

The Best of Italy

Italy is so packed with attractions that it's hard to know where to start. But that's where we come in. In this chapter is our personal, opinionated list of what we consider to be Italy's top highlights. Our list will get you started and point you toward some of the possibilities for designing your own vacation. Whether this is your first trip or your 10th, you're bound to come away with your own favorites to add to the list.

1 The Best Travel Experiences

- **Visiting the Art Cities:** When Italy consisted of dozens of principalities, art treasures were concentrated in many small capitals, each blessed with the patronage of a papal representative or ducal family. Consequently, these cities became treasure-troves of exquisite paintings, statues, and frescoes displayed in churches, monasteries, and palaces, whose architects are now world-acclaimed. Although Rome, Florence, and Venice are the best known, you'll find stunning collections in Assisi, Cremona, Genoa, Mantua, Padua, Palermo, Parma, Pisa, Siena, Taormina, Tivoli, Turin, Verona, and Vicenza.
- **Dining Italian Style:** One of the most cherished pastimes of the Italians is eating out. Regardless of how much pizza and lasagna you've had in your life, you'll never taste any better than the real thing in Italy. Each region has its own specialties, some handed down for centuries. If the weather is fine and you're dining outdoors with a view of, perhaps, a medieval church or piazza, you'll find your experience the closest thing to heaven in Italy. *Buon appetito!*
- **Attending Mass in St. Peter's Basilica:** With the exception of some sites in Jerusalem, St. Peter's in the Vatican is Christendom's most visible and important building. The huge size of the church is daunting. For many, attending Mass here is a spiritual highlight of their lives. In addition, many Catholic visitors to Rome await papal audiences every Wednesday morning, when the pope addresses the general public. (Please confirm that Benedict XVI will continue the Wednesday audiences by calling ahead or visiting the Vatican website prior to your visit.) There is a regularly updated list of ceremonies the pope will preside over, including celebrations of Mass, on the Vatican website. If the day is fair, these audiences are sometimes held in St. Peter's Square. Your fellow faithful are likely to come from every corner of the world. See "St. Peter's & the Vatican" in chapter 6.
- **Riding Venice's Grand Canal:** The S-shaped *Canal Grande*, curving for 3.3km (2 miles) along historic buildings and under ornate bridges, is the most romantic waterway in the world. Most first-timers are stunned

by the variety of Gothic and Renaissance buildings, the elaborate styles of which could fill a book on architecture. A ride on the canal will give you ever-changing glimpses of the city's poignant beauty. Your ride doesn't have to be on a gondola; any public *vaporetto* (motorboat) sailing between Venice's rail station and Piazza San Marco will provide a heart-stopping view. See chapter 10.

- **Getting Lost in Venice:** The most obvious means of transport in Venice is by boat; an even more appealing method is on foot, traversing hundreds of canals, large and small, and crossing over the arches of medieval bridges. Getting from one point to another can be like walking through a maze—but you won't be hassled by traffic, and the sense of the city's beauty, timelessness, and slow decay is almost mystical. See chapter 10.
- **Spending a Night at the Opera:** More than 2,000 new operas were staged in Italy during the 18th century, and since then, Italian opera fans have earned a reputation as the most demanding in the world. Venice was the site of Italy's first opera house, the Teatro di San Cassiano (1637), but it eventually gave way to the fabled La Fenice, which burned down in 1996 and was later rebuilt. Milan's **La Scala** is historically the world's most prestigious opera house, especially for bel canto, and has been restored to its former glory. There's also a wide assortment of outdoor settings, such as Verona's Arena, one of the largest surviving amphitheatres.

Suitable for up to 20,000 spectators and known for its fine acoustics, the Arena presents operas in July and August, when moonlight and the perfumed air of the Veneto add to the charm.

- **Shopping Milan:** Milan is one of Europe's hottest fashion capitals. You'll find a range of shoes, clothing, and accessories unequalled anywhere else, except perhaps Paris or London. Even if you weren't born to shop, stroll along the streets bordering Via Montenapoleone and check out the elegant offerings from Europe's most famous designers. See "Milan" in chapter 12.
- **Experiencing the Glories of the Empire:** Even after centuries of looting, much remains of the legendary Roman Empire. Of course, Rome boasts the greatest share (the popes didn't tear down everything to recycle into churches)—you'll find everything from the Roman Forum and the Pantheon to the Colosseum and the Baths of Caracalla. And on the outskirts, the long-buried city of Ostia Antica, the port of ancient Rome, has been unearthed and is remarkable. Other treasures are scattered throughout Italy, especially in Sicily. Hordes of sightseers also descend on Pompeii, the city buried by volcanic ash from Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79, and Herculaneum, buried by lava on that same day. Our favorite spot is Paestum, along Campania's coast; its ruins, especially the Temple of Neptune, are alone worth the trip to Italy. See chapters 6, 15, and 17.

2 The Most Romantic Getaways

- **Todi:** For the ultimate escape, the hilltop of Todi, 203km (126 miles) south of Florence, will transport you

back to the Middle Ages. You can lose yourself in its tangle of ancient streets and wine-dark alleys. Let the sun

shine on you at its central square, where you might seriously contemplate moving and living in a gentler time. See “Spoleto” in chapter 8.

