1 The Best of Northern Italy

Northern Italy's riches are vast, varied, and yours to discover, from art-packed museums and mosaicked cathedrals to Roman ruins and hill towns amid vineyards that produce some of Europe's best wines. You can dine at refined restaurants that casually flaunt their Michelin star ratings, or chow down with the town priest and police chief at *osterie* (small local eateries) that have spent generations perfecting traditional recipes. You can spend the night in a sumptuous Renaissance villa on Lake Como in the Alpine foothills where Napoléon once stayed (the Villa d'Este), or in a converted 17th-century Venetian palazzo where the room opens directly onto the Grand Canal but costs a mere $109 (the Hotel Galleria). Here's a short list of the best of what northern Italy has to offer.

1 The Best Travel Experiences

- **Gondola Ride in Venice:** Yes, it's hokey. Yes, it's way overpriced. But when it comes down to it, there's nothing quite so romantic after a long Venetian dinner as a ride on one of these long black skiffs, settling back into the plush seats with that special someone and a bottle of wine and sliding through the waters of Venice's back canals guided by the expert oar of a gondolier. See p. 78.
- **A Day Among the Islands of the Venetian Lagoon:** Venice's ferry system extends outside the city proper to a series of other inhabited islands in the lagoon. First stop, Murano, a village where the famed local glassblowing industry began and where its largest factories and best artisans still reside. Not only can you tour a glass factory (complete with hard sell in the display room at the end), but you'll discover a pair of lovely churches, one hung with paintings by Giovanni Bellini, Veronese, and Tintoretto, the other a Byzantine-Romanesque masterpiece of decoration. The isle of Burano is a colorful fishing village with an ancient lace-making tradition and houses in a variety of super-saturated hues. Nearby, lonely Torcello may have been one of the first lagoon islands settled, but it's long been almost abandoned, home to a straggly vineyard, reed-banked canals, the fine Cipriani restaurant, and a stunning Byzantine cathedral swathed in mosaics (see "The Best Churches," below). Time it right and you'll be riding the last ferry back from Torcello into Venice proper as the sun sets and lights up the lagoon waters. See p. 151.
- **Cruising the Brenta Canal:** The lazy Brenta Canal, lacing its way into the Veneto from Venice's lagoon, has long been the Hamptons of Venice, where the city's nobility and merchant princes have kept summer villas. From the massive, palatial Villa Pisani, with its elaborate gardens, to the Villa Foscari, designed by Palladio himself, most of these villas span the 16th to 19th centuries and are open to

visitors. In the past few years, a few have even been opened as elegant hotels. There are two ways to tour the Brenta: on a leisurely full-day cruise between Padua and Venice, stopping to tour several villas along the way with an optional fish lunch; or by driving yourself along the banks, which allows you to pop into the villas you are most interested in—plus you can pull over at any grassy embankment for a picnic lunch on the canal. See p. 168.

- **Driving the Great Dolomite Road:** From the Adige Valley outside Bozen (Bolzano) across to the ski resort of Cortina d'Ampezzo runs 110km (68 miles) of twisting, winding, switchbacked highway called the Great Dolomite Road, which wends its way around some of the most dramatic mountain scenery in Italy. The Dolomiti are craggier and sheerer than the Alps, and as this road crawls around the peaks and climbs over the passes, one breathtaking panorama after another opens before you, undulating to the distant Po plains to the south and to the mighty Swiss Alps to the north. See p. 232.
- **Riding the Cable Cars over Mont Blanc:** There are not many more dramatic trips in Europe than this one, where a series of cable cars and gondolas rise from Courmayeur in the Valle d'Aosta to the 3,300m (11,000-foot) Punta Helbronner from which the icy vistas spread over Mont Blanc's flank in one direction and across to Monte Cervina (the Matterhorn) in the other. It is here that the true thrill ride begins as you clamber into a four-seat enclosed gondola that dangles from a trio of stout cables some 2.4km (1½ miles) above the deep fissures of the Vallée Blanche glacier. It takes half an hour to cross to Aiguille du Midi on French soil—the longest cable car ride in the world not supported by pylons. From here, you can take a jaunt down into France's charming Chamonix if you'd like, or turn around to head back into Italian territory, perhaps stopping at the Alpine Garden two-thirds of the way back to Courmayeur to sun yourself and admire the wildflowers. See p. 365.
- **Hiking the Cinque Terre:** At the southern end of the Italian Riviera lies a string of former pirate coves called the Cinque Terre. These five fishing villages are linked by a local train line; a meandering trail that clambers over headlands, plunges amid olive groves and vineyards, and skirts cliff edges above the glittering Ligurian Sea and hidden scraps of beach; and an excellent communal white wine. Though tourism is discovering this magical corner of Italy, there are as yet no big resort hotels or overdevelopment; just trattorie on the tiny harbors and houses and apartments converted into small family hotels and short-term rental units. It takes a full, long day to hike from one end to the other, or you can simply walk the stretches you prefer (conveniently, the trails get progressively easier from north to south) and use the cheap train to connect to the other towns. Pause as you like in the *osterie* and bars of each town to sample the dry Cinque Terre white wine and refresh yourself for the next stretch. See p. 410.

2 The Best Museums

- **Galleria dell'Accademia** (Venice): The single most important gallery of Venetian painting and one of Italy's top museums was founded in 1750 and gorgeously installed in this trio of Renaissance buildings by Napoléon himself in 1807. (Napoléon swelled the collections

with altarpieces confiscated from churches and monasteries he suppressed.) The works, spanning the 14th through 18th centuries, include masterpieces by all the local, Northern Italian greats—the Bellini clan, Paolo Veneziano, Carpaccio, Giorgione, Mantegna, Piero della Francesca, Lorenzo Lotto, Palma il Vecchio, Paolo Veronese, Titian, Tintoretto, Tiepolo, and Canaletto. See p. 128.

