

Baroque (1600–1750) — theatre in stone: Bernini and Borromini in Rome, Caravaggio's lighting, Lecce and Sicily's Noto Valley.

Modern (1900–) — Futurism, rationalist architecture, Italian design; the Venice Biennale, Milan's galleries, MAXXI in Rome.

How to see it without drowning

Choose ten works, not ten museums. A day spent with Caravaggio's three paintings in San Luigi dei Francesi (free, in a working church) beats a forced march through a gallery. **Read one paragraph before you look** — knowing that Giotto was the first painter in a thousand years to give figures weight changes what you see in Padua. **Book the timed slots** (Sistine, Uffizi, Accademia, Borghese, Last Supper, Scrovegni) and go early or in the last two hours. **Remember that churches are free museums:** Rome, Florence, Venice and Naples have masterpieces hanging where they were painted to hang, with no queue and no ticket. And take an afternoon off — the reason people remember Italian art badly is that they saw too much of it in one go.

PART TWENTY-THREE

Hidden gems & borghi

Twenty-five towns and villages most visitors never reach — the Italy that still belongs to Italians. Many are members of *I Borghi più belli d'Italia*, the official association of the country's loveliest small towns.

Civita di Bagnoregio · Lazio — the "dying town" on an eroding pinnacle, reached by a long footbridge. Otherworldly at dawn.

Ostuni · Puglia — the White City, a blaze of whitewash on a hill above the olive plain.

Santo Stefano di Sessanio · Abruzzo — a Medici hill village restored as a scattered hotel, in the Gran Sasso highlands.

Cefalù · Sicily — a Norman cathedral, a beach, and a rock fortress, an hour from Palermo.

Castelmezzano & Pietrapertosa · Basilicata — twin villages clinging to jagged peaks, linked by a zipline across the valley.

Scanno · Abruzzo — a mountain village of stone alleys above a heart-shaped lake, in Italy's wildest national park.

Bosa · Sardinia — coloured houses along a river beneath a castle, with tanneries and no tour buses.

Ragusa Ibla · Sicily — baroque stacked in a ravine; walk down from the upper town at sunset.

Procida · Campania — the small, unglamorous, entirely lovely third island of the Bay of Naples.

Pitigliano · Tuscany — a tufa town growing out of a cliff, with an old Jewish quarter called "Little Jerusalem".

Bagno Vignoni · Tuscany — a village whose main square is a steaming Renaissance thermal pool.

Gradara · Le Marche — a perfect fortified castle village, said to be the setting of Dante's Paolo and Francesca.

Ferrara · Emilia-Romagna — a whole Renaissance walled city with a moated castle and no crowds.

Vipiteno / Sterzing · Alto Adige — an arcaded Tyrolean main street under the Brenner peaks.

Atrani · Campania — two minutes from Amalfi and somehow still a real village with a real piazza.

Montefioralle · Tuscany — a tiny walled ring of a village above Greve, in the middle of Chianti.

Spello · Umbria — Roman gates, quiet lanes, and June streets carpeted in flower petals.

Brisighella · Emilia-Romagna — three hilltops, an elevated covered street, olive oil and thermal water.

Dozza · Emilia-Romagna — a village whose walls are an open-air gallery of contemporary murals.

Glorenza / Glurns · Alto Adige — Italy's smallest walled town, with 900 residents inside intact ramparts.

Orta San Giulio · Piedmont — the lake Italians kept for themselves, with a monastery island offshore.

Camogli · Liguria — the Riviera fishing town the crowds skip on their way to Portofino.

Locorotondo · Puglia — circular, white, and the best evening stroll in the Valle d'Itria.

Neive & Barolo · Piedmont — wine villages in the Langhe hills; go in October for truffles and fog.

Tellaro · Liguria — a red-and-ochre cliff village at the far end of the Gulf of Poets.

Two ways to find your own. The *Borghi più belli d'Italia* and *Bandiere Arancioni* (Touring Club orange flags) lists are both searchable online and genuinely well curated. And when driving, take the road that climbs: in Italy the town on the hill above the main road is almost always older, quieter and better than the one on it. We add new finds to the hidden-gems collection at **lovetovisititaly.com** as we travel.

PART TWENTY-FOUR

Beaches & the islands

Italy has 7,600 km of coast and a beach culture with its own etiquette. Here is where the water is best, and how the loungers work.



Where to swim

Sardinia — the best water in Italy, full stop: Cala Goloritzé, Cala Mariolu, La Pelosa, Is Arutas, the Maddalena islands. Some now cap daily visitors — book ahead.

Puglia & Salento — Caribbean colour at Punta Prosciutto, Pescoluse and Torre dell'Orso; cliff coves at Polignano.

Sicily — San Vito Lo Capo, the Zingaro reserve, Isola Bella at Taormina, and the Aeolian islands' black sand.

Tuscany — the Maremma's pine-backed sands, Elba island, and Argentario's coves. Family-friendly and easy.

The Adriatic — long shallow sand from Rimini to Puglia; the family beach coast, with lidos and shallow water.

The smaller islands

Capri — glamorous, worth an overnight so you see it after the day boats leave.

Procida — tiny, unglamorous, deeply charming; the fishing-village Italy of films.

Elba — Napoleon's exile, now Tuscany's beach island, easy from Piombino.

Amalfi & Capri — dramatic rather than sandy: pebble coves, Marina Grande at Praiano, the Faraglioni swim.