- **Spoleto:** Spoleto is as ancient as the Roman Empire and as timeless as the music presented there every summer during its world-renowned arts festival. The architecture of this quintessential Umbrian hill town is centered on a core of religious buildings from the 13th century. It’s even more romantic during the off season, when the crowds are less dense. See “Spoleto” in chapter 8.
- **Bellagio:** Often called “the prettiest town in Europe,” Bellagio is perhaps the loveliest town in Italy’s beautiful Lake District. Its lakeside promenade, which follows the shores of Lake Como, is fragrant with flowers in bloom. Couples can spend their days exploring the arcaded streets and little shops, visiting lush gardens, and relaxing in the sun. See “Lake Como” in chapter 12.
- **Capri:** Floating amid azure seas south of Naples, Capri is called the “Island

of Dreams.” Everywhere, you’ll find the aroma of lemon trees in bloom. Roman emperors Augustus and Tiberius both went there for R & R, and since the late 1800s celebrities have flocked to Capri for an escape. A boat ride around the island’s rugged coastline is one of our favorite things to do. See “Capri” in chapter 15.

- **Ravello:** It’s small, sunny, and loaded with notable buildings (such as its 1086 cathedral). Despite its choice position on the Amalfi coast, Ravello manages to retain the aura of an old-fashioned village. Famous residents have included writer Gore Vidal. See “Ravello” in chapter 15.
- **Taormina:** This resort, the loveliest place in Sicily, is brimming with regional charm, chiseled stonework, and a sense of the ages. Favored by wealthy Europeans and dedicated artists, especially in midwinter, when the climate is delightful, Taormina is a fertile oasis of olive groves, grapevines, and orchards. Visitors will relish the delights of the sun, the sea, and the medieval setting. See “Taormina” in chapter 17.

3 The Best Museums

- **The Vatican Museums** (Rome): Rambling, disorganized, and poorly labeled they might be, but these buildings are packed with treasures accumulated over the centuries by the popes. There’s the incomparable Sistine Chapel, such priceless ancient Greek and Roman sculptures as *Lacoön* and the *Belvedere Apollo*, buildings whose walls were almost completely executed by Raphael (including his majestic *School of Athens*), and endless collections of art ranging from (very pagan) Greco-Roman antiquities to Christian art by famous European masters. See p. 149.
- **Galleria Borghese** (Rome): One of the world’s great small museums reopened a few years ago after a 14-year restoration that breathed new life into the frescoes and decor of this 1613 palace. That’s merely the backdrop for the collections, which include masterpieces of baroque sculpture by a young Bernini and paintings by Caravaggio and Raphael. See p. 171.
- **National Etruscan Museum** (Rome): Mysterious and, for the most part, undocumented, the Etruscans were the ancestors of the Romans. They left

a legacy of bronze and marble sculpture, sarcophagi, jewelry, and representations of mythical heroes, some of which were excavated at Cerveteri, a stronghold north of Rome. Most startling about the artifacts is their sophisticated, almost mystical sense of design. The Etruscan collection is housed in a papal villa dating from the 1500s. See p. 171.

- **Uffizi Gallery** (Florence): This 16th-century Renaissance palace was the administrative headquarters, or *uffizi* (offices), for the Duchy of Tuscany when the Medicis controlled Florence. It's estimated that up to 90% of Italy's artistic patrimony is stored in this building, the crown jewel of Italy's museums. This is the world's greatest collection of Renaissance paintings. See p. 242.
- **Bargello Museum** (Florence): Originally built as a fortress palace in 1255, this imposing structure is now a vast repository of some of Italy's most important Renaissance sculpture. Donatello's bronze *David* is a remarkable contrast to the world-famous Michelangelo icon. See p. 238.
- **National Gallery of Umbria** (Perugia): Italian Renaissance art has its roots in Tuscan and Umbrian painting from the 1200s. This collection, on the top floor of the Palazzo dei Priori (parts of which date from the 1400s), contains a world-class collection of paintings, most executed in Tuscany or Umbria between the 13th and the 18th centuries. Included are works by Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca, Perugino, Duccio, and Gozzoli, among others. See p. 325.
- **Academy Gallery** (Venice): One of Europe's great museums, this is an incomparable collection of Venetian painting, exhibited chronologically from the 13th to the 18th century. It's one of the most richly stocked art museums in Italy, boasting hundreds of works by Bellini, Carpaccio, Giorgione, Titian, and Tintoretto. See p. 444.
- **Peggy Guggenheim Collection** (Venice): A comprehensive, brilliant modern art collection, assembled by legendary arts patron Peggy Guggenheim, is housed in an unfinished palazzo along the Grand Canal. The collection is a cavalcade of 20th-century art, including works by Max Ernst (one of Ms. Guggenheim's former husbands), Picasso, Braque, Magritte, Giacometti, and Moore. See p. 448.
- **Brera Picture Gallery** (Milan): Milan is usually associated with wealth and corporate power, and those two things can buy a city its fair share of art and culture. The foremost place to see Milan's artistic treasures is the Brera Picture Gallery, whose collection—shown in a 17th-century palace—is especially rich in paintings from the schools of Lombardy and Venice. Three of the most important prizes are Mantegna's *Dead Christ*, Giovanni Bellini's *La Pietà*, and Carpaccio's *St. Stephen Debating*. See p. 533.
- **National Archaeological Museum** (Naples): Naples and the region around it have yielded a wealth of sculptural treasures from the Roman Empire. Many of these riches have been accumulated in a rambling building designed as a barracks for the Neapolitan cavalry in the 1500s. Much of the loot excavated from Pompeii and Herculaneum, as well as the Renaissance collections of the Farnese family, is in this museum, which boasts a trove of Greco-Roman antiquities. See p. 632.