- **Collezione Peggy Guggenheim** (Venice): The Guggenheim family was one of the 20th century's greatest art patrons. Peggy not only amassed a stunning collection of modern art, she even married Max Ernst. Her half-finished 18th-century palazzo on the Grand Canal is now installed with her collections, works by Picasso, Pollock (an artist Peggy "discovered"), Magritte, Dalí, Miró, Brancusi, Kandinsky, and Marini. See p. 128.
- **Museo Archeologico dell'Alto Adige** (Bozen): Bozen's major sight is a high-tech, modern museum crafted around one of the most important archaeological finds of the past 50 years. When hikers first discovered the body of Ötzi high in the Alps at the Austrian border, everyone thought it was a mountaineer who succumbed to the elements. It turned out to be a 5,300-year-old hunter whose body, clothing, and tools had been preserved intact by the ice in which he was frozen. The Ice Man has done more to give us glimpses into daily life in the Stone Age than any other find, and the museum does a great job of relaying all that scientists are still learning from him. See p. 216.
- **Pinacoteca di Brera** (Milan): One of Italy's finest collections of art, from medieval to modern, is housed in a 17th-century Milanese palazzo. Venice's Accademia may have a richer collection of Venetian art, but the Brera has a broader collection of masterpieces from across northern and central Italy. As with the Accademia, the Brera started as a warehouse for artworks Napoléon looted from churches, monasteries, and private collections. There are masterpieces from Mantegna, Raphael, Piero della Francesca, the Bellinis, Signorelli, Titian, Tintoretto, Reni, Caravaggio, Tiepolo, and Canaletto, and great works by 20th-century geniuses such as Umberto Boccioni, Gino Severini, Giorgio Morandi, and Giorgio de Chirico. They even throw in some works by Rembrandt, Goya, and Reynolds. See p. 265.
- **Museo Egizio & Galleria Sabauda** (Turin): The world's first real museum of Egyptian artifacts remains one of the most important outside Cairo and London's British Museum. The history between Italy and Egypt dates back to Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, though this collection of 30,000 pieces was largely amassed by the Piedmont Savoy kings. The exhibits range from a papyrus *Book of the Dead* to a full 15th-century B.C. temple to fascinating objects from everyday life. But Egypt isn't all; upstairs the Galleria Sabauda displays the Savoy's amazing collection of Flemish and Dutch paintings by Van Dyck, Van Eyck, Rembrandt, Hans Memling, and Van der Weyden. See p. 339.

3 The Best Churches

- **Basilica di San Marco** (Venice): No church in Europe is more lavishly decorated, more exquisitely mosaicked, more glittering with gold than Venice's San Marco. Built in the 11th century, the church has as its guiding architectural and decorative principles Byzantine style,

but more than 6 centuries of expansion and decoration have left behind Romanesque and Gothic touches as well. The interior is encrusted with more than 40,000 square feet of gold-backed mosaics crafted between the 12th and 17th centuries, some based on cartoons by Tintoretto, Veronese, and Titian. The uneven floor is a mosaic of marble chips in swirling patterns; the Pala d'Oro altarpiece a gem-studded golden trophy from Constantinople. Stairs lead up to a view over the piazza from atop the atrium, where visitors get to see up close both the mosaics and the original *Triumphal Quadriga,* four massive bronze horses probably cast in the 2nd century A.D. See p. 120.

- **Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari** (Venice): "I Frari" is named for the Franciscan "brothers" who founded this Gothic giant in 1250, rebuilt it between 1330 and 1453, and made it one of the most art-bedecked churches in Venice, filled with works of art by Donatello, Titian, Giovanni Bellini, and Canova. See p. 136.
- **Cattedrale di Torcello** (Torcello, Venice): Venice's oldest church is pretty much all that remains of one of the lagoon's earliest settlements on the now all-but-abandoned island of Torcello, north of what is now the city of Venice. Santa Maria Assunta was begun in the 7th century, its interior slathered with glittering gold-backed Byzantine mosaics in the 11th and 12th centuries, precursors to those that would later decorate Venice's San Marco. The inside of the entrance wall is filled with a massive *Last Judgment.* This was a common device in medieval churches: placing a scene depicting the heavenly rewards that await the faithful and the horribly inventive, gruesome punishments for the damned in hell above the door from which parishioners would exit—sort of a final sermon at the end of the service to remind everyone of what was at stake and keep them holy until the next Sunday. The bell tower offers a pretty panorama over the sparsely populated island and surrounding lagoon. See p. 152.
- **Basilica di Sant'Antonio** (Padua): Think of all the people of Italian descent you know or have heard of named Tony. You're starting to get an idea of how popular the 13th-century Portuguese-born St. Anthony is among Italians. The patron of the lost lived in Padua, and when he died in 1231, the citizenry quickly canonized the man and began building this huge church to honor his remains, and finished it in a remarkably short 76 years. The style in 13th-century Veneto was still largely Byzantine, so the brick basilica is topped by an octet of domes and twin minaret-style bell towers. Donatello, whose *Gattamelata* (the first large equestrian bronze cast since ancient Roman times) sits out front, even crafted the high altar, but that is virtually ignored by the flocks of faithful in favor of a chapel off the left aisle. This is where a constant stream of supplicants file past the saint's tomb to press their palms against it and leave flowers, small gifts, pictures, and written prayers asking for him to help them find everything from lost health to lost love to lost children (some even pray for material objects, but rarely). *Il Santo's* robes are also preserved here, as are the silver-tongued preacher's miraculously preserved jawbone, vocal chords, and tongue, all kept in a chapel behind the high altar. See p. 164.
- **Basilica San Zeno Maggiore** (Verona): Verona is home to perhaps the greatest Romanesque

basilica in all of northern Italy, a stunning example of the early medieval sculptor's art. Between the 9th and 12th centuries, architects raised the church, crated the massive rose window *Wheel of Fortune* in the facade, and hired artists who revived the ancient art of casting in bronze to create magnificent doors set with 48 wonderfully minimalist panels telling stories from the Bible as well as the life of St. Zeno. The stone reliefs flanking them date to the 12th century. The 12th- to 14th-century frescoes inside lead up to Andrea Mantegna's 15th-century altarpiece. See p. 196.

