ARNO
TRAVEL & EVENT DESIGN

ITALY TRAVEL GUIDE

Part of TOIT GROUP

BENVENUTO!

Welcome to Italy!
We at Arno Travel will be your trusted companion as you embark on an extraordinary journey through this captivating country. From the iconic cities of Rome, Florence, and Venice to the scenic countryside of Tuscany and the picturesque Amalfi Coast, Italy offers a diverse range of experiences that will leave you enchanted. Whether you're here to explore ancient ruins, indulge in exquisite cuisine, discover world-class art and architecture, or simply bask in the warm Mediterranean sun, Italy has something for everyone. Our comprehensive guide is designed to provide you with invaluable insights, insider tips, and expert recommendations to make your stay in Italy truly unforgettable. So, get ready to immerse yourself in the wonders of Italy and let Arno Travel be your guide to this incredible destination.

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ABOUT ARNO TRAVEL

Founded in 1969, Arno Travel is an onsite Italian travel planner, a leading company for United States, Brazilian and Mexican luxury tourism for over 50 years.

Committed to offering its clients the best in Italy, and providing guests with memorable experiences, Arno Travel specializes in selecting the finest properties, sourcing and ideating outstanding experiences and partnering with charismatic experts to create uniquely enlightening Italian journeys. Arno's dedicated team guarantees professional assistance and creative solutions, ensuring guests enjoy personalized attention and care throughout their stay. Thanks to our extensive network of contacts throughout the country, we open the doors to museums, landmarks and main sites not always accessible to the general public. Committed to guests' full well-being, we check and double check services, brief our escorts, guides and drivers, then brief them again to make sure each and every one of them knows the logistics, is aware of each guest's needs, and offers a genuine, heartfelt Italian style hospitality. Strategically based in the city center of Florence, Arno comprises a passionate and skilled team dedicated to creating sensational itineraries and delivering the world-class service required by the standards of the premium networks we work with: Virtuoso, Private XO and Travel Leaders. Arno Travel is constantly moving forward, aiming to meet current contemporary desires by offering brand-new inspirational experiences. Not only will we accompany our guests to see Italy's most striking sights but once there, we will go behind the scenes, through the vineyards and open-air markets with the locals, into the kitchens, the cellars and beneath the labels, to be delighted, to have an authentic insider's view and live the beauty of a genuine, timeless, Italian lifestyle.

THE TEAM

Arno comprises a passionate team of skilled professionals dedicated to creating sensational itineraries and delivering the world-class service required by the standards of the premium networks we work with.

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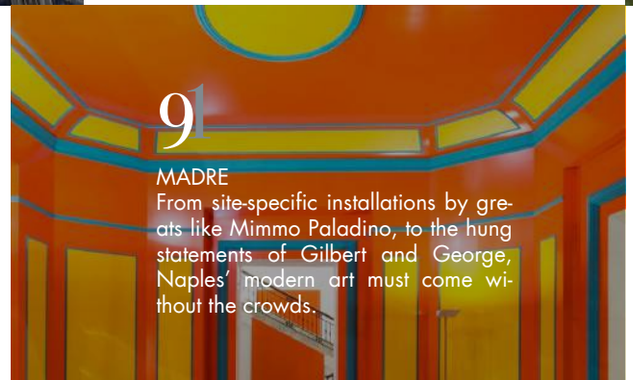

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ITALY BY THE HOUR

It is remarkable how different Italy – and thus, Italians – can be from north to south, east to west. It's hard to sum up a typical day considering the vast differences, histories, habits and even dialects. The divergent climates from north to south also impact ways of life. Still, the following is a very general rundown of a typical day of the average Italian – if there can be such a thing.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN ITALIAN

Morning for Italians means coffee. Be it at home, made on the stovetop in a moka or at the coffee shop (or, "bar"). Politely wait your turn and you'll likely go thirsty! Stand at the counter like Italians do or take a seat at one of the tables – but be aware that you will possibly be charged a table service. Breakfast is usually a pastry or other sweet but simple start to the day. Italians generally work from around 9 o'clock until 1:00 pm before taking a luxurious lunch break. Larger businesses will have a "mensa" – like a canteen – where hot meals are served as part of people's remuneration. Other companies issue a "buono pasto", basically a check for an average of around 8–10 euro per day that can be used in restaurants and supermarkets to buy food. Lunch is usually the main meal of the day, comprised of a plate of pasta or risotto and often a second course of meat and a side of vegetables. A glass of wine is often enjoyed with lunch. After the meal, Italians might return to their favorite bar for an espresso and a chat. For some, lunch breaks are an hour but for others, lunch can be several hours long. Indeed, it's not uncommon to see businesses close until late in the afternoon, in time for those who finish work at 6:00 or 7:00 pm to stop in for supplies for dinner or some after-work shopping. After work, many Italians will head to their favorite coffee shop for an aperitivo – a drink (be it prosecco, wine or a cocktail, with a Spritz or Negroni being favorites) served with a selection of hors d'oeuvres. Some places offer apericena – a mix between the lighter aperitivo and heavier cena (dinner). Dinner is served rather late, not before 8:30 pm in most restaurants and households. And while wine is almost always on the table, it is put away when the table is cleared, often to make room for an amaro – a bitter herbal liqueur – or an icy limoncello sipped slowly from tiny glasses. Bedtime is late – closer to midnight for most. And dreams are golden, with "sogni d'oro" (or, "dreams of gold") being the Italian version of "sweet dreams".

ITALY BY MONTH

JANUARY

This new year is marked by the feast day of the Epiphany on 6th. Like a smaller version (but at the table, not much smaller) of Christmas, Italians will usually gather with the family for yet another exuberant meal. In Venice, La Befana arrives not on a broom but in a boat! This occasion is marked by the Regatta of the Witches, seeing the rowers (dressed in their best witchy costume) rowing for glory. But it's also ski season in the Alps, Dolomites, as well as in Friuli, the Apennines, Le Marche and even Sicily. Most beach-side resorts (and the services that go with it) are closed however, so a January visit does take some planning if you're thinking of heading to the south.

FEBRUARY

The ski season slides along as Carnevale arrives. In the lead-up to Ash Wednesday and Lent, Italians love a good party, replete with whimsical costumes, confetti scattered around the streets and even dedicates sweets you can only fine during this time of year. The most famous Carnevale is that of Venice, with the Viareggio version being well-known for its giant papier-mâché floats. In Sardinia, in the town of Oristano, the Sa Sartiglia sees masqueraded horse riders perform equestrian acrobatics on the last Sunday before Lent and on Shrove Tuesday. In the town of Norcia in Umbria, the Mostra Mercato del Tartufo Nero takes place. This event might be dedicated to truffles but there is no shortage of the other famous delicacies from the area, such as cured meats, lentils and porcini mushrooms.

MARCH

The weather in March can be a bit unpredictable in the leadup to the official start of spring on March 21. There are lots of interesting traditions around Easter to experience, from special foods to parades and more. Stazione Leopolda, Florence's oldest train station, has been transformed into an event space where, for three days in March, foodies can head to visit Taste, a food fair with a program including themed talks, cooking demonstrations, as well as samples of food, coffee and liquor from over 100 Italian artisan producers.

EASTER

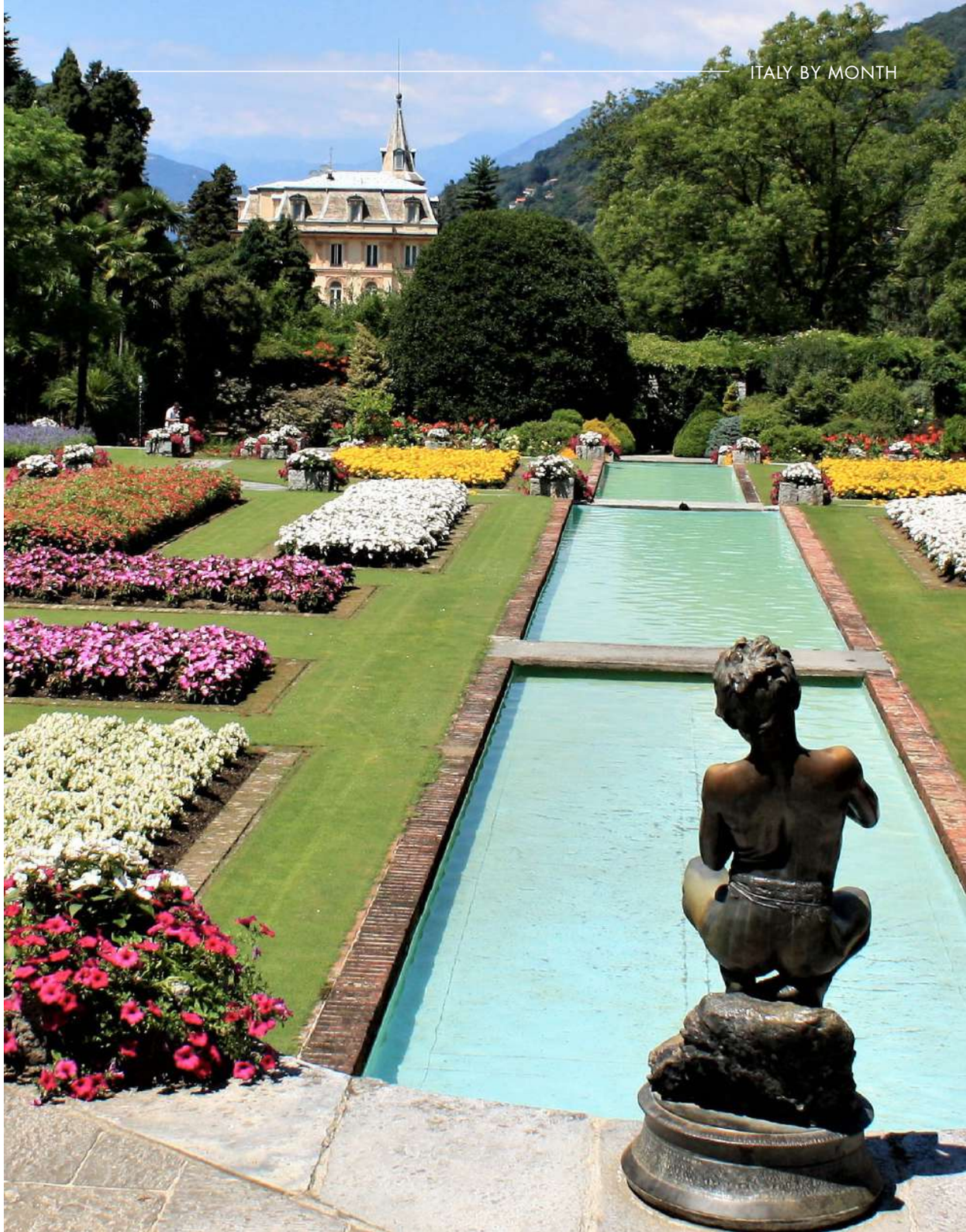
Falling in March or April, Italy goes all out with special occasions during Settimana Santa – or, Holy Week. On Good Friday is a candlelit procession to the Colosseum led by the Pope. On Easter Sunday, the Pope then gives his blessings in St Peter's Square. Florence, rather, goes all out with Scoppio del Carro ("Explosion of the Cart"), where a fireworks piled up in an ancient and ornate cart explode in Piazza del Duomo. There are also traditional processions in Sorrento and Procida (Campania), Taranto (Puglia) and in Procida and Trapani (Sicily).

APRIL

With Spring in full bloom, much of Italy's meadows burst with wildflowers. Italy also has no shortage of gardens to visit. One of Europe's loveliest botanical gardens is that of Lago Maggiore's Villa Taranto where an entire week is dedicated to tulips – the Settimana del Tulipano. In Milan, the Salone Internazionale del Mobile takes place each year. The most prestigious furniture fair in the world sees lighting, accessories, office, kitchen and bathroom shows in alternating years. Another event that attracts visitors from all around the world is VinItaly in Verona. The world's largest wine fair, 4000 international exhibitors offer wine tastings, lectures, and seminars over four days.

MAY

May is the month of roses. At the table, the recipes are light and tasty – think Caprese salad. This is a great month for those who like to trek … or simply sit in a piazza and enjoy a spritz or white wine. It's comfortably warm and still not too crowded. In Cocullo, Abruzzo, the Processione dei Serpari is held on 1st of this month. For this patron saint day, a statue of St Dominic is draped with live snakes and carried in the Snake Charmers' Procession. In Naples, the Festa di San Gennaro is dedicated to safeguarding the city from volcanic and other disasters. Held within the cathedral, the patron saint's blood is checked to see if it liquefies – if it does, the city is safe. The blood is checked again on September 19 and December 16.



JUNE

The summer season officially starts in June. Temperatures rise, beaches open and the summer festivals commence. June 2 is a national holiday dedicated to the Festa della Repubblica – Republic Day. For three weeks this month, Naples celebrates theatre with the Napoli Teatro Festival. Held in historic but also more alternative venues, the program ranges from the classic to new local and international performances. In odd-numbered years, the Venice Biennale is one of the world's most prestigious art events, with exhibitions in various venues around the city from June to October. High up over the Amalfi Coast, the Ravello Festival draws world-renowned artists all summer long. Events dedicated to music, dance, film and art exhibitions are held in the exquisite Villa Rufolo gardens from June to mid-September. Then there is the Spoleto Festival dei Due Mondi from late-June to mid-July. For the festival, the Umbrian hill town is transformed into an international arts event rich in music, theatre, dance, and art. In the capital, Estate Romana – Roman Summer – sees a calendar of events that transform the city into an outdoor stage featuring music, dance, literature, and film, with events held in some of the city's most evocative sites.

JULY

School holidays commence and kick off somewhat of a mass exodus from Italian cities towards the mountains or coast for summer holidays. All is not lost in the cities, however, with many summer art festivals being held. The Palio di Siena is a bareback horse race held on July 2 (and again on August 16) in the main piazza of Siena, preceding by a parade of locals in medieval costumes. In Sicily, Taormina Arte is a major arts festival held through July and August with events including film screenings, theatre, opera, and concerts in ancient ruins on hot summer nights.

AUGUST

August in Italy temperatures (and rates) spike! Almost all Italians go on summer holidays and, while not everything is shut, many businesses and restaurants do close for part of the month. This is particularly so around Ferragosto on August 15. After Christmas and Easter, Ferragosto is Italy's biggest holiday. Where the Romans honored their gods on Feriae Augusti, today the date is the Feast of the Assumption. Towards the end of the month and into September comes the Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica – the Venice International Film Festival, one of the world's most prestigious silver-screen events, attracting the world's film glitterati.

SEPTEMBER

September is one of the best months to visit Italy. With autumn comes cooler weather, the start of harvest season with lots of local food festivals (sagre) and the beginning of the grape harvest. On the first Sunday of the month, gondoliers in period dress take part in Venice's Historic Regatta – the Regata Storica – in historic boats and gondolas. There are also other boat races along the Grand Canal. 7 days later is the Festival delle Sagre where more than 40 communes in the province of Asti peddle their wines and local gastronomic products. Towards the end of the month, the Sicilian town of St Vito celebrates its famous seafood couscous at a six-day event – the Couscous Fest.

OCTOBER

October is a fabulous time to visit Italy but especially the south, where the warm weather persists but the crowds do not. From late in the month through to November, top international artists take to the stage for Rome's premier festival of theatre, opera and dance – the Romaeuropa Festival. But that's not all there is to sing about this month. From mid-October to March is Italy's Opera Season, with Italy behind home to four of the world's great opera houses – La Scala in Milan, La Fenice in Venice, Teatro San Carlo in Naples and Teatro Massimo in Palermo. Hosted by the Slow Food Movement, the biennial food expo of Salone Internazionale del Gusto is held in Turin in even-numbered years. Five days are filled with workshops, presentations and tastings of food, wine and beer from Italy and beyond.

NOVEMBER

As winter takes over the peninsula, a new collection of events fills the calendar. Ognissanti – or, All Saints – is celebrated all over the country. This national public holiday on November 1 commemorates the Saint Martyrs while All Souls' Day on November 2 is for honoring the deceased. This is the season for truffles, the chestnut harvest and mushroom picking. From Alba and Asti in Piedmont to San Miniato in Tuscany and Acqualagna in Le Marche, the truffle is celebrated with local fairs, events and music dedicated to this beloved tuber.

DECEMBER

With the cold comes the opening of the Alpine resorts for the early ski season. Christmas festivities lighten up the month, with the weeks preceding Christmas being rich in religious events. Many churches set up ornate nativity scenes known as "presepi", with those of Naples being especially famous. The Pope serves midnight mass in St Peter's Square on Christmas Eve. The streets are filled with the scent of roasting chestnuts that can be purchased piping hop from street vendors. December 8 is the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (another public holiday) and with it, many seasonal delights. There are Christmas markets all around the country. Pantone and Pandoro are likewise everywhere, best enjoyed with a glass of Spumante. Each reason then has its traditional Christmas food traditions so no matter where you are, there are sumptuous dishes to try. As to New Years' Eve, a lot of Italians will go to an extravagant dinner that starts late in the evening so that everyone is still at the table when it's time to welcome in the New Year (since Italians rarely drink without food). Chin chin!

So … the Best Time to Visit Italy?
Whenever you have the time to travel! Every month is different and offers an entirely diverse experience.

ITALY BY ITINERARY

ART CITIES

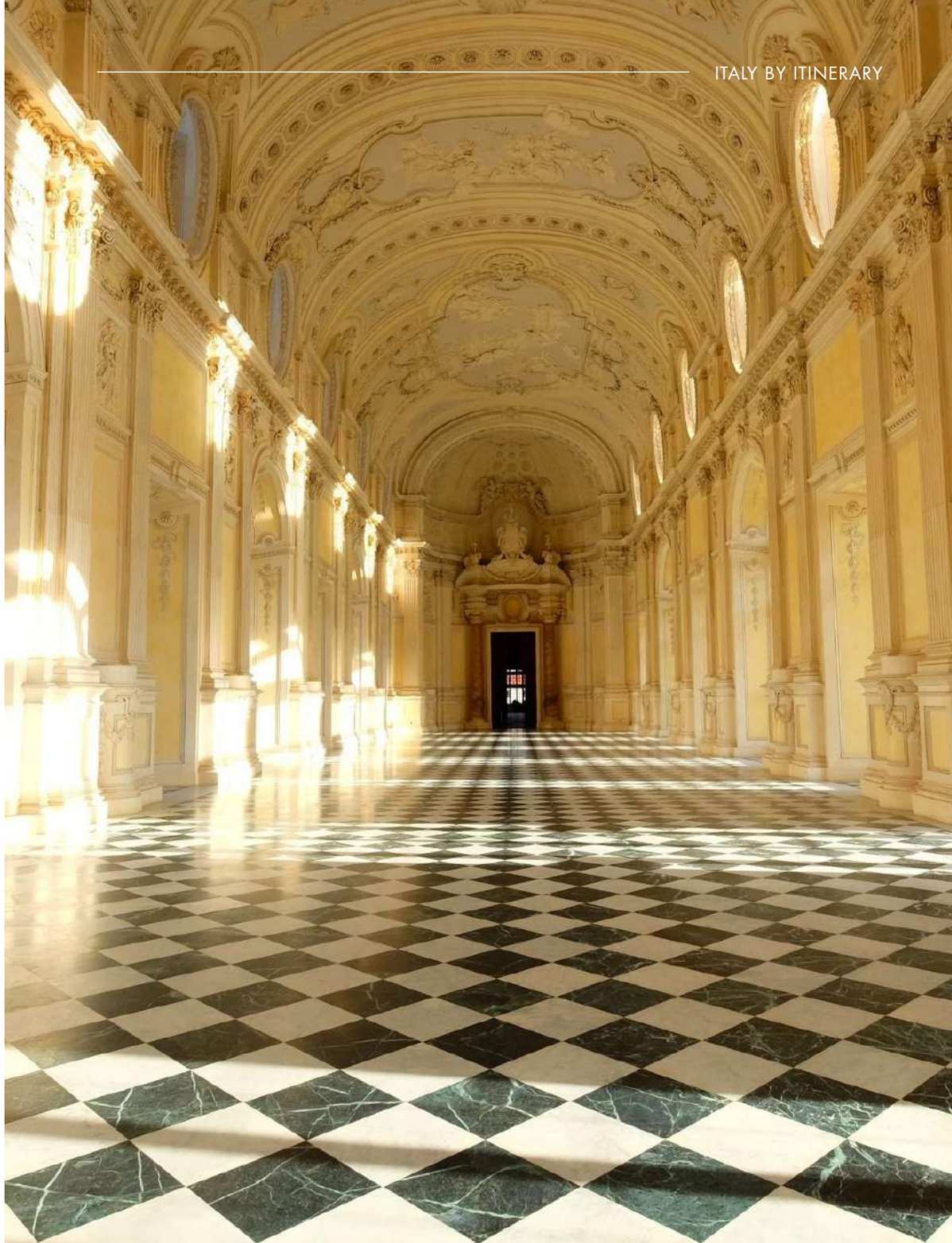
These microcosmic cities of culture, history, architecture, fashion, good food and wine are then adorned by some of the world's best artworks. Start perhaps with three days in Rome to see sites that mark the history of mankind then unwind in lively piazzas such as Campo de' Fiori or Trastevere. Fashion is also an artform and one of the best streets for that is Via dei Condotti, leading up to the Spanish Steps. Along the way, stop for one of the poshest coffees in the capital at Caffè Greco, which first opened in 1760. From ancient ruins, head to the Tuscan capital of Florence, capital also of the Renaissance. See Michelangelo's David in the Galleria dell'Accademia. Explore the greats in the Uffizi Gallery – Botticelli, Michelangelo, Raphael, Caravaggio, Vasari, Giotto, Artemisia Gentileschi, Piero della Francesca, da Vinci … Step out into Florence's backyard – the rolling hills of Tuscany to explore the Chianti wine region. Take day trips to one of the walled hilltop towns (Siena, Monteriggioni, San Gimignano, Lucca), perhaps stopping to explore a historic wine cellar or two. Next, delight in the gothic splendor of Bologna. Stroll along porticoed streets, visit the museums and savor the regional food and wine (think ragout coating handmade pasta, Parmigiano Reggiano, cured Prosciutto and Balsamic vinegar of Modena). Heading further north, three unforgettable days and nights in Venice is enough time to take in the breathtaking mosaiced Basilica di San Marco, explore the art of the Gallerie dell'Accademia (did you know that canvas painting was developed in place of the traditional wooden boards to cope with the Venetian humidity?). Cross the secret passageways in the Palazzo Ducale, then toast to your trip with a Veneto prosecco or perhaps a Spritz in one of the many quaint piazzas around the city.