4 The Best Cathedrals

- **St. Peter's Basilica** (Rome): Its roots began with the first Christian emperor, Constantine, in A.D. 324. By 1400, the Roman basilica was in danger of collapsing, prompting the Renaissance popes to commission plans for the largest, most impressive, most jaw-dropping cathedral the world had ever seen. Amid the rich decor of gilt, marble, and mosaics are countless artworks, including Michelangelo's *Pietà*. Other sights here are a small museum of Vatican treasures and the eerie underground grottoes containing the tombs of former popes, including the most recently interred, John Paul II. An elevator ride (or a rigorous climb) up the tower to Michelangelo's glorious dome provides panoramic views of Rome. See p. 148.
- **The Duomo of Florence:** Begun in the late 1200s and consecrated 140 years later, the pink, green, and white marble Duomo was a symbol of Florence's prestige and wealth. It's loaded with world-class art and is one of Italy's largest and most distinctive religious buildings. A view of its red-tiled dome, erected over a 14-year period in what was at the time a radical new design by Brunelleschi, is worth the trip to Florence. Other elements of the Duomo are Giotto's *Campanile* (bell tower) and the octagonal Baptistery (a Romanesque building with bronze doors). See p. 244.
- **The Duomo of Siena:** Begun in 1196, this cathedral is one of the most beautiful and ambitious Gothic churches in Italy, with extravagant zebra-striped bands of marble. Masterpieces here include a priceless pavement of masterful mosaics, an octagonal pulpit carved by master sculptor Nicola Pisano, and the lavishly frescoed Piccolomini Library. See p. 303.
- **Basilica di San Francesco** (Assisi): St. Francis, protector of small animals and birds, was long dead when construction began on this double-tiered showcase of the Franciscan brotherhood. Giotto's celebrated frescoes reached a new kind of figurative realism in Italian art around 1300, long before the masters of the Renaissance carried the technique even further. Consecrated in 1253, the cathedral is one of the highlights of Umbria and the site of many pilgrimages. It took a direct hit from the 1997 earthquakes but has miraculously made a recovery. See p. 332.
- **The Duomo of Orvieto:** A well-designed transition between the Romanesque and Gothic styles, this cathedral was begun in 1290 and completed in 1600. It sheltered an Italian pope (Clement VII) when French soldiers sacked Rome in 1527. Part of the building's mystery derives from Orvieto's role as an Etruscan stronghold long before Italy's recorded history. The cathedral is known for its great fresco cycles by Fra Angelico and Luca Signorelli. See p. 344.
- **St. Mark's Basilica** (Venice): Surely the most exotic and Eastern of the Western world's churches, the onion-domed and mosaic-covered San Marco took much of its inspiration from Constantinople. Somewhere inside the mysterious candlelit cavern of the 1,000-year-old church, which began as the private chapel of the doges, are the remains of St. Mark, patron saint of Venice's ancient maritime republic. See p. 440.

- **The Duomo of Milan:** It took 5 centuries to build this magnificent and ornate Gothic cathedral, the third-largest church in the world. It's marked

by 135 marble spires, a stunning triangular facade, and thousands of statues flanking the massive but airy, almost fanciful exterior. See p. 533.

5 The Best Ruins

- **The Roman Forum (Rome):** Two thousand years ago, most of the known world was directly affected by decisions made in the Roman Forum. Today classicists and archaeologists wander among its ruins, conjuring up the glory that was Rome. What you'll see today is a pale, rubble-strewn version of the site's original majesty—it's now surrounded by modern boulevards packed with whizzing cars. See p. 160.
- **Palatine Hill (Rome):** According to legend, the Palatine Hill was the site where Romulus and Remus (the orphaned infant twins who survived by being suckled by a she-wolf) eventually founded the city. Although Il Palatino is one of the seven hills of ancient Rome, you'll find it hard to distinguish it as such because of the urban congestion rising all around. The site is enhanced by the Farnese Gardens (Orti Farnesiani), laid out in the 1500s on the site of Tiberius's palace. See p. 160.
- **The Colosseum (Rome):** Rome boasts only a handful of other ancient monuments that survive in such well-preserved condition. A massive amphitheater set incongruously amid a maze of modern traffic, the Colosseum was once the setting for gladiator combat, lion-feeding frenzies, and public entertainment whose cruelty was a noted characteristic of the Empire (just ask Russell Crowe). All three of the ancient world's classical styles (Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian) are represented, superimposed in tiers one above the other. See p. 156.
- **Hadrian's Villa (Villa Adriana) (near Tivoli):** Hadrian's Villa slumbered in rural obscurity until the 1500s, when Renaissance popes ordered its excavation. Only then was the scale of this enormous and beautiful villa from A.D. 134 appreciated. Its builder, Hadrian, who had visited almost every part of his empire, wanted to incorporate the wonders of the world into one building site—and he succeeded. See p. 191.
- **Ostia Antica (near Rome):** During the height of the Roman Empire, Ostia ("mouth" in Latin) was the harbor town set at the point where the Tiber flowed into the sea. As Rome declined, so did Ostia; by the early Middle Ages, the town had almost disappeared, its population decimated by malaria. In the early 1900s, archaeologists excavated the ruins of hundreds of buildings, many of which you can view. See p. 192.
- **Herculaneum (Campania):** Legend says that Herculaneum was founded by Hercules. The historical facts tell us that it was buried under rivers of volcanic mud one fateful day in A.D. 79 after the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. Seeping into the cracks of virtually every building, the scalding mud preserved the timbers of hundreds of structures that would otherwise have rotted during the normal course of time. Devote at least 2 hours to seeing some of the best-preserved houses from the ancient world. See "The Environs of Naples: The Phlaegrean Fields & Herculaneum" in chapter 15.