- **Basilica** (Aquileia): Tiny Aquileia was a major town in Roman times, and wasted no time in building a church in A.D. 313 just as soon as Constantine the Great declared the religion legal in the empire. The town was a hotbed of early Christianity, hosting a theological conference in 381 attended by the likes of Jerome and Ambrose. Though the church was rebuilt and frescoed in the 11th and 12th centuries, the original flooring has been uncovered and is now on display, a marvelous and precious mosaic of complicated paleo-Christian and pagan iconography. A crypt retains more mosaics from the 4th century, plus even earlier ones from a pagan house dating to the early 1st century A.D. See p. 248.
- **Tempietto Longobardo** (Cividale): This fantastic 8th-century church hollowed out of the cliff face over Cividale's mighty gorge gives us a precious glimpse into true Lombard style, before the High Middle Ages began to mix and mingle the cultural groups of northern Italy. Flanking the entranceway are statues and decorations carved directly out of the native limestone in an early Lombard Romanesque style. See p. 254.
- **Duomo** (Milan): The greatest Gothic cathedral south of the Alps, a massive pile of pinnacles and buttresses, was begun in the 14th century and took 500 years to complete—but it remained true to its original, Gothic styling. It's the fourth-largest church in the world, its cavernous interior peppered with statues and monuments. The highlight, though, is the chance to climb up onto the eaves, weave your way through the statue-peaked buttresses, and clamber up onto the very rooftop to gaze out across the hazy city and beyond to the Alps rising from the lakes north of the Lombard plain. See p. 264.
- **Certosa** (Pavia, outside Milan): Though Milan's Sforza family completed this Carthusian monastery, called a charterhouse, it's really the late-14th-century brainchild of the Visconti clan. The massive building, rich with Lombardesque decorations and sculptures, was commissioned by Gian Galeazzo in 1396 as thanks that his second wife was delivered from illness and bore him heirs. It became the repository of funerary monuments to Milan's greatest rulers and despots—though the finest, to Ludovico il Moro and his wife Beatrice d'Este, neither houses worthy's remains, nor was it even ever supposed to be here (cash-poor Santa Maria della Grazie in Milan—the one with Leonardo's *The Last Supper*—sold it to the charterhouse). This is still a working monastery, now hosting a Cistercian community, and you can tour an example of the little houses they occupy (a far cry from the cramped cells one pictures monks enduring) and purchase their own beauty products and liqueurs. See p. 289.

- **Cappella Colleoni** (Bergamo): The mercenary commander Bartolomeo Colleoni, a son of Bergamo, fought so gloriously on behalf of Venice that he was actually given the generalship over the entire Venetian army (unheard of in such a suspicious republic formed of interlocking check-and-balance branches of power). They commissioned Verrocchio to erect a statue in his honor in Venice, and gave Colleoni control of his hometown. He was foresighted enough to commission his own tomb, which was created in the late 15th century as a separate chapel to the cathedral. Colleoni invited one of the great sculptors decorating the magnificent charterhouse at Pavia to carve on his tomb a complex series of panels and statues whose symbolisms interweave in medieval style grafted onto Renaissance architecture. In the 18th century, Tiepolo was brought in to fresco the ceiling. See p. 295.
- **Basilica di Superga** (Turin): Turin got a taste of the extravagant southern Italian baroque in the early 18th century when Sicilian architect Juvarra set up shop in town. After the Virgin saved the city from French troops, the Savoys dutifully erected a church in her honor, and hired Juvarra for the job. He married early neoclassical ideals of proportion with the theatricality of the baroque to build this magnificent balcony overlooking the Alps in the hills above Turin. Vittorio Amadeo II liked his results so much he decided to turn it into the Royal Tomb, wedging monuments to various Savoys into the chapels and the underground Crypt of Kings. See p. 341.
- **Sacra di San Michele** (outside Turin): Its stony bulk, elaborate carvings, and endless staircases, all towering over the valley from a Monte Pirchiriano perch, give this abbey a movie-set air. Its setting is more appropriate to a Tibetan monastery than a Christian abbey. The gravity-defying way it hangs halfway off the cliff face is all the more remarkable when you consider that the engineering is purely medieval—started in 983 and rebuilt in the 1100s. Before the Savoys were the bigwig kings they became, their early members were buried here, in rock-carved chapels under the partly frescoed main church interior and where today, free concerts are held April through September, with a range of offerings, from Gregorian chants and Celtic music to classical pieces and gospel hymns. See p. 347.

4 The Best Artistic Masterpieces

- **Scuola Grande di San Rocco** (Venice): When the Scuola di San Rocco (a sort of gentlemen's club/lay fraternity) held an art competition in 1564, the Renaissance master Tintoretto pulled a fast one on his rivals. Instead of preparing a sketch for the judges like everyone else, he went ahead and finished a painting, secretly installing it in the ceiling of the Sala dell'Albergo off the second-floor hall. The judges were suitably impressed, and Tintoretto got the job. Over the next 23 years, the artist filled the *scuola*'s two floors with dozens of works. The *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* on the ground floor is superb, but his masterpiece hangs in that tiny Sala dell'Albergo, a huge *Crucifixion* that wraps around the walls and ranks among the greatest and most moving works in the history of Venetian art. The San Rocco baroque

orchestra holds excellent regular chamber concerts in this fantastic setting; for info, contact ✆ **041-962-999** or www.musicinvenice.com. See p. 129.