Liguria — pebbly and pretty: Monterosso, Camogli, Paraggi's little bay near Portofino.

Lakes as beaches — Garda and Como have swimming lidos, warmer than you'd think from mid-June.

Ischia — bigger, greener, thermal spas, and where Neapolitans actually holiday.

The Aeolians — seven volcanic islands off Sicily; Stromboli erupts nightly, Salina is the gentle one.

The Tremiti — four small islands off the Gargano with the clearest water on the Adriatic.

Ponza & the Pontine islands

— Rome's weekend escape, pastel and rocky.

The Egadi — Favignana and Levanzo off western Sicily: bicycles, tuna history, glassy coves.

How Italian beaches work

Most developed beaches are **lidos** (*stabilimenti*): you pay for a sun-lounger and umbrella set, typically €15–40 a day depending on region and row, with showers, a bar and often a restaurant. Between them sit **spiagge libere** — free public beaches, marked as such, where you bring your own towel. Both are legitimate; the lido is worth it on a hot August day and pointless in June.

Practicalities: water shoes for pebble and rock coasts, no glass, most lidos close in the low season, and Blue Flag (*Bandiera Blu*) status is a reliable marker of clean water. In Sardinia especially, **taking sand, shells or pebbles home is illegal** and prosecuted with real fines — airport screening looks for it.

PART TWENTY-FIVE

A year in Italy

Month by month: the weather, the festivals, the crowds and the prices. There is no bad month here, only months suited to different trips.

January

2–12°C north · 8–15°C south

Epiphany (6th), winter sales, ski season, empty museums

Cheapest month. Cities, food and art without a queue.

February

3–13°C · rising

Carnival — Venice's masks, Viareggio's floats, Ivrea's orange battle; Almond Blossom in Agrigento

Great value, real atmosphere. Book Venice's Carnival early.

March

7–16°C · variable

Lent, spring in Sicily, wisteria beginning, clocks forward

Shoulder season. The south is already warm.

April

10–19°C · showers

Easter (Holy Week processions everywhere), Rome's birthday, Salone del Mobile in Milan

Beautiful, green, busy at Easter. Book well ahead.

May

14–23°C · the best light

Vinitaly aftermath, festivals begin, Verona opera season opens

The best all-round month. Warm, open, not yet crowded.

June

18–28°C · long days

Feast of St John (Florence, Genoa, Turin), Spoleto Festival, Piano Grande wildflowers

Excellent, hot in the south, prices climbing.

July

21–32°C · hot

Siena's Palio (2 July), Umbria Jazz, Verona opera, Puglia festivals

Hot and busy. Head for the mountains or the sea.

August

21–33°C · hottest

Ferragosto (15th) — the whole country stops; Siena's second Palio (16th)

Cities empty of Italians and full of tourists; many businesses shut.

September

17–28°C · settled

Grape harvest, Venice Film Festival, Regata Storica, truffle season begins

The connoisseur's month. Warm sea, thinner crowds.

October

12–22°C · golden

White truffles in Alba, chestnut festivals, olive harvest, autumn colour

Superb for food and driving. Some coastal closures late in the month.

November

7–17°C · wet

All Saints (1st), olive oil pressing, opera season opens, Christmas markets late

Quiet and cheap. Cities and kitchens, not beaches.

December

3–13°C · cool

Christmas markets in Alto Adige, Naples' nativity workshops, La Scala's opening night (7th), New Year

Festive and atmospheric; book the markets and the 7th early.

Booking rhythm. Peak-season Amalfi, Cinque Terre, Venice and the Dolomites need **4–6 months**; everything else in high season, 2–3 months; November to March, a fortnight is usually

plenty. Two dates to plan around: **Ferragosto** (15 August), when Italy itself goes on holiday and the coast is full while cities close, and **Easter week**, when Rome, Florence and Assisi fill completely. For this year's festival dates and regional events, see the calendar at **lovetovisititaly.com**.

PART TWENTY-SIX

Where to stay

Italy's best accommodation is often its most Italian: a farm, a converted palazzo, a fortified masseria. Book early for May–October, and check what the "tourist tax" adds.

Agriturismo — a working farm with rooms, legally required to produce much of what it serves. Rural, excellent value, usually with a pool and often the best food of a trip. The single best way to sleep in Tuscany, Umbria or Piedmont.

Palazzo & historic hotels — frescoed ceilings and stone stairs in city centres; often better value than international chains and infinitely more memorable.

Trulli, sassi & cave hotels — sleep inside a conical trullo in Alberobello or a Matera cave dwelling. Genuinely unusual and surprisingly comfortable.

Masseria — Puglia's fortified farmhouses, many converted into beautiful hotels with olive groves and whitewashed courtyards. Ranges from simple to seriously luxurious.

B&B and pensione — small, family-run, breakfast included. The Italian standby, and the fastest route to local advice.

Rifugi & mountain huts — in the Dolomites and Alps: dormitory or small rooms, three-course dinner, spectacular position. Book weeks ahead, bring cash.

Apartments — the sensible choice for families and for cities in high summer; check the ZTL situation if you have a car and get the tourist-tax figure in writing.

Convents & monasteries — many still take guests, in extraordinary locations, cheaply. Simple rooms, sometimes a curfew, always quiet.