THE GRAND TOUR

A Victorian trend for aristocratic young men was to head off on a Grand Tour – part scholar's pilgrimage, part rite of passage. Today, the Grand Tour is a great way to explore Italy in greater depth, crossing the peninsula from north to south. Traditionally, this adventure started in Turin or, less commonly, in Milan. In Turin, explore the Savoy palaces – if you have to pick one, we suggest the Venaria Reale, Italy's mini-Versailles. In Milan, book ahead to see Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper. Day trips or overnight stays in Lago Maggiore or Lago di Como mean you can enjoy the pristine lake gardens of Villa Taranto and Villa Carlotta. Catch the train to Verona for a night or two to see opera in the Roman Arena then to Venice. You'll need three or four days to truly enjoy the architectural masterpiece of the lagoon city. For the second week, head south to Padua to savor Giotto's groundbreaking frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel. Be dazzled by Byzantine mosaics in Ravenna and the culinary delights of Bologna before pausing in Florence for a few days. Here in the Tuscan capital, enjoy extensive museum visits admiring the artworks and monuments of Roman times through to the Renaissance. Time permitting, Florence is a great place for day trips to Lucca, Pisa or Siena, either by availing of the exceptional public transport or by booking a private driver through Arno Travel. Week three is dedicated to Rome to study the ruins of the ancient world and the extensive collections in the Vatican, Villa Borghese and Capitoline Hill. Indeed, so vast are the collections that it is best to select a few highlights or even book an expert guide to exalt your experience. Take time out for a coffee in Piazza Navona or dinner in one of Rome's restaurants – think pizza, pasta (in the home of Carbonara and Amatriciana), artichokes, Saltimbocca ... Continuing on to Naples, go to the opera at the Teatro San Carlo. Take day trips dedicated to archaeology in Herculaneum and Pompeii, explore the city's catacombs or even scale Mount Vesuvius. As your month-long tour comes to an end, rest up along the romantic Amalfi Coast from where you can day trip to offshore Capri.

PUGLIESE STYLE

Most visitors stick to Italy's west coast when heading 'south' (think Naples, the Amalfi Coast, Sorrento ...). Yet, the region of Puglia that forms the heel of the 'boot' of Italy is one of the country's most underrated areas. Whether it be on a road trip, with private transport, by train or plane, head to Bari to see the relics of Father Christmas in the Romanesque cathedral. Go further south via Polignano a Mare to visit the famous Grotte di Castellana. And be delighted by food and wine that will redefine what you define as "Italian cuisine". From here, you can take a road trip south through some of the finest towns of Valle d'Itria, including Alberobello with its iconic trulli houses, the wine-producing Locorotondo, beautifully baroque Martina Franca and the whitewashed Ostuni. Martina Franca hints at what to expect in Lecce. Known as the "Florence of the south" thanks to its dramatic architecture and scholarly focus. If you have a few days, hire a bike to enjoy the extensive bike trails. Visit the fortified ports of Otranto in the southeast or Gallipoli in the southwest, with sandy beaches awarded the much sought-after Blue Flag of excellence. Further south is the opportunity to visit Santa Maria di Leuca, the very tip of the Italian heel.

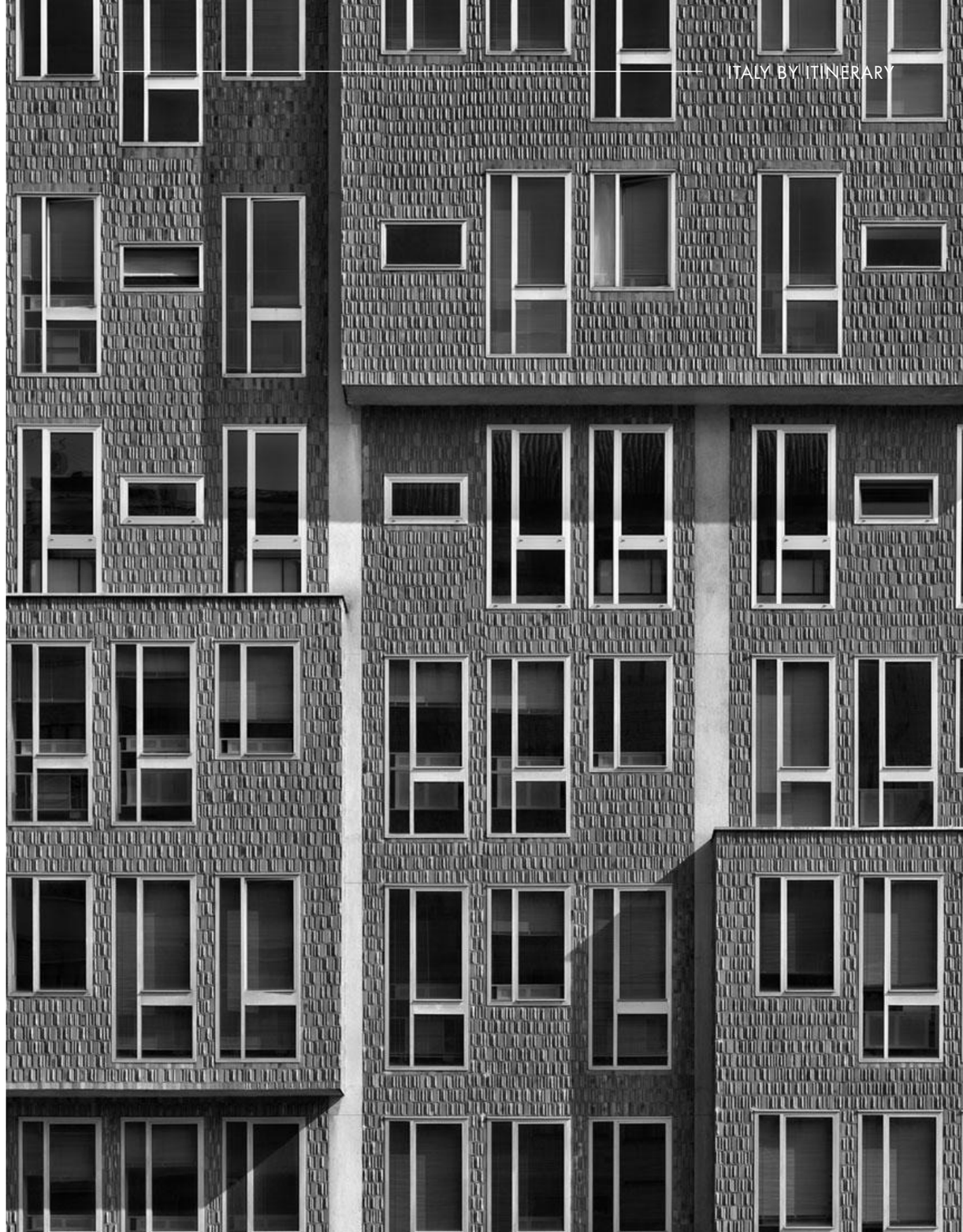


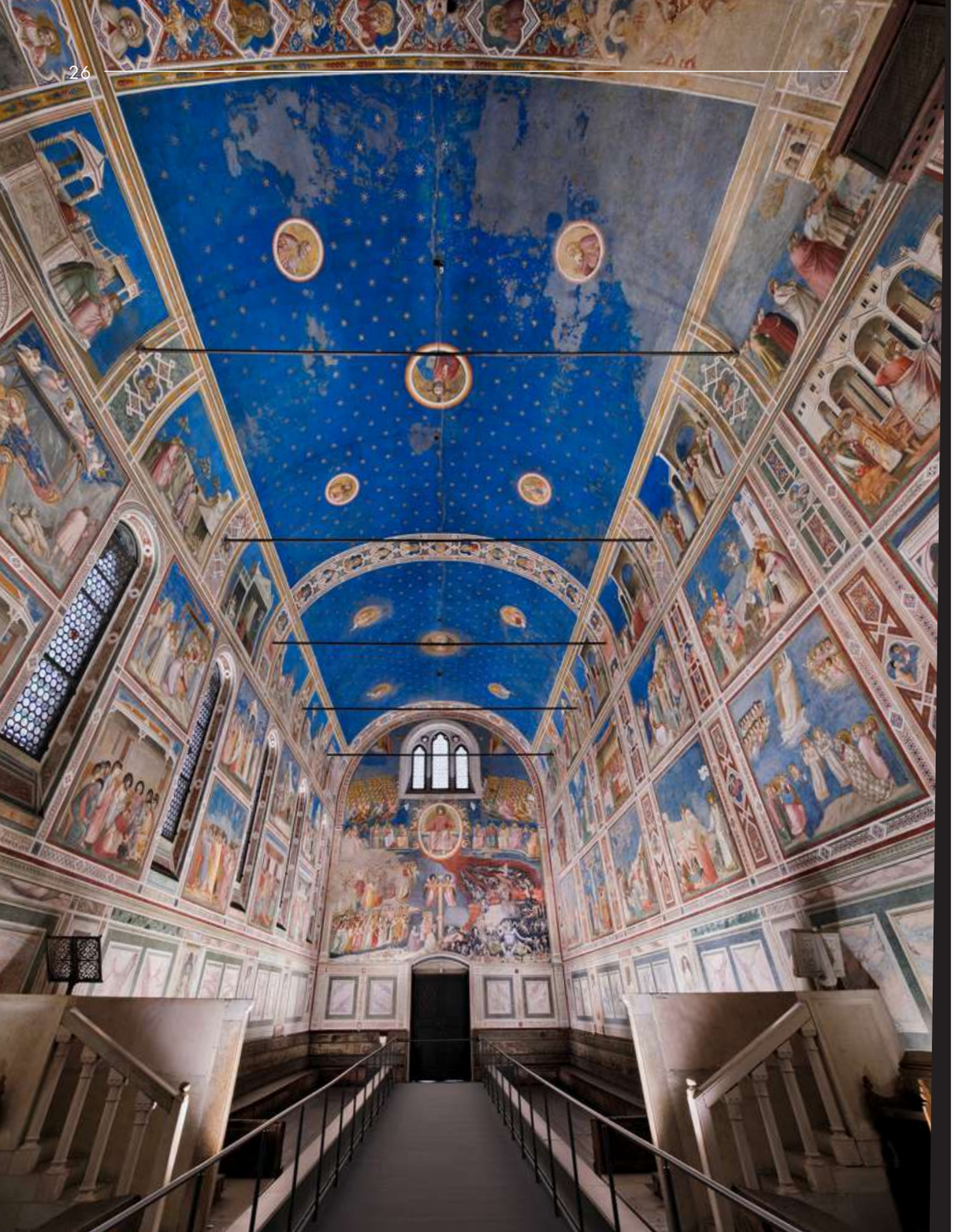
MODERN ITALY BY DESIGN

Better living by design: what could be more Milanese? From the cup that holds your morning espresso to your bedside light, there's a designer responsible and almost everyone in Milan will know their name. Design here is a way of life. The fame of Italian Design came thanks to the Fiera Milano, first held in 1920. Then there was the rebuild of the Rinascente department store (where Giorgio Armani got his start as a window dresser), the launch of architectural and design magazines Domus and Casabella and the opening of the Triennale in 1947. The dynamic Art Deco styling of Italian futurism paired perfectly with the industrial revolution and Fascist philosophies. Fascist ideals found in futurism a radical, neoclassical streamlining that was implemented into new architecture and design. The wars and the (economic) booms they provoked boosted Italian manufacturing. And perhaps it was the chaos of wartime that meant comfort was found in the purity of line, balance, symmetry, a refreshing lack of detail in minimalism and utility that came to represent the very essence of modernity. Milan's philosopher-architects and designers – Giò Ponti, Vico Magistretti, Gae Aulenti, Achille Castiglioni, Ettore Sottsass and Piero Fornasetti – saw their postwar mission not merely to rebuild the bombed city but to redesign the urban environment. Nearby are production centers in the province of Brianza, north of Milan, an industrial district that grew from a rural community, retaining many specialist peasant craft skills in becoming international names in Modern Design. With many of the works being used as hotels, homes, offices and such, seeing Italy from this viewpoint is perhaps best discovered with an expert guide.

MILANO TO PORTOFINO

Often overlooked as merely being the country's economic engine, Italy's northwest conceals a marvelous cultural and culinary wealth. It is worth dedicating at least three days to Milan to take in masterpieces at the Pinacoteca di Brera, strutting your stuff in the fashion-focused Quadrilatero d'Oro and mingling with the chic locals in Navigli. Next, head west to Turin for three days savoring in the area's French-influenced architecture, historic cafés, and fabulous museums dedicated to everything from ancient Egypt to world cinema. Further south is the food haven of Alba, famed for its treasured black truffles. Over another three days here, you'll have time to sip vino from the winegrowing towns of Barolo and Barbaresco. Spend a day in the south in gritty Genoa. Fuel up on its world-famous Pesto Genovese before taking in the distinguished art and architecture of the Musei di Strada Nuova. The day after, head east for an afternoon in chic Portofino before an overnight stay in Santa Margherita. Your final two days can be spent hiking the picturesque Cinque Terre coast, pinstriped by terraced vines and adorned by fairy-tale fishing villages offering up some of Italy's tastiest seafood.





VENICE TO MILANO

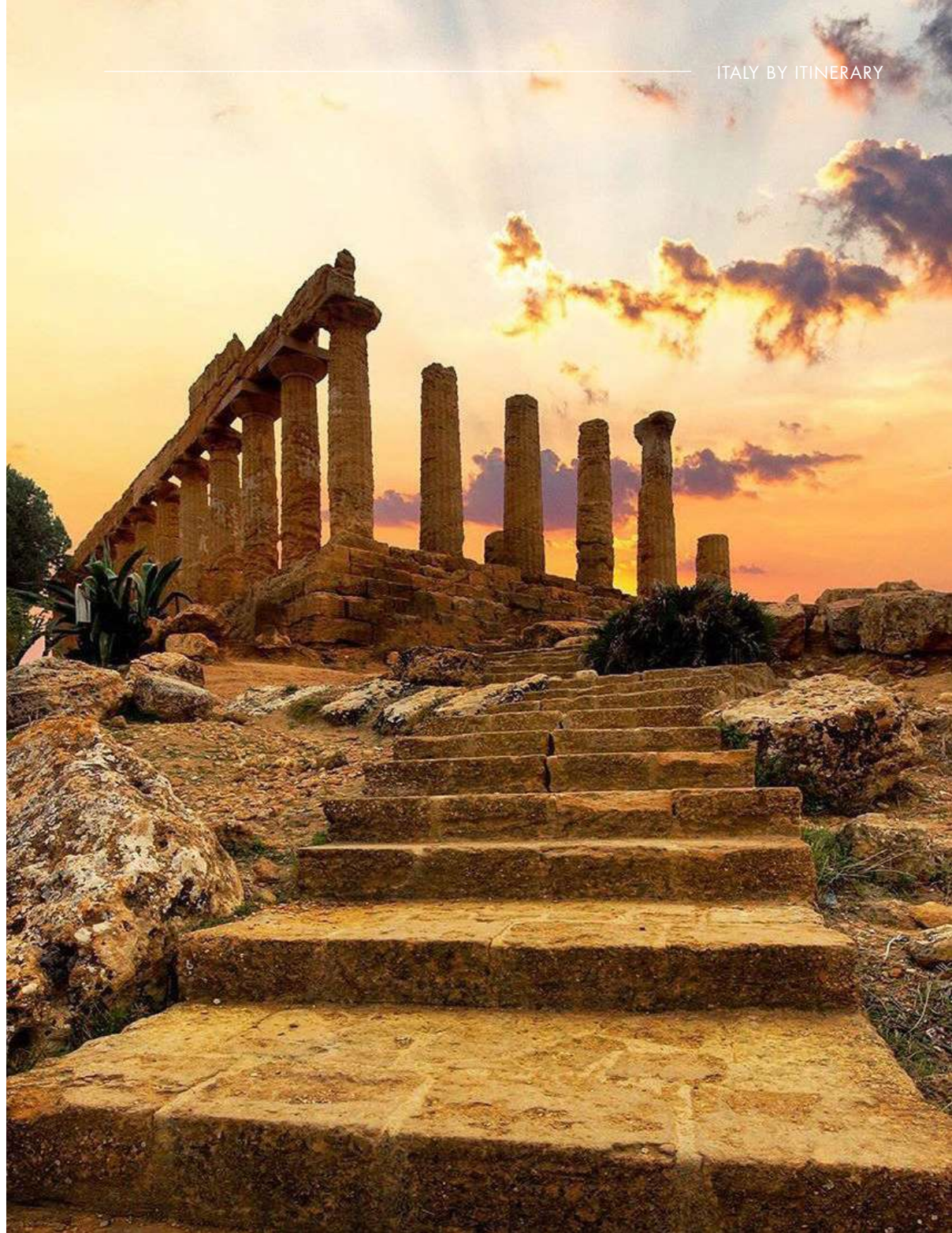
Start with a few days savoring Venice. See the Tiepolo frescoes of Villa Pisani Nazionale, stroll through the Shoemakers' Museum of Villa Foscarini Rossi and stop in at Palladio's Villa Foscari. In the 16th century, when the Venetian summer began early in June, it was custom for local households to pile onto barges to set off on their summer sojourn along the Brenta Riviera. Today, the boats are a bit more modern for your very own boat trip along the Riviera. The journey ends in Padua where you can stay the night overlooking the Basilica di Sant'Antonio. Next door are the little-known treats of the Oratorio di San Giorgio and the Scoletta del Santo. Padua's crowning glory is Giotto's frescoed Scrovegni Chapel (requiring advance booking – ask us at Arno Travel for details). Next, catch the train to Vicenza to spend an afternoon watching sunlight ripple across the soaring facades of Palladio's Palazzi and illuminate the Villa Valmarana 'ai Nani', covered floor-to-ceiling with frescoes by Giambattista and Giandomenico Tiepolo. We then recommend dedicating three or four days to Verona where you can view Mantegnas at Basilica di San Zeno Maggiore, window shop along Via Mazzini then listen to opera in the Roman Arena. And even wander Verona's balconied backstreets where Romeo wooed Juliet. From Verona, you can take a day trip northwest to Valpolicella to sample the highly prized Amarone red wine in the Montecariano Cellars (by appointment), or back east to Soave for a sampling of its namesake Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC) white wine at the Azienda Agricola Coffele. Southwest takes you to Mantua for an impressive display of dynastic power and patronage at the Gonzagas' fortified family home, the Palazzo Ducale. For something a tad more dramatic, witness the giants trying to storm Mount Olympus in Giulio Romano's fresco in the Camera dei Giganti at Palazzo Te. A two-day stay in Cremona affords you the chance to chat with artisans in one of the 100 or so violin workshops around Piazza del Comune before hearing these exquisite instruments played at the Teatro Amilcare Ponchielli. To conclude this 2-week itinerary, head to Milan.

THE DOLOMITES

"Enrosadira" is the famed alpenglow of the Dolomites pinnacles. The truly spectacular spectacle has enticed hikers, skiers, romantics and the outdoorsy for centuries. Boasting seven natural parks, the two semi-autonomous provinces of Trentino and Alto Adige offer up stunning wilderness areas. But it's not all adventure – luxurious comfort also abounds in the plethora of high-end hotels and lodges. From five-star spa resorts to the humblest mountain huts, multi-generational hoteliers serve genuine warmth, great local food, incredible wines and a contagious love for their ancestral lands. Yet another long-standing tradition here is a blending of cultures, resulting in markedly different culinary offerings compared with other regions of Italy. This area is great for snow-lovers in the winter and those seeking pretty flower-adorned meadows in the summer – perfect for those wanting to put on their hiking shoes to explore.

SICILY AND THE ISLANDS

This island off the 'toe' of Italy's mainland is a spicy blend of East-West architecture, impossibly ancient ruins, and fiery geology. The quickest way is to fly into Palermo but there are also ferries and trains (including overnight). Savor colorful palazzi, bazaar-like markets, and the extraordinary mosaics at Cattedrale di Monreale. And again, the entirely unique cuisine inspired by Sicily's amalgamation of cultures and peoples throughout the ages. If you have more than a few days, step into the ancient atmosphere of the Doric temple in Segesta. Continue to Trapani to sample Arabesque cuisine. Take the funicular to hilltop Erice then come back down for a day in refined Marsala perhaps sipping sweet local wine. Take a day to roaming the Greek ruins of Selinute and yet another in Agrigento's Valle dei Templi. In Val di Noto, you can explore the World Heritage baroque towns of Ragusa, Modica and Noto. Change pace with a visit to Catania, perhaps even taking the time to climb Mount Etna. Two days of wining and dining along the chic coastal Taormina, home of White Lotus brings us well over 2 weeks in Sicily. Perhaps now is the perfect time to catch a hydrofoil from Messina to the Aeolian Islands for five days of beaches – including with black sands and pyrotechnics thanks to the volcanoes in the area, still active today. This is the case in Stromboli, where you can enjoy a dinner illuminated solely by the red of the lava sputtering out of the crater slightly further up the hill.



THE LAKES

Italian lakes have been immortalized in the works of Goethe, Stendhal, DH Lawrence and Hemingway who lavished great praise on the bodies of water ringed by snow-sprinkled mountains. Drive the short distance northwest of Milan's Malpensa Airport and you can reach the shores of one of Italy's most scenic bodies of water, Lago Maggiore, with the belle époque air of its 19th-century heyday. It was during this time that the European haute bourgeoisie flocked to buy and build grand lakeside villas and establish a series of extraordinarily rich gardens we can admire today, making it well worth taking the delightful drive south along the SS34 and SS33. Three nights in Stresa allows you to visit the lush Borromean Islands of Isola Madre adorned with romantic gardens and the wisteria-clad Staircase of the Dead plus Isola Bella with its priceless art, vast ballrooms, and shell-encrusted grotto. A funicular leads to Monte Mottarone. From there, take a day trip to Lago d'Orta and the bijou Isola San Giulio. Over an additional two days, you can head north from Stresa to Verbania, to frolic amongst the tulips of Villa Taranto before heading east to Laveno and straight on to celebrity haunt Como. Amble the flower-wreathed lakeside to explore art exhibits at Villa Olmo before relaxing on a sun lounger at the Lido di Villa Olmo. Set in the shadow of the Rhaetian Alps and cupped on both sides by steep, wooded hills, Lago di Como is truly spectacular. Shaped like an upside-down Y, its shoreline is peppered with villages, including the charming Bellagio. The lake's main town of Como, rather, lies where the southern and western shores converge. Days could be spent having fun in Como, renting out seaplanes and boats or perhaps hiking the mountainous hinterland of the Triangolo Lariano. In May and June, watch out for musical concerts at some of Lago di Como's finest villas as part of the Lake Como Festival. You can walk to chic Bellagio or for something less strenuous, drive around the lake to lunch in Lezzeno before one last romantic night by these shores.

Less than 50 kilometers from both Bergamo and Brescia, Lago d'Iseo (aka Sebino) lies in a deep glacial valley. One of the least known of the Lombard lakes, it is hidden by soaring mountains that make this a truly magnificent sight. To the lake's north is Valle Camonica, renowned for its Stone Age rock carvings, whilst to the south is the undulating Franciacorta wine country, and to the west the pretty Lake Endine. Much of the roadway closely flanks these waters, making for a picturesque driving experience. Heading on, we get to the largest of the Italian lakes, Lago di Garda. At an impressive 370 square kilometers, this body of water straddles the border between Lombardy and Veneto, with towering mountains to the north and more yielding hills to the south. Vineyards, olive groves and citrus orchards shade the slopes, whilst villages are perched around a garland of natural harbors. The southwest Desenzano del Garda has good transport connections. Despite there being many accommodation options, particularly in Garda, the most developed of the lakes, booking ahead is advised.