- **Veronese's *Feast in the House of Levi,* Accademia** (Venice): Paolo Veronese was a master of human detail, often peopling his large canvases with a rogues' gallery of characters. When Veronese unveiled his *Last Supper,* puritanical church bigwigs nearly had a conniption. They threatened him with charges of blasphemy for portraying this holiest of moments as a rousing, drunken banquet that more resembled paintings of Roman orgies than the Last Supper. Veronese quickly retitled the work *Feast in the House of Levi,* a rather less holy subject at which Jesus and Apostles were also present, and the mollified censors let it pass. See p. 128.
- **Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel** (Padua): Padua's biggest sight by far is one of the two towering fresco cycles created by Giotto (the other one is in Assisi), the artist who did more than any other to lift painting from its static Byzantine stupor and set it on the naturalistic, expressive, dynamic Gothic road toward the Renaissance. From 1303 to 1306, Giotto covered the walls of this private chapel with a range of emotion, using foreshortening, modeled figures, and saturated colors, revolutionizing the concept of art and kicking off the modern era in painting. The chapel as a whole is breathtaking, depicting scenes from the life of Mary and Jesus in 38 panels, and has recently emerged from a 3-year cleaning. See p. 161.
- **Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper,* Santa Maria delle Grazie** (Milan): This tempera fresco looks somehow more like a snapshot of a real dinner table than the staged holy event that Last Suppers usually appear to be—instead of a hovering halo, Jesus' holy nimbus is suggested by the window behind his head. Leonardo was as much a scientist and inventor as he was painter, and unfortunately for us he was wont to try new painting techniques directly on his major commissions rather than testing them fully first. When painting one fresco in Florence, he used wax in the pigments, but when it was drying too slowly he put heaters along the wall, and the whole thing simply melted. Well, whatever chemistry he was experimenting with in Milan when Ludovico Il Moro hired him to decorate the refectory (dining hall) of Santa Maria della Grazie with a *Last Supper,* it didn't work properly. The fresco began deteriorating almost as soon as he finished painting it, and it had to be touched up and painted over several times in the succeeding centuries. It also didn't help when Napoléon's troops moved in and used the wall for target practice, or when Allied World War II bombs tore the roof off the building, miraculously not damaging the fresco but still leaving it open to the elements for 3 years. A lengthy restoration has stripped away the centuries of grime and overpainting, so what we see now is more or less pure Leonardo, even if the result is extremely patchy and looks rather faded. See p. 266.
- **Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pietà,* Castello Sforzesco** (Milan): Michelangelo's first great sculptural triumph was a *Pietà* he carved for Rome's St. Peter's at age 19. During a lifetime in which he became the foremost artist of his age, acknowledged as a genius in painting, fresco, architecture, and engineering, he never lost his love for marble and chisel. At age 89, he was

working yet again on one of his favorite subjects, this *Pietà.* It may be unfinished—in fact, Michelangelo was in the midst of changing it wholesale, reordering the figures and twisting the composition around—but this tall, languid representation of Mary and Nicodemus bearing the body of Christ remains one of Michelangelo's most remarkable works. At the end of his life, Michelangelo had grown so advanced in his thinking and artistic aesthetics that this remarkable, minimalist work (the sculptor had early on developed a rough style dubbed *nonfinito,* or "unfinished") looks eerily as if it were chiseled in the 1950s rather than 1560s. Michelangelo was in his Roman studio chiseling away on the statue when, on February 12, 1564, he was struck with a fever and took to bed. He died 6 days later. See p. 266.

- **Mantegna's *Dead Christ,* Pinacoteca di Brera** (Milan): This masterpiece of the Brera's collection displays not only Mantegna's skill at modeling and keen eye for texture and tone, but also his utter mastery of perspective and how he used it to create the illusion of depth. In this case, we look at Jesus laid out on a slab from his feet end, the entire body foreshortened to squeeze into a relatively narrow strip of canvas. Like many great geniuses in the arts, Mantegna actually warped reality and used his tools (in this case, perspective and foreshortening) in an odd way to create his image. Most art teachers would tell you that the rules of perspective would call for the bits at the "near end" (in this case the feet) to be large and those at the far end (that is to say, the head) to be small to achieve the proper effect, but Mantegna turned it around. At first glance, the work seems wonderfully wrought and perfectly foreshortened. But after staring a few moments, you realize the head is grotesquely large and the feet tiny. Mantegna has given us perfect foreshortening by turning perspective on its end. See p. 265.

5 The Best Castles

- **Museo Castelvecchio** (Verona): Most people do the Romeo-and-Juliet trail and peak at the ancient Arena, then call it a day in Verona. Unfortunately, few make it to the stunning castle on the river. This 14th-century stronghold, complete with its own fortified bridge across the river, was built by "Big Dog" Cangrande II Scaligeri. It was so mighty that it survived the centuries intact until the Nazis bombed it in World War II. Though there are collections of local wood sculptures and canvases by Tintoretto, Tiepolo, Veronese, Bellini, and local boy Pisanello, the true treat here is just wandering the maze of halls, passageways, stony staircases, and ramparts to relive the bad old days of the Middle Ages. See p. 194.
- **Castello Sabbionara** (Avio): This bellicose castle was a true fortress and makes no bones about it. Built in the 11th century and enlarged in the 13th century, it helped define and hold the line between the constantly warring neighboring powers of Venice and Austria. It switched hands several times, and in the 13th century the Guard's Room was frescoed with marvelous scenes of battles fought here. See p. 213.
- **Castello di Buonconsiglio** (Trent): Serious history went down in Trent's "Castle of Good Council."