TWO THINGS TO CHECK BEFORE YOU BOOK

The tourist tax (*tassa di soggiorno*) is €1–10 per person per night, is almost never in the online price, and is often payable in cash at check-out — ask the figure in advance so it isn't a surprise. And **the ZTL**: if you're driving, confirm the property can register your plate or tell you where to park legally, before you arrive rather than after the fine.

PART TWENTY-SEVEN

Artisan crafts & shopping

Italy still makes things by hand, and buying one well is better than a suitcase of souvenirs. Here is what each place is genuinely known for — and how not to be sold a fake.

Florence — leather & paper.

Jackets, bags and belts in the Oltrarno and San Lorenzo, plus marbled paper and bookbinding. Real leather smells of leather and has an uneven surface; the Scuola del Cuioio behind Santa Croce is the benchmark.

Deruta & Vietri — ceramics.

Umbria's Deruta and the Amalfi Coast's Vietri sul Mare both hand-paint majolica; look for the maker's mark on the base, and ask about shipping — most will crate it.

Sorrento — inlaid wood.

Intarsio marquetry boxes and tables, a two-century local tradition.

Venice — glass & masks.

Murano glass should carry the *Vetro Artistico Murano* trademark; watch a furnace demonstration on the island. Masks should be papier-mâché, made in the shop.

Naples — tailoring & nativity figures.

The soft-shouldered Neapolitan jacket is a world standard; Via San Gregorio Armeno makes hand-carved *presepe* figures all year.

Sardinia — textiles &

baskets. Hand-woven rugs and blankets, cork, coral and filigree jewellery.

Alto Adige — woodcarving.

Val Gardena has carved religious figures and toys for 300 years; the workshops are still family-run.

Como — silk. Scarves and ties from the historic mills; the silk museum explains why the industry settled here.

Cremona — violins.

Stradivari's town still has more than a hundred working luthiers, and a violin museum worth the detour.

Food to bring home — vacuum-packed parmigiano, olive oil in tins, dried pasta, traditional balsamic, saffron, dried porcini, Modica chocolate. Check your country's rules on cured meat and fresh cheese before packing them.

Avoiding fakes and tourist tat

Buy where it's made. A shop that sells leather, glass, ceramics and lace together sells none of them well. **Look for the workshop** — *laboratorio* or *bottega* — behind or beside the counter. **Ask who made it;** a real artisan will tell you at length. Street vendors selling designer bags are selling counterfeits, and in Italy **buying them is itself an offence** with fines for the purchaser. And skip the €5 gondola magnets: one good ceramic bowl will still be in your kitchen in twenty years. We keep a list of trusted workshops by region at **lovetovisititaly.com**.

PART TWENTY-EIGHT

Language & glossary

Italian is phonetic and forgiving — say it as it's written and you'll be understood. Fifty words will transform how you are treated.

Pronunciation in six rules

c before e/i = "ch" — *ciao* (chow), *cena* (CHAY-na)

g before e/i = "j" — *gelato* (jeh-LA-to)

gn = "ny" — *gnocchi* (NYOK-kee), *bagno* (BAN-yo)

sc before e/i = "sh" — *prosciutto* (pro-SHOO-toh)

Every vowel is pronounced — *Firenze* is fee-REN-tseh, three syllables

The phrases that matter

Buongiorno / Buonasera — good day / good evening. Say it entering every shop and bar.

ch = hard "k" — *Chianti* (kee-AN-tee)

gh = hard "g" — *spaghetti*

gli = "lyee" — *tagliatelle* (tal-ya-TEL-le)

Double consonants are held — *pizza, anno*. It changes meaning.

Stress usually falls on the second-to-last syllable, unless accented

Per favore · Grazie · Prego — please · thank you · you're welcome (also "go ahead", "after you").

Scusi — excuse me (formal).

Permesso — may I pass.

Vorrei... — I would like... The politest way to order anything.

Un caffè, per favore — one espresso. At the counter, standing.

Dov'è il bagno? — where is the toilet?

Vietato / Chiuso / Aperto — forbidden / closed / open. Read these on signs.

Menu Italian

Antipasto starter · **Primo** pasta course · **Secondo** main · **Contorno** side · **Dolce** dessert

Manzo beef · **Vitello** veal · **Maiale** pork · **Agnello** lamb · **Pollo** chicken · **Cinghiale** wild boar

Parla inglese? — do you speak English? Ask before assuming.

Il conto, per favore — the bill, please. It never comes unasked.

Cosa mi consiglia? — what do you recommend? The single most useful sentence in Italy.

Quanto costa? — how much is it?

Sciopero — a strike. Worth knowing when it appears on a station board.

Coperto cover charge · **Servizio** service · **Acqua frizzante / naturale** sparkling / still water

Pesce fish · **Frutti di mare** seafood · **Vongole** clams · **Gamberi** prawns · **Baccalà** salt cod

Funghi mushrooms · **Tartufo**
truffle · **Melanzane** aubergine
· **Carciofi** artichokes · **Zucca**
pumpkin

Sfizioso / Casereccio
homemade-style · **Nostrano**
our own, local · **Di stagione**
seasonal

Alla griglia grilled · **Al forno**
baked · **Fritto** fried · **Crudo**
raw · **Ripieno** stuffed

Senza glutine gluten-free ·
Vegetariano / Vegano
vegetarian / vegan · **Allergia**
allergy

PART TWENTY-NINE

The regions in full

All twenty regions, north to south, in the order a traveller meets them. What each is known for, what not to miss, the local secret, and what to order.