EMILIA-ROMAGNA FOOD HEAVEN

To many a gourmand, Emilia-Romagna is Italy's culinary king. At least two days should be spent in Parma, home to Italy's finest cured ham (Prosciutto di Parma) and most revered cheese (Parmigiano Reggiano), along with local Lambrusco wines, best savored at Salumeria Garibaldi. Get your fill of classics like Tortelli di Zucca (pumpkin-stuffed pasta) and Cappelletti in Brodo (pasta filled with meat and Parmigiano cheese in beef broth) at foodie favorite Trattoria del Tribunale. The more fearless can seek out Pesto di Cavallo (raw minced horse meat with herbs and Parmesan), one of Parma's less common – or should we say, rarer (sorry!) – specialties. There is even an entire museum dedicated to Italy's most famous cheese – the Museo del Parmigiano Reggiano in Soragna, 30 kilometers northwest of Parma. Next comes Modena where you can get your fill of the world-famous aged Aceto Balsamico (balsamic vinegar) at Enoteca Ducale. You can even delve deeper on a guided visit to local producers. Alternatively, head to the Museo del Balsamico Tradizionale in the town of Spilamberto, 17 kilometers southeast of Modena. If money permits (and you've booked ahead – or asked us to do so for you!), dine at Michelin-starred darling Osteria Francescana. A more wallet-friendly meal can be had at Franceschetta 58, its more casual sibling. From Modena, continue to buzzing Bologna, Emilia-Romagna's capital city and your final stop. Two days can be spent exploring the city's medieval streetscapes and delighting in hearty flavors. Explore fresh produce at the Mercato delle Erbe and the deli-packed Quadrilatero area. Learn the secrets behind this world-class cuisine with a cooking course at La Vecchia Scuola Bolognese. For cookbooks, check out the shelves of Librerie Coop, a multilevel bookstore partnered with Turin's famous food emporium, Eataly. There is no shortage of locations plating up unmatched classics like Tagliatelle al Ragù, Mortadella and Stinco di Maiale al Forno con Porcini (roasted pork shanks with porcini mushrooms), with Osteria dell'Orsa and Trattoria dal Biassanot among the best.

ITALY BY MEAL

To find the perfect place to dine, us the Arno Travel Restaurant Locator at restaurants.arnotravel.it (or contact us for avail of our restaurant booking service).
Italian food is unarguably one of the greatest drawcards for most visitors. Yet many are surprised to find just how different the food is not only from region to region but also compared with the Italian fare served in local Italian restaurants back home. The term "Italian food" carries a lot of weight given the country's truly diverse regional cuisines. Still, one common denominator on every plate is just how simple and delicious each recipe is. The secret lies in the ingredients, with each chosen with careful consideration to the aroma, mouthfeel, ripeness, seasonality and combination.
Italian cooks manage to achieve a combination and balance of flavors, with the most important ingredient being intuition, given that many recipes list the ingredient quantities as "q.b." – "quanto basta" – meaning "as required" or "to taste", to adjust for the subtle differences in produce throughout the seasons and even at different altitudes. Italians may be famous for not following road rules and seemingly incapable of forming queues but when it comes to food, they are often sticklers for traditions, not only in term of the recipe but also the long-standing tradition of dining with friends and family over long lunches and enduring dinners.

Buongiorno!
In Italy, colazione (breakfast) is a minimalist affair. Early-morning fry-ups are unheard of while brunch is a relatively new import found in trendy eateries. Italy's long-standing breakfast staple is caffè (coffee). Piping-hot espresso, a more tepid cappuccino (espresso with a good dash of frothy milk) or caffè latte – hot milk with espresso – just don't ask for a "latte" unless you actually want a glass of warm milk! An alternative beverage is orzo, a caffeine-free roasted barley beverage that looks like cocoa but has a slightly nutty flavor. Italians may insist on stopping to enjoy lunch and dinner around the table, preferably with friends or family. But breakfast is often consumed standing up at the counter, coffee in one hand and a pastry in the other. One stable is the Cornetto – Italy's take on the French croissant but usually smaller, lighter with less butter but still slightly sweet, often with an orange-rind glaze on top, perhaps filled with dark chocolate, white chocolate, crema (Italian-style custard) or varying flavors of marmellata (jam). Then there is the Crostata, an Italian breakfast tart with a dense, buttery crust filled with your choice of fruit jam, such as amarena (sour cherry), albicocca (apricot) or frutti di bosco (forest fruits). Italian-style doughnuts (enjoyed not only at breakfast but also for morning or afternoon tea) include the ciambella (also called by its German name, krapfen), a classic fried-dough treat covered in granulated sugar and sometimes filled with jam or custard. Kiosks and street fairs peddle fritole (also known as frittelle in Tuscany), fried balls of dough sometimes studded with raisins and coated in powdered or granular sugar, zeppole (also called Bigné di San Giuseppe), chewy doughnuts filled with ricotta or zucca (pumpkin), rolled in confectioners' sugar and served in a paper cone to be consumed steaming hot. Italy's colonization by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 19th century left behind a broad selection of sweet buns and other rich baked goods such as cream-filled brioches and strudel di mele, an Italian adaptation of the traditional Viennese apfelstrudel.

LUNCH

Italians are notoriously always on the go and at high speed – think Vespas, Ferraris and Bianchis – but when it comes to lunch, the country grinds to a hungry halt for their pausa a pranzo or, lunch break. In bigger cities, locals take their place at tables in a ristorante and trattoria. Florence is also famous for sandwiches served with lampradotto (a type of tripe served with a green sauce on a bread roll and accompanied by a glass of Chianti wine), often from carts or hole-in-wall places around town. In the smaller towns and villages, everyone heads home for a two- to three-hour midday break of a hot lunch in winter and cool fresh produce in summer (think melon and cured ham or a caprese salad of mozzarella, tomato and basil). Lunch is then followed by a little nap before returning to work, with many stopping for an espresso on their way. In terms of takeaway lunches, options include pizza al taglio (pizza by the slice), rosticcerie (rotisseries) or tavole calde (literally 'hot tables') serving pre-cooked dishes such as roast chicken and supplì (fried risotto balls with a molten mozzarella center). Bakeries and bars are also on hand with pre-made focaccia, panini and tramezzini (triangular, stacked sandwiches made with soft, crustless white bread).

DINNER

Traditionally, cena (dinner) is lunch's lighter sibling but that still means a bowl of pasta, some vegetables or salad, perhaps some cheese and fruit. Almost always accompanied by wine. Mercifully, both home and restaurant portion sizes are much smaller than other countries so you can enjoy either more dishes (or more servings!). And don't be afraid to ask to share a dish with your dinner companion(s) so that you can order both a primo and secondo, and perhaps even an antipasto and dolce if you please for a DIY tasting menu. Head to an osteria or pizzeria for simple fare at decent prices, a trattoria for something more mid-range, and a restaurant for a dash of fine dining. No matter where you chose to eat, it is generally (but not always) best to opt for places with small menus (even better if hand-written each day!). A lavish dinner at one of Italy's fine-dining hot spots, such as Milan's Cracco-Peck or Rome's Open Colonna is a highlight few will want to skip. Many top-ranked restaurants open only for dinner, with a set-price degustation menu that leaves the major decisions to your chef and frees you up to concentrate on the noble quest to conquer four to six tasting courses.

ITALY BY COURSES

ANTIPASTI (APPETIZERS)

Antipasti are a good way to sample several different dishes. Tantalizing offerings on the antipasti menu may include the house bruschetta – roasted slices of bread to be eaten with this season's extra-virgin olive oil and perhaps a sprinkling of salt or perhaps coming with a variety of toppings, from chopped tomato and garlic (bruschetta al pomodoro) to a black-truffle or mushroom spread. Then there are regional treats like mozzarella di bufula (buffalo mozzarella) or salatini con burro d'acciughe (pastry sticks with anchovy butter). For the culinarily curious, an antipasto misto (mixed appetizers) is the way to go to have a platter of morsels including anything from olive fritte (fried olives) and prosciutto e melone (cured ham and melon) to friarielli con peperoncino (Neapolitan broccoli with chili). Bread (and sometimes grissini – Turin-style breadsticks) are placed on the table as part of your €1 to €3 (or more) coperto (cover or table service fee).

PRIMI (FIRST COURSES)

Hello carbs! This course is dedicated to pasta, gnocchi, risotto and polenta. Although perhaps not as big as US portions, the sizes are certainly not meagre. Primi menus usually include vegetarian or vegan options, such as pasta con pesto – the classic Ligurian basil paste with parmigiano reggiano (Parmesan) and pine nuts – or pasta alla norma (with basil, eggplant, ricotta and tomato), risotto ai porcini (risotto with porcini mushrooms) or the extravagant risotto al Barolo (risotto with high-end Barolo wine, though actually any good dry red will do if you want to recreate this dish at home). For vegetarians, do be sure to check before you order about the stock used in a risotto or polenta, or the ingredients in that suspiciously rich tomato sauce – there may be beef, ham or ground anchovies (the 'Italian MSG') involved. Meat eaters will rejoice in such legendary dishes as pasta all'amatriciana (Roman pasta with a spicy tomato sauce, pecorino cheese and guanciale, or bacon-like pork cheek), osso bucco con risotto alla milanese (Milanese veal shank and marrow melting into saffron risotto), Tuscan specialty pappardelle alle cinghiale (ribbon pasta with wild boar sauce) and northern favorite polenta col ragù (polenta with meat sauce). In coastal areas, look for seafood variations like risotto al nero (risotto cooked with black squid ink), spaghetti alle vongole (spaghetti with clams) or pasta ai frutti di mare (pasta with seafood).

SECONDI (SECOND COURSES)

Buongustai (foodies) pace themselves for the secondi – meat, fish, perhaps a grilled round of cheese or other delights – and contorni (side dishes, such as cooked vegetables or simple salad) in the second course. These options may range from the outrageous Bistecca alla Fiorentina, a 3-inch-thick steak served on the bone and quite rare (never well done!), to more modest yet equally impressive Fritto Misto di Mare (mixed fried seafood), Carciofi alla Romana (Roman artichokes stuffed with mint and garlic) or Pollo in Tegame con Barbe (chicken casserole with salsify). A less inspiring option is insalata mista (mixed green salad), typically unadorned greens with vinegar and oil on the side – croutons, crumbled cheeses, nuts, dried fruit and other froufrou ingredients have no business in a classic Italian salad. That said, big salads are starting to creep onto Italian menus (particularly at lunch).

FRUTTI E DOLCI (FRUIT AND DESSERTS)

In Italian homes, the fruit bowl might be placed on the table at the end of a meal so diners may help themselves to a piece of fruit. It is also quite common for restaurants to have fruit – either fruit salad or a quarter of a pineapple artistically sliced – amongst the dessert options. Formaggi (cheeses) are another option for those with a more savory leaning. Indeed, an ancient proverb says, "la bocca non è stracca se non sa di vacca" ("the mouth is not satisfied until it tastes like cow"!). Biscotti (twice-baked biscuits) made to dip in a small glass of dessert wine make for a delicious closure to the meal, but other great desserts include Zabaglione (egg and marsala custard), Torta di Ricotta e Pera (pear and ricotta cake), cream-stuffed Profiteroles, or Cannoli Siciliani, the ricotta-stuffed shell pastry immortalized thus in The Godfather: "Leave the gun. Take the cannoli".

CAFFÈ (COFFEE)

Most Italian mornings start with a creamy, frothy cappuccino (named for the Capuchin monks, with their brown hoods), which is rarely consumed after about 11:00 am and usually served not too hot. Otherwise, it's espresso all the way, though you could ask for a tiny 'stain' of milk in a caffè macchiato. On the hottest days of summer, a granita di caffè (coffee with shaved ice and whipped cream) is ideal.

LIQUORI (LIQUEURS)

To be enjoyed with an espresso, after an espresso or in an espresso (called a Caffè Corretto or, corrected coffee). Ordering a digestivo (digestive) – be it a grappa (a potent grape-derived alcohol), an amaro (a dark liqueur prepared from herbs) or limoncello (lemon liqueur) is par for the course. Do note that Italian digestives can be an acquired taste and quite strong. They are to be sipped slowly and never taken as a shot.

ITALY BY THE GLASS

For Italians, vino (wine) is present at almost every meal. Italian wines are considered amongst the most versatile and 'food friendly' in the world, indeed, they are specifically cultivated over the centuries to elevate regional cuisine. Since many wines cost less than a pint of beer in Italy, it is not a question of price, but one of taste. Some Italian wines will be quite familiar, such as the everyday Chianti or the summertime staple of Pinot Grigio. But you'll also find some captivating Italian varietals and blends for which there is no translation (think Brunello, Vermentino, Sciacchetrá), and intriguing Italian wines that have little in common with European and Australian cousins by the same name (Merlot, Pinot Nero – aka Pinot Noir, and Chardonnay).

Many visitors default to carafes of house reds or whites, which in Italy usually means young, fruit-forward reds to complement tomato sauces, and chilled dry whites as palate-cleansers after a seafood meal. House wine is never bad but if you'd like something more elaborate, check out the wider range of options by the glass, half-bottle or bottle.

For a thirst-quenching adventure through Italy's most celebrated wine region, there are many vineyard tours, cellar visits, tasting options and even wine museums to explore (ask Arno Travel about making arrangments). Just note that most Italian cellars are by advance appointment only, unlike the open doors you might find abroad.

Sparkling wines:	Franciacorta (Lombardy), Prosecco (Veneto), Asti (aka Asti Spumante from Piedmont), Lambrusco (Emilia-Romagna)
Light, citrusy whites with grassy or floral notes:	Vermentino (Sardinia), Orvieto (Umbria), Soave (Veneto), Tocai (Friuli)
Dry whites with aromatic herbal or mineral notes	Cinque Terre (Liguria), (Piedmont), Falanghina (Campania), Est! Est!! Est!!! (Lazio)
Versatile, food-friendly reds with pleasant acidity	Barbera d'Alba (Piedmont), Montepulciano d'Abruzzo (Abruzzo), Valpolicella (Veneto), Chianti Classico (Tuscany), Bardolino (Lombardy)
Well-rounded reds, balancing fruit with earthy notes	Brunello di Montalcino (Tuscany), Refosco dal Pedulunco Rosso (Friuli), Dolcetto (Piedmont), Morellino di Scansano (Tuscany)
Big, structured reds with velvety tannins	Amarone (Veneto), Barolo (Piedmont), Sagrantino di Montefalco Secco (Umbria), Sassicaia and other 'Super-Tuscan' blends (Tuscany)
Fortified and dessert wine	Sciacchetrá (Liguria), Colli Orientali del Friuli Picolit (Friuli), Vin Santo (Tuscany), Moscato d'Asti (Piedmont)

ITALY BY FOOD SPECIALTY

So seriously do Italians take their cheese that giving an entire wheel of "formaggio" as an elaborately wrapped Christmas or birthday present is quite common. There are even sports events seeing cheese wheels being used as the 'ball' rolled in ancient versions of bowls played in the town square, some even dating back to Etruscan times. But cheese is just one of Italy's many specialties. Indeed, each region – and even each town or city – boasts its own specialty dishes and delicacies.

For truffles, go to Piedmont, Tuscany and Umbria to seek out world's most coveted hypogean mushroom. Truffles are Italy's gastronomic gold. Roman emperor Nero called them the "food of the gods", while composer Rossini hailed them as the "mushrooms of Mozart". Subterranean edible fungi, truffles colonize the roots of certain tree species and are notoriously hard to find. Hunting them is a specialist activity and quite a fun exercise if you're visit falls within truffle season (ask Arno Travel to arrange a personalized hunt!). The most prized variety is the white truffle from the Alba region in Piedmont. Other slightly less aromatic white truffles are found in Tuscany, while black truffles are most prevalent in Umbria and Le Marche. White truffles are harvested from early October to December whereas black truffles are available from November to March. The season is crowned in the Umbrian town of Norcia during late February and early March with a lively black-truffle festival. Italy's biggest truffle festival is held in Alba every weekend in October, while other notable extravaganzas animate the Tuscan towns of San Miniato and San Giovanni d'Asso, near Siena, during the second half of November.

Then there is the incredible recipe repertoire of pastas, risottos, spelt and other carbaceous delights that fall under the category of 'primi' (first courses). Pasta is cooked al dente then coated with a perfectly-paired sauce (note, coated – the sauce is never served atop 'naked' noodles like some kind of garnish but carefully mixed through the pasta, usually with a splash of pasta water for the perfect consistency). Risottos are carefully stirred to be perfectly cooked and delightfully creamy (albeit it without any actual cream in most cases). Each region of Italy and even each town therein will have their own recipes. Even each season has its own selection of recipes. Think steaming bowls of lasagna in winter and light panzanella in summer.

And we haven't even mentioned the pizza! Steering-wheel sized pizzas are ordered one per person. Toppings are simple, not too saucy. Crusts are usually crispy and thin but in some regions, can be thicker. Pizza is arguably Italy's most famous export, but who makes the best: Naples or Rome?

Italians love their proteins almost as much as their carbs! From the most luscious Bistecca alla Fiorentina to the stews of local meats simmering on stovetops for days … This is in stark contrast to the seafood that is so fresh, you can eat it raw in Venice, Sardinia, Sicily and Puglia. In Campania, order a plate of spaghetti alle vongole (spaghetti with clams). So crisp and delightfully light is the mixed fried seafood that you should order this delicacy whenever and wherever you can!

And we hope you saved room for dessert …

PIEDMONT

This is perhaps Italy's most culinary progressive region, having challenged the hegemony of the nation's pizza and spaghetti monopoly to shine light on many a gourmet alternative. Leaning heavily on their proximity to northern Europe and eschewing the habits of their southern cousins, the Piedmontese have always had a different approach to food. They have long preferred risotto over pizza, butter over olive oil, and egg pasta over durum wheat spaghetti. Gastronomically, favorite dishes call upon precious local ingredients (white truffles, Arborio rice, hazelnuts and Castelmagno cheese among them), supported by a weighty wine culture, with the region producing two of Italy's finest wines: Barolo and Barbaresco. Classic trattoria dishes in Piedmont include Agnolotti al Plin (meat ravioli in beef broth and butter), Risotto al Barolo (sometimes served with sausages), and Vitello Tonnato (cold veal with a tuna-flavored cream topping). Applying the regions penchant for innovation, you can also find high-art hipster offerings fanned by a mixture of international influences. Then there's the region's ever-expanding stash of acclaimed Michelin star restaurants. Ristorante Piazza Duomo in Alba serves a dish called Salad 41 named after the number of different leaves it contains, while Davide Scabin at Turin's Combal Zero offers a plate called Virtual Oysters (since it tastes like oysters but is made from watermelon, anchovies and almonds), and another called Hambook (prosciutto and melon gel served in a hollowed-out book). Weird, playful, and intentionally funny. But also yummy.

LOMBARDY

Lombardy loves its burro (butter), risotto and gorgonzola cheese. Risotto alla Milanese (saffron and bone marrow risotto), Panettone (sweet bread), trendy eateries and the food emporium Peck. The Renaissance spirit of Mantua retains its love of pumpkin tortelli, wild fowl and Sbrisolona (a delicious cornmeal cake with almonds, lemon and vanilla). The Valtenesi area is then home to some of Italy's finest olive oils, including Comincioli's award-winning Numero Uno.

VENETO

Come for the bubbly Prosecco and fiery Grappa and stay for the Risotto alle Seppie (cuttlefish-ink risotto), Polenta con le Guaglie (quail polenta), as well as the odd 'foreign' treat – Sarde in Soar (grilled sardines in a sweet-and-sour sauce). Visit Venice for Cicchetti (Venetian hors d'oeuvres) at local bacari (bars). In the Rialto Market, find produce such as seafood plucked right from the lagoon and radicchio di Treviso (red, bitter chicory). Near Verona, the prime wine region of Valpollicella is celebrated for Amarone, Valpollicella Superiore, Ripasso, Recioto, and Indicazione Geografica Tipica (IGT) red blends.

EMILIA-ROMAGNA

Emilia-Romagna claims some of Italy's most iconic edibles, from Tagliatelle alla Bolognese (pasta with meat ragout) to Parmigiano Reggiano (Parmesan cheese) and Prosciutto di Parma (cured ham). Bologna straddles Italian food lines between the butter-led north and the tomato-based cuisine of the south. Parma's cheese is the most famous there is – indeed, so valuable are the wheels that there is even a dedicated Parmesan bank with a vault where the gigantic precious rounds are housed and cared for. At Osteria Francescana, Massimo Bottura's creative flavor combinations can be savored at the world's third-best restaurant. Ask Arno Travel about our restaurant booking service or use our Arno Travel Restaurant Locator at restaurants.arnotravel.it to explore more options in this foodie mecca.

TUSCANY

In Florence, the most prized meal is succulent Bistecca alla Fiorentina (T-bone steak) from the world-famous Chianina beef from the Valdichiana valley. This area is also famous for Ravaggiolo (sheep's-milk cheese strained through fern fronds or fig leaves). In Castelnuovo di Garfagnana, get your fill of autumnal porcini and chestnuts. From October to December, go to San Miniato for white truffles, celebrated at a white-truffle fair (Sagra del Tartufo), held over three weekends in November. Savor cured Cinta Senese (indigenous Tuscan pig), pecorino (sheep's-milk cheese) and prized extra-virgin olive oils in Montalcino, a place also known for its Brunello and Rosso di Montalcino reds. Montepulciano is then home to Vino Nobile red and it's "little brother", Rosso di Montepulciano. Just leave time for Chianti's world-famous vineyards – Arno Travel can also make arrangements for access to the most exclusive cellars.

UMBRIA

Here, grate black truffle from Norcia over fresh and buttery tagliatelle (ribbon pasta). Quaff Sagrantino di Montefalco red wine in the midst of splendid landscapes able to rival the beauty of Tuscany. Norcia is Italy's capital of pork. Its famous Norcinerie (butcher shops) are filled with the heady scent of hung hams and cured meats. In Lago Trasimeno, freshwater fish are transformed into dishes like Regina alla Porchetta (roasted carp stuffed with garlic, fennel and herbs) and Tegemacchio (fish stew made with garlic, onions, tomatoes and a selection of underwater critters). Meanwhile, along the Strada dei Vini del Cantico wine trail, stop in at the town of Torgiano to trawl through the dedicated wine and olive museums.

ROME AND LAZIO

On Roman menus, find traditional thin-crust pizza or Supplì (fried risotto balls), Spaghetti alla Carbonara, Bucatini all'Amatriciana (with bacon, tomato, chili and pecorino cheese) and Cacio e Pepe (spaghetti with pecorino cheese and black pepper). Rome's most famous sites barely need mentioning. Once you've ticked off the must-sees, head to Rome's Testaccio neighborhood for nose-to-tail staples like Trippa alla Romana (tripe with potatoes, tomato, mint and pecorino cheese). Visit the Jewish Ghetto for kosher deep-fried Carciofi (artichokes). Southeast of the city in Frascati, tour the vineyards and swill the area's delicate white vino.