The name might not be apt, however, because the famous Council of Trent (p. 208)—many sessions of which were held here—effectively put up the wall between the Vatican and the burgeoning Protestant movement that ended up being the cause (or at least excuse) for many European wars and numerous unjust politico-social systems, from the 16th century all the way to today's unrest in Northern Ireland. Much later, leaders of the *Irredentisti* (a World War I–era movement to return the then-Austrian South Tirol region to Italy) were imprisoned here, including the popular Cesare Battisti, who was executed in the yard. The castle is vast, built around the core 13th-century Castelvecchio and 15th-century palace of Trent's bishop-prince. The highlight is the *Cycle of the Months* fresco painted around 1400 and laden with late medieval symbolism. See p. 208.

- **Castel Roncolo** (Bozen): This 13th-century castle sits atop a small cliff upriver from the town, and looks like the most livable medieval castle you can imagine; cozy, with views of the vineyards. The central courtyard is hung with staircases and open wood balconies running along the upper stories, while many rooms retain all sorts of wonderfully crude medieval frescoes, including a lovely set that tells the story of Tristan and Isolde, a popular romantic tale from the Middle Ages. See p. 217.
- **Castel Tirolo** (outside Merano): The entire Tirol, covering this region of Italy and much of western Austria, was once ruled from this medieval fortress perched dramatically on an outcropping 4.8km (3 miles) outside Merano. You must walk a long and narrow path to get here, where there's a gorgeously frescoed Romanesque chapel and a new museum on Tirolean history and culture. See p. 224.
- **Castello di San Giusto** (Trieste): Built between 1470 and 1630 and pleasingly castlelike, this gem has mighty ramparts to walk for city vistas, modest collections of armor and furnishings to peruse, and outdoor concerts and films presented in the huge courtyard in summer. See p. 244.
- **Castello di Miramare** (near Trieste): The "Castle Admiring the Sea" rises in gleaming white fairy-tale splendor along the coastline. Built in the 1850s, it was doomed to host ill-fated potentates ever since. Its original owner, Austrian Archduke Maximilian, was sent to Mexico to be emperor and ended up shot. Another archduke, this time Ferdinand, spent the night here before going off to Sarajevo to be shot (which kicked off World War I). Other dukes and ladies have met bitter ends after sojourning here, which is perhaps why it is now public property and no longer a royal guesthouse. They do nice concerts here, plus sound-and-light shows telling the sad tale of the castle's builder, Maximilian. See p. 244.
- **Castello Scaligero** (Sirmione): A mighty midget among castles, not spectacular as far as castles go, but—if you can apply this term to a fortress—cute as a button. Unimportant in most respects, it *is* darn picturesque, guarding the entrance to town with somber 13th-century stone turrets and surrounded by its little moat complete with drawbridges. See p. 305.
- **Castello di Fenis (Castle of Fenis)** (outside Aosta): The Challant viscounts controlled the Aosta Valley from this stronghold throughout

the Middle Ages. The frescoed figures strolling about the balconies of its central courtyard spout cartoon balloon–like scrolls of speech that are a treasure trove for linguists unlocking the origins of the local dialect, which is founded largely in a medieval variant on French. The furnishings, though all genuine castle antiques, were culled from sources throughout this area, Switzerland, and France to give the place that medieval lived-in look. See p. 360.

6 The Best Villas & Palazzi

- **Palazzo Ducale** (Venice): The Gothic palazzo from which the Venetian Republic was ruled for centuries offers two incredible experiences. One simply is to wander the gorgeous rooms and halls, which are decorated with frescoes and paintings (including the world's largest oil canvas) by all the Venetian School greats, from Titian, Tintoretto, and Veronese on down. The placards in each room are marvelously informative, not only about the art but also about the function of each room and its role in government or daily Venetian life. But to discover what really made the Byzantine Venetian political machine tick, take the "Secret Itineraries" tour, which lets you slip behind the camouflaged doors and enter the hidden world of the palace-within-the-palace, the chambers in which the real governing took place, all wedged into the massive space between the inner and outer walls of the palazzo. See the chamber where the powerful Council of Ten met, the tiny office where the doge's secretary kept track of all the machinations going on in high society, the tribunal where three judges condemned the guilty and hanged them from the rafters, and the cramped "leads" cells under the roof from which Casanova famously escaped. Then saunter across the storied Bridge of Sighs to explore the dank, dungeonlike prisons across the canal where lesser criminals served out their miserable terms—lagoon floods and all. See p. 121.
- **Ca d'Oro** (Venice): Though no longer graced with the decorative facade that earned Venice's most beautiful palazzo its name "House of Gold," the 15th-century Ca d'Oro remains one of the most gorgeous palaces in Venice, outside (see the main facade from the Grand Canal) and in. The gallery of art, donated—along with the palace—to the state by Baron Giorgio Franchetti in 1916, includes paintings by Van Dyck, Giorgione, Titian, and Mantegna. There's also a small ceramics museum and fantastic canal views. See p. 137.
- **Ca' Rezzonico** (Venice): Even though Venice was in fact well past its heyday in the 18th century and technically in decline, this is nonetheless the era in which the city expressed its own unique character fully, the age of Casanova and costume balls, all the things we picture when we think of Venice. To this end, the Rezzonico, built in 1667 by the same architect who crafted the baroque Santa Maria della Salute and topped with an extra story in 1745 (and once owned by poet Robert Browning), was turned into a museum of the 18th century. The powers-that-be wanted the "museum" moniker to be taken lightly; in reality what the city has done is outfit this gracious palazzo as an actual house from the era as closely as possible, using

pieces culled from across the city. To add to the 200-year time warp are a series of scenes from daily Venetian life painted by Pietro Longhi plus several carnival frescoes that Giandomenico Tiepolo (son of the more famous Giovanni Battista Tiepolo) originally painted for his own house. See p. 133.