- **Pompeii** (Campania): Once it was an opulent resort filled with 25,000 wealthy Romans. In A.D. 79, the eruption that devastated Herculaneum (above) buried Pompeii under at least 6m (20 ft.) of volcanic ash and pumice stone. Beginning around 1750, Charles of Bourbon ordered the systematic excavation of the ruins—the treasures hauled out sparked a wave of interest in the classical era throughout northern Europe. See “Pompeii” in chapter 15.
- **Paestum** (Campania): Paestum was discovered by accident around 1750 when local bureaucrats tried to build a road across the heart of what had been a thriving ancient city. Paestum originated as a Greek colony around 600 B.C., fell to the Romans in 273 B.C., and declined into obscurity in the final days of the empire. Today amateur archaeologists can follow a well-marked walking tour through the excavations. See “Paestum & Its Glorious Greek Temples” in chapter 15.
- **The Valley of the Temples** (Sicily): Although most of the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento lies in ruins, it is one of Europe’s most beautiful classical sites, especially in February and March when the almond trees surrounding it burst into pink blossoms. One of the site’s five temples dates from as early as 520 B.C.; another (never completed) ranks as one of the largest temples in the ancient world. See “Agrigento & the Valley of the Temples” in chapter 17.
- **Segesta** (Sicily): Even its site is impressive: a rocky outcropping surrounded on most sides by a jagged ravine. Built around 430 B.C. by the Greeks, Segesta’s Doric colonnade is one of the most graceful in the ancient world. The site is stark and mysterious. The temple was probably destroyed by the Saracens (Muslim raiders) in the 11th century. See “Palermo” in chapter 17.
- **Selinunte** (Sicily): The massive columns of Selinunte lie scattered on the ground, as if an earthquake had punished its builders, yet this is one of our favorite ancient ruins in Italy. Around 600 B.C., immigrants from Syracuse built Selinunte into an important trading port. The city was a bitter rival of neighboring Segesta (above) and was destroyed around 400 B.C. and then again in 250 B.C. by the Carthaginians. See “Selinunte” in chapter 17.

6 The Best Winegrowing Regions

- **Latium** (Lazio, outside Rome): The region around Rome is known for predominantly white wines that include Marino, Est! Est!! Est!!!, Colli Albani, and the famous Frascati (“the wine of the popes and the people”). All these are derived almost exclusively from Malvasia and Trebbiano grapes or from combinations of the two. The region’s most famous producers of Frascati are **Fontana Candida**, Via di Fontana Candida 11, 00040 Monte Porzio Catone, Roma (☎ 06-9401881), whose winery, 23km (14 miles) southwest of Rome, was built around 1900; and **Gotto D’Oro—Cantina Sociale di Marino**, Via del Divino Amore 115, 00040 Frattocchie, Roma (☎ 06-93022211; www.gottodoro.it). To arrange visits, contact the **Gruppo Italiano Vini**, Villa Belvedere, 37010 Calmasino, Verona (☎ 045-6269600; www.gruppoitalianovini.com). See chapter 6.
- **Tuscany & Umbria**: Some of Italy’s most scenic vineyards lie nestled among the verdant rolling hills of these two stately regions. In fact, the

most famous kind of wine in Italy (Chianti) is indelibly associated with Tuscany, whereas the (usually white) Orvieto and the (usually red) Torgiano are closely associated with Umbria. One of Tuscany's largest vintners is **Banfi**, Castello Banfi, Sant'Angelo Scalo, Montalcino, 53024 Siena (☎ **0577-840111**; www.castellobanfi.com). Near Siena are two other good choices: **Biondi-Santi**, Loc. Greppo 183, 53024 Montalcino (☎ **0577-848087**), and **Casa Vinicola L. Cecchi**, Loc. Casina dei Ponti 56, 53011 Castellina in Chianti (☎ **0577-54311**). See "The Chianti Road" in chapter 8.