NAPLES AND CAMPANIA

Procida lemons are key to making golden limoncello (lemon liqueur) while the region's vines create intense red Taurasi and the dry white Fiano di Avellino. Naples is where pizza was 'invented' – stick to simple classic toppings for the most authentic experience. The coffee culture here is unparalleled – with the tradition of paying for a Caffè Sospeso ("suspended coffee" where you pay for an extra coffee to be offered to someone in need at some point in the future). Outside of mealtimes, snack on Pizza Fritta (fried pizza dough stuffed with salami, dried lard cubes, smoked provola cheese or ricotta and tomato). The town of Gragnano produces much-lauded pasta, perhaps in a dish of Spaghetti alle Vongole (spaghetti with clams). Leave room for a Sfogliatella (sweetened ricotta pastry) and Babà (rum-soaked sponge cake). Both Caserta and the Cilento produce scrumptious mozzarella di bufala (buffalo mozzarella).

PUGLIA

In Italy's 'heel', the must-tries are peppery olive oil, crunchy bread and 'cucina povera' (peasant cooking). Breadcrumbs add a delightful crunch to everything from Strascinati con la Mollica (pasta with anchovies and breadcrumbs) to Tiella di Verdure (baked vegetable casserole). Snacks include Puccia (bread with olives) and ring-shaped Taralli (little round crackers). In Salento, linger over a long lunch at a masseria and raise a toast with bold reds like Salice Salentino and Primitivo di Manduria. Il Frantoio offers multi-course lunches in this Puglian farmhouse that are the very definition of Slow Food – ask Arno Travel to make a booking or arrange other exquisite experiences.

SICILY

Thanks to the intense sun over Sicily, the local wines pack a decisive punch, as is the case with the red Nero d'Avola. The local cuisine is best enjoyed by the sea, under the shade of Etna or along the gritty streets of Palermo. Ancient Arab influences can be savored in fragrant seafood couscous to be tried in San Vito Lo Capo and spectacular sweets like cannoli (pastry shells filled with sweet ricotta) to taste anytime you can! In Palermo, local fare includes Sfincione (soft oily pizza with onions and caciocavallo cheese), Pasta con le Sarde (pasta with sardines, pine nuts, raisins and wild fennel) and Involtini di Pesce Spada (swordfish rolls). But it is Palermo's street food that is truly iconic. Buffitieri are little hot snacks prepared at stalls and meant to be eaten on the spot. Pane e Panelle is the famous chickpea fritter sandwich – great for vegetarians and a nice alternative to traditional sweet breakfasts. Crocchè (potato croquettes, sometimes flavored with fresh mint) and Quaglie (literally translated as quails but actually fried eggplant cut lengthwise and fanned out to resemble a bird's feathers) are other savory specialties. In summer, locals also enjoy a freshly baked brioche filled with gelato or granita (crushed ice flavored with fresh fruit, almonds, pistachios, or coffee). Afternoon favorites include barbecued Stigghiola (goat intestines stuffed with onions, cheese and parsley) and Pani Ca Meusa (bread rolls stuffed with sauteed beef spleen).

FESTIVE FAVORITES

In Italy, culinary indulgence is the focus of any celebration and major holiday, with each occasion marked by particular dishes. Lent is heralded by Carnevale (Carnival), a time for Migliaccio di Polenta (a casserole of polenta, sausage, pecorino and Parmigiano Reggiano cheeses), Sanguinaccio ('blood pudding' made with dark chocolate and cinnamon), Chiacchiere (fried strips of pastry sprinkled with icing sugar) and Sicily's Mpagnuccata (deep-fried dough coated in soft caramel). March 19 is St Joseph's Feast Day, when Bignè di San Giuseppe (doughnuts filled with cream or chocolate) are fried up in Rome, Zeppole (fritters topped with lemon-scented cream, sour cherry, and a dusting of sugar) in Naples and Bari, and Crispelle di Riso (citrus-scented rice fritters dipped in honey) and Quaresimali (hard, light almond biscuits) in Sicily. Easter means lamb while dessert is Colomba (dove-shaped cake). The dominant ingredient at this time is egg, also used to make traditional regional specialties like Genoa's Torta Pasqualina (pastry tart filled with ricotta, parmigiano, artichokes and hard-boiled eggs), Florence's Brodetto (egg, lemon and bread broth) and Naples' legendary Pastiera (shortcrust pastry tart filled with ricotta, cream, candied fruits and cereals flavored with orange water). In the markets, the fresh produce changes each month throughout the year. Towards the end of summer and Autumn in particular, food fares (Sagre) are dedicated to local specialties. You'll find the Sagra del Tartufo (truffles) in Umbria, Sagra del Pomodoro (tomatoes) in Sicily and Sagra del Cipolle (onions) in Puglia. For a list of these events, check out www.prodottitipici.com/sagre (in Italian). Christmas means stuffed pasta, seafood dishes and one of Milan's greatest inventions: Panettone (a yeasty, golden cake with raisins and dried fruit). Equally famous are Verona's simpler, fruit-free Pandoro (a yeasty, star-shaped cake dusted with vanilla icing sugar) and Siena's Panforte (a chewy, flat cake made with candied fruits, nuts, chocolate, honey and spices). Further south, Neapolitans prepare Raffioli (sponge and marzipan biscuits), Struffoli (tiny fried pastry balls dipped in honey and sprinkled with colorful candied sugar) and Pasta di Mandorla (marzipan), while their Sicilian cousins mark the season with Cucciddatu (ring-shaped cake made with dried figs, nuts, honey, vanilla, cloves, cinnamon and citrus fruits).

ITALY BY THRILL

Thanks to the varied terrains, mountains, lakes, 7600 kilometers of coastline, plains and forests, Italy is like one giant playground. Ski in the Alps, hike in Sardinia, go white-water rafting in Calabria, cycle through Piedmont … Madre Natura (Mother Nature) has you covered.

Italy's varied geography offers up a plethora of land-locked diversions. In the Alps, skiers and snowboarders slice the slopes during the snow season. Trails are trekked and biked through all seasons. Most local and regional tourist office websites have information about walking in their area. The Italian Parks (www.parks.it) organization lists walking trails (sentieri) through each of the country's 24 national parks. Then there are the marine parks and other protected areas. Italy's major walking association is the Club Alpino Italiano (www.cai.it). They offer up a list of rifugi (mountain huts) along certain mountainous walking routes for very basic accommodation and scrumptious food and wine.

The precipitous peaks of the Amalfi Coast and Cinque Terre harbor an ancient network of shepherds' paths, making for heavenly hikes. Since 2009, the Cinque Terre national park has allowed mountain bikes on some of its paths, with the starting point for most trails being the Santuario della Madonna di Montenero, accessible by road or Sentiero (Trail) no. 3 above Riomaggiore. Then there is the 12-kilometre Sentiero Azzurro (marked no. 2 on maps). Once a mule path, it links all five oceanside villages and dates back to the early days of the Republic of Genoa in the 12th and 13th centuries. Until the railway line was opened in 1874, this trail was the only practical means (with the word "practical" holding a lot of weight!) of getting from village to village. Today, most walkers head off from Riomaggiore and finish in Monterosso. But there is also an entire network of splendid trails for village-to-village trekking, along the 30 numbered paths. At 38 kilometers, the Sentiero Rosso (Red Trail, marked no. 1 on maps) extends from Porto Venere to Levanto. Experienced walkers aim to complete this walk in 9 to 12 hours. The efficient train and bus connection to Porto Venere (via La Spezia) allows for an early start while refreshments en route can be found in the many welcoming bars and restaurants.

The vine-laced landscapes of Tuscany and Piedmont add a touch of romance to cycling. Yet, enticing cycling paths delineate the entire peninsula, with there being a range of dedicated hotels for cyclists – ask Arno Travel to help with bookings and transport. Abandoned trainlines are being transformed into hiking and biking paths all around the country, with former stations being restored and historic trains being done up for adventures to visit small villages on rest days, cutting through pristine landscapes.

Along the coast, sport goes beyond the beaches. Sardinia's cobalt waters and Sicily's Aeolian Islands offer up some of Italy's best diving. Windsurfers flock to Sardinia, Sicily and the northern lakes, while adrenalin junkies ride rapids from Piedmont to Calabria.

ROCK CLIMBING

The soaring rock walls of the Dolomites prove irresistible for rock climbers of all levels, with everything from simple, single pitch routes to long, multipitch ascents, many of which are easily accessible by road. The Vie Ferrate in the Brenta Dolomites combine rock climbing with high level hiking. The Trentino town of Arco, home to the world-famous Rock Master Festival (www.rockmasterfestival.com), offer climbs of all grades. Hard-core mountaineering alpinists can take on Europe's highest peaks in the Valle d'Aosta. Courmayeur and Cogne, a renowned ice-climbing center, make good bases. To the south, the Gran Sasso massif is a favorite, with three peaks. Corno Grande (2912 meters) is the highest and Corno Piccolo (2655 meters) is the easiest to get to. Other hot spots include Monte Pellegrino outside Palermo in Sicily, and Domusnovas, Ogliastra and the Supramonte in Sardinia.

SKIING

Most of Italy's top ski resorts are in the northern Alps, including Sestriere, Cortina d'Ampezzo, Madonna di Campiglio and Courmayeur loved by serious skiers. Down the peninsula are smaller resorts throughout the Apennines, in Lazio, Le Marche and Abruzzo. Even Sicily's Mt Etna is skiable in winter. Facilities at the bigger centers are generally world-class, with pistes ranging from beginner slopes to tough black runs. As well as sci alpino (downhill skiing), resorts might offer sci di fondo (cross-country skiing) and sci alpinismo (ski mountaineering). Ski season is from December to late March, yet you can ski year-round in Trentino Alto-Adige and on Mont Blanc (Monte Bianco) and the Matterhorn in the Valle d'Aosta. January and February are generally the best, busiest and priciest months, whilst better value can be found in Friuli's expanding Sella Nevea runs or Tarvisio, one of the coldest spots in the Alps, where the season is often extends into April. Yet, the best bargain for the ski year is the Settimana Bianca (literally "white week") package covering accommodation, food, and ski passes. Online, J2Ski (www.j2ski.com) has detailed information about Italy's ski resorts, including facilities, accommodation and updated snow reports. And Arno Travel can help from whole itineraries through to simple dinner reservations.

SNOWBOARDING

Two snowboarding hot spots are Trentino's Madonna di Campiglio and Valle d'Aosta's Breuil-Cervinia. Madonna's facilities rank among the best in Italy and include a snowboard park with descents suited to any level and a dedicated border-cross zone. Situated at 2050 meters in the shadow of the Matterhorn, Breuil-Cervinia is better suited to intermediate and advanced levels.

CYCLING

Whether you're after a gentle ride between trattorias, a 100-kilometer road race or a teeth rattling mountain descent, you'll find a route to suit. Tourist offices can usually provide details on trails and guided rides, with bike hire being available in most cities and key spots. Tuscany's undulating countryside is a hotspot for cyclists, particularly the wine-producing Chianti area south of Florence. In Umbria, the Valnerina and Piano Grande at Monte Vettore have beautiful trails and quiet country roads to explore. Further north, the flatlands of Emilia-Romagna and the terraced vineyards of Barolo, Barbaresco and Franciacorta are also ideal for bike touring. Cycling meets architecture on Veneto's Brenta Riviera, offering 150 kilometers of bike routes past glorious Venetian villas. To the south, Puglia's flat countryside and coastal paths are also satisfying. In summer, many Alpine ski resorts offer magnificent cycling. Mountain bikers will be spoilt for choice in the peaks around Lago di Garda, Lago Maggiore and the Dolomites in Trentino Alto-Adige. Yet another challenging area is the granite landscape of the Supramonte in eastern Sardinia. The best season for cycling is spring, when it's not too hot and the countryside is at its splendid best.

DIVING

Diving is a popular summer pursuit in Italy. There are hundreds of schools offering courses, dives for all levels and equipment hire. Most diving schools open seasonally, typically from about June to October. If possible, avoid August, when the Italian coast is besieged by holidaymakers and peak-season prices. Information is available from local tourist offices and online in Italian at Diveltaly (www.diveitaly.com). Top dive sites include the Aeolian Islands and Sicily. A volcanic ridge with warm waters encompasses the islands of Vulcano, Lipari, Salina, Panarea, Stromboli, Alicudi and Filicudi. Dive in sea grottoes around the remains of old volcanoes. Capri, Ischia, Procida in Campania – three islands in the Bay of Naples – offer exceptional diving amid sun-struck sea caves. Then there is the Cinque Terre marine reserve in Liguria offering one of the few places to dive in the north of the country, with dives from Riomaggiore and Santa Margherita.

ITALY BY ADVENTURE

THE ALPS

Arching from Slovenia in the east, via the southern borders of Austria and Switzerland, to France in the west, the Alps offer heady mountain vistas, swooping forested valleys and views over large glacial lakes such as Garda, Como and Maggiore. To the east in Friuli Venezia Giulia is the Giulie and Carnic Alps, where hikers can try to spot lynx, marmots and eagles in between quaint Tyrolean villages. Westwards, white ridges pass through Trento's Parco Nazionale dello Stelvio, northern Italy's (and the Alps') largest national park, spilling into Lombardy. There, great lakes – encompassing Garda, Como, Iseo, Maggiore and Orta – are prime hiking territory mixing mountain and lake vistas. Particularly picturesque is the furrowed ridge of mountains in Como's Triangolo Lariano, and Garda's Monte Baldo. Far west, in Piedmont and Liguria, are the Graian, Maritime and Ligurian Alps, embracing the Valle d'Aosta, the Gran Paradiso Park and the lesser-known Parco Naturale delle Alpi Marittime. Make a sharp and dramatic descent to get to the Cinque Terre and Portofino park on the Ligurian coastline. Accommodation in the mountains is in the chalets or casual rifugi (huts), which should be booked ahead in high season. For serious hiking, you'll need to bring appropriate equipment and get detailed trail maps. Tourist offices and visitor centers provide some information, resources and basic maps for easier tourist routes. Another good information source is the website Climb Europe (www.climb-europe.com), which also sells rock-climbing guidebooks covering Italy. And of course, Arno Travel can also help with bookings, transfers, and other services.

THE DOLOMITES

Soaring across the borders of the Veneto, Trentino and Alto-Adige, the Dolomites are a stunning, UNESCO World Heritage-listed mountain range where some of Italy's most scenic (and vertiginous) walking trails are equally well known for skiing and cycling. Alpe di Siusi, Alto-Adige Europe's largest plateau, comes to a dramatic end at the base of the Sciliar Mountains. An average amount of stamina will get you to Rifugio Bolzano, one of the Alps' oldest mountain huts. For a greater challenge, the peaks of the Catinaccio group and the Sassolungo are nearby.

VAL PUSTERIA, ALTO-ADIGE

This narrow Tyrolean valley extends from Bressanone to San Candido. At the far end of the valley are the Sesto Dolomites, crisscrossed with spectacular walking trails, including moderate trails around the iconic Tre Cime di Lavaredo (Three Peaks).

VAL GARDENA, ALTO-ADIGE

One of only five valleys where the Ladin heritage is still preserved. Located amid the peaks of the Gruppo del Sella and Sassolungo there are challenging Alte Vie (high-altitude) trails and easier nature walks such as the Naturonda at Passo di Sella (2244 meters).

BRENTA DOLOMITES, TRENTINO

The Brenta group is famed for its sheer cliffs and tricky ascents, which are home to some of Italy's most famous Vie Ferrate (trails with permanent steel cables and ladders), including the Via Ferrata delle Bocchette.

PARCO NAZIONALE DELLE DOLOMITI BELLUNESI, VENETO

A UNESCO World Heritage Park offering trails amid wildflowers. This park also harbors the high-altitude Alte Vie delle Dolomiti trails, accessible between June and September.

CENTRAL ITALY

Abruzzo's national parks are among Italy's least explored. Here, you can climb Corno Grande, the Apennines' highest peak, and explore vast, silent valleys. Likewise, Umbria's Monti Sibillini and Piano Grande are well off the trodden path. Both burst with wildflowers in spring. In Abruzzo, hikers of the Cammino di San Tommaso pilgrimage can also be delighted by the free wine fountain ('Fontana del Vino') along the way. Tuscany's only significant park with good walking trails is in the southern Maremma, where you can sign up for walks of medium difficulty. For most people though, an easy amble through picturesque Chianti suits just fine. Then there is also the Via Francigena, once paced by pilgrims funneling into Italy from Europe on their way to Rome and today a lovely way to travel through picturesque Tuscan countryside.

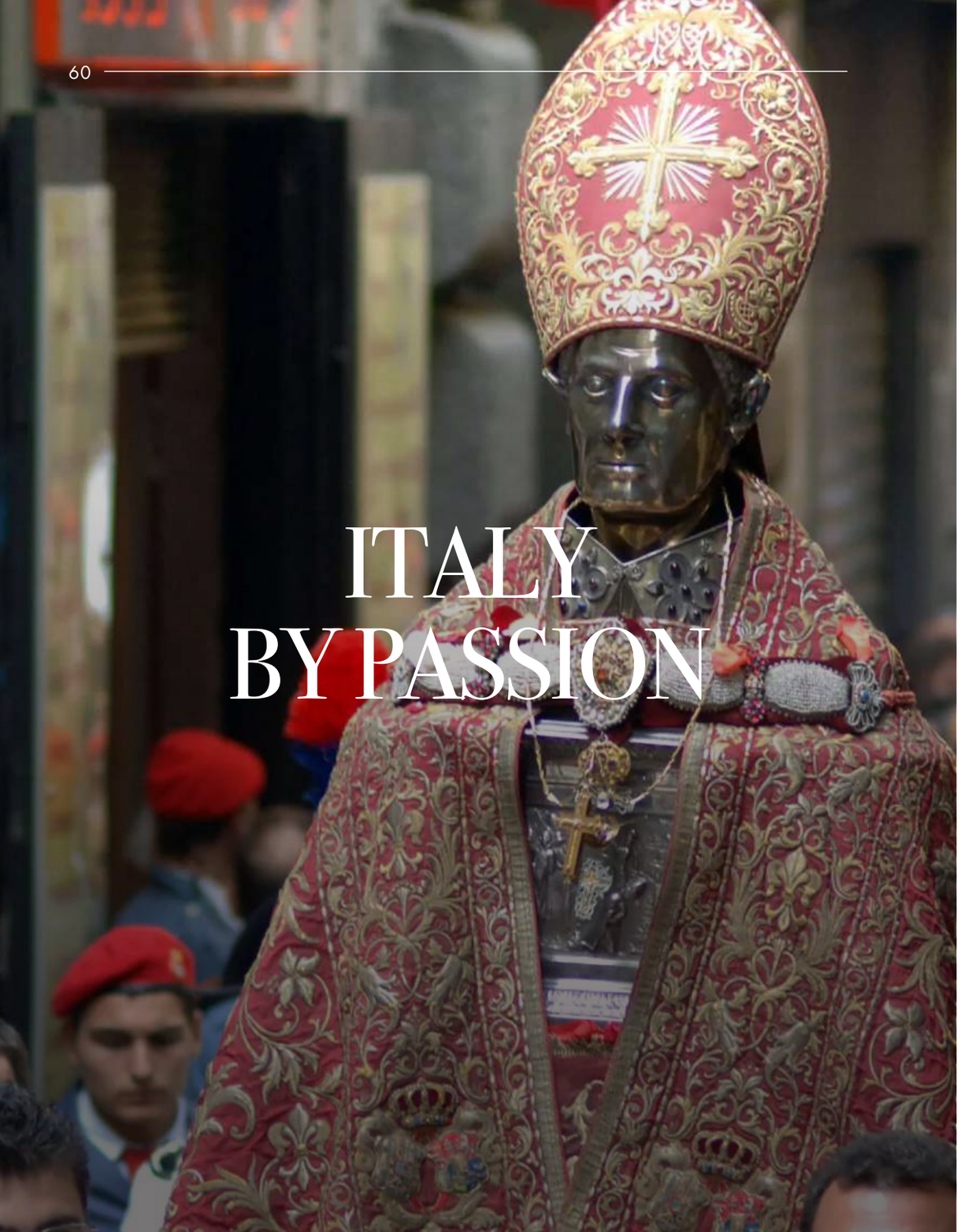
THE SOUTH

For spectacular sea views, hit the Amalfi Coast and Sorrento Peninsula, where age old paths such as the Sentiero degli Dei (Path of the Gods) vanish into wooded mountains and ancient lemon groves. Across the water, Capri changes pace with a series of bucolic walking trails far from the crowds. Crossing the border between Calabria and Basilicata is the Parco Nazionale del Pollino, Italy's largest national park, the richest repository of flora and fauna in the south with varied landscapes ranging from deep river canyons to alpine meadows. Calabria's other national parks – the Sila and Aspromonte – offer similarly dramatic hiking, particularly around the Sersale in the Sila, adorned with waterfalls and offering trekking trails through the Valli Cupe canyon.

SICILY AND SARDINIA

Sicily and Sardinia provide unforgettable walking opportunities through their unique topographies. Hike a volcano in Sicily, with the mother of them all being Mt Etna. There are also many lesser volcanoes along the Aeolian Islands, from extinct Volcano, where you can descend to the crater floor, to a three-hour climb to the summit of still-active Stromboli to see it exploding against the night sky. From Etna, you can also trek across into the Madonie park or, on Sicily's northwest coast, track the shoreline in the Riserva Naturale dello Zingaro.

Sardinia's granite peaks offer more challenging hikes. The Golfo di Orosei e del Gennargentu park offers a network of ancient shepherd trails along the Supramonte plateau, incorporating the prehistoric site of Tiscali and the Gola Su Gorropu canyon, requiring a guide and a little rock climbing.



ITALY BY PASSION

RELIGION

Almost 80% of Italians identify as Catholics, yet only around 15% regularly attend Sunday Mass. Recent church scandals have Italians feeling increasingly cynical of the Vatican's moral authority, while shifting attitudes on issues such as gay marriage and abortion see many at odds with official church doctrine. Still, crucifixes continue to adorn state buildings and classrooms, even if they're more often considered as 'cultural' and not religious artefacts. The Church continues to exert considerable influence on public policy and political parties, especially those of the center- and far-right. The clergy are treated with much respect, however. And the Churches and Basilicas around Italy are a worthy source of architectural, artistic, monumental, and historic pride. Menus serve seafood most Fridays and particular on Good Friday. Aside from religious beliefs, Italians are a highly superstitious bunch. Don't dare make a toast with water or without looking into the eyes of each person as you clink glasses. Superstitious beliefs are especially strong in Italy's south. Here corni (horn-shaped charms) adorn everything from necklines to rear-view mirrors to ward off the malocchio (evil eye) and devotion to local saints takes on an almost cultish edge. Every year in Naples, thousands cram into the Duomo to witness the blood of San Gennaro miraculously liquefy inside a phial. When the blood liquefies, the city breathes a sigh of relief – it symbolizes another year safe from disaster. When it didn't in 1944, Mt Vesuvius erupted, and when it failed again in 1980 an earthquake struck the city that year. Coincidence? Perhaps. But even the most cynical Neapolitan would rather San Gennaro perform his magic trick … just in case.