Italy's regions were kingdoms and republics until 1861, and each still governs its own food, dialect and character. Use this as the shortlist for a second or third trip — or to work out which one your family came from. Every region has its own deeper guide at lovetovisititaly.com.

Lazio

CAPITAL REGION · ROME

KNOWN FOR Rome, the Vatican, Etruscan tombs, the Castelli Romani wine hills

DON'T MISS Ostia Antica, Tivoli's Villa d'Este and Hadrian's Villa, Civita di Bagnoregio

LOCAL SECRET Lake Bracciano for a swim and Calcata's cliff-top artists' village

ON THE PLATE Carbonara, cacio e pepe, artichokes, porchetta, Frascati wine

Tuscany

ART & HILLS · FLORENCE

KNOWN FOR The Renaissance, Chianti, cypress landscapes, Pisa's tower

DON'T MISS Siena's Campo, the Val d'Orcia, Lucca's walls, San Gimignano's towers

LOCAL SECRET The Maremma's empty beaches and free thermal water at Saturnia

ON THE PLATE Bistecca fiorentina, ribollita, pecorino di Pienza, Brunello

Veneto

LAGOON & VINES · VENICE

KNOWN FOR Venice, Verona's arena, Palladio's villas, Prosecco

DON'T MISS Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Burano, the Valdobbiadene hills

LOCAL SECRET The Colli Euganei thermal towns and the Po delta's birdlife

ON THE PLATE Cicchetti, sarde in saor, risotto, tiramisù, Amarone

Lombardy

BUSINESS & LAKES · MILAN

KNOWN FOR Milan, Lake Como, Lake Garda's west shore, design and finance

DON'T MISS The Last Supper, Bergamo's upper town, Mantua's Gonzaga palaces

LOCAL SECRET Franciacorta for sparkling wine, and Val Camonica's rock art

ON THE PLATE Risotto alla milanese, ossobuco, cotoletta, panettone

Campania

COAST & RUINS · NAPLES

KNOWN FOR Naples, Pompeii, the Amalfi Coast, Capri, Vesuvius

DON'T MISS Herculaneum, Paestum's Greek temples, Ravello's gardens, Procida

LOCAL SECRET The Cilento coast south of Salerno — Amalfi's scenery at half the price

ON THE PLATE Pizza napoletana, mozzarella di bufala, sfogliatella, limoncello

Sicily

AN ISLAND APART · PALERMO

KNOWN FOR Greek temples, Etna, Arab-Norman mosaics, baroque towns

DON'T MISS Valley of the Temples, Monreale, Siracusa's Ortigia, Villa Romana del Casale

LOCAL SECRET The Aeolian Islands, and inland Enna's empty hill country

ON THE PLATE Arancine, pasta alla Norma, cannoli, granita, Etna wines

Puglia

TWO SEAS · BARI

KNOWN FOR Trulli, whitewashed towns, baroque Lecce, olive oil, beaches

DON'T MISS Alberobello, Ostuni, Lecce, the Salento coast, Trani's cathedral

LOCAL SECRET The Gargano peninsula's forests and the Tremiti islands

ON THE PLATE Orecchiette, burrata, focaccia barese, raw seafood, Primitivo

Sardinia

WATER & NURAGHI · CAGLIARI

KNOWN FOR Turquoise coves, Bronze Age towers, an untouched interior

DON'T MISS Gulf of Orosei, Su Nuraxi, La Maddalena, Alghero, the Barbagia

LOCAL SECRET Bosa's river town and Is Arutas' quartz-grain sand

ON THE PLATE Porceddu, culurgiones, bottarga, pane carasau, Cannonau

Piedmont

WINE & TRUFFLES · TURIN

KNOWN FOR Barolo, white truffles, the Langhe hills, royal Turin

DON'T MISS Alba in October, the Sacra di San Michele, the Egyptian Museum, Lake Orta

LOCAL SECRET Lake Orta's island monastery and Alta Langa's empty ridges

ON THE PLATE Tajarin, vitello tonnato, bagna cauda, hazelnuts, Barolo

Emilia-Romagna

ITALY'S KITCHEN · BOLOGNA

KNOWN FOR Parmigiano, prosciutto, balsamic, ragù, Ferrari, Ravenna mosaics

DON'T MISS Bologna's porticoes, Modena's balsamic cellars, Ravenna, Ferrara

LOCAL SECRET Brisighella's three hills and the Apennine borghi

ON THE PLATE Tagliatelle al ragù, tortellini in brodo, mortadella, piadina

Liguria

RIVIERA · GENOA

KNOWN FOR Cinque Terre, Portofino, pesto, focaccia, cliff villages

DON'T MISS The coastal trails, Portovenere, Camogli, Genoa's old town

LOCAL SECRET Tellaro and the Gulf of Poets; San Fruttuoso by boat

ON THE PLATE Pesto genovese, focaccia di Recco, anchovies, Vermentino

Umbria

GREEN HEART · PERUGIA

KNOWN FOR Assisi, hill towns, black truffles, Sagrantino, no coastline

DON'T MISS Basilica of St Francis, Orvieto's cathedral, Spoleto, Lake Trasimeno

LOCAL SECRET The Piano Grande's wildflower bloom at Castelluccio in late June

ON THE PLATE Norcia truffles and cured pork, strangozzi, lentils, Sagrantino

Trentino-Alto Adige

ALPINE · TRENTO / BOLZANO

KNOWN FOR The Dolomites, skiing, German-speaking Südtirol, apples and speck

DON'T MISS Tre Cime, Alpe di Siusi, Ötzi in Bolzano, the Great Dolomites Road

LOCAL SECRET Glorenza's tiny walled town and the Val di Funes church

ON THE PLATE Speck, canederli, barley soup, strudel, Gewürztraminer

Le Marche

UNDISCOVERED · ANCONA

KNOWN FOR Urbino's Renaissance court, the Conero coast, Frasassi caves

DON'T MISS Urbino's ducal palace, Ascoli Piceno's piazza, the Sibillini mountains