- **Emilia-Romagna:** Composed of two distinct areas (Emilia, to the west of Bologna, around the upriver Po Valley; and Romagna, to the east, centered on the delta of the Po), the region is known to gastronomes as the producer of some of Italy's best food, with wines worthy of its legendary cuisine. Emilia's most famous wine is Lambrusco, 50 million bottles of which are produced every year near Modena and Reggio Emilia. Less well known but also highly rated are the Colli Piacentini wines, of which **Cantine Romagnoli**, Via Genova 20, Villò di Vigolzone 29020 (☎ **0523-870129**; www.cantineromagnoli.it), is a rising star. Wines from Romagna are made from Sangiovese, Trebbiano, and Albana grapes and are well respected, cropping up on wine lists throughout the country. See chapter 9.
- **The Veneto:** The humid flatlands of the eastern Po Valley produce memorable reds and whites in abundance, including everything from soft-white Soaves and Pinot Grigios to red Valpolicellas and merlots. Important vineyards in the region are **Azienda Vinicola Fratelli Fabiano**, Via Verona 6, 37060 Sona, near Verona (☎ **045-6081111**; www.fabiano.it),

and **Fratelli Bolla**, Piazza Cittadella 3, 37122 Verona (☎ **045-8670911**; www.bolla.com). Smaller, but well respected because of recent improvements to its vintages, is **Nino Franco** (known for its sparkling prosecco), in the hamlet of Valdobbiadene, Via Garibaldi 147, 31049 Valdobbiadene, Treviso (☎ **0423-972051**). For information on these and the dozens of other producers in the Veneto, contact the **Azienda di Promozione Turistica**, Via Degli Alpini no. 9, Piazza Bra, 37121 Verona (☎ **045-8068680**). See chapter 11.

- **Trentino–Alto Adige:** The two most important wine-producing regions of northwestern Italy are the Alto Adige (also known as the Bolzano or Sudtirol region) and Trento. The loftier of the two, the Alto Adige, was once part of the Austro-Hungarian province of the South Tirol. More Germanic than Italian, it clings to its Austrian traditions and folklore and grows an Italian version of the Gewürztraminers (a fruity white) that would more often be found in Germany, Austria, and Alsace. Venerable winegrowers include **Alois Lageder** (founded in 1855), Tenuta Louwengang, Vicolo dei Conti 9, 39040 in the hamlet of Magré (☎ **0471-809500**; www.lageder.com), and **Schloss Turmhof**, Via Castello 4, Entiklar, Kurtatsch, 39040 (☎ **0471-880122**; www.tiefenbrunner.com). The Trentino area, a short distance to the south, is one of the leading producers of chardonnay and sparkling wines fermented using methods developed centuries ago. A winery worth a visit is **Cavit Cantina Viticoltori**, Via del Ponte di Ravina 31, 38100 Trento (☎ **0461-381711**; www.cavit.it).
- **Friuli–Venezia Giulia:** This region in the alpine foothills of northeastern Italy produces a light, fruity vintage

that's especially appealing when young. One of the largest and best-respected wineries is **Marco Felluga**, Via Gorizia 121, Gradisca d'Isonzo, 34072 Gorizia (☎ **0481-99164**; www.marcofelluga.it). Another producer known for its high-quality wines is **Eugenio Collavini Vini & Spumanti**, Loc. Gramogliano, Via della Ribolla Gialla 2, 33040 Corno di Rosazzo, Udine (☎ **0432-753222**; www.collavini.it).

- **Lombardy:** The Po Valley has always been known for its flat vistas, mid-summer humidity, fertile soil, and excellent wines. The region produces everything from dry, still reds to sparkling whites with a champagne-like zest. **Guido Berlucchi**, Piazza Duranti 4, Borgonato di Cortefranca, 25040 Brescia (☎ **030-984381**; www.berlucchi.it), one of Italy's largest wineries, is especially welcoming to visitors.
- **The Piedmont:** Reds with rich, complex flavors make up most of the wine output of this high-altitude region near Italy's border with France. One of the most interesting vineyards is in a 15th-century abbey near the hamlet of Alba: **Renato Ratti Cantina**, Abbazia dell'Annunziata, La Morra, 12064 Cuneo (☎ **0173-50185**; www.renato.ratti.com). See chapter 13.
- **Campania:** The wines produced in the harsh, hot landscapes of Campania, around Naples in southern Italy, seem stronger, rougher, and, in many

cases, more powerful than those grown in gentler climes. Among the most famous are the Lacryma Christi (Tears of Christ), a white that grows in the volcanic soil near Naples, Herculaneum, and Pompeii; Taurasi, a potent red; and Greco di Tufo, a pungent white laden with the odors of apricots and apples. One of the most frequently visited vineyards is **Mastroberardino**, Via Manfredi 75–81, Atripalda, 83042 Avellino (☎ **0825-614111**; www.mastro.it). See chapter 15.

- **Sicily:** Because of its hot climate and volcanic soil, Sicily is home to countless vineyards, many of which produce only simple table wines. Of the better vintages, the best-known wine is Marsala, a dessert wine produced in both amber and ruby tones. Its production was given a great boost by the British, whose fleet paid frequent calls in Sicily throughout England's Age of Empire. Lord Nelson was an avid connoisseur, encouraging its production and spurring local vintners to produce large quantities. See chapter 17.
- **Marsala:** You can also visit the best wineries in Marsala: **Cantina Pellegrino**, Via del Fante 37–39, 91025 Marsala (☎ 0923-719911; www.carlopedellegrino.it); **Rallo**, Via Florio 3, 91025 Marsala (☎ 0923-721633); and **Cantone Florio**, Via Florio 1, 91025 Marsala (☎ 0923-781111).