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU KNOW…

Italy is famous for its bureaucracy. And not in a good way. As a tourist, you likely won't have to worry about navigating the infamous and torturous routes of getting an official procedure completed. Seemingly simple court cases can take decades, getting a Permesso di Soggiorno (a residency permit) can be the stuff of nightmares for foreigners. But there is a way – particularly if you know someone either personally or through a series of connections. We're not talking bribes (although they surely happen too), just favors – often with nothing expected in return, safe in the knowledge that what goes around, comes around. Locals will often have a set price for dinner at a restaurant they frequent on a weekly basis. Order a simple plate of pasta or the Bistecca, 20 euro a head with wine. In cash, of course. If you walk in off the street as a stranger, staff will certainly be friendly, just don't expect to always receive the best prices and super special treatment – that's saved for friends, family and regulars who've 'earned' it – and in the land where tipping is not mandatory, why shouldn't it be?

LA BELLA FIGURA

As much as we can stress the differences between each region in Italy, there are still some things that unite Italians. A love of family and reverence for their mamma. Passion for good, wholesome food (eavesdrop on roadworkers chatting away as they are working and chances are they'll be talking about food!) and particularly pasta. Dedication to their annual leave each August when almost everyone shuts up shop and heads to the hills or the sea. A strong belief that cappuccino is a breakfast drink and should not be consumed after around 11 am. And the importance of making a bella figura (basically, cut a fine figure or make a good impression). It's not all about fashion though. Yes, there are many (many!) stylish Italians but there are also many who couldn't care less about the latest trends. La bella figura also means making a good impression in the sense of creating or upholding a positive reputation, doing something nice and well. As a national obsession, la bella figura gives Italy its undeniable edge in design, cuisine, art and architecture. It's opposite? Una brutta figura – the ultimate offence.

CALCIO

Catholicism may be the official faith, but for many Italians, their true religion is likely to be calcio (football or, soccer). On any given weekend from September to May, the tifosi (football fans) will be at the stadium, glued to the TV, or checking the score on their cell phones. Even in coffee shops, pubs, pizzerias and some more casual (but also not so casual) eateries, don't be surprised to find a big screen showing the big match. For truly important clashes, mega-screens will be set up in piazzas for the locals to come together and watch the game. Like politics and fashion, football is in the very DNA of Italian culture. Indeed, they sometimes even converge. Silvio Berlusconi first found fame as the owner of AC Milan and cleverly named his political party after a well-worn football chant. Fashion royalty Dolce & Gabbana declared football players 'the new male icons', using five of Italy's hottest on-field stars to launch its 2010 underwear collection. Nothing quite stirs Italian blood like a good (or a bad) game. For particularly rivalrous clubs, police will form a barricade around the entrance to bus in and out the opposing team's fans, complete with police escort through the city. Yet, the same game that divides also unites. You might be a Lazio Loathing, AS Roma supporter on any given day, but when the national Azzurri (the Blues) are in the World Cup, you are nothing but a Blues-blooded italiano.

OPERA

Italy's opera legacy remains a source of pride. After all, not only did Italians invent the art form, but some of the greatest composers and compositions hail from these lands. Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868) transformed Pierre Beaumarchais' Le Barbier de Séville (The Barber of Seville) into one of the greatest comedic operas. Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) produced the epic Aida, while Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) delivered staples such as Tosca, Madama Butterfly and Turandot. Lyrical, intense and dramatic – it's only natural that opera bears the 'Made in Italy' label. Italian opera houses are architectural marvels in themselves. La Scala, the Arena di Verona, La Fenice in Venice, the Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino in Florence … these are all truly impressive. But the operatic culture is so pervasive that even a performance in a smaller theatre or church can be a hauntingly beautiful experience. Feel free to ask Arno Travel about the best big performances or even the more small-scale events for a cultural immersion you'll sing the praises of.

ITALY WITH CHILDREN

The country offers few amenities specifically for little ones, but with a little planning, an amazing time can be had. Kids are hardly going to be thrilled by an itinerary of archaeological sites, museums and hilltop towns. There are a range of children's books and activity books about the historic sites that can help bring these places to life, exposing them as the setting for heroic battles, mythical creatures or a blockbuster apocalypse. Our tips are not to over-book your schedule, schedule naps if necessary, and alternate museum visits with plenty of gelato stops. Perhaps stay in a place with a swimming pool (not as common as you may think!). Book tickets for the many water parks, aquariums, and zoos. In cities, consider booking a tour guide able to bring the history of the sites to life (ask Arno Travel about our best guides for kids!). Italy also has many parks with play equipment, but they aren't always so easy to find. Indeed, some are inside walled gardens that only locals would know about so do be sure to ask around. Discounted admission for children is available at most Italian tourist attractions, though age limits can vary. Most government-run museums and archaeological sites offer free entry to EU citizens under the age of 18, though some staff may extend this discount to all under 18s, despite the official 'EU-only' policy.

HIGHLIGHTS

HERCULANEUM
Smaller than nearby Pompeii, Herculaneum is easier to visit in a shorter time. It's also better preserved, complete with carbonized furniture.

COLOSSEUM
Here, the imagination runs wild with images of fearless gladiators and wild beasts in the Roman Empire's biggest, mightiest stadium. Book a guide to truly bring this space to life and hear about the most outrageous tales.

MEDIEVAL TUSCAN TOWNS
Climb a tower, catch a medieval horse race, or chase imaginary dragons down twisting alleys in storybook towns like Siena and San Gimignano. And don't forget to try the world-champion gelato!

CASTEL DEL MONTE
This curious, octagonal 13th-century castle in Puglia is home to Europe's very first flush toilet.

OSTIA ANTICA
Mosaic mermaids and sea monsters, and frescoed advertising conjure up the age of togas at Rome's ancient port.

MUSEO NAZIONALE DELLA SCIENZA E DELLA TECNOLOGIA
On rainy days, this Museo in Milan is Italy's best science and technology museum for budding inventors.

MUSEO NAZIONALE DEL CINEMA
Multimedia displays and movie memorabilia make this Turin museum a winner for kids and adults alike.

EXPLORA
Rome's children's museum expands minds with hands-on exhibitions spanning bioscience, society and media.

CASA DEL CIOCCOLATO PERUGINA
Tour the Baci Perugina chocolate factory in Perugia for a sweet day in Umbria.

MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO DELL'ALTO ADIGE
Drop in to see Iceman Ötzi, Europe's oldest natural human mummy, in Bolzano.

SARDINIA
Go dolphin spotting in the Golfo Aranci, horseback riding along La Giara di Gesturi, or tackle water sports on some of Italy's top beaches.

AEOLIAN ISLANDS
Seven tiny volcanic islands off Sicily with everything from spewing lava to black-sand beaches.

THE DOLOMITES
Head to Alto Adige's Alpe di Siusi and Kronplatz for abundant blue and red runs, or cycle through orchards and farmland on a Dolomiti di Brenta Bike tour.

SAILING IN VENICE
Glide across Venetian waters on a customized sailing tour or learn to row standing up like a verified gondolier.

CATACOMBE DEI CAPPUCCINI
The Catacombe dei Cappuccini are creepy Palermo catacombs packed with actual bodies in their Sunday finest. Not for the very young.

NAPOLI SOTTERRANEA
A secret trap door and war-time hideouts make this guided tour of underground Naples truly gripping.

ALBEROBELLO
Imagination runs riot in this World Heritage-listed town in Puglia, famous for its trulli (whitewashed circular dwellings with cone-shaped roofs).

WHEN IS BEST WITH KIDS?

When to Go
The best times to visit Italy with young travel companions are generally April to June and in September – temperatures are mild to warm, with most hotels and restaurants in coastal holiday areas open. Tourist numbers are manageable, meaning shorter queues and less-irritable little ones. In July and August, prices rise and the country broils. Many Italians head to the cooler coasts or mild mountains meaning a lot of places are closed. In the Alps, winters are long and perfect for skiing, with many resorts offering family-tailored activities. Elsewhere, winters range from dull and rainy (Milan) to relatively mild (Rome and further south). Sicily has long summers and short winters, making it a sound choice for coastal family fun.

Where to Stay
Hotels, Luxury Resorts and Villas are good options for families, offering multibed rooms, guest kitchens, lounge facilities and, in many cases, washing machines. In peak summer (July and August), they are great for offering fresh air, space and extra perks like having animals or a swimming pool. Book accommodation in advance and be sure to check that any hotels you book (or we book on your behalf with the Arno Travel booking service) can accommodate a cot or bed for kids.

How to Get Around
Arrange car rental before leaving home. Car seats for infants and children are available from most car-rental agencies but should be booked in advance. Driving and parking in the big cities can be highly stressful, so consider using public transport into and within large urban areas. Public transport discounts are available for children (usually aged under 12). Intercity trains and buses are safe, convenient, and relatively inexpensive. To save money on high-speed Freccia and Italo trains, contact your Travel Agent or get in touch with Arno Travel. Large car ferries connect the mainland with Sicily and Sardinia, while smaller ferries and hydrofoils run to other islands. Many large ferries travel overnight, in which case a cabin is worthwhile.

ITALY BY REGION

ROME

Legend has it that Rome was founded on the Palatino (Palatine Hill) by Romulus, twin brother of Remus. The twins had been abandoned as babies and raised by a shewolf, hence the iconic symbol of Rome (and of Siena, incidentally) of the babies being fed by a wolf. Historians proffer a more prosaic version of events, involving Romulus becoming the first king of Rome on 21 April 753 BC and the city comprising Etruscan, Latin and Sabine settlements on the Palatino, Esquiline and Quirinale hills. Following the fall of Tarquin the Proud, the last of Rome's seven Etruscan kings, the Roman Republic was founded in 509 BC. From modest beginnings, it spread to become the dominant Western superpower until internal rivalries led to civil war. Julius Caesar, the last of the Republic's consuls, was assassinated in 44 BC, leaving Mark Antony and Octavian to fight for top job. Octavian prevailed and, with the blessing of the Senate, became Augustus, the first Roman emperor. Augustus ruled well, with the city enjoying a period of political stability and unparalleled artistic achievement – a golden age the Romans pined for as the Romans endured the depravities of Augustus' successors Tiberius, Caligula and Nero. A huge fire reduced Rome to ashes in AD 64. But the city bounced back and by AD 100, its population reached 1.5 million to become the undisputed Caput Mundi. It wouldn't last though. Indeed, when Constantine moved his power base to Byzantium in 330, Rome's glory days were numbered. In 476, the last emperor of the Western Roman Empire, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed.

By the 6th century, Rome was not in a good way. In desperate need of a leader, the Church stepped in. Christianity had been spreading since the 1st century AD thanks to the underground efforts of Apostles Peter and Paul. Under Constantine, the faith received official recognition. Then in late-6th century, Pope Gregory I managed to strengthen the Church's grip over the city, laying the foundations for its later role as capital of the Catholic world. The medieval period was a dark age, marked by almost continuous fighting. The city was reduced to a semi-deserted battlefield as the powerful Colonna and Orsini families fought for supremacy whilst plague, famine and flooding of the Tiber befell the local population. Today, choosing which impressive and historic monuments, galleries and museums to visit in Rome can be overwhelming. The Colosseum is an obvious choice. For baroque art, head to the Museo e Galleria Borghese and Piazza Navona. Nearby is the Pantheon, the best preserved of Rome's ancient monuments. The city's finest ancient art is found in the Museo Nazionale Romano: Palazzo Massimo alle Terme and the Capitoline Museums on Piazza del Campidoglio. Within walking distance are ancient ruins littered over the atmospheric Palatino (Palatine Hill). The city can also be explored underground at the Catacombs. If your aim is to get off the beaten path, don't go to the Via Appia Antica (or Appian Way), an evocative walkway out of the city and lined with ancient stones treaded by pilgrims for centuries, making this one of the oldest roads in Rome. Legend has it that tossing a coin over your shoulder into the Trevi Fountain will ensure your return to this city. A small price to pay to come back to Roma Caput Mundi.

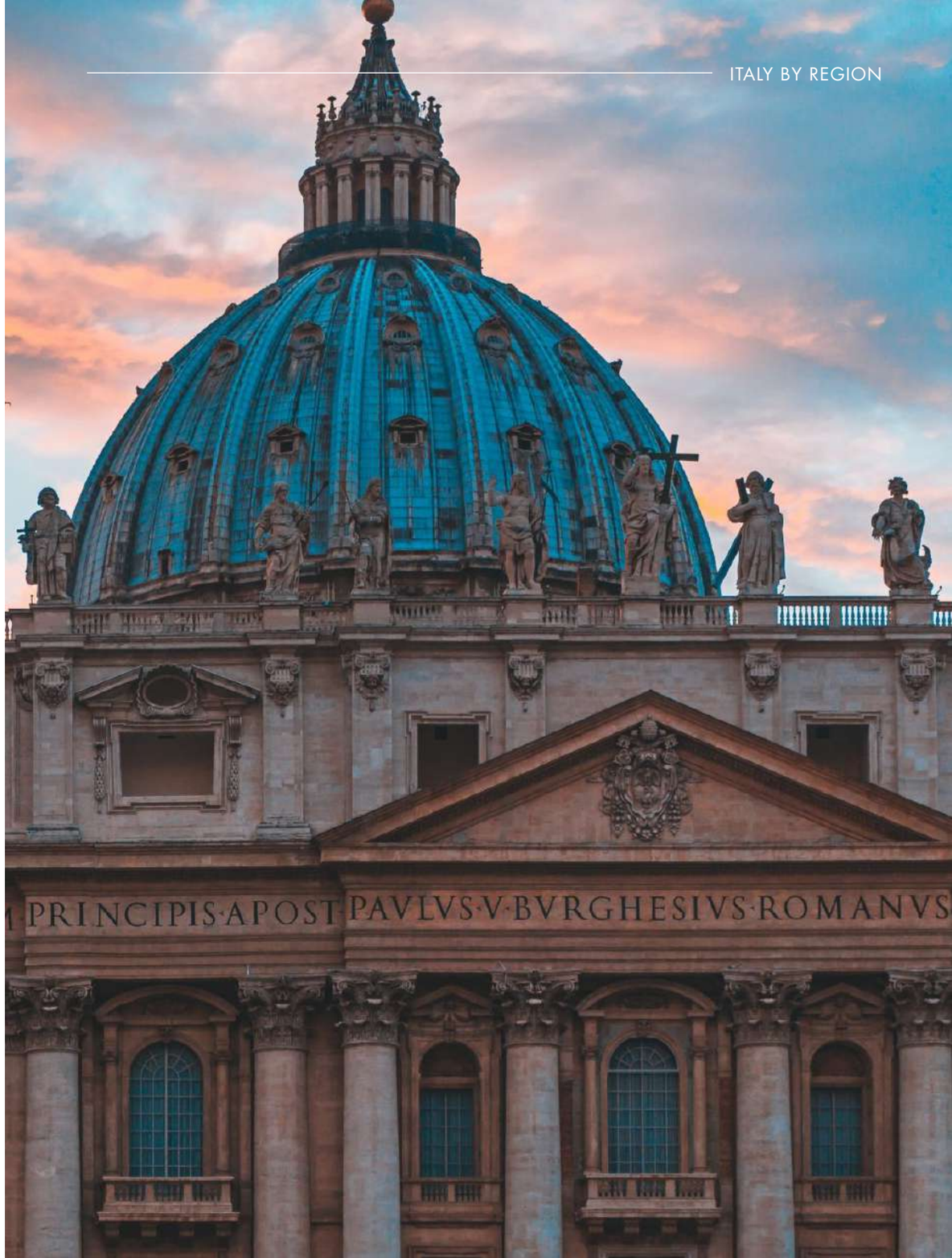
THE VATICAN

Not technically part of Italy, we'll nonetheless go by the "When in Rome …" and add it in. This landlocked ecclesiastical state is an enclave and seat of the Roman Catholic Church. The history of this nation-state (the smallest in the world) began with the construction of a Basilica over St. Peter's tomb in the 4th century A.D. The area developed into a popular pilgrimage site and commercial district, yet it was abandoned in 1309 when the papal court moved to France. Upon its return in 1377, famous landmarks such the Apostolic Palace, the Sistine Chapel (originally built in 1483 for – and named after – Pope Sixtus IV) and the new St. Peter's Basilica were erected within the city limits. Vatican City took on its current guise as a sovereign nation with the signing of the Lateran Pacts in 1929.

Over the centuries, the Catholic Church and the papacy have amassed a patrimony of artworks beyond parallel. Pope Julius II founded the Vatican Museums in the early 16th century to be open to the public, displaying works from the immense collection swelled throughout the centuries, including several of the most renowned Roman sculptures and most important masterpieces of Renaissance art in the world. The museums contain roughly 70,000 works, yet only ('only') 20,000 are on display.

The Sistine Chapel, with its ceiling and altar wall decorated by Michelangelo, and the Stanze di Raffaello are on the visitor route through the Vatican Museums. There are 54 galleries in total, with the Sistine Chapel being the last sala within the Museum.

Apart from the wall frescoes and flooring, little remains of the original décor of the Sistine Chapel, which was sacrificed to make way for Michelangelo's two masterpieces. First to be completed was the ceiling, commissioned by Pope Julius II and painted between 1508 and 1512. Second came the Giudizio Universale (The Last Judgment), completed almost 30 years later in 1541. Both were controversial works influenced by the political ambitions of the Popes who commissioned them. The ceiling came as part of Julius II's drive to transform Rome into the Church's showcase capital, while Pope Paul III intended the Giudizio Universale to serve as a warning to Catholics to toe the line during the Reformation in Europe. Despite regarding himself as a sculptor and having little experience in painting frescoes, Julius persisted and commissioned Michelangelo for a fee of 3000 ducats (approximately €1.5 to €2 million) in 1508. Michelangelo rejected Julius' vision to create a work based on the 12 apostles and instead devised a much more complex plan centered on stories from the book of Genesis. For the Giudizio Universale on the 200-square-metre west wall, Michelangelo produced a highly charged depiction of Christ's second coming. Commissioned by Pope Clement VII and encouraged by his successor Paul III, it was controversial from the start. Critics were outraged when Michelangelo destroyed two Perugino frescoes when preparing the wall. When it was unveiled in 1541, its mass of 391 predominantly naked bodies provoked scandal. Pope Pius IV later had Daniele da Volterra cover 41 nudes, earning the artist the nickname il braghettone (the breeches-maker).



LIGURIA AND CINQUE TERRE

The Italian Riviera. For any inhabitants of Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore – the five villages of the Cinque Terre in the region of Liguria – caught sinning, penance involved a lengthy and arduous hike up the steep cliffs to the local village sanctuary to plead for forgiveness. Today, scaling the same trails, through terraced vineyards and hillsides smothered in macchia (shrubbery) and backdropped by heavenly views, it's hard to think of a more benign punishment.

Climb above the crowds on Cinque Terre's terraced cliffs and you might have to pinch yourself to check you're still in the 22nd century. Rooted in antiquity and bereft of modern interferences, these five historic fishing villages have embellished the Ligurian coastline with subtle touches of manmade beauty and a fascinating medieval heritage. Cinque Terre's cleverly cultivated cliff terraces are so old no-one truly knows who fitted the hundreds of kilometers of dry-stone walls that hold them in place.

This is a true paradise for hikers and mountain bikers. The region's main highway, the famed Sentiero Azzurro (Blue Trail), is a sinuous footpath that contours Cinque Terre's precipitous coastline. For over a millennium, it has guided farmers, pilgrims, invasion-thwarters, and happy wanderers. Nowadays, tourists can drink in its exquisite views along this walk. But there is also a train connecting the villages for anyone wanting a less strenuous stretch.

The medieval village of Riomaggiore is perhaps the most famous, courtesy of its position at the start of the Sentiero Azzurro. Grapes grow abundantly on Cinque Terre's terraced plots, especially around the village of Manarola, with the area's signature wine being the sweet white Sciacchetrà, a blend of Bosco, Albarola and Vermentino grapes best sampled with cheese or desserts. Guarding the best natural harbor in the five towns, Vernazza is a maze of tightly clustered streets and lanes.

If the Cinque Terre were ever to pick up an honorary sixth member, Porto Venere would surely be it. Perched on the Gulf of Poets' western promontory, the village's sinuous seven- and eight-story harbor-front houses form an almost impregnable citadel around the brawny Castello Doria. The Romans built Portus Veneris as a base en route from Gaul to Spain, and in later years the Byzantines, Lombards, Genovese and Napoleon all passed through here. Cinque Terre's marathon-length Sentiero Rosso (Red trail) to Levanto starts here, just behind the Castle.

PIEDMONT

Italy's second-largest region is arguably its most elegant: a purveyor of Slow Food and fine wine, regal palazzi and an atmosphere that is superficially more français than italiano. But dig deeper and you'll discover that Piedmont has 'Made in Italy' stamped all over it. Emerging from the chaos of the Austrian wars, the unification movement first exploded here in the 1850s, when the noble House of Savoy provided the nascent nation with its first prime minister and its dynastic royal family.

Most Piedmont journeys start in grandiose Turin, famous for football and Fiats. But beyond the car factories, Piedmont is also (but isn't everywhere in Italy?) notable for its food – everything from Arborio rice to white truffles – and pastoral landscapes not unlike nearby Tuscany. The region's smaller towns were once feuding fiefdoms that bickered over trade and religion. Traditionally, Asti and Alba stand tallest in the culinary stakes, while understated Cuneo uses its long-standing chocolate obsession to help fuel outdoor adventures in the nearby Maritime Alps.

TURIN

Occupied since BC times, today's Turin has elegant boulevards reminiscent of Paris with echoes of Vienna in its art nouveau cafes. The innovative Torinese gave the world its first saleable hard chocolate, perpetuated one of its greatest mysteries (the Holy Shroud), popularized a best-selling car (the Fiat) and inspired the black-and-white stripes of one of the planet's most iconic football teams (Juventus). But more important is Turin's role as instigator of the modern Italian state arising from Italian unification. Turin even briefly served as Italy's first capital and donated its monarchy – the venerable House of Savoy – to the newly-unified Italian nation in 1861. More recently, the 2006 Winter Olympics sparked an urban revival in the city, which has spread to its culture and, most deliciously, its cuisine.

