

# Cover story

GUIDE

# Italian lessons



What do you get when you put a quartet of Italy experts together? This ultimate guide to everything from beaches to bites. **Bellissimo.**

**I**t's impossible not to love Italy. Few European countries match its regional diversity, from the misty hills of Piedmont, to the parched southern landscapes of Campania, Basilicata and Calabria.

Each district has its own distinct culture – and cuisine. In Tuscany, even the most modest trattoria will serve a perfect tagliata, a huge slab of meat smothered in olive oil, green peppercorns and rosemary, while the south is famous for its seafood and Emilia Romagna for its pasta dishes, cheeses, salamis and cured meats.

Then there are the wines, from chianti and barolo to etna rosso, served in a dizzying range of restaurants and along well-organised wine trails.

With so many riches to choose from, planning your ideal Italian holiday can be overwhelming. So here, some experts on all things Italiano give you their top tips for pulling together an itinerary bellissimo. Prego! (You're welcome.)

#### How to book the best...

#### ITALIAN BEACH HOLIDAYS

Italians are big fans of the seaside, escaping to local beaches for the day and often returning to the same resort town year after year for an extended holiday. That said, with a few exceptions, Italy does not have lots of glorious beaches. But you can still have a great time on the Italian coast.

Sardinia has some of the best beaches in Europe, never mind Italy. This makes it popular, so book well in advance.

Choose between small, boutique and luxury hotels on tiny bays, with sickles of white sand, or chic,

#### ABOUT THE EXPERTS

**Tim Jepson** has spent many years living in and writing about Italy for *National Geographic Traveler*, *National Geographic*, the BBC and others.

Travel writer **Lee Marshall** moved to Italy in 1984. He is a columnist for *The Telegraph* in London.

**Anne Hanley** has lived in Italy for 25 years. She is the Venice expert for *The Telegraph* in London and writes for *Time Out* guides.

**Rob Andrews** has co-written Rough Guides to Sicily and Sardinia.

This feature first appeared in *The Telegraph*, London.



Roman holidays: Hundreds of stories and guides to Italy online.  
SMH.COM.AU/TRAVEL



**Must-sees:** (Clockwise from left) gondolas on the Grand Canal; the 13th-century Matera Cathedral; a boutique hotel in Sicily; delicacies at Nero di Norcia fair in Umbria; Villa Foscari in northern Italy.

family- and couple-friendly resorts such as Forte Village ([fortevillageresort.com](http://fortevillageresort.com)), Chia Laguna ([en.chialagunaresort.com](http://en.chialagunaresort.com)) and Hotel Flamingo ([hotelflamingosardinia.com](http://hotelflamingosardinia.com)).

Sicily is also emerging. The hill town of Taormina is the island's best known resort. It is attractive, but expensive, and has relatively poor beaches. Cefalu is a pleasing resort town with a fine historic core. Key emerging destinations are the smaller islands, particularly Pantelleria and the Egadi and Aeolian archipelagos.

Even for mainland Italians, Sardinia and Sicily are a cultural world apart, so get guidance from a specialist such as CIT Holidays ([cit.com.au](http://cit.com.au)).

Many Italians love the Adriatic coast, which for most of its length south of Ravenna has good sand, safe seas and unpretentious small-town resorts.

If you want a gentle, Italian family-style seaside holiday, this is the place. Just avoid Rimini, a big and sometimes brash resort. Beaches near Monte Conero, near Ancona, are standouts ([emiliaromagnaturismo.it/en](http://emiliaromagnaturismo.it/en)).

Puglia, too, the "heel" of Italy's "boot", has a decent but often rocky coastline. While the Gargano peninsula is busy, the almost Greek-looking Salentino peninsula is quieter, with especially good beaches around Gallipoli and south of Otranto.

The big package operators mostly stick to traditional areas: the Neapolitan Riviera (including Amalfi and Sorrento – though beaches on the Amalfi Coast are small: Positano has the best); the Venetian Lido and nearby Lido di Jesolo (the "Venetian Riviera"), which have big beaches but are more developed in the manner of the Spanish Costas (Caorle is the choice here for a more intimate stay); and the Tuscan Riviera, notably the celebrity favourite Forte dei Marmi (which is not as

chic as its reputation suggests) and the belle-époque resort of Viareggio.

Most Italians holiday in August, which means other summer months are often cheaper. Flight Centre ([flightcentre.com.au](http://flightcentre.com.au)) often has excellent packages going, while Creative Holidays offers some good deals on hotels and can tailor something to suit ([creativeholidays.com](http://creativeholidays.com)).