7 The Best Luxury Hotels

- **Hotel Eden** (Rome; ☎ **06-478121**; www.hotel-eden.it): The Eden offers great service and plush comfort, but without all the ostentation of Rome's grand hotels. Spacious, elegant guest rooms offer panoramic views over the Eternal City, and the Eden offers other perks such as a health club and

one of the city's best restaurants. See p. 109.

- **Hotel de Russie** (Rome; ☎ **800/323-7500** in North America, or 06-328881; www.roccofortehotels.com): Opulently furnished, this chic boutique hotel enjoys a spectacular location in a setting of terraced gardens

near Rome's Piazza del Popolo. About three-quarters of the guest rooms are done in a stark, striking contemporary minimalist style. All are incredibly comfortable and offer lots of high-tech gadgets and thoughtful touches. See p. 116.

- **The Inn at the Spanish Steps** (Rome; ☎ 06-69925657; www.atspanishsteps.com): This intimate, upscale inn is a real find. The former Roman residence of Hans Christian Andersen has been transformed into a small inn of charm and grace, with each bedroom furnished with an authentic period decor and modern comforts. See p. 116.
- **Hotel Regency** (Florence; ☎ 055-245247; www.regency-hotel.com): An intimate and luxurious hideaway in a tranquil part of Florence, this hotel is filled with stained glass, paneled walls, and reproduction antiques. The exquisite guest rooms boast thoughtful touches such as custom mattresses, double-glazed windows, thick carpeting, coffered or beamed ceilings, rich fabrics, and the most fabulous marble bathrooms in town. See p. 218.
- **Villa San Michele** (Fiesole, near Florence; ☎ 800/237-1236 in the U.S., or 055-59451; www.orient-express-hotels.com): This former 15th-century monastery is set behind a facade reputedly designed by Michelangelo. Brigitte Bardot chose it for one of her honeymoons (no one remembers with which husband). With a decor no set designer could duplicate, it evokes the charm of an aristocratic villa. See p. 265.
- **Certosa di Maggiano** (Siena; ☎ 0577-288180; www.certosadimaggiano.it): This early-13th-century Certosinian monastery has been impeccably restored and converted into an upscale Relais & Châteaux inn. The individually decorated guest rooms are spacious, with antiques, art objects, and sumptuous beds; one has a private walled garden. See p. 306.
- **Cipriani** (Venice; ☎ 041-5207744; www.hotelcipriani.com): This exclusive, elegant hotel is situated in a 1.2-hectare (3-acre) garden on the isolated Isola della Giudecca, removed from the tourist bustle of Venice. It offers chic, contemporary surroundings; sumptuous guest rooms; and a wealth of recreational facilities, including an Olympic-size pool, a first-rate health club, and Venice's only tennis court. Service is the best in town, with two employees for every room. See p. 421.
- **Gritti Palace** (Venice; ☎ 800/325-3535 in the U.S., or 041-794611; www.hotelgrittivenice.com): The Gritti, in a stately, central Grand Canal setting, is the renovated palazzo of 15th-century doge Andrea Gritti. It's quite formal, and it simply oozes glamour and history. Expect superb service, and elegant rooms with nice touches such as hypoallergenic pillows, bottled water, two-line phones, and marble bathrooms with deep soaking tubs. See p. 403.
- **Four Seasons Hotel Milano** (Milan; ☎ 02-77088; www.fourseasons.com): The building was first a 15th-century monastery, then the residence of the Habsburg-appointed governor of northern Italy in the 1850s. The Four Seasons chain has created one of Italy's finest hotels, incorporating the medieval facade, many of the frescoes and columns, and the original monastic details into a modern edifice accented with stone floors, pearwood cabinetry, Murano chandeliers, and acres of Fortuny fabrics. The guest rooms are cool, sleek, and spacious, with a sense of understated luxury and state-of-the-art bathrooms. Service is impeccable. See p. 519.

- **Grand Hotel Villa d'Este** (Cernobbio; ☎ 031-3481; www.villadeste.it): Built in 1568, this palace in the Lake District is one of Europe's finest resort hotels. Step inside, and you're surrounded by frescoed ceilings, gorgeous antiques, and other exquisite details. Four magnificently landscaped hectares (10 acres), parts of which have been nurtured since the 1500s, surround the hotel. Guests enjoy dining on outdoor terraces, swimming in the gorgeous pools, using the health club and reveling in spa treatments, and much more. Cool breezes are provided by nearby Lake Como. See p. 565.
- **Hotel Splendido and Splendido Mare** (Portofino; ☎ 800/223-6800 in the U.S., or 0185-267801; www.orient-expresshotels.com): Built as a monastery in the 14th century and abandoned because of attacks by North African pirates, this monument was rescued during the 19th century by an Italian baron, who converted it into a summer home for his family. The posh hillside retreat on the Italian Riviera now accommodates a sophisticated crowd, including many film stars. The views over the sea are stunning; you can enjoy the hotel's own lovely pool, or the staff will take you by boat to a private cove with changing cabins and lounge chairs. See p. 617.
- **Grand Hotel Quisisana Capri** (Capri; ☎ 081-8370788; www.quisi.com): This is the grande dame of Capri's resort hotels, with glorious views, a posh style, and supremely comfortable rooms. See p. 669.
- **Hotel di San Pietro** (near Positano; ☎ 089-875455; www.ilsanpietro.it): The only marker identifying this cliff-side hotel is a 15th-century chapel set beside the winding road. The hotel doesn't advertise and offers a quiet place to escape from it all, but this Relais & Châteaux property, with its gorgeous views, is the most luxurious retreat in the south of Italy. Strands of bougainvillea twine around the dramatically terraced white exterior walls; the spacious rooms are super-glamorous. An elevator takes you down to the cliff ledges to a private beach. See p. 677.
- **Palazzo San Domenico** (Taormina; ☎ 0942-613111): This is the grande dame of all of Sicily's hotels and one of the greatest in Italy. It's a virtual museum, a national monument, and one of the most elegant, comfortable, and tasteful hotels in the south of Italy. It originated in the 14th century as a monastery. See p. 722.