LOCAL SECRET Gradara's castle village and the beaches below Monte Conero

ON THE PLATE Olive all'ascolana, brodetto fish stew, vincisgrassi, Verdicchio

Abruzzo

MOUNTAINS & PARKS · L'AQUILA

KNOWN FOR Three national parks, wolves and bears, hilltop villages, empty beaches

DON'T MISS Scanno, Santo Stefano di Sessanio, Rocca Calascio, the Trabocchi coast

LOCAL SECRET Campo Imperatore — "Italy's Little Tibet" — and Sulmona's confetti

ON THE PLATE Arrosticini lamb skewers, saffron from Navelli, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo

Basilicata

STONE & SILENCE · POTENZA

KNOWN FOR Matera's cave city, mountain villages, two short coastlines

DON'T MISS Matera's sassi, Castelmezzano and Pietrapertosa, Maratea's coast

LOCAL SECRET The Volo dell'Angelo zipline and Craco's abandoned ghost town

ON THE PLATE Peperoni cruschi, lucanica sausage, Aglianico del Vulture

Calabria

WILD SOUTH · REGGIO CALABRIA

KNOWN FOR Cliff beaches, Tropea, Aspromonte and Sila mountains, bergamot

DON'T MISS Tropea, the Riace Bronzes in Reggio, Scilla's fishing quarter

LOCAL SECRET Gerace's Norman hill town and the Costa degli Dei's empty coves

ON THE PLATE 'Nduja, swordfish, red onions of Tropea, Cirò wine

Friuli Venezia Giulia

BORDER COUNTRY · TRIESTE

KNOWN FOR Habsburg Trieste, Italy's finest white wines, Alpine and Adriatic in one region

DON'T MISS Trieste's cafés and Miramare castle, Aquileia's mosaics, Cividale's Lombard temple

LOCAL SECRET The Collio wine road and Grado's lagoon beaches

ON THE PLATE Prosciutto di San Daniele, frico, jota, Friulano and Ribolla Gialla

Molise

THE SMALLEST · CAMPOBASSO

KNOWN FOR Being the region Italians joke does not exist — and staying genuinely untouched

DON'T MISS Saepinum's Roman town in a field, Termoli's old walled port

LOCAL SECRET The tratturi — ancient sheep-droving roads you can walk for days

ON THE PLATE Cavatelli, caciocavallo, white truffles from San Pietro Avellana

Valle d'Aosta

PEAKS · AOSTA

KNOWN FOR Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn, castles, French-Italian bilingualism

DON'T MISS Skyway Monte Bianco, Fénis castle, Gran Paradiso park, Aosta's Roman ruins

LOCAL SECRET Cogne's valley for summer walking and winter quiet

ON THE PLATE Fontina, carbonada, polenta concia, Genepy liqueur

PART THIRTY

The great cities on foot

Seven self-guided walks through Rome, Florence and Venice. Each is two to three hours at a stroll, needs no ticket unless you choose to go in, and shows you the parts of the city that guided groups march past.

Rome — Walk 1: the ancient spine

~3 km · 3 hours · start: Piazza Venezia

Climb the **Vittoriano** steps for the free terrace view over the Forum, then look down into **Trajan's Markets** and the Imperial Fora from the Via dei Fori Imperiali. Walk the length of it to the **Colosseum**, then instead of joining the queue turn uphill to the **Arch of Constantine** and the quiet **Celio**, where San Clemente stacks three churches on top of each other. Drop down to the **Circus Maximus**, still the shape of the chariot track, and finish on the **Aventine** — the orange garden, the keyhole view of St Peter's through the Knights of Malta door, and Santa Sabina's 5th-century timber doors.

Rome — Walk 2: fountains, domes and the centro storico

~2.5 km · 2 hours · start: Piazza del Popolo

Through the twin churches into **Via del Babuino** for antique shops, then the **Spanish Steps** and Keats' house at the foot of them. Cut through to the **Trevi Fountain** early or late — at midday it is a scrum — then the **Pantheon**, and coffee at one of the two rival bars behind it. On to **Piazza Navona**, Bernini's

river-gods fountain, and around the corner to **San Luigi dei Francesi** for three Caravaggios hanging free in a working church. Finish over the bridge in **Trastevere** for dinner.

Rome — Walk 3: the Appian Way

~5 km, or hire a bike · half a day · start: Porta San Sebastiano

The Roman road that carried legions to Brindisi, still paved in basalt, lined with tombs, pines and umbrella cypress. Walk or cycle out past the **Catacombs of San Callisto** and **San Sebastiano** — book one, not three — the circular **Tomb of Cecilia Metella**, and the arches of the **Aqueduct Park** beyond. Sundays the road closes to traffic and becomes one of the great walks in Europe. Take water; there is almost no shade and few cafés.