Whether the ancient city of Taurisia began as a Celtic or Ligurian settlement is unknown. In any case, it was destroyed by Hannibal in 218 BC. The Roman colony of Augusta Taurinorum was established here almost two centuries later. Then in succeeding years, the Goths, Lombards and Franks tramped through the city. In 1563, the Savoys abandoned their old capital of Chambéry (now in France) to set up court in Turin, which shared the dynasty's fortunes thereafter. The Savoys annexed Sardinia in 1720. Napoleon virtually put an end to their power when he occupied Turin in 1798. Turin was occupied by Austria and Russia before Vittorio Emanuele I restored the House of Savoy and re-entered Turin in 1814. Nevertheless, Austria remained the true power throughout northern Italy until the Risorgimento in 1861, when Turin became the nation's inaugural capital. Its capital status lasted only until 1864, yet the parliament had already moved to Florence by the time full-sized chambers were completed. Turin adapted quickly to its loss of political significance, becoming a hub of industrial production during the early-20th century. Giants such as Fiat lured hundreds of thousands of impoverished southern Italians to Turin, housing them in vast company-built and -owned suburbs. Fiat's owners, the Agnelli family (who also happen to own the Juventus football club, Turin's local newspaper and a large chunk of the national daily rag Corriere della Sera), remain one of Italy's most powerful establishment forces. Fiat's fortunes declined later in the 20th century, however, only to be revived around a decade ago. The highly successful 2006 Winter Olympics were a turning point for the city. The Olympics not only ushered in a building boom, including a brand-new metro system, but also transformed Turin from a staid industrial center into a vibrant metropolis.

Many are the architectural sites to behold, thanks in part to the Savoy princes having quite the penchant for extravagant royal palaces. While Turin's Palazzo Madama and Palazzo Reale are striking enough, they barely hold a candle to Italy's mini-Versailles, the Reggia di Venaria Reale. In fact, Duke Carlo Emanuele II's oversized hunting lodge is one of the largest royal residences in Europe, its mammoth 200-million-euro restoration involving the preservation of 1022 square meters of frescoes and 139,400 square meters of stucco and plasterworks.

LOMBARDY

Milan is a futuristic and fast-paced metropolis with New World qualities: ambition, aspiration, and a highly individualistic streak. The Milanese love beautiful, luxurious things, seeing Italian fashion and design maintain their esteemed global position. Many consider Milan to be quite cold and dull. But this superficial lack of charm disguises a city of ancient roots and many treasures, that, unlike in the rest of Italy, you'll often get to experience without the queues. So, while the Milanese get on with business, feel free to partake in shopping, browsing edgy contemporary galleries or loading up a plate with local delicacies while downing an expertly mixed negroni cocktail.

Celtic tribes settled along the Po river in the 7th century BC, and the area encompassing modern-day Milan has remained inhabited since. In AD 313, Emperor Constantine made his momentous edict granting Christians freedom of worship here. The city had already replaced Rome as the capital of the empire in 286, a role it kept until 402. A comune (town council) was formed by all social classes in the 11th century and, from the mid-13th century, government passed to a succession of dynasties – the Torrianis, Viscontis and, finally, the Sforzas. It fell under Spanish rule in 1525 and Austrian rule in 1713 before becoming part of the nascent Kingdom of Italy in 1860.

Benito Mussolini, one-time editor of the socialist newspaper Avanti!, founded the Fascist Party in Milan in 1919. Mussolini joined Germany in WWII in 1940. By early 1945, Allied bombings had destroyed much of central Milan. And it was here he was eventually strung up by partisans after he seeking to escape to Switzerland in the same year.

At the vanguard of two 20th-century economic booms, Milan cemented its role as Italy's financial and industrial capital. Immigrants poured in from the south and were later joined by others from China, Africa, Latin America, India and Eastern Europe, making for one of the least homogenous cities in Italy. Culturally, the city was the epicenter of early Italian film production, and in the 1980s and '90s it ruled the world as the capital of design innovation and production. Milan's self-made big shot and media mogul, Silvio Berlusconi, turned to politics in the 1990s and was then elected prime minister three times.

In the 1950s, Florence's fashion houses were turning away from only made-to-measure designs and presenting seasonal collections to a select public, perhaps inspiring Milan to host Italy's first Fashion Week in 1958. With its ready factories, cosmopolitan workforce and long-established media presence, Milan created ready-to-wear fashion for global markets. Recognizing the enormous potential of mass markets, designers such as Armani, Missoni and Versace began creating and following trends, selling their 'image' through advertising and promotion. In the 1980s, Armani's power suits gave rise to new unisex fashions, Dolce & Gabbana became a byword for Italian sex appeal and Miuccia Prada transformed her father's ailing luxury luggage business by introducing democratic, durable totes and backpacks in radical new fabrics (think waterproof Pocono, silk faille and parachute nylon).

Milan's rise to global fashion prominence was not by chance. Thanks to its geographic position, the city had historically strong links with European markets. It was also Italy's capital of finance, advertising, television and publishing, with both Vogue and Amica magazines based there. What's more, Milan had long boasted a fashion industry based around the historic textile and silk production of upper Lombardy. And, with the city's postwar focus on trade fairs and special events, it provided a natural marketplace for the exchange of goods and ideas. As a result, by 2011, Milan emerged as Italy's greatest (and the world's fourth biggest) fashion exporter. Six of the world's top 10 fashion houses are Italian, and four of those are based in Milan. The Quadrilatero d'Oro, that 'Golden Quadrangle, is now dominated by more than 500 fashion outlets in an area barely 6000 square meters – a tourist drawcard in its own right. This quaintly cobbled parallelogram of streets may have always been synonymous with elegance and money (Via Monte Napoleone was where Napoleon's government managed loans), but the quad's legendary fashion status belongs firmly to Milan's postwar reinvention. During the boom years of the 1950s, the city's fashion houses established ateliers in the area bounded by Via Monte Napoleone, Via Sant'Andrea, Via della Spiga and Via Alessandro Manzoni and by the 1960s, Milan had outflanked Florence and Rome to become the country's haute couture capital. Nowadays, the world's top designers unveil their women's collections in February/March and September/October, while men's fashion hits the runways in January and June/July.

But Lombardy is not all big city. Nestled in the shadow of the Rhaetian Alps, dazzling Lago di Como is the most spectacular of the Lombard bodies of water, its Liberty-style villas home to movie moguls, fashion royalty and Arab sheikhs. Surrounded on all sides by lush greenery, the lake's drawcards include the gardens of Villa Melzi d'Eril, Villa Carlotta and Villa Balbianello, which blush pink with camellias, azaleas and rhododendrons in April and May.

VALLE D'AOSTA

Italy's smallest and least populous region, Valle d'Aosta (or, Aosta Valley) is also Italy's most precipitous. This picture-perfect valley is ringed by the icy peaks of some of Europe's highest natural skyscrapers – the Matterhorn, Mont Blanc, Monte Rosa and Gran Paradiso. Bordered by France and Switzerland and extending across the Western Alps, it has some of the best skiing facilities on the continent. Hitting the slopes is an international affair, with hair-raising descents into France, Switzerland or Piedmont from the A-list resorts of Courmayeur, Cervinia and Monterosa. The region's countryside then is dotted with medieval castles and fortresses, such as the 14th-century Castello Fénis and Castello di Verrès.

Valle d'Aosta cuisine is marked by simplicity and made with hearty ingredients such as potatoes, polenta, cheese, meat and rye bread. With PDO status, the Fontina cow's milk cheese originates here and is found in dishes such as the Soup à la Vâpeuleunèntse (Valpelline Soup). Also worth trying are Tomme de Gressoney and Seras. Fromadzo (Valdôtain for cheese) has been produced locally since the 15th century and also boasts PDO status. Other regional specialties are Motzetta (dried chamois meat), Vallée d'Aoste Lard d'Arnad (cured and brined fatback product with PDO status), Vallée d'Aoste Jambon de Bosses (a kind of PDO ham), dark rye bread, and honey. Order anything stewed or fried for a good time, even better if accompanied by a local wine. Notable are two whites – Blanc de Morgex et de La Salle and Chaudelune – from Morgex, the red blend of Enfer d'Arvier from from Arvier and one from Gamay.

VENETO

Scan the Veneto coastline, and you might spot signs of modern life: beach resorts, malls and traffic. But look closer and you'll also spy stately villas on the Brenta Riviera, and newly restored masterpieces: Titians and Veroneses in Venice, Palladios and Tiepolos in Vicenza, and Giottos in Padua. This calls for a toast with local prosecco (sparkling wine) or cult wines from Valpolicella and Soave, raising your glass to La Bella Vita.

From the 5th to 8th centuries AD, the Huns, Goths and sundry barbarians repeatedly sacked Roman towns along Veneto's Adriatic coast. We now turn our attention to …

VENICE

In 726, the people of Venice elected their first Doge, whose successors would lead the city for more than 1000 years. Next, Venice shored up its business interests. The city accepted a Frankish commission of 84,000 silver marks to join the Crusades, even as it continued trading with Muslim leaders from Syria to Spain. When the balance wasn't forthcoming from the Franks, Venice claimed Constantinople 'for Christendom' … but sent ships loaded with booty home, instead of onward to Jerusalem. After Venice was decimated by plague, Genoa tried to take over the city in 1380. But Venice prevailed, controlling the Adriatic and a backyard that stretched from Dalmatia to Bergamo.

As the Age of Exploration began, Venice lost its monopoly over seafaring trade routes. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the Venetian territory of Morea (in Greece) in 1499 gave the Turks control over Adriatic Sea access. The Genovese opened transatlantic trade routes following Columbus' 1492 discovery of the Americas, and Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama rounded Africa's Cape of Good Hope in 1498.

Once it could no longer rule the seas, Venice changed tack and began conquering Europe by charm. Venetian art was incredibly daring, bringing sensuous color and sly social commentary even to religious subjects. By the end of the 16th century, Venice was known across Europe for its painting, catchy music and 12,000 registered prostitutes.

Shakespeare set Othello in Venice. The Merchant of Venice mentions the Rialto Market area several times. There is even reference to gondolas and 'the tranect', which could refer to the traghetto ferry that transported people from Venice to the mainland. Much of the city remains unchanged today. Indeed, the Palazzo Ducale, with its magnificent Gothic façades and huge council hall, is likely what Shakespeare envisaged as the setting for the final courtroom scene in The Merchant of Venice, while the two bronze figures on top of the Torre dell'Orologio clock tower in Piazza San Marco are known as 'i Mori', or 'the Moors', which is a key reference in Othello. For something less dramatic, we at Arno Travel might recommend a stroll to the Rialto Bridge (which was started in 1588 and completed just a few years before Othello was penned).

Venetian reputations did nothing to prevent Napoleon from claiming the city in 1797 and looting it of its art. By 1817, one-quarter of Venice's population was destitute. When Venice rallied to resist the Austrian occupation in 1848–49, a blockade left it wracked by cholera and short on food. Venetian rebels lost the fight but not the war: they became early martyrs to the cause of Italian independence, and in 1866, Venice joined the independent Kingdom of Italy. The once-glamorous empire gradually took on an industrious workaday aspect, with factories springing up on Giudecca and a roadway from the mainland built by Mussolini.

Italian partisans joined Allied troops to wrest Veneto from Fascist control, but the tragedy of war and mass deportation of Venice's Jewish population in 1942–44 shook Venice to its moorings. Postwar, many Venetians left for Milan and other centers of industry.

On November 4, 1966, disaster struck: record floods poured into 16,000 Venetian homes, stranding residents in the wreckage of 1200 years of civilization. But Venice's cosmopolitan charm was a saving grace: assistance from admirers poured in (from Mexico to Australia, from millionaires to pensioners) and UNESCO coordinated some 27 international charities to redress the ravages of the flood.

Today, Venice, Gondoliers call out their warning song before going around canal bends. 250-year-old cafes serve fresh espresso. Tourists bustle amongst the locals through the Rialto market stalls. Always, everywhere, surrounded by water. The city remains relevant and realistic, a global launch pad for daring art and film, ingenious crafts, opera premieres and music revivals, even as it seeks sustainable solutions to rising water levels.

To whoever had the audacity to build a city of marble palaces on a lagoon we owe thanks for the vivid paintings, baroque music, modern opera, spice-route cuisine, bohemian-chic fashions, and a Grand Canal's worth of spritz – the signature prosecco/Aperol cocktail. Today, cutting-edge architects and billionaire benefactors are spicing up the art scene, musicians play 18th-century instruments and backstreet osterie are winning a Slow Food following. If you fancy a bit of shopping, find unique pieces by simply meandering through the key artisan areas of San Polo around Calle dei Saoneri, Santa Croce around Calle Lunga and Calle del Tentor, San Marco along Frezzeria, Dorsoduro around the Peggy Guggenheim and of course, Murano.

It is on this island that Venetians have been working in crystal and glass since the 10th century. Trade secrets were so closely guarded that any glass worker who left the city (and for some time, even left Murano!) was considered guilty of treason. Glassblowers were veritable superstars of their time. Today, along Murano's Fondamenta dei Vetrai, centuries of tradition are upheld by Davide Penso, Nason Moretti, and Marina and Susanna Sent. Arno Travel can arrange for a private boat to take you to Murano and even an exclusive visit to one of the best glassmaker's workshops.

But Venice is not all glass. Embossing and marbling paper began in the 14th century as part of Venice's burgeoning publishing industry. But these bookbinding techniques and ebru (Turkish marbled paper) endpapers have taken on lives of their own. You can still watch a Heidelberg press in action at Venezia Stampa.

Completing the classic Venetian 'glass-paper-scissors' is the tradition of fabrics. Venetian lace was a fashion must for centuries, as Burano's Lace Museum attests. But the modern master of Venetian textiles is Fortuny, whose showroom on Giudecca features fabrics created using top secret techniques.

VERONA

Verona was not thought of as a city of romance before Romeo and Juliet – in fact, not many people would have heard of it as it was very much in the shadow of Venice at that time. We don't know whether Romeo and Juliet existed, although Italian poet Dante did mention two feuding families, called the Montecchi and the Capuleti. The famous balcony where Romeo is said to have declared his love to Juliet is close to Verona's main promenade – although since the balcony was apparently added to a suitably old house in 1936, it's unlikely to be the original! An iconic site which can't be missed in Verona is Juliet's tomb. People go there to pay tribute to Juliet and Shakespeare – even Dickens stopped by.

PADUA

The University of Padua was one of the first in the world. In the 1500s, the city was very well known as a center of learning throughout Europe – Galileo (of telescope fame) and Casanova (of a, um, different fame). It was even used as the backdrop of Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew.

There is a marvelous wooden anatomical amphitheater in the Medical School, built in the 16th century as a place for students to dissect humans and animals. The life of the university runs through the city. It's lovely to stroll through the porticoed walkways that run under the houses, and into the Prato della Valle, one of the main city squares.

Often regarded as just plain 'dark', the Italian Middle Ages had an artistic brilliance that it would be remiss to ignore. Perhaps it was the sparkling hand-cut mosaic of Ravenna's Byzantine basilicas that provided the guiding light, but something inspired Giotto di Bondone to leap out of the shadows with his daring naturalistic frescoes in Padua's Cappella degli Scrovegni and the Basilica di San Francesco in Assisi. He gave the world a new artistic language and then it was just a short step to Masaccio's Trinity and the dawning light of the Renaissance.

The city also has an extraordinary religious heritage and an accompanying artistic patrimony. Visit Basilica di Sant'Antonio di Padova, one of just eight international shrines recognized by the Holy See and a renowned place of pilgrimage. Founded in 1545, the Orto Botanico di Padova is the world's oldest academic botanical gardens still in its original location. Founded by the Venetian Republic to grow medicinal plants, the gardens have long been connected to the University and used in the study of botany, medicine, pharmacology, ecology, and a plethora of other disciplines. Today, the beautiful gardens are a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Then there is the Brenta Canal, a scenic waterway linking Padua with Venice along the coast. Flanking the banks of the canal is the "Brenta Riviera", famed for sprawling Venetian Villas and stunning countryside, once the summer playgrounds of Venetian noblility. The canal is best travelled by Burchiello, once the traditional wooden barge used by the well-to-do to reach their villas but are today modern, comfortable vessels that cruise along the canal. A full-day mini-cruise will take you all the way to Venice and back. Many cruises even include stops and guided tours of certain villas along the Riviera. Feel free to ask Arno Travel to help with making the arrangements, including any dinner plans for the evenings.

EMILIA ROMAGNA

Since ancient times, the verdant plains of the region's Po river valley underlined by exceptionally fertile soil have resulted in world-class agricultural riches – not to mention the financial boost that comes from it. Think lush Balsamic vinegar from Modena, the sharp Parmigiano Reggiano (Parmesan Cheese – the real deal!), delicately sweet yet salty Prosciutto Crudo (Parma ham). This is home to Bolognese sauce (Ragù alla Bolognese or just "Ragù") perhaps served with thick ribbons of fresh pasta or baked into delicious lasagne (but never served with spaghetti!). Away from the table, Emilia-Romagna produces everything lavish – think luxury cars, regal palazzi, fine Romanesque churches, prosperous towns, a sturdy industrial infrastructure but also a gigantic operatic legacy (Verdi and Pavarotti!) and a wealth of mosaics in Ravenna. The affluent micronation and Italy's other enclave of San Marino also lies on its border with Le Marche.

Between Modena and Bologna extends the "Motor Valley" where the world's finest luxury cars are produced – Ferraris and Lamborghinis. Motorheads flock to the Galleria in Maranello to obsess over the world's largest collection of Ferraris, including Formula 1 exhibits, a trajectory of mechanical evolution and a revolving feature of 40 of the landmark models. A second Ferrari museum, the Museo Casa Enzo Ferrari, has also opened in Modena. Situated 20 kilometers east of Modena in the village of Sant'Agata Bolognese is the Lamborghini Museum where you can visit the company factory where Lamborghinis are custom-made. Factory tours must be pre booked so ask Arno Travel to help you arrange a visit!

BOLOGNA

Don't let Bologna's elegance fool you into thinking its people aren't down-to-earth and hard-working. The city's colonnaded medieval grid delineates a modern city in the rich Po valley soundtracked by operas performed in regal theatres, fueled by some of Italy's greatest foods and finest restaurants. But Bologna isn't always so posh. There is also the edgy and educational side. Here is the world's oldest university, whose students fill graffiti-embellished piazzas to hang out and imbibe. The city is toned by medieval buildings in terracotta adorned with vast stretches of porticoes.

PARMA

Not to go on and on about the food, but how can we not when talking about Parma? Home to exquisite Prosciutto Crudo and crumbly aged Parmigiano Reggiano cheese, producer of amazing wines, peppered with art-nouveau cafés and architecturally dramatic opera houses (in the birthplace of Verdi) … One of Italy's most prosperous cities, Parma is more metropolitan than Modena yet not as rowdy as Bologna can be.

MODENA

Sing praise for Modena's balsamic vinegar, just don't miss the note. After all, this is also home to a great opera heritage. To work up an appetite, stroll through the 18th-century Palazzo dei Musei (Museums Palace) to peruse works by Tintoretto, Correggio and Bernini, visit the cathedral and climb the tour. Or simply wander through the charming streets, sit in one of the relaxed piazzas and just enjoy the atmosphere!

TUSCANY

Called Toscana in Italian, this region is the perfect microcosm. There are long stretches of sandy shores along its coastline for swimming and boating, snowy slopes for a weekend of skiing in winter, lush hilltops for trekking, the prettiest countryside, cities replete with some of the world's most astounding art and architecture, not to mention (or better yet, to talk about over and over!) the food, the wine, the spicy extra-virgin olive oil … Tuscany really does have it all. This is also home to some of the best fabric producers (in Prato), fashion houses (Ferragamo, Gucci, Pucci, Cavalli …), a heady history of leather production, jewelry-making (dating even back to Etruscan times!) and, of course, some great shopping! Here, you can dedicate your trip to visiting only World Heritage sites of the region – the cities of Florence, Pisa, San Gimignano, Siena and Pienza, to the Val d'Orcia landscape and the Medici Villas and Gardens. Along the way, visit vineyards, a frantoio (olive oil mill), a producer of world-class pecorino (sheep's milk) cheese, cured prosciutto or even a salumificio producing cured meat products from Cinta Senese, a domestic pig breed from the province of Siena.

FLORENCE

Home of the Renaissance, the place where banks were 'invented', home of Machiavelli, Michelangelo and the Medici. You don't need to throw a coin into any fountain to want to return to Florence over and over again. Surprisingly small, Florence (or, Firenze to locals) has much to see, thanks to its incredibly rich history, robust cuisine and genteel charm. Towers and palaces hark back to a medieval past with weird (truly weird) histories (ask your Arno Travel guide about the stone bull head on the side of the Duomo or the mummified relic of St. Antoninus!). One way to spot a Florentine is that they are always impeccably dressed and achingly stylish, thanks to the designer boutiques and artisan workshops that have produced garments that enriched the city since ancient times. We've established that Italians love their food and food culture, well Florence is no different – there's a buzzing café, restaurant and bar scene.

The most commonly accepted story about how Florence began credits Emperor Julius Caesar with founding Florentia around 59 BC, yet archaeological evidence suggests an earlier Etruscan village in Fiesole around 200 BC.

The merchant class had a stronghold over the city for eras. A century-long argy-bargy that broke out between two factions of the pro-papal Guelphs (Guelfi) and pro-imperial Ghibellines (Ghibellini) is still talked about to this day. As is the conflict between the Medici and their many rivals, not to mention the enduring rivalry between Florence and Siena and between Florence and Pisa.

You'll hear a lot about the Medici family. They ruled Florence and, later, Tuscany from 1434 to 1737, except for two brief intervals (from 1494 to 1512 and 1527 to 1530). During this time, they were great supporters of the arts, supporting names such as Alberti, Brunelleschi, Lorenzo Ghiberti, Donatello, Fra' Angelico and Fra' Filippo Lippi. It was under Lorenzo il Magnifico (1469–92) that the most glorious period of Florentine civilization and the Italian Renaissance came about, with his court turning Florence into Italy's flamboyant cultural capital. For a (thankfully) brief period, the family was driven out of Florence and fell under the control of Savonarola, a Dominican monk who led a puritanical republic, burning the city's wealth on his 'bonfire of vanities'. After falling from favor, he was tried as a heretic and executed in 1498.

Eventually, Florence became part of the Kingdom of Italy in 1860, even acting as the nation's capital until Rome could wrestle its powers from the Vatican to assume the mantle permanently in 1870.

The city was severely damaged during WWII then ravaged by floods in 1966. In 1993, the Mafia exploded a massive car bomb, destroying part of the Uffizi Gallery. But the city of today is a very walkable, pretty city with lots of cultural events from the ancient to the most modern (sometimes even juxtaposed), sprawling piazzas bordered by restaurants serving up local fare, delicious street food, bustling markets and so much more. Indeed, feel free to ask Arno Travel to help you pair down the list of things to do and see and to make bookings to make the best of your time.

LUCCA

This beautiful old city is just so delightful. Its ancient city walls embrace a rich history of handsome churches and excellent restaurants. Founded by the Etruscans, Lucca became a Roman colony in 180 BC and a free comune (self-governing municipality) during the 12th century, during which it enjoyed a period of prosperity based on the silk trade. In 1314, Lucca briefly fell under the control of Pisa but with the leadership of local adventurer Castruccio Castracani degli Antelminelli, the city regained its freedom and remained an independent republic for almost 500 years. Until, that is, in 1805 when Napoleon created the principality of Lucca with his sister Elisa at the helm. Twelve years later, Luca became a Bourbon duchy before being incorporated into the Kingdom of Italy. The city was unscathed by WWII bombings, meaning the fabric of the historic center is still intact. Today, take a stroll long cobbled streets, visit the museums, peruse the stores, perhaps go to the Lucca Blues Festival during the summer and of course, eat and drink to your heart's (and tummy's) content.