- **Villa Pisani** (Stra, Brenta Canal): Tiepolo frescoed the ballroom for this massive 18th-century villa built for the family of a Venetian doge, though Napoléon bought it in 1807. Its most notorious moment, though, came in 1934 when two European leaders met here for their very first summit: Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. The rooms are sumptuous, and the gardens are extensive and include a quirky hedge maze. See p. 168.
- **Villa Barbaro** (outside Asolo): Though the villas right around Vicenza get more visitors, this 1560 Palladio-designed masterpiece outside Asolo is perhaps the most gorgeous to visit. That's because it matches the perfect Palladian architecture with stunning frescoes by Veronese, which carpet almost every inch of wall and ceiling inside. And to think it's still actually in private hands (with owners gracious enough to allow visitors in)! See p. 177.
- **Villa Rotonda** (outside Vicenza): If you've seen Monticello, the architecture of Washington, D.C., or Inigo Jones's buildings, you'll be prepared for La Rotonda—it was the model for them all. UNESCO has placed this pinnacle of Palladio's architectural theories on the same World Heritage List as the pyramids, a towering monument of human achievement and ingenuity. This is Palladio's strict neoclassical take on the Renaissance in all its textbook glory, an ancient temple rewritten as a home and softened by Renaissance geometry of line. It was also one of his last, started in 1567 but largely executed by a faithful follower after the master's death. See p. 185.
- **Villa Valmarana** (outside Vicenza): Mattoni's 17th-century Palladian-style villa is nicknamed *ai Nani,* or "of the dwarves," because its walls are patrolled by an army of stone dwarves. The architecture isn't all that remarkable, but the 18th-century frescoes inside by Giambattista and Giandomenico Tiepolo certainly are. See p. 185.
- **Palazzo Patriarcale** (Udine): Until 1734 it was the bishops who ruled Udine as Patriarchs, and the final Patriarch had the foresight to invite Tiepolo to Udine to decorate their palace with scenes from the Old Testament that double as early-18th-century fashion shows. There's also a fine collection of locally carved wood sculptures spanning the 13th to 18th centuries. See p. 251.
- **Palazzo Te** (Mantua): Raphael's protégé Giulio Romano, hounded from Rome over a scandalous series of erotic engravings, was let loose to fill libidinous Frederico Gonzaga's Mannerist pleasure palace with racy frescoes. The place was built to look as if it were crumbling, from arch keystones to the illusionistic frescoes in the Room of Giants. See p. 300.
- **Il Vittoriale** (Gardone, Lake Garda): Gabriele D'Annunzio was a Romantic ideal made flesh, an Italian Hemingway-meets-Shelley, an adventurer, soldier, and poet who carried on a torrid affair with the greatest actress of his age, Eleonora Duse, who napped on a funeral bier covered in leopard skins, and who crafted every iota of his villa in meticulous Victorian detail. It's said that Mussolini himself gave D'Annunzio

the property—either to honor his vociferous support of Fascism or simply to shut him up before he said something to get them all into trouble. D'Annunzio was a bit of a hothead, and not much of a team player. In 1918 he flew to Vienna just to drop leaflets on it and prove to what he saw as the wimpy Italian military command that he could penetrate that far. When the Adriatic town of Fiume, previously promised to Italy, ended up in Yugoslav hands, he led his own army to occupy the town and claim it—much to the chagrin of the Italian commanders, who had to talk him into giving it up and coming home (this is the "victory" after which the villa is named). With a whole villa to keep him occupied, D'Annunzio proceeded to remake it to his own image. The very route guests take upon entering is a subtle and intricate play on the structure of Dante's *Divine Comedy.* The sheer volume of bric-a-brac is enough to drive a maid with a feather duster nuts, but is redeemed by the fantastic anecdote or quirky explanation behind each one (hope for a chatty guide with a good command of English). Nestled in the extravagant gardens are a structure built as a ship, the actual boat D'Annunzio commanded during the Great War, his biplane, and his heroic hilltop tomb. See p. 308.

- **Palazzo Reale (Royal Palace)** (Turin): This was where the Savoy kings hung their crowns in all the sumptuous, overwrought, gilded glory that the 17th and 18th centuries could offer. From Gobelin tapestries to Oriental vases, from the royal armory to the elegant gardens laid out by master landscape architect Le Nôtre (who did the Versailles gardens and those of the Tuileries in Paris), this palace drips with royal frippery. See p. 340.
- **Palazzina di Caccia di Stupinigi** (outside Turin): Sicilian baroque genius Juvarra laid out this extravagant and palatial hunting lodge for the Savoys in 1729. To fill the numerous frescoed rooms and vast halls of its giant, sinuous X-shape, local authorities have collected furnishings, paintings, and other decorative elements from dozens of Savoy palaces to create here a sort of museum of 18th- and 19th-century interior decor. Napoléon liked it so much he set up housekeeping here for a time when he first conquered the region before pressing on. See p. 341.
- **Galleria Nazionale di Palazzo Spinola** (Genoa): The Spinola provides its collection of canvases (by Antonello da Messina, Guido Reni, Luca Giordano, Van Dyck, and Strozzi) with a stellar backdrop consisting of a Genovese palace of which the merchant/banking Spinola family lavishly frescoed and decorated each room. See p. 377.

7 The Best Festivals

- **Carnevale** (Venice): Every spring Venice brings back the glory days of the 18th century in all its silk and brocade, poof-sleeved, men-wearing-colored-hose, Casanova, ballroom-dancing glory. In most Catholic countries, the week before Lent begins has long been a time to let down your hair and party. It all culminates in Shrove Tuesday, the day of feasting before Ash Wednesday kicks off the sober Lenten period. This bash has earned the day the nickname Fat Tuesday—called *Martedì Grasso* in Italian, but better known by its

French name, Mardi Gras. Venice ranks with Rio and New Orleans as host of one of the most elaborate and famous Carnival celebrations anywhere. Rather than a Bacchanalian bash, Venice goes the genteel route, with concerts and masked costume balls filling performance spaces, churches, and frescoed palaces. Ten days leading up to Shrove Tuesday. See p. 140 and 142.