#### How to book the best... **ITALIAN CULTURAL HOLIDAYS**

Given Italy's extraordinary artistic and architectural heritage, culture will be a feature of most Italian holidays. Book with a specialist tour operator whose trips will allow you to see particular elements of Italian culture in detail – the Greeks in Sicily, or the Palladian villas of the Veneto region, for example. These tours typically have a guest lecturer, and some include private or out-of-hours visits and meetings with curators.

Operators should guarantee timed entry to the big sights: if they don't, you could wait hours to see Michelangelo's *David*, say, or the paintings of the Uffizi. Also check the accommodation: are the places you will be staying



convenient for exploring historic towns on your own?

Reputable companies such as Abercrombie and Kent ([abercrombiekent.com.au](http://abercrombiekent.com.au)), Tauck Tours ([throughtraveltheworld.com.au](http://throughtraveltheworld.com.au)) and Trafalgar ([Trafalgar.com/aus](http://Trafalgar.com/aus)) are all good options.

If travelling independently, consult local tourist offices. An online search using a town's name plus "turismo" or "ufficio informazioni" usually brings up the official site. You will find information on money-saving passes to cultural attractions (often available to buy online) and how to book tickets before you leave for timed entry to the big sights.

Here are five cultural holiday ideas to get you going.

**1. Umbria, Roman to Renaissance** Umbria's hill-top towns are often overshadowed by next-door Tuscany. Try Assisi, Spello, Bevagna, Montefalco, Orvieto, Todi and San Sepolcro ([umbriatourism.com](http://umbriatourism.com)).

**2. A city in the cliffs** Matera is an entire inner-city district built into

and around the cliffs. Stay in an underground hotel ([materaturismo.it](http://materaturismo.it)).

#### **3. Opera in Rossini's birthplace**

The Rossini Opera Festival – in the composer's birthplace of Pesaro, in central Italy is a hot ticket. The 2014 festival runs August 10-22 ([rossinioperafestival.it](http://rossinioperafestival.it)).

**4. Stradivari violins and Renaissance red brick** A slightly offbeat but fascinating town, often overlooked by tourists, is known for the making of violins. Antonio Stradivari is just one of the master craftsmen commemorated in the new multimedia Museo del Violino ([museodelviolino.org](http://museodelviolino.org)).

**5. Gardens in the "campagna romana"** Two of the most beautiful gardens in Italy, Giardino di Ninfa ([fondazionecaetani.org](http://fondazionecaetani.org)) and Giardini della Landriana ([aldobrandini.it](http://aldobrandini.it)), are in this low-lying area of Lazio, south of Rome.

#### How to book the best... **ITALIAN FOOD AND WINE HOLIDAYS**

Italy has varied regional cuisines, from rich dishes using maize, beef and butter in Lombardy, to seafood specialities on the coast and Arab-influenced spices in Sicily.

Wine and cookery courses are hugely popular. They range from week-long residential schools, to morning drop-in courses.

When choosing longer courses, which are often in rural villas rather than towns, consider the destination carefully. You will have plenty of free time, and will visit local towns as part of the course, so is the area one that you want to explore? Are other historic centres within striking distance?

The most flexible arrangement can be to contact an Italian school. In Bologna, La Vecchia Scuola Bolognese ([lavecchiascuola.com](http://lavecchiascuola.com)), has a range of three or four-hour courses in English. Similar short courses can be booked independently in other cities. For example, Florencecookingclasses.com has daily morning lessons.

Wine tours can also be booked independently. In Chianti, for example, chianticlassico.com is a good starting point for Tuscan tours, or try movimentoturismo vino.it for countrywide information.

Here are some food and wine holiday inspirations.

**1. Truffle time** Norcia, a pleasing

Continued page 12



# Cover story

GUIDE

## Italian lessons

### From page 10

Umbrian mountain town 2½ hours' drive from Rome, offers rustic Italian food at its best, with excellent local hams, salamis, wild boar, lentils, truffles and mountain cheeses. Visit during the town's annual truffle festival ([neronocia.it](http://neronocia.it)).

**2. The new Burgundy** Etna rosso, a graceful Sicilian red, is produced in one of Italy's most dramatic wine-growing areas. Call producers to make tasting appointments ([monacidelletterrenere.it](http://monacidelletterrenere.it)).

**3. Mastering gelato** Ever wondered how Italians make such delicious gelato? Yummy Italy, a new Bologna-based organiser of culinary experiences, offers half-day and one-day courses with the master ice-cream makers Gabriele and Claudia, who run a famed emporium in the Colli Bolognesi hills ([yummy-italy.com](http://yummy-italy.com)).