PISA

Once a maritime power and one-time (from the 9th to 12th or 13th century) independent maritime republic to rival Genoa and Venice, Pisa now draws its fame from an architectural project gone terribly marvelously wrong. But don't let one Leaning Tower distract you from the many noteworthy sights in this compact and compelling city. A university town since the 1400s, students from around Italy vie for places in its elite university and research schools. Their presence elicits a youthful, vibrant, and affordable café and bar scene, balancing out an enviable portfolio of well-maintained Romanesque buildings, Gothic churches and Renaissance piazzas where the locals hang out.

Most of the city's finest buildings date from the period when Pisa controlled Corsica, Sardinia and most of the mainland coast as far south as Civitavecchia. Pisa's support for the Ghibellines during the clashes between the Holy Roman Emperor and the pope brought the city into conflict with its mostly Guelph Tuscan neighbors, including Siena, Lucca and Florence. In 1406, the city fell to Florence. During this time, the Medici encouraged great artistic, literary, and scientific endeavors, even re-establishing Pisa's university where famous local Galileo Galilei eventually taught.

CHIANTI

Chianti the wine takes its name from the mountainous area of Tuscany that lies within the provinces of Florence, Siena and Arezzo. Geographical Chianti is composed mainly of the iconic hills and mountains, lashed by ancient vineyards producing grapes used in Chianti Classico and its cousins. Between the provinces of Florence (Chianti Fiorentino) and Siena (Chianti Sienese), Chianti is crisscrossed by a picturesque network of strade provinciale (provincial roads) and strade secondaria (secondary roads), some of which are little more than dirt tracks. Tidy vineyards are topped by olive groves, alongside which are stone farmhouses, Romanesque rural churches, striking Renaissance villas and impressive castles built by the Florentine and Sienese well-to-do from the Middle Ages onwards. To visit the wine cellars and estates, it is usually necessary to book ahead – something we at Arno Travel can do for you.

SIENA

Legend says that Siena was founded by the son of Remus, with the symbol of the shewolf feeding twins Romulus and Remus being as ubiquitous in Siena as it is in Rome. Reality says that the city was likely of Etruscan origin. Its wealth, extent, and power stem from the 12th century thanks to the city's involvement in commerce and trade. Indeed, Siena is also home to the Banca Monte di Paschi di Siena – the world's oldest bank. Numerous wars with Florence and others mark a tumultuous history. Like Florence, much of the population was wiped out by a plague in 1348, leading to a period of decline which, like neighboring San Gimignano, meant much of the city was preserved due to a lack of redevelopment and new construction. This has led to the historic center being declared a UNESCO World Heritage site as the living embodiment of a medieval city. Whilst the historic rivalry between adversaries Siena and Florence has not been fully extinguished to this day, you don't have to choose sides to enjoy both Renaissance Florence and Gothic Siena. Yet, this isn't the only rivalry – the entire city is broken down into 'contrade', 17 urban wards, each named after an animal or symbol, with a complex history and heraldic associations. Established in the Middle Ages as a system for supplying troops to defend the city against the onslaughts of its rivals, today the division is more patriotic. Still taken very seriously by the Sienese, every contrada has its own dedicated church, museum, baptismal font, motto and symbol. Most even have established allies and adversaries … it might sound a bit intimidating until you realize that the contrada names of Bruco, Drago and Giraffa translate to Caterpillar, Dragon and Giraffe!

Dating from the Middle Ages, Siena's Palio is a spectacular annual event, comprised of a series of colorful pageants and a wild horse race each July 2 and August 16. 10 of the 17 contrade compete for the coveted Palio (silk banner), each bearing its own traditions, symbols, colors and superstitions. The race takes place in the shell-shaped Piazza del Campo, with riders in historical costume. Note that the piazza and city generally are jam-packed for these events so chose your dates wisely depending on your love of crowds! The center of the Campo fills up at least four hours before the race and once there, you cannot leave until the race has finished. Alternatively, the cafes in the Campo sell places on their terraces (albeit at eyebrow raising prices!).

SAN GIMIGNANO

Known as "medieval Manhattan" due to the cluster of 15 towers within this walled hilltop town, San Gimignano sits at the crest of a hill in the middle of a splendid countryside. Originally an Etruscan village, the town was named after the bishop of Modena, San Gimignano, who is said to have saved the city from Attila the Hun. In 1199, SG became a commune, thriving due partly to its location along the pilgrim trail of Via Francigena. Local families flaunted their wealthy by building a tower taller than those of their neighbors. There were originally 72 but some were demolished or simply collapsed over time. The 1348 plague wiped out much of the population (and economy) here too, leading to the town's submission to Florence in 1353. Today, this is a pretty town to visit for a few hours to walk the uphill cobbled path that extends from the city's gates, up and up past stores selling traditional products, exquisite foods (including award-winning gelato), by ancient wells, a pretty collegiate church and minor basilica, a wine museum, piazzas for splendid views and street artists. This is also home to the strong white Vernaccia wine, which can be enjoyed with and even in the local rabbit dishes, such as Coniglio alla Vernaccia e Zafferano (rabbit with Vernaccia and saffron).

UMBRIA

Umbria is the only Italian region that borders neither the sea nor another country. With landscapes just as pretty as Tuscany, Umbria is separated from Le Marche by the Monti Sibillini. The Etruscans, Romans and feuding medieval families have left their indelible mark on its quaint hilltop towns, from the Gothic wonder of Orvieto to the spiraling splendor of Assisi. And it wouldn't be an Italian region if the food wasn't awesome. Here, try the earthy funk of tartufo (truffle), fine cured meats from Norcia and full-bodied reds on local menus.

The first inhabitants were the Umbri people who settled east of the Tiber river around 1000 BC, establishing the towns of Spoleto, Gubbio and Assisi. The protracted battle for power with the Etruscans – founders of Perugia and Orvieto – until the 3rd century BC left the Umbri well prepared to take on the Romans, being victorious in both skirmishes. Following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, the region spent much of the Middle Ages being fought over by Holy Roman Empire advocates (Ghibellines) and Pope supporters (Guelphs). It was during this turbulent period that hippie-precursor St Francis came to prominence in Assisi. Time stopped in Umbria in 1540 when the pope imposed a salt tax, leading to a war that brought Umbrian culture to a standstill that resulted in the medieval hearts of Umbrian towns being so well preserved.

PERUGIA

Perugia has a strong artistic and cultural tradition. There is also the University of Perugia and the Università per Stranieri (University for Foreigners) that teaches Italian, art and culture to thousands of students from around the World. Spreading across a hill above a valley checkered with fields watered by the Tiber River, Perugia is Umbria's petite capital. Its centro storico (historic center) is a mishmash of cobbled alleys, arched stairways and piazzas guarded over by magnificent palazzi. Dedicate at least a couple of hours to getting delightfully lost in what is today a fun-loving, pleasure-seeking university city, with a buzzing nightlife and café scene. Come in summer for one of Europe's best jazz festivals.

ASSISI

You'll never forget the first time you lay eyes on Assisi. As if wound around a little hill, with plains spreading picturesquely below and Monte Subasio raising above, the mere sight of Assisi is a true wonder. No wonder St Francis of Assisi, born here in 1181, was such a chill guy (well, mostly). By day, visit the historic sites, dine on sumptuous foods exalted by the spectacular views, step into the pleasantly cool churches. Then by night, enjoy a relaxing dinner and perhaps even head to one of the city's hidden bars. After all, it's the saintly thing to do. Born here in 1181, Francis Bernardone was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant and a French noblewoman who, as a young lad, enjoyed hanging out in the local bars and listening to music. But in 1202, he joined a military expedition to Perugia and was taken prisoner for nearly a year until his father paid ransom. After enlisting in the army of the Count of Brienne and just before setting off for Puglia in 1205, he had a holy vision that sparked a spiritual awakening. The once pleasure-seeking Francis renounced all his possessions to live a humble life in imitation of Christ, preaching and helping the poor. He set off to travel Italy and beyond, performing miracles such as curing the sick, communicating with animals, spending hermit-like months praying in a cave, and founding monasteries, soon attracting a crowd of faithful followers.

CAMPANIA

The Campania region is known for its ancient ruins and breathtaking coastline. Its regional capital is Naples, a bustling metropolis dramatically backdropped by the imposing Mt. Vesuvius calmed by the blue waters of the Golfo di Napoli. The most densely populated region of Italy, it also comprises the Amalfi Coast where Positano, Amalfi and Ravello are nestled between sheer cliffs and calm seas. 10 of Italy's 58 UN, including Pompeii and Herculaneum, the Royal Palace of Caserta, the Amalfi Coast and the Historic Centre of Naples. In addition, Campania's Mount Vesuvius is part of the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves. And here too, the food … uhhhh.

NAPLES

Somewhat battered by a turbulent history (said to date back to 680 BC), Naples is arguably Italy's most intense and charismatic city. Traders from Rhodes, Greeks from Cumae, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Normans and then the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the German Swabians, the Angevins, the Spanish Aragons, Napoleon, the Bourbons, the Garibaldi and finally the Kingdom of Italy in 1860 … all ruled Naples at some point throughout an almost fanciful history.

Today, gnarly cobbled streets do nothing to slow down the locals buzzing past on motorbikes and scooters – sometimes bulging under the weight of whole families stacked on like some kind of circus act – rushing off into achingly beautiful settings. But this is still Italy so the food, the coffee culture, the wine … everything is exquisite. Enjoy a stroll around the city, perhaps stopping in the Porta Nolana market to be impressed by the vocality of the vendors peddling their just-picked fruit and vegetables, just-caught seafood and just-baked pastries. And don't forget to try the pizza – this is, after all, where it was first 'invented'. Italy's most misunderstood city is also one of its most intriguing – an exhilarating mess of bombastic baroque churches, cocky baristas and electrifying street life. Anarchy and pollution don't detract from glorious churches, tranquil cloisters, and story-book seaside castles. Naples' centro storico is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its museums safeguard Europe's finest archaeology and art. Its gilded (and sometimes graffitied) royal palaces make Rome look positively provincial.

ERCOLANO AND HERCULANEUM

Ercolano is a typical Neapolitan suburb and home to one of Italy's best-preserved ancient sites – Herculaneum. A superbly conserved Roman fishing town, less delicate and daunting than Pompeii, visiting here is like a walk in the (very ancient) park. Destroyed by an earthquake in AD 63, it was then completely submerged in the AD 79 eruption of Mt Vesuvius – not in lapilli (burning pumice stone) and ash like Pompeii but in 16 meters of mud. This essentially fossilized the town, meaning that even furniture and clothing were remarkably well preserved. The town was unearthed in 1709, with amateur excavations carried out every so often until 1874. Serious archaeological work began in earnest in 1927 and continues to this day.

MT VESUVIUS

At 1281 meters in height, Mt Vesuvius is the only active volcano on the European mainland. Since its most famous explosion in AD 79, burying Pompeii and Herculaneum and pushing the coastline out several kilometers into the water, Mt Vesuvius has erupted over 30 times, the most devastating in 1631 and the most recent in 1944. Some 600,000 people live within 7 kilometers of the crater and, despite incentives to relocate, few are willing to go. For a thrilling way to get your steps in, head to the Vesuvius National Park to be explored on foot, choosing either to hike the trails surrounded by greenery or visit the Gran Cono of Mount Vesuvius.

POMPEII

A stark reminder of human fragility at the whim of Mother Nature, Pompeii (spelled Pompei in Italian) is a spectral shell of what was once a thriving commercial center. A massive earthquake hit the city in AD 63, causing much damage and seeing many of the 20,000-strong locals move away. So, when Vesuvius blew its top on August 24, AD 79, 'only' 2000 people were killed. Wiped out was a seven-centuries-old city that had been passed around between the Greeks, Samnites and Romans, only to be mostly forgotten – out of sight, out of mind. In 1594, architect Domenico Fontana came across some ruins while digging a canal. However, short of recording the find, he took no further action. Exploration proper only began in 1748 under the Bourbon King Charles VII and continued into the 19th century. At first, many of the more spectacular mosaics went to adorn Charles' palace in Portici, though most were returned to Naples, where they can be seen in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale. From an archaeological point of view, it's priceless. Having been fossilized by Vesuvius under lapilli, Pompeii offers a well-preserved snapshot of ancient life. The cobbled streets are not the faint of ankle but having a stickybeak around the ancient abodes and businesses (including for the world's oldest tradition) is a hauntingly beautiful experience.

SORRENTO

Cliff-straddling Sorrento has remarkably few sites to visit. Yet, being perfectly positioned for daytrips and well worth at least one day exploring the area, it's a strangely appealing place to stay. The locals prefer tradition over transformation, meaning the recipes, the customs, the festivities, the handicraft items are all much as they have been for centuries or more.

From Sorrento, you can explore unspoiled countryside to the west and the Amalfi Coast beyond. Take the rickety regional train to explore Pompeii and archaeological sites. Catch a boat to the fabled island of Capri that lies offshore. And be sure to try the local limoncello – a lemon liquor whose sweet tang masks a deceivingly powerful alcoholic content.

AMALFI COAST

Stretching some 50 kilometers along the southern side of the Sorrentine Peninsula, the Amalfi Coast (Costiera Amalfitana) is one of the most spectacular in Europe. Terraced with fragrant lemon groves, the cliffs dive down into sparkling seas. Pastel villas are perched precariously atop precipitous slopes while sea and sky merge in one vast blue horizon. Centuries after the Amalfi's glory days as a maritime superpower (9th to the 12th centuries), the area fell into financial difficulties, its isolated villages falling regular victim to foreign incursions, earthquakes and landslides. Yet, it was this very isolation that first drew visitors in the early 1900s, paving the way for the advent of tourism in the latter half of the century. Today, the Amalfi Coast is one of Italy's premier tourist destinations, much beloved by jetsetters and loved-up couples. To best exploit the stunning shoreline, visit in spring or early autumn. It's still great in summer but be prepared that the coast's single road (SS163) can be quite crowded. In winter, rather, much of the coast simply shuts down.

POSITANO

Positano is the most photogenic (and expensive) town along the coast. The steeply stacked houses are painted in pastels along near-vertical streets (many of which are actually staircases) lined with chic stores, jewelry stalls, elegant hotels and stylish restaurants. Part of the charm of this area is its realness – think chipping paint, laundry flapping overhead – but also its wild natural beauty. A dreamy place, achingly beautiful, with exquisite fresh foods, delightful sunshine, crisp wines and (is it any wonder?) happy locals.

AMALFI

Amalfi is just so pretty! With its sun-filled piazzas and small beach, it's the perfect place to chill and appreciate life. Yet, this was once a maritime superpower with a population of over 70,000. Amalfi is not even that big a place – you can easily get from one end to the other on foot in about 20 minutes. Surprisingly, there are very few historical buildings of note – meaning you can spend more time relaxing on the beach – since most of the old city slid into the sea following an earthquake in 1343, taking with it much of its population at the time.

ATRANI

Just around the headland from Amalfi, Atrani is a stunning tangle of whitewashed alleys and archways structured around on a buzzing piazza and popular beach.

CAPRI

A bold limestone rock rising up out of impossibly blue waters, Capri is the perfect miniature of Mediterranean appeal – elegant piazzas and cool cafés, Roman ruins, rugged seascapes and holidaying VIPs. A popular day-trip destination – catch the ferry from Sorrento, for example – you could certainly spend a couple of nights here exploring beyond Capri Town and the uphill Anacapri. In Anacapri, Capri's hinterland, explore the island's overgrown greenery, sun-bleached stucco and indescribably beautiful walking trails. Preferably with a gelato.

SOUTHERN ITALY

Nicknamed "Mezzogiorno" – literally "midday" – Southern Italy offers an appealing climate and a chill approach to living. Technically, the term "Mezzogiorno" covers the areas once politically under the administration of the former Kingdoms of Naples and Sicily and later, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Crossing Italy's boot, the landscape changes subtly with the individuality of its people and history. The aggressive history of invasion after invasion along with economic hardships has produced a fiercely proud people and influenced their distinctive cultures and cuisines. A hotter, edgier place than the urbane north of Italy, this is an area that still feels like it has secret places to explore, although you will need your own wheels (and some Italian – if you can find someone who doesn't only speak a local dialect) if you plan to seriously sidestep from the beaten track.

PUGLIA

Puglia offers charming seaside villages dotting 800 kilometers of coastline, picturesque seascapes, lush farmlands, dense forests, and pretty olive groves along with memorable hilltop and coastal towns. The sun-bleached landscapes are largely flat and dedicated to farming, skirted by a long coast that alternates between glittering limestone precipices and lengthy sandy beaches. The heel of Italy juts into the Adriatic and Ionian Seas of stunningly beautiful waters, some translucent emerald green, others dusky powder blue. The extensive coastline (and the local cuisine) is marked by many conquering invaders who took advantage of the vulnerable coastal position: the Normans (thank them for the fine Romanesque churches), Spanish (hello flamboyant baroque buildings), Turks, Swabians (you can still admire their fortifications) and the Greeks – indeed, there is still a bit of a Greek feel to the place and to some of the dialects. No-one, however, knows exactly the origins of the extraordinary conical-roofed stone houses, the trulli, unique to Puglia. But none of this could overpower Puglia's own distinct and authentic identity. Cuisine is all-important here too. Puglia's cucina povera (peasant cooking) is legendary. The hot sun produces divine olive oil, grapes (and wines that pack a punch – be warned), tomatoes, eggplants, artichokes, peppers, salami, mushrooms, olives, and fresh seafood. Expect a full immersion here – there are very few foreign voices. But in July and August Puglia becomes a huge party, with sagre (food festivals), concerts and events where you can hang out with the thousands of Italian tourists that flock to Italy's boot to kick up their heels on their annual vacation.

BARI

Once regarded as quite gritty, Bari's reputation has gradually improved. Puglia's capital is now one of the south's most prosperous cities, well worth spending a few days to explore. Bari Vecchia, the historic old town, has been restored to be an interesting and atmospheric warren of streets. In the evenings, piazzas buzz with trendy restaurants and bars, without having fully smoothed out the course undertone entirely (thank goodness).

POLIGNANO A MARE

Thought to be one of the most important ancient settlements in Puglia, later inhabited by successive invaders ranging from the Huns to the Normans, this spectacularly positioned little town is often forgotten. Located around 34 kilometers south of Bari on the S16 coastal road, Polignano a Mare is perched on the edge of a craggy ravine pockmarked with caves.

ALBEROBELLO

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Alberobello seems quite fake. So cute is the Zona dei Trulli on the western hill of town, comprised of a dense mass of 1500 beehive-shaped, white-tipped dwellings. These dry-stone buildings are made from local limestone and date back to the 14th century and beyond. The name of the town is a nod to the primitive oak forest Arboris Belli (literally, "beautiful trees") that once covered the area. From May to October, busloads of tourists pile into the homes, bars and shops now found in the trulli. If you park in Lago Martellotta, follow the steps up to the Piazza del Popolo where Belvedere Trulli offers fabulous views over the whole higgledy-piggledy picture.

MARTINA FRANCA

The old quarter of this town is a picturesque scene of winding alleys, blinding white houses and blood-red geraniums. Extravagant baroque and rococo buildings are lightened by airy piazzas and curlicue ironwork balconies poking out above narrow streets. This town is the highest in the Murgia, having been founded in the 10th century by refugees fleeing the Arab invasion of Taranto. It took four centuries for the town to flourish when Philip of Anjou granted tax exemptions (franchigie, hence Franca). With its newfound wealth, the town built a castle and defensive walls complete with 24 solid bastions.

LECCE

A beautiful baroque town, Lecce offers glorious architecture in its palaces and churches intricately sculpted from the soft local sandstone. Sleek designer Milanese fashion contrasts with historic churches topped with asparagus-tipped column, decorative dodos, and cavorting gremlins. Ever a lively, graceful yet relaxed university town, Lecce is packed with upmarket boutiques, antique shops, restaurants, and bars. Both the Adriatic and Ionian Seas are within easy access, making this a great base from which to explore the Salento.

OTRANTO

Overlooking a pretty harbor on the turquoise Adriatic coast, the historic center of Otranto is delineated by golden walls embracing narrow car-free lanes. Countless little shops peddle souvenirs and local goods. In July and August, Otranto is one of the most vibrant towns in Puglia. Once Italy's main port to the East for a good 1000 years, Otranto suffered a brutal history. Fanciful tales talk of King Minos dropping by and St Peter having supposedly celebrated the first Western Mass here. A better proven event is the Sack of Otranto in 1480, when 18,000 Turks led by Ahmet Pasha besieged the town, being held back by the townsfolk for 15 days before capitulating. Today, the only invasion is the summer crowd flocking to Otranto's scenic beaches and narrow streets.

BASILICATA

Mountains and rolling hills are exalted by a dazzling smile of coastline on the Tyrrhenian Sea. Indeed, 47% of Basilicata is mountainous. Yes, you'll find amazing food and wine here, museums, churches, and a great atmosphere but what is arguably most striking is the Sassi di Matera – ancient cave dwellings inhabited since the Paleolithic period and suspected to be among the first human settlements in Italy. Lived in for thousands of years, they were abandoned in the mid-1900s by ordinance, but restoration works began several decades on to make these ancient dwellings carved into the rock truly a sight to see.

GALLIPOLI

This Gallipoli (meaning 'beautiful town' in Greek) fills an island in the Ionian Sea, bridged to the mainland and modern city. The picturesque town is surrounded by high walls built to protect it against attacks from the sea. An important fishing hub, Gallipoli feels like a working Italian town, setting it apart from more seasonal coastal destinations. In the summer, bars and restaurants make the most of the island's ramparts that look out to sea.

MATERA

In the approach to Matera, from virtually any direction, your first unforgettable glimpse is of its famous sassi that sprawl below the ridge of a gaping ravine like some gigantic nativity scene. The old town is simply unique and warrants at least one day to explore, delightedly destination-free. Although many buildings are crumbling and abandoned, others have been restored and transformed into quaint abodes, restaurants, and swish cave-hotels. On the cliff top, the new town is a lively place rich in elegant churches, palazzi and especially the pedestrianized Piazza Vittorio Veneto. Matera is said to be one of the world's oldest towns, dating back to the Palaeolithic Age and inhabited continuously for around 7000 years. It became the capital of Basilicata in 1663, a position it held until 1806 when the power moved to Potenza. Matera has had its ups and down. By the 1950s, more than half of Matera's population lived in the sassi, typical caves sheltering families with an average of six children. Poverty and malaria reigned until the authorities took action. In the late 1950s, some 15,000 inhabitants were forcibly relocated to new government housing. In 1993, the sassi were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Ironically, the town's lack of development due to years of misery has transformed it into Basilicata's leading tourist attraction. Being appointed European Capital of Culture in 2019 saw much attention focused on the area, hopefully to stay.