- **Venice International Film Festival:** This is one of the movie business's premier festivals, ranking just below Cannes in importance. The best films made over the past year from around the world are screened for audiences and judges at the Palazzo del Cinema, other movie houses, and sometimes even open-air piazzas. Unlike, say, the Oscars, which celebrates highly promoted Hollywood products, this is a chance for all movies—from would-be blockbusters to low-budget, unknown indies—to catch the attention of critics and distributors. Late August/early September. See p. 141.
- **Biennale d'Arte** (Venice): One of the most important art festivals in the world is hosted every 2 years by the city of Venice. Contemporary artists (both celebrated modern masters and talented unknowns), critics, and art aficionados from around the world fill the hotels to attend shows and peruse the works displayed in the gardens and Arsenale warehouses at the far end of the Castello district. June to early November, odd years. See p. 141.
- **Regata Storica** (Venice): Every Venetian must have an 18th-century outfit mothballed in a closet to break out for yearly fetes such as Carnevale and, of course, this "historical regatta"—less of a race than merely a parade of gorgeously bedecked gondolas and other boats laden with costumed gentry for a day cruising the Grand Canal. First Sunday in September. See chapter 3.
- **Partita a Scacchi** (Marostica): A living chess match may be a throwaway gag to Mel Brooks or special-effect sequence in a Harry Potter film, but it's the highlight of Marostica's calendar. This pretty little medieval hamlet, which barely fills the bottom third of the ring made by its ancient wall clambering up the hillside, would probably be overlooked if it weren't for the biennial festival that turns the checkerboard main piazza in front of the castle into a weird piece of yesteryear. After a parade of costumed gentlefolk and medieval-style entertainers (jugglers, fire-eaters, clowns), people dressed as chess pieces fill the piazza's board, the players sit atop a stage ready to call out their moves, and the match begins. Actually, it's technically not chess as we know it but rather a medieval variant, and it's not a proper match since they're in fact re-creating, move for move, a game played in the 15th century between two noblemen vying for the hand of a fair lady. Still, it's all great fun. Marostica has only a handful of hotels, so book a few months in advance. Second Sunday in September, even years. See p. 181.
- **Concerti in Villa** (Vicenza): The Veneto region around Vicenza opens up its villas or their grounds for a series of summertime concerts and performances. From famous masterpieces like Palladio's La Rotonda to little-known Renaissance villas, the settings are memorable and the music is sweet. June and July. See p. 182.
- **Opera in Arena** (Verona): La Scala and La Fenice may be more famous, but few opera stages in Italy have a more natural dramatic

setting than Verona's ancient Roman amphitheater. Every season they put on *Aïda* as they have since 1913, surrounded by other operatic masterpieces by Giuseppe Verdi. For a huge 2,000-year-old sports stadium open to the sky, the Arena enjoys surprisingly good acoustics. Late June through August. See p. 193.

- **Festival Shakespeariano** (Verona): Verona mixes its two powerhouse attractions—ancient Roman heritage and Shakespearean fame—in a theater festival of Shakespeare's plays (along with ballets and concerts, from classical to jazz) put on in the garden-set ruins of the Teatro Romano ancient theater. Since 1998 they've invited the Royal Shakespeare Company to come and perform (naturally) *Romeo and Juliet* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona,* as well as other plays, in English. See p. 190.
- **Palio** (Asti): Medieval pageantry precedes a breakneck horse race on the piazza. The 2 weeks leading up to it comprise the **Douja d'Or,** a grape-and-wine festival and trade fair. Rival town **Alba** spoofs the event with a race of their own—riding asses—in their **Palio degli Asini** on the first Sunday in October. Third Sunday in October. See p. 349.
- **Sanremo Festival** (San Remo): It's the Grammy Awards meets Sundance meets Star Search. Since 1950 Sanremo has been Italy's beloved festival of pop music, where faded Italian stars get to strut their stuff, major international rock stars and artists are invited to play, and scruffy teenage musicians from across Italy get the chance to play that carefully crafted song they just know would be a number-one hit if only they could sign a record contract (and many do). If you want to hear what will be belting out of boomboxes and Fiat speakers this summer at Italy's beaches and pumping in the discos, listen to the winning performances here. Late February or early March. See p. 386.
- **Sagra del Pesce** (Camogli): Take the world's largest frying pan (3.6m/12 ft. across) and place it on the wide, waterfront promenade of this tiny Riviera fishing town. Fill the pan with sizzling sardines and the town with hungry folks ready to party. There you have a *sagra,* or celebration of food, in this case of seafood, the town's traditional economic lynchpin. Second Sunday in May. See p. 397.

8 The Best Luxury Inns

- **Hotel Gritti Palace** (Venice): The grandest hotel on the Grand Canal, hosting the crème de la crème of whoever came and comes to visit Venice since Doge Andrea Gritti built the palace in the 16th century. Charles de Gaulle, Winston Churchill, Truman Capote, John Ruskin, Henry Ford, Mick Jagger, Giorgio Armani, Robert De Niro, Charlie Chaplin . . . the list goes on. This place is luxury-everything: hand-painted and inlaid antiques, 18th-century stuccoed ceilings, cutting-edge designer entertainment centers, and, of course, balconies overlooking the Grand Canal (well, from the top-notch rooms at least; everyone else gets to enjoy the water from the restaurant or piano bar, or can overlook a side canal). Because this is now a Westin property, you also get access (on a free hourly boat) to their Lido Westin Excelsior hotel and its facilities (see below). See p. 89.