8 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- **La Residenza Hotel** (Rome; ☎ 06-4880789; www.hotel-la-residenza.com): This town-house hotel, close to Via Veneto, is elegantly old-fashioned and homey. With its ivy-covered courtyard, it is a converted villa with spacious and tastefully furnished guest rooms. See p. 110.
- **Hotel Bellettini** (Florence; ☎ 055-213561): If you're looking for a place with *A Room with a View* atmosphere, head for this Renaissance palazzo midway between the Duomo and the rail station. It's a family-run affair with an old-time atmosphere evoked by terra-cotta floors and stained-glass windows. The rooms are a bit plain but very comfortable. See p. 214.
- **Palazzo Ravizza** (Siena; ☎ 0577-280462; www.palazzoravizza.it): Right in the heart of Siena, a short walk from Piazza del Campo, you can stay in an elegant building that was converted from a 19th-century

palace. Every guest room has a few antiques along with ceiling frescoes. See p. 310.

- **La Residenza** (Venice; ☎ 041-5285315; www.venicelaresidenza.com): In a 14th-century building that looks like a miniature Doge's Palace, this little hotel is on a residential square. You'll enter through an enormous salon filled with antiques, 300-year-old paintings, and some of the most marvelously preserved walls in Venice. The guest rooms aren't as grand, but they're comfortable and offer remarkably good value for pricey Venice. See p. 414.
- **Hotel Menardi** (Cortina d'Ampezzo; ☎ 0436-2400; www.hotelménardi.it): Built a century ago, this family-run alpine inn is adorable with its

wooden balconies and shutters and blazing fireplaces. Its rear windows open onto a flowery meadow and a view of the Dolomite peaks. The Menardi is a great buy in a high-priced resort town. See p. 508.

- **Victoria Hotel** (Turin; ☎ 011-5611909; www.hotelvictoria-torino.com): One of Turin's best hotel buys, the Victoria has the distinct flavor of a British manor. You get touches of luxury and even a private garden. See p. 582.
- **Hotel La Villarosa** (Ischia; ☎ 081-991316): In a semitropical garden setting, this is the island's finest pensione. It's like a Mediterranean-style country villa with antiques and tiles adorning bright, airy rooms. See p. 656.

9 The Best Restaurants

- **Sapori del Lord Byron** (Rome; ☎ 06-3613041): The restaurant of the dignified Lord Byron Hotel, in an upscale residential neighborhood a short drive from the center of Rome, is one of Italy's best. There are places in Rome with better views, but not with such an elegant setting. The service is impeccable, and the menu varies according to what's in season. See p. 142.
- **La Terrazza** (Rome; ☎ 06-478121): You get two winning elements here: some of the finest cuisine in Rome and a panoramic view toward Michelangelo's dome of St. Peter's. The constantly changing menu takes advantage of the best seasonal ingredients, and the chef constantly dazzles discerning palates with new taste sensations. This prestigious restaurant is located in the Hotel Eden. See p. 128.
- **Cibrèò** (Florence; ☎ 055-2341100): Fabio Picchi, the chef-owner, serves the most innovative cuisine in

Florence. Cibrèò consists of a restaurant, a less formal trattoria, and a cafe/bar across the street. The impossibly old-fashioned small kitchen doesn't have a grill and doesn't turn out pastas; it specializes in sophisticated creations based on age-old Tuscan recipes with a twist. Don't miss the flourless chocolate cake. See p. 231.

- **Antica Trattoria Botteganova** (outside Siena; ☎ 0577-284230): On the road leading north of Siena to Chianti, just outside the city walls, lies this outstanding restaurant. Chef Michele Sonentino gives standard Italian dishes a modern touch and uses the best seasonal ingredients from the Tuscan countryside. Try his tortelli stuffed with pecorino cheese and served with a hot parmigiano cheese sauce and truffled cream, and sample a regional vintage from the fine wine cellar. See p. 277.
- **San Domenico** (Imola, outside Bologna; ☎ 0542-29000): Foodies

from all over Europe flock to the town of Imola to visit this, our pick as Italy's best restaurant. Convenient to Bologna and Ravenna, San Domenico features a cuisine that seems to feature modern French influences. But owner Gian Luigi Morini claims that his heavenly offerings are nothing more than adaptations of festive regional dishes—they're just lighter, more subtle, and served in manageable portions. Enjoy a vintage from one of Italy's finest wine cellars to accompany your memorable meal here. Simply marvelous! See p. 350.