Florence — Walk 4: the Renaissance mile

~2 km · 2–3 hours · start: Piazza San Marco

Begin where the Medici collected: the **San Marco** convent, where Fra Angelico frescoed every monk's cell — the quietest great sight in the city. Down Via Ricasoli past the Accademia to the **Duomo**, around it to the **Baptistry's** bronze doors, then Via dei Calzaiuoli to **Orsanmichele**, a grain market turned church with sculpture in every niche. Into **Piazza della Signoria** and the open-air Loggia dei Lanzi, past the **Uffizi** colonnade to the river, and over the **Ponte Vecchio**.

Florence — Walk 5: the Oltrarno and the hill

~3.5 km, uphill · 2–3 hours · start: Ponte Santa Trinita

Cross to the artisan side. Wander **Borgo San Frediano** and **Santo Spirito** — leather workshops, gilders, frame-makers and the best-value trattorie in Florence — then the **Brancacci Chapel** in Santa Maria del Carmine, where Masaccio invented perspective in painting and every Renaissance artist afterwards came to study. Climb through the **Boboli** or the Costa San Giorgio lanes to **San Miniato al Monte** for the city from above, then down to **Piazzale Michelangelo** as the light goes.

Venice — Walk 6: Cannaregio and the Ghetto

~3 km · 2 hours · start: Santa Lucia station

Turn left off the station steps and leave the crowds within four minutes. Along the **Cannaregio canal** to the **Ghetto Nuovo** — the world's first ghetto, from 1516, with tall crowded houses, five synagogues and a moving memorial. Continue to the **Fondamente Nove** for the open lagoon and the cemetery island of San Michele, then inland to **Santa Maria dei Miracoli**, a jewel box of coloured marble, and finish at **Campo Santi Giovanni e Paolo**. Bacari along the way serve *cicchetti* and a glass for a few euro.

Venice — Walk 7: Dorsoduro, end to end

~3 km · 2–3 hours · start: Rialto

Over the bridge and west through **San Polo** to the **Frari** church for Titian's *Assunta*, then the **Scuola Grande di San Rocco**, where Tintoretto covered every wall and ceiling — bring the mirror they hand you. On into **Dorsoduro: Campo Santa Margherita** for student life and cheap wine, the **Accademia** or

the **Guggenheim**, the great domed **Salute**, and out to the **Punta della Dogana**, where the two canals meet and the whole city arranges itself in front of you.

WALKING THESE CITIES WELL

Start at 8am. Rome, Florence and Venice belong to residents and early walkers for two hours a day. **Wear real shoes** — these are cobbles and bridges, not pavements. **Carry a refillable bottle:** Rome's *nasoni* street fountains and Venice's public taps are safe and free. **Duck into churches** when the heat peaks; they are cool, free and full of masterpieces. And **get deliberately lost once** in each city — it is the only way to see the parts nobody photographs.

PART THIRTY-ONE

Day trips from the big cities

If you are based in one city — as most first visits are — these are the escapes that fit into a single day by train or bus, with no car and no repacking.

From Rome

Ostia Antica — 40 min by metro and train. A whole Roman port town with mosaics, bakeries and a theatre; a quieter, cheaper Pompeii.

Orvieto — 1 hr 15 by fast train. Cathedral, underground caves and a funicular from the station. The best single day trip from Rome.

Castelli Romani — 45 min. Frascati and Castel Gandolfo for wine, porchetta and a lake in a volcanic crater.

Tivoli — 1 hr. Hadrian's Villa, an emperor's pleasure complex, and the Villa d'Este's hillside of fountains. Do both in one day; wear shoes for gravel.

Naples & Pompeii — 1 hr 10. Doable but long; two days is far better.

Civita di Bagnoregio — 2 hrs by train and bus. The footbridge town; go for sunrise or sunset if you can stay over.

From Florence

Siena — 1 hr 30 by bus (faster and more scenic than the train). The Campo, the cathedral, and lunch off the piazza.

Lucca — 1 hr 20. Rent a bike at the gate and ride the walls; the most relaxing day near Florence.

San Gimignano — 1 hr 30 via Poggibonsi. Towers, gelato world champions, and views over vines.

From Venice

Padua — 25 min. Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel (book ahead), the botanical garden and a huge pilgrim basilica.

Vicenza — 45 min. Palladio's city and the Teatro Olimpico.

Pisa — 1 hr by train. The tower, the baptistery's echo, and out again by mid-afternoon.

Bologna — 37 min by fast train. Genuinely the best lunch in Italy, and back for dinner if you must.

Cinque Terre — 2 hrs 30 to Monterosso. Long, but a real day if you start at 7am.

Verona — 1 hr 10. The arena, the piazzas, and opera on a summer night.

Burano & Torcello — 45 min by vaporetto. Painted houses, lace, and the mosaic basilica where Venice began.

The Prosecco hills — 1 hr by train to Conegliano, then a tour. Vertiginous vineyards and cellar doors.

From Milan

Lake Como — 1 hr to Varenna. Ferry to Bellagio and back; the classic Milan day out.

Turin — 1 hr. Royal palaces, the Egyptian Museum, arcaded cafés and the best chocolate in Italy.

Verona or Bologna — 1 hr 10. Both easy and both worth it.