CALABRIA

Traces of Neanderthal, Paleolithic and Neolithic life have been found in Calabria, but the region only became internationally significant with the arrival of the Greeks in the 8th century BC where they founded a colony that is now Reggio di Calabria. Roman control came in 202 BC, along with irreparable geological damage due to destroying the area's fine forests and alterations of the natural waterways. The 18th-century Napoleonic incursion and the arrival of Garibaldi and Italian unification inspired hope for change. Yet Calabria remained a disappointed, feudal region and, like the rest of the south, was racked by malaria. Visit today and you'll find Italy's wildest area, with fine beaches, mountainous landscape and peaks frequently crowned by ruined castles that once weathered successive invasions by the Normans, Swabians, Aragonese and Bourbons. Calabria may be known abroad for the notorious 'ndrangheta – the Calabrian mafia. But Calabria is also startling natural beauty and spectacular towns emerging from craggy mountaintops. There are three national parks – Pollino in the north, Sila in the center and Aspromonte in the south – in a land that is around 90% hills. The region is then skirted by some 780 kilometers of Italy's finest coast perfumed by bergamot. This is the only place in the world where these plants produce the essential oil used in many perfumes and to flavor Earl Grey tea. The incredible food, wine and music from this region are all celebrated in a bevy of festivals held year-round, albeit concentrated in July and August. Not the most modern of areas, many towns were destroyed by a series of earthquakes that have seen the locals long ago moved into 'temporary' breeze-block suburbs. While far from picture perfect, this is where to head for an adventure into the unknown.

SICILIA

After 25 centuries of foreign domination, Sicilians have an impressive cultural legacy, from the refined architecture of Magna Graecia to the Byzantine splendor and Arab craftsmanship of the island's Norman cathedrals and palaces. The island's classical treasure trove includes Greek temples and amphitheaters, Roman mosaics and a host of fine archaeological museums. This cultural richness is matched by a startlingly diverse landscape that includes bucolic farmland, smoldering volcanoes, and kilometers of island-studded aquamarine coastline. Sicily's first inhabitants – the Sicani from North Africa, the Siculi from Latium (Italy), the Elymni from Greece and the subsequent colonization by the Carthaginians (also from North Africa) and the Greeks, in the 8th and 6th centuries BC respectively, compounded this cultural divide through decades of war when powerful opposing cities struggled to dominate the island. It was not until the Arab invasions of AD 831 that Sicily truly came into its own, despite being part of the Roman Empire. Under Arab influence, trade, farming, and mining all saw Sicily soon became an enviable prize for European opportunists. But further invasions were to come. First, the Normans in 1061 arrived to make Palermo the center of their expanding empire. After two centuries of pleasure and profit, the Norman line was extinguished and in came the austere German House of Hohenstaufen. In the centuries that followed, Sicily passed to the Holy Roman Emperors, the Angevins (French) and the Aragonese (Spanish) in a turmoil of rebellion and revolution that continued until the Spanish Bourbons united Sicily with Naples in 1734 as the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Little more than a century later came the unification of Italy. Sicilians struggled in poverty-stricken conditions. Unified with Italy but no better off, nearly one million men and women emigrated to the USA between 1871 and 1914 before the outbreak of WWI. From this point, the Mafia began to claim increasing power. When Sicily became a semi-autonomous region in 1948, Mafia control extended right to the heart of politics. But various facts and factors have seen Sicilian public opposition to the Mafia's inordinate influence grow. So, while organized crime lives on (do pay the young guy a few coins to 'look after your car' if you park somewhere and want to find your car unharmed), the thuggery and violence of the 1980s has diminished. But this is not what will be on your mind as you wander down achingly beautiful – albeit it ofttimes scarred – streets, as you watch locals call out to each other with big friendly hand gestures, try the incredible food that is a mix of all the history and all the spices that have found their way here. Sicily is an intense, bittersweet experience. Brimming with art treasures and natural beauty, come with an open mind and a healthy appetite. Despite the island's perplexing contradictions, one factor remains constant: the uncompromisingly high quality of the cuisine, the warmth of the people, and the beauty of the land.

CATANIA

Much of Catania is constructed from the lava that poured down the mountain and engulfed the city in the 1669 eruption, taking 12,000 lives. Lava-black in color, most of the elegant buildings are the work of baroque master Giovanni Vaccarini who almost single-handedly rebuilt the downtown area into an elegant, modern city of spacious boulevards and set-piece piazzas. Today, Catania is Sicily's second commercial city – a thriving, entrepreneurial hub with a large university and a cosmopolitan urban culture. Come here for the atmosphere, to hang out with the locals, perhaps even just sit by the waterfront and chill as you look out over the water. Whatever you do, just be sure to work up an appetite!

MT ETNA

Mt Etna might be visible from the moon, but we prefer to see Europe's largest volcano (and one of the world's most active) from a little closer up. Eruptions occur frequently, yet the most devastating were in 1669 and lasted 122 days. Lava poured down Etna's southern slope, engulfing much of Catania and dramatically altering the landscape. Less destructive yet still dramatic instances of lava fountaining – vertical jets of lava spewing from the mountain's southeast crater – mean locals understandably keep a close eye on the smoldering peak. The volcano is surrounded by the huge Parco dell'Etna, the largest unspoiled wilderness remaining in Sicily. The park encompasses a remarkable variety of environments, from the severe, almost surreal, summit to deserts of lava and alpine forests. Just don't wear your best shoes as you tread through lava dust seeking out the incredible vistas.

SYRACUSE

Syracuse is one of Sicily's most appealing cities. A dense tapestry of overlapping cultures and civilizations, it was settled by colonists from Corinth in 734 BC. Once the most powerful city in the Mediterranean, Syracuse brims with reminders of its ancient past, from the Greek columns supporting Ortygia's cathedral to the annual festival of classical Greek drama, staged in a 2500-year-old amphitheater. Considered to be the most beautiful city of the ancient world, rivalling Athens in power and prestige, age has not diminished her beauty. Under the demagogue Dionysius the Elder, the city reached its zenith, attracting luminaries such as Livy, Plato, Aeschylus and Archimedes, and cultivating the sophisticated urban culture that was to see the birth of comic Greek theatre. As the sun set on Ancient Greece, Syracuse became a Roman colony that was looted of its treasures. While modern-day Syracuse lacks the drama of Palermo and the energy of Catania, the ancient island neighborhood of Ortygia continues to seduce visitors with its atmospheric piazzas, narrow alleyways and pretty waterfront. Then there is the Parco Archaeologico della Neapolis, 2 kilometers across town and one of the islands great classical treasures.

TAORMINA

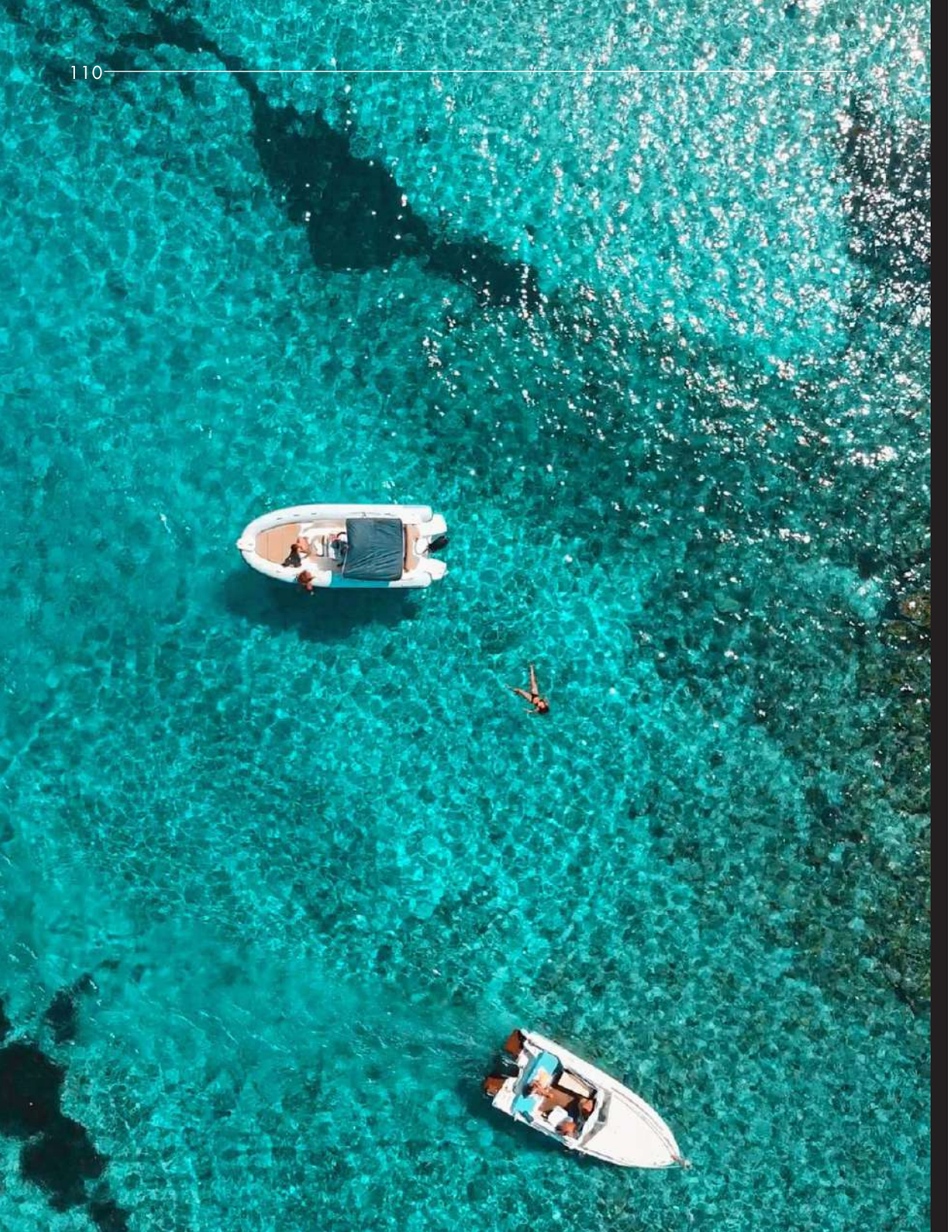
Spectacularly situated on a terrace of Monte Tauro, with views westwards to Mt Etna, Taormina is a beautiful small town, reminiscent of Capri or an Amalfi coastal resort. Over the centuries, Taormina has seduced an exhaustive line of writers and artists, aristocrats and royalty. These days, it hosts a summer arts festival that packs the town with international visitors. Taormina is sophisticated, chic and comfortably cushioned by some serious wealth – very far removed from the economic realities of other Sicilian towns. The capital of Byzantine Sicily in the 9th century, Taormina is an almost perfectly preserved medieval town, and if you can tear yourself away from the shopping and sunbathing, it has a wealth of small but perfect tourist sites, particularly buzzing in July and August.

AGRIGENTO

Seen from a distance, you might be underwhelmed at the sight of the modern city's rows of unsightly apartment blocks looming on the hillside. But turn your attention to the splendid Valley of the Temples below, where the ancient Greeks once built their great city of Akragas, and you'll get it. Meandering through the ruins, their monumental grace becomes quickly apparent. Crowning the craggy heights of Agrigento's Valle dei Templi are five Doric temples – including stunning Tempio della Concordia, one of the best preserved in all of Magna Graecia. Throw in the superb archaeological museum and you've got Sicily's most cohesive and impressive collection of Greek treasures. It's easy to understand how this became Sicily's preeminent travel destination, first put on the tourist map by Goethe in the 18th century. Three kilometers uphill from the temples, Agrigento's medieval core is a pleasant place to pass the evening after a day exploring the ruins. The intercity bus and train stations are both in the upper town, within a few blocks of Via Atenea, the main street of the medieval city.

AEOLIAN ISLANDS

The seven islands of Lipari, Vulcano, Salina, Panarea, Stromboli, Alicudi and Filicudi are part of a huge 200-kilometer volcanic ridge that runs between Mt Etna and the threatening mass of Vesuvius above Naples. Expect to find stunning cobalt seas, splendid beaches, some of Italy's best hiking, and an awe-inspiring volcanic landscape. Even these islands have a fascinating human and mythological history that goes back several millennia. The Aeolians figured prominently in Homer's Odyssey and evidence of the distant past can be seen everywhere, most notably in Lipari's excellent archaeological museum. Collectively, the islands exhibit a unique range of volcanic characteristics, which earned them a place on UNESCO's World Heritage list in 2000. The islands are mobbed with visitors in July and August but out of season things remain remarkably tranquil.



SARDINIA

Here, magmatic granite that crystallized some 300 million years ago is embellished by the lush green maquis characteristic of Mediterranean coastal regions, interspersed with wildflowers. The first islanders probably arrived from mainland Italy around 350,000 BC. By the neolithic period (8000 BC to 3000 BC), tribal communities were thriving in north-central Sardinia. Their Bronze Age descendants, known as the Nuragic people, dominated the island until the Phoenicians arrived around 850 BC. Then came in slow succession the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Pisans and Genoese, the Catalan-Aragonese from northern Spain. Sardinia became Spanish territory after the unification of the Spanish kingdoms in 1479 and today there remains a tangible Hispanic feel to towns such as Alghero and Iglesias, despite the Italian Savoys taking possession of the island in 1720. After Italian unity in 1861, Sardinia found itself under the thumb of Rome. Coastal tourism that arrived in the 1960s played its own role in the history of this little paradise, becoming a mainstay of the Sardinian economy. One of the many drawcards is the fauna, equally spectacular in the water, in the sky and on land (including one of Europe's last herds of wild horses plus four million sheep). Also flocking to the island's celebrated Costa Smeralda are well-heeled and well-dressed holidayers who come for the amazing cuisine, wine, beaches and shopping and stay for the wild nature in the surrounds. Richness can also be found below-ground, with there being a wealth of (now abandoned) mines, around which were once bustling miner communities. To see the prosperous past and the wealth of beauty in Sardinia's present wild beauty for yourself, hop on the Trenino Verde, a train service operating along historic lines to pass through some of the islands 365 villages, passing by shimmering bays, alpine forests, granite peaks, cathedral-like grottoes, rolling vineyards and one-time bandit towns. Sardinia is also pierced by prehistory with 7000 Nuragic sites. The food here is different again from mainland Italian fare. Think spit-roasted suckling pig, sea urchins and crumbly pecorino cheese. There is also a distinct dialect and a host of unique events throughout the year.

CAGLIARI

Founded by the Phoenicians in the 8th century BC, Cagliari came of age as a Roman port. Later, the Pisans arrived and treated the city to a major medieval facelift, the results of which impress to this day. Cagliari is Sardinia's most Italian-flavored hot-spot. Vespas buzz down tree-fringed boulevards and locals relax at cafes tucked under the graceful arcades by the seafront. Swing east and you reach Poetto beach, the hub of summer life with its crystalline waters and upbeat party scene. Cultured and cosmopolitan at every turn, Cagliari is also rich in archaeological sites, museums and churches.

THE COSTA SMERALDA

Costa Smeralda epitomizes Sardinia's classic images of a gilded enclave of luxury hotels, exclusive marinas, pearly-white beaches and wind-carved rock leading to secluded beaches lapped by azure seas, on which bob zillion-dollar yachts. Stretching kilometers from Porto Rotondo to the Golfo di Arzachena, the Costa Smeralda (or, Emerald Coast) is Sardinia's most fêted summer destination. Ever since the Aga Khan bought the coast for a pittance in the 1960s, it has attracted A-listers. But despite the superficial fluff, it remains stunning.

The Costa's capital is Porto Cervo. It's dead out of season, then between June and September is party central, with tanned beauties posing on the Piazzetta and cashed-up shoppers perusing the designer boutiques. To the west, Baia Sardinia faces onto a gorgeous strip of sand, while to the south, aficionados head for Capriccioli and Spiaggia Liscia Ruia, both near the exclusive Hotel Cala di Volpe. The Spiaggia del Principe is a magnificent crescent of white sand bordered by Caribbean-blue waters. Inland, the rustic village of San Pantaleo merits a quick look, particularly on summer evenings when its picturesque piazza hosts a bustling market. Further on, the town of Arzachena offers several interesting archaeological sites, including the Nuraghe di Albucciu and Coddu Ecchju.

GALLURA

In the inland region of Gallura, you could be on another island entirely, with vine-striped hills rolling down into quaint villages, granite mountains and mysterious nuraghe. Gallura's northern coast is wild, with its waters swum by dolphins, divers and windsurfers frolicking in the crystal waters of La Maddalena marine reserve.

OLBIA

Olbia has more to offer than at first meets the eye, if the eye spies the area's industrial outskirts. There is also a handsome city whose downtown is replete with boutiques, wine bars and café-rimmed piazzas. Above all, Olbia is a refreshingly authentic and affordable alternative to the purpose-built resorts to the north and south.

GOLFO ARANCI

Some 18 kilometers northeast of Olbia, Golfo Aranci is an important summer port, with services to Livorno and Civitavecchia. For most, this is a pass-through, but it is actually worth a stop to check out the three white sandy beaches, particularly if activities like diving and speargun fishing are your jam.

PALAU AND THE ARCIPELAGO DI LA MADDALENA

On Sardinia's northeastern tip, Palau is a well-to-do summer resort crowded with surf shops, boutiques, bars and restaurants. From here, year-round ferries make the short crossing over to Isola della Maddalena, the largest of the 60-plus islands and islets that comprise the Parco Nazionale dell'Arcipelago di La Maddalena. This area is rich in spectacular, windswept seascapes. La Maddalena is best explored by boat, although the two main islands have plenty of charm with their sunbaked ochre buildings, cobbled piazzas and infectious holiday atmosphere.

ITALY BY TIPS

Don't get caught off guard during your trip to Italy! Check out these tips by Arno Travel Team to ensure a smooth and enjoyable Italian adventure while steering clear of unexpected surprises.

Weather:

Italy's weather is as diverse as its landscapes! Before your trip, it's wise to check the weather and the temperatures. From north to south, there can be big differences, especially in winter: Milan might be snowy at 0°C, while Rome is a cozy 12°C, and Palermo basks in 18°C warmth.

Winters are mildest in the south, offering relief from the cold elsewhere, while summers are the warmest and sunniest across the country. Southern Italy, especially Sardinia and Sicily, sizzles in the summer heat, with temperatures soaring. Coastal areas benefit from refreshing sea breezes during the day, but cities like Florence and Rome can get hot and humid without that cooling wind.

WHAT TO WEAR:

Layering is key: given the diverse climates across Italy, layering is essential. Be prepared for temperature variations throughout the day, especially if you're moving between different regions.

In the colder months, particularly in the north, pack thermal wear, sweaters, coats, scarves, and gloves. Southern regions may require lighter layers but still keep a jacket handy, especially for chilly evenings.

For the summer heat, opt for lightweight, breathable clothing like cotton or linen. Dresses, shorts, and short-sleeved shirts are ideal. Don't forget a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses to shield yourself from the sun.

Footwear: Comfortable walking shoes are a must, especially for exploring cobblestone streets and historic sites. Sandals or breathable shoes are great for summer, while waterproof boots or shoes are advisable for rainy seasons or winter.

Accessories: Always carry a compact umbrella or a lightweight rain jacket, especially in the spring and fall when showers are common. Additionally, a small backpack or crossbody bag is convenient for carrying essentials during your outings.

HEALTH:

It's always wise to secure comprehensive health and travel insurance before your trip. While Italy has public healthcare, it's not discouraged to obtain insurance as well, as wait times for medical care could be lengthy.

ARRIVAL & CITY TAX:

Touching down in Italy, you'll likely land at one of the two major international airports in Rome or Milan. Rome's Leonardo da Vinci airport, situated in Fiumicino, is about a 50-minute drive from the city center, while Milan Malpensa airport is approximately 55 minutes away from Milan's heart. English is commonly spoken at these airports for easy navigation.

Upon arrival at your hotel, you may encounter a city tax, newly introduced in many Italian municipalities for non-residents. Managed by local authorities, the tax varies from city to city and is settled directly with your hotel at the end of your stay.

CONNECTIVITY:
Staying connected in Italy is convenient with international roaming for European travelers. However, Australians and Americans may find it beneficial to purchase an Italian SIM card for local communication. These cards are readily available at mobile phone providers. Please note that due to strict regulations, third parties cannot purchase SIM cards on behalf of travelers.
Internet access in Italy is widespread, with numerous Wi-Fi spots available in cafes, airports, and hotels, often accessible for hourly fees. Most hotels provide complimentary Wi-Fi, while others may offer discounted initial access with subsequent charges. While broadband is prevalent in urban centers, smaller villages may have limited dial-up or ISDN connections.

HOW TO RECHARGE YOUR ELECTRONIC DEVICES:
If you're bringing your own appliances from abroad, remember that Italian outlets are shaped for round 2/3 prong plugs. Make sure your devices can handle 220 volts or use a voltage converter if they're designed for 110 volts. Some gadgets, like laptops and certain electric shavers, are dual voltage, so you won't need a converter for those.

SHOPS & RESTAURANTS:
Broadly speaking, shops in major cities operate with continuous hours, often staying open until 8:00 p.m. Some follow a schedule of 9:00 a.m. to 13:30 p.m. and 2 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. However, it's important to note that these are general guidelines and may vary depending on the establishment and location.
it's worth noting that many non-tourist shops close on Sundays and Monday mornings, and on Mondays, keep in mind that some restaurants and pizzerias may close their doors, so it's wise to plan your dining options accordingly.

CREDIT CARDS & ELECTRONIC PAYMENTS:
Credit cards, including American Express, Visa, and Mastercard, are widely accepted in Italy. While there's greater flexibility in using them for smaller purchases nowadays, it's still advisable to avoid using cards for transactions under €10, as some smaller stores may not accept electronic payments or may even refuse them. Additionally, it's important to note that tips cannot be added to credit card purchases.
When it comes to ATM cash withdrawals, Bancomat machines are prevalent throughout Italy, typically identifiable by a blue sign resembling an upside-down number 3. These machines are commonly found outside banks or behind secure doors that open with your card swipe. If your ATM card is part of the Mastercard/Cirrus or Visa/Plus networks, you can withdraw cash from Italian ATMs. However, there's usually a maximum withdrawal limit of €250 per day at most Italian Bancomats.

Italian etiquette: from dress codes to tipping
When in Italy, it's important to pay attention to certain etiquettes, especially in religious contexts. Churches, for instance, have dress codes prohibiting shorts, short skirts, or revealing tops during visits, and when inside, you should not disrupt the religious function if there is one. Additionally, many religious sites and cultural venues prohibit the use of flash photography or cameras without prior permission to safeguard their artistic heritage from potential damage.
When it comes to tipping the matter is not quite easy as it can be in other countries you may be used to. Tipping in Italy is appreciated but not obligatory, so if you've received exceptional service and wish to express your gratitude you could tip your tour guide, your driver, your waiter, or someone who pleased your stay in the hotel you've chosen. How? For a local approach to tipping at bars and restaurants, leaving the change is customary. For example, if your meal costs €56, you can leave €4, or if it's €92, you can leave €8. (Keep in mind that tips cannot be added to credit card purchases.)

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