**4. Rolling Langhe hills and Piedmontese wine** Heralded by the Italian wine bible *Gambero Rosso* for its "dedication to quality", the Michele Chiarlo winery in Piedmont is a stunning example of how vines and landscape bring the best out of each other ([palascerequio.com](http://palascerequio.com)).

**5. Bogart's lemon cake and Fellini's pasta** Her lemon cake was a favourite of Humphrey Bogart, and she served her pasta e fagioli to Federico Fellini. Mamma Agata has since welcomed Woody Harrelson and Pierce Brosnan to her cooking classes on the Amalfi coast ([mammaagata.com](http://mammaagata.com)).

### How to book the best... ITALIAN ACTIVITY HOLIDAYS

Walking and cycling are the most popular activity holidays in Italy, and the country's varied topography provides challenges for all. The degree of difficulty will dictate the region visited.

Itineraries in Tuscany and Umbria are the most popular, thanks to these regions offering gentle walking and a wealth of historic towns.

The Lakes, Sorrentine Peninsula, Sicily and Le Marche are also popular. Beware the Cinque Terre in Liguria, on the Italian Riviera, where trails are busy or often closed.

## Mosaics have a long history in Venice.

For something more challenging, consider the Pollino national park, Calabria-Basilicata ([parcopollino.gov.it](http://parcopollino.gov.it)), the Sibillini park in Umbria ([sibillini.net/en/](http://sibillini.net/en/)), the Alpi Marittime in Piedmont ([parks.it/parco.alpi.marittime/](http://parks.it/parco.alpi.marittime/)) and the Dolomites. Sardinia, meanwhile, offers something in-between: a cycling route that makes a relaxed trip for fitter riders.

You can choose between escorted group tours and self-guided trips, with your luggage transported between hotels.

Many itineraries involve remote



**Magnifico:** (Clockwise from top) Costa Smeralda, a boutique country hotel; a cyclist is forced to carry the bike on the Sinis Peninsula.

**3. Tuscan wheels** Marco Mori's company, Gusto Cycling, draws on such talents as the former regional champion Fabrizio Giacomelli, who leads guided rides and has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the region's food and wine ([gusto-cycling.com](http://gusto-cycling.com)).

**4. Bike Sardinia's Sinis Peninsula** Sardinia's quiet roads and spectacular coastline make it ideal for exploration on two wheels. Exodus, which specialises in low-impact activity holidays that are slightly off the beaten track, organises eight-day guided cycling trips in the island's south-west ([exodus.co.uk](http://exodus.co.uk)).

**5. Venetian mosaic master-classes** You have only to stand beneath the glittering ceiling vaults of Saint Mark's in Venice to realise that mosaics have a long history in the northern Italian city. Making them is an art that is still carried out in Venice, notably at the historic Orsoni workshop in Cannaregio. To immerse yourself in this ancient craft, sign up for a masters course at the workshop ([orsoni.com](http://orsoni.com)). 

destinations. Ask whether the tour operator will book flights and offer transfers or maybe you can arrange them more cheaply yourself. Also ask about escorted group sizes. Peregrine Adventures is one company operating in Australia that offers Italian itineraries ([peregrine-adventures.com](http://peregrine-adventures.com)).

On self-guided trips, ask if a route manager is available to help with problems. Also ask to see sample notes and mapping – the quality varies. Focus on the detail: lazier walking-tour operators may plot itineraries that use a lot of

tarmac or gravel roads, especially in Tuscany and Umbria. Hidden Italy is a reputable Australian operator ([hiddenitaly.com.au](http://hiddenitaly.com.au)).

Similar travel and transfer issues usually attach to other activity holidays such as riding and painting, although in these areas the choice of operators and destinations is much more limited. Venice is among the most popular places to learn about crafts ranging from glass-blowing to glass-cutting.

Italian activity holidays are many and varied, but here are some ideas for starters.

**1. Walk Umbria's mountains** The hill towns and gentle pastoral countryside of Umbria are well known but Monti Sibillini national park, on the region's eastern flanks, is more of a secret. It has some spectacular mountain scenery ([sibillini.net/en/](http://sibillini.net/en/)).

**2. A thrilling Riva ride** The sleek, wooden-hulled Riva has long been admired by speedboat aficionados; Jeremy Clarkson called it "the most beautiful piece of sculpture in man's entire history". Moored at Salo on Lake Garda, the speedboat has been newly restored for the 2014 season ([rivacharter.com](http://rivacharter.com)).