- **Harry's Bar** (Venice; ☎ 041-5285777): It's legendary, it's light-hearted, and it's fun. Made famous by Ernest Hemingway, Harry's Bar still serves sublime food in the formal dining room upstairs. The Bellini, peach juice with *prosecco* (Italian sparkling wine), was born here. See p. 426.
- **Antico Martini** (Venice; ☎ 041-5224121): Founded in 1720 as a spot to enjoy the new trend of drinking coffee, this restaurant is one of the best in Venice. Replete with paneled walls and glittering chandeliers, the Martini specializes in Venetian cuisine. See p. 427.
- **Ristorante Il Desco** (Verona; ☎ 045-595358): Set in a former

palazzo, this restaurant is the best in the Veneto region of northeastern Italy. Its culinary repertoire emphasizes a *nuova cucina* (nouvelle cuisine) that makes use of the freshest ingredients. The wine selections are excellent. See p. 490.

- **Restaurant Joia** (Milan; ☎ 02-29522124): The vegetarian dishes here are among the best in Italy, but Swiss chef Pietro Leemann also excels in seafood. This is a hot dining ticket in Italy's city of fashion. See p. 528.
- **Vecchia Lugana** (Sirmione; ☎ 030-919012): Lake Garda's finest dining choice is outside this resort. Visitors from all over northern Italy drive here for a top culinary experience in which the chef is known for his deft use of market-fresh ingredients. See p. 560.
- **La Cantinella** (Naples; ☎ 081-7648684): The only Michelin-starred restaurant in Naples, La Cantinella serves some of the best and most refined seafood in Campania. Opening onto the bay of Santa Lucia, this will be the highlight of your culinary tour of the area. Time-tested Neapolitan classics are served, along with an array of more imaginative dishes. Grilled fish can be prepared as you like it—and chances are, you'll like it a lot. See p. 672.

10 The Best Buys

- **Ceramics:** The town of Faenza, in Emilia-Romagna, has been the center of pottery making, especially majolica, since the Renaissance. Majolica, also known as faience, is a type of hand-painted, glazed, and heavily ornamented earthenware. Of course, you don't have to go to Faenza to buy it because shops throughout the country carry it. Tuscany and

Umbria are also known for their earthenware pottery, carried by many shops in Rome and Florence.

- **Fashion:** Italian fashion is world-renowned. Pucci and Valentino led the parade, to be followed by Armani, Missoni, Gucci, Versace, and Ferre. Following World War II, Italian design began to compete seriously against the French fashion monopoly.

Today Italian designers such as Krizia are among the arbiters of the world fashion scene. Milan dominates with the largest selection of boutiques, followed by Rome and Florence. Ironically, a lot of “French” fashion is now designed and manufactured in Italy, in spite of what the label says.

- **Glass:** Venetian glass, ranging from the delicate to the grotesque, is world famous. In Venice you’ll find literally hundreds of stores peddling Venetian glass in a wide range of prices. Here’s the surprise: A great deal of Venetian glass today is manufactured not on Murano (an island in the Venetian lagoon) but in the Czech Republic. That doesn’t mean that the glass is unworthy. Many factories outside Italy turn out high-quality glass products that are then shipped to Murano, where many so-called glass factories aren’t factories at all but storefronts selling this imported “Venetian” glass. See “Shopping” in chapter 10.
- **Gold:** The tradition of shaping jewelry out of gold dates from the time of the Etruscans, and this ancient tradition is going strong today, with artisans still toiling in tiny studios and workshops. Many of the designs are based on ancient Roman originals. Of course, dozens of jewelers don’t follow tradition at all but design original and often daring pieces. Many shops will even melt down your old gold jewelry and refashion it into something more modern.
- **Lace:** For centuries, Italy has been known for its exquisite and delicate lace, fashioned into everything from women’s undergarments to heirloom tablecloths. Florence long ago distinguished itself for the *punto Firenze* (Florentine stitch) made by cloistered nuns, although this tradition has waned. Venetian lace is even more famous, including some of the finest products in the world, especially *tombolo* (pillow lace), macramé, and an expensive form of lace known as *chiacchierino*. Of course, the market is also flooded with cheap machine-made stuff, which a trained eye can quickly spot. Although some pieces, such as a bridal veil, might cost hundreds of euros, you’ll often find reasonably priced collars, handkerchiefs, and doilies in Venice and Florence boutiques. See “Shopping” in chapters 7 and 10.
- **Leather:** The Italians craft the finest leather in the world. From boots to luggage, from leather clothing to purses (or wallets), Italian cities—especially Rome, Florence, Venice, and Milan—abound in leather shops selling quality goods. This is one of Italy’s best values, in spite of the substandard work that’s now appearing. If you shop carefully, you can find lots of quality handcrafted leather products.
- **Prints & Engravings:** Wood engravings, woodcuts, mezzotints, copper engravings—you name it and you’ll find it, especially in Rome and Florence. Of course, you have to be a careful shopper. Some prints are genuine antiques and works of rare art, but others are rushed off the assembly line and into the shops.
- **Religious Objects & Vestments:** The religious objects industry in Italy is big and bustling, centered mostly in the Vatican area in Rome. The biggest concentration of shops is near the Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva. These shops have it all, from cardinals’ birettas and rosaries to religious art and vestments.