The Dolomites — 2 hrs to Cortina by bus. Long, but a mountain day from a lagoon city is a memorable contrast.

Bergamo — 50 min. A walled upper town on a hill, funicular included.

Lake Maggiore — 1 hr 20 to Stresa. The Borromean Islands by boat.

Franciacorta — 1 hr. Italy's answer to Champagne, with cellar tours in the hills near Brescia.

Ten dishes to take home

The best souvenir from Italy is a dish you can cook. These are the ten most worth learning — all authentic, all short on ingredients, all built on the principle that Italian cooking is about restraint rather than addition.

A note on quantities: Italian home cooks work by eye and by taste, and these are written the same way. Use the best tomatoes, oil and cheese you can find — with four ingredients there is nowhere for a bad one to hide. And salt the pasta water properly: it should taste of the sea.

Cacio e pepe

ROME · 2

YOU NEED 200 g tonnarelli or spaghetti · 100 g Pecorino Romano, finely grated · 1 tbsp black peppercorns, coarsely cracked

Toast the pepper in a dry pan until fragrant. Cook the pasta two minutes short, reserving a mug of water. Off the heat, whisk the pecorino with a little cool pasta water into a smooth cream — never over direct heat, or it seizes. Add the drained pasta and the pepper to the pan with a splash of hot water and toss hard until glossy. Serve immediately; it waits for nobody.

Carbonara

ROME · 2

YOU NEED 200 g spaghetti · 100 g guanciale (or pancetta), diced · 2 whole eggs + 1 yolk · 60 g Pecorino Romano · black pepper

Render the guanciale slowly until crisp; keep the fat. Beat the eggs with the cheese and a great deal of pepper. Cook the pasta, then toss it into the pan off the heat with the guanciale and fat. Add the egg mixture with a spoonful of pasta water, stirring fast — the residual heat cooks it into a sauce. **No cream, no garlic, no onion, ever.**

Pasta alla Norma

SICILY · 4

YOU NEED 400 g casarecce · 2 aubergines, cubed · 400 g tinned tomatoes · garlic · basil · ricotta salata

Salt the aubergine for 30 minutes, pat dry and fry in olive oil until deep gold — do not stint on the oil, it is the dish. Make a simple tomato sauce with garlic and basil, simmered 20 minutes. Fold in the aubergine, dress the pasta, and grate over plenty of ricotta salata.

Pesto alla genovese

LIGURIA · 4

YOU NEED A large bunch of basil (Genovese if you can) · 30 g pine nuts · 1 small garlic clove · 60 g Parmigiano + 30 g Pecorino · 100 ml extra-virgin olive oil · salt

Pound the garlic and salt in a mortar, add the pine nuts to a paste, then the basil a handful at a time with a grinding motion rather than chopping. Work in the cheeses, then trickle in the oil. Serve with trofie, plus a potato and a few green beans cooked in the pasta water — the Ligurian way.

Ragù alla bolognese

EMILIA-ROMAGNA · 6

YOU NEED 300 g minced beef · 150 g minced pork · 80 g pancetta · 1 onion, 1 carrot, 1 celery stick, finely diced · 150 ml white wine · 300 ml passata · 250 ml whole milk · nutmeg

Soften the vegetables and pancetta in butter and oil. Add the meat and brown properly. Deglaze with the wine, add the passata, then simmer **very gently for three hours**, adding the milk in stages — it tenderises the meat and rounds the acidity. Serve with tagliatelle, never spaghetti.

Risotto alla milanese

LOMBARDY · 4

YOU NEED 320 g Carnaroli rice · 1 onion · 1 l hot beef or chicken stock · a good pinch of saffron threads · 80 g butter · 80 g Parmigiano · dry white wine

Soften the onion in half the butter, toast the rice for two minutes, splash in wine. Add stock a ladle at a time, stirring, for about 17 minutes. Steep the saffron in a little hot stock and add near the end. Off the heat, beat in the cold butter and cheese vigorously — the *mantecatura* — and rest two minutes. It should ripple, not stand up.

Cullurgiones-style potato & mint filling

SARDINIA · 4

YOU NEED 500 g floury potatoes · 100 g pecorino sardo, grated · a handful of mint · garlic · pasta dough (300 g semola + water)

Boil and mash the potatoes, mix with the cheese, chopped mint and a little crushed garlic. Fill discs of thin dough and seal with the wheat-ear pleat that gives the parcels their name. Boil 4–5 minutes and serve simply with tomato sauce or melted butter.

Panzanella

TUSCANY · 4

YOU NEED 400 g stale country bread · 500 g ripe tomatoes · 1 red onion · cucumber · basil · red wine vinegar · olive oil

Soak the bread in water, then squeeze it dry and crumble. Toss with roughly chopped tomatoes and their juices, thinly sliced onion, cucumber and torn basil. Dress generously with oil and a little vinegar, salt well, and leave 30 minutes for the bread to drink the tomato. Peasant food, and one of the great summer salads.

Tiramisù

VENETO · 6

YOU NEED 4 eggs, separated · 100 g sugar · 500 g mascarpone · 300 ml strong espresso, cooled · savoiardi biscuits · cocoa

Beat the yolks with the sugar until pale, fold in the mascarpone, then fold in the whisked whites. Dip each biscuit briefly in coffee — a second, no more — and layer with the cream. Chill at least four hours, dust with cocoa just before serving. No cream, no alcohol required.

Cantucci with vin santo

TUSCANY · ~30

YOU NEED 300 g flour · 200 g sugar · 2 eggs + 1 yolk · 200 g whole almonds · 1 tsp baking powder · zest of an orange

Mix to a stiff dough, fold in the almonds, shape two logs on a tray and bake at 170°C for 25 minutes. Slice on the diagonal while warm, lay the slices cut-side down and bake 10 minutes more. Serve with a small glass of vin santo for dipping — the correct end to any Tuscan meal.

PART THIRTY-THREE

Practical A–Z

Everything else, alphabetically — the questions that come up once you are actually there.

Accessibility — historic centres are cobbled and stepped, and many churches have no ramp; Rome's metro is patchy but buses are largely low-floor. Bolzano, Milan and Turin are the easiest cities. Museums are generally good and often free for a companion.

Beaches — lidos charge €15–40 for two loungers and an umbrella; *spiaggia libera* is free. See Part Twenty-Four.

Cash — carry €50–100 in small notes for markets, village bars and church donations.

ATMs — *bancomat*. Use bank-branded machines; independent ones in tourist areas charge more. Decline the "convert to your currency" offer.

Bidet — in every Italian bathroom. It is not decorative.

Churches — shoulders and knees covered, no hats, no beachwear; a light scarf solves it. Most close 12.30–3.30pm.

Coperto — the per-person cover charge, €1.50–4, printed on the menu. Not a tip and not a scam.

Electricity — 230 V, type L and F plugs. Bring an adapter; hotels rarely lend them.

Ferragosto — 15 August. The country stops; cities shut, coasts fill. Plan around it.

Luggage storage — *deposito bagagli* at major stations, plus private services near sights; useful on travel days.

Opening hours — shops roughly 9–1 and 4–7.30, closed Sunday and often Monday morning; the south keeps a longer *riposo*.

Drinking water — tap water is safe; public fountains are free and everywhere. Only avoid taps marked *non potabile*.

Emergencies — 112 from any phone, free, English available. 118 ambulance, 113 police, 115 fire.

Laundry — self-service *lavanderia automatica* in most towns; hotel laundry is expensive.

Mosquitoes — real, from May to October, especially Venice and the lakes. Bring repellent and use the plug-in the hotel provides.

Pharmacies — green cross. Pharmacists treat minor complaints without a doctor; the night rota is posted in the window.

Pickpockets — the only real crime risk. Crowded buses (Rome's 64), station concourses and the Colosseum queue. Front pockets, zipped bags, no phone on the café table.

Restrooms — few and often paid (€0.50–1.50). Bars will let you use theirs if you buy a coffee, which is the local solution.

Smoking — banned indoors; permitted on terraces, where it is common.

Sunday — most shops shut, museums open, restaurants busy with families at lunch. A good museum day.

Tipping — round up, or leave a couple of euro for good service. Never expected, always noticed.

Public holidays — 1 & 6 Jan, Easter Monday, 25 Apr, 1 May, 2 Jun, 15 Aug, 1 Nov, 8, 25 & 26 Dec, plus each town's patron saint day.

SIM cards & data — an eSIM from TIM, Vodafone or Iliad is cheap and instant; EU roaming is free for EU numbers.

Strikes — *sciopero*. Transport strikes are announced days ahead and usually partial; check before travel days.

Taxis — metered, from ranks or by phone; hailing rarely works. Airport routes often have fixed fares posted.

Tourist tax — €1–10 per person per night, often cash at check-out and not in the online price. Ask the figure when booking.

Water bottles — refill everywhere; buying bottled is expensive and unnecessary.

Wi-Fi — good in hotels and cafés, patchy on trains. Download offline maps before rural driving.

PART THIRTY-FOUR

Essentials & links

QUICK REFERENCE

- **Emergency:** 112 (all services, free, any language)
- **Ambulance 118 • Police 113 • Fire 115**
- **Electricity:** 230 V, type L / F plugs
- **Time zone:** CET (CEST, GMT+2, in summer)
- **Tipping:** round up, or a couple of euro; service is usually included
- **Tap water:** safe everywhere; public fountains too (unless marked *non potabile*)
- **Pharmacy:** green cross; night rota posted in the window

OFFICIAL INFORMATION

- **italia.it** — the national tourism board
- **travel-europe.europa.eu** — EES & ETIAS, the only official source
- **esteri.it** — visas and consulates
- **beniculturali.it** — state museums and monuments
- **coopculture.it** — Colosseum and major site tickets
- **museivaticani.va** — Vatican Museums booking

TRANSPORT

- **trenitalia.com** · **italotreno.com** — high-speed rail
- **flxbus.it** · regional bus sites for the hill towns
- **direttaferries.com** — Sicily, Sardinia and the islands
- **autostrade.it** — tolls and traffic
- **Car hire:** Hertz, Avis, Europcar, Maggiore, AutoEurope
- **IDP:** obtain at home — AAA in the US, the Post Office in the UK

MORE FROM US

- **lovetovisititaly.com** — guides, itineraries, recipes and heritage research
- **antenati.cultura.gov.it** — the free state genealogy archive
- **lovetovisitireland.com** · **lovetovisitScotland.com** — our other destinations
- Also available: **The Ultimate Ireland Travel Guide** and **The Ultimate Scotland Travel Guide**

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