- **Hotel Danieli** (Venice): Venice's *bacino* (the bay into which the Grand Canal spills) is lined with luxury hotels, but none beats the Danieli, a 14th-century doge's palace of pink plaster and elaborate marble windowsills that's been a hotel since 1822. The centerpiece is a four-story, sky-lit enclosed courtyard of Byzantine-Gothic arches, open stairwells, balustrades, and junglelike potted plants off of which open its luxurious salons. It's worth popping your head in just to see it even if you don't stay here. The rooms vary, but no matter what, insist upon a lagoon view—and try to stay in the original wing or, failing that, the larger rooms of the 19th-century palazzo next door (by all means avoid the bland, albeit cushy, 1940s wing). As with its Westin sister, Hotel Gritti Palace, you can enjoy the facilities at the chain's Excelsior on the Lido (see below). See p. 94.
- **Hotel Cipriani** (Venice): This is the last independent, locally owned luxury hotel in Venice, and quite possibly the best. It sits in splendid isolation at the tip of Giudecca, the only large island of central Venice not connected by a bridge (rather, it's a 10-min. boat ride to Piazza San Marco). Giuseppe Cipriani, the Venetian impresario behind Harry's Bar and the Locanda Cipriani on Torcello where Ernest Hemingway loved to hang out (he even made it into a Papa story), crafted this retreat out of several Renaissance palazzi in 1959, offering stylish accommodations, discreet service, and modern comfort. See p. 105.
- **Westin Excelsior** (Venice): The Lido might never have been developed as a bathing resort if not for the prescience of Nicolò Spada, who created the Excelsior's Moorish-style central structure in 1907. As one of Venice's only custom-built luxury hotels, it didn't have to abide by all the historical considerations converted palazzi now have to take into account, so its architectural plans allowed for more spacious accommodations than those found in most Venetian hotels. Rooms overlook either the Adriatic (there's a private beach across the road) or the small, lush, Moorish garden. It also sports all the resort-type amenities: pool, fitness center, golf and tennis, sauna. See p. 106.
- **Villa Margherita** (Mira Porte, Brenta): This villa's role as a guesthouse hasn't changed much since it was built in the 17th century by Venice's Contarini family. It still looks much like a country-villa home (if your family happened to be Venetian and fabulously wealthy), with rooms overlooking the shady gardens, a restaurant across the street along the canal, and a similar sister property nearby with a swimming pool. See p. 170.
- **Hotel Villa Cipriani** (Asolo): In 1962 Giuseppe Cipriani branched out from his premium-grade Venice mini-empire to turn this 16th-century villa into a well-appointed hotel. Once the home of poets Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, it enjoys a dreamlike setting: the medieval hill town of Asolo, famed for its vistas over the Veneto. See p. 176.
- **Hotel Greif** (Bozen): Boutique hotels have officially arrived in Italy—though so far only the Greif seems to have heard. The Staffler family has owned this 500-year-old hotel on the main square of Bozen—the Dolomiti's liveliest town—since 1796. But in 1999 and 2000, they decided to overhaul it completely in a minimalist, modern vein of burnished steel and original contemporary art mixed with 19th-century antiques

and an Internet-equipped laptop in every room. See p. 218.

- **Four Seasons Hotel Milano** (Milan): In 1993 the Four Seasons opened and rewrote the rules on deluxe hotels in Milan. Seven years were spent restructuring and transforming a 1476 convent, a process that brought many of its Renaissance elements back to light, including a lovely cloister. The rooms are huge by Italian city standards and flush with amenities and small luxuries such as CD stereos and king-size beds. The bi-level suites with frescoed vaulting are particularly nice. See p. 276.
- **Grand Hotel et De Milan** (Milan): How do you define superior service? While resident guest Giuseppe Verdi, who lived for 30 years in the suite now named for him, lay dying in his bed, the hotel spread straw over the streets under his window every day to muffle the sounds of carriage wheels so as not to disturb the maestro's rest. They're constantly updating the luxury quotient here—even closing down from 1993 to 1995 for a complete overhaul (perhaps a response to the sudden competition from the Four Seasons)—to keep the 1863 hotel looking and feeling its best. This means marble and lush upholstery, thick curtains, and antique furnishings. Okay, so the opera music trickling lightly from hidden speakers may be overdoing it, but what did you expect from a hotel 3 blocks from La Scala that has played host to divas and tenors for decades? See p. 277.
- **Villa d'Este** (Cernobbio, Lake Como): On short lists of the world's greatest hotels, the Villa d'Este always ranks near the top. There's nothing reproduction or faux about this place. The villa is true Renaissance, the marble precious, the guestbook A-list, and the Empire furnishings so genuine they actually date back to Napoléon's tenure when his aide-de-camp owned it. Add to all that several pools (one floating on the lake), a vast park that hides tennis courts, a fitness center that includes squash courts and a virtual driving range, and a trio of restaurants. See p. 317.
- **Grand Hôtel et des Iles Borromées** (Stresa, Lake Maggiore): Ernest Hemingway loved this retreat by the lake so much he set part of *A Farewell to Arms* at the hotel. Shell out $2,400 and you can stay in the suite named after him (two bedrooms with king-size beds and huge marble bathrooms in each, frescoed ceilings, lake-view terrace). Recent renovations have restored the decor to its original 1860s splendor and richness, regilding an old lily of the Italian hotel scene and restoring it to the ranks of Europe's most exclusive hotels. Rooms are sumptuously appointed in a variety of styles, from 19th-century inlaid wood to lavish Empire style to opulent Italianate rooms of lacquered furnishings and Murano chandeliers. See p. 328.
- **Hotel Splendido/Splendido Mare** (Portofino): Portofino is the fishing village chosen by the world's jet-set elite as their own little bit of Italy, its tiny cove harbor overshadowed by yachts, and the hillside Splendido hotel booked by the top names from Hollywood, European nobility registers, and CEO boardrooms. The villa itself is 19th century, though its foundation is a 16th-century monastery, set amid olive groves a 10-minute walk above the town. Suites come with antique furnishings and cutting-edge entertainment centers (DVD anyone?). Their sister hotel, Splendido Mare, sits right at the harborfront, stays open all year,

and offers dining with a view of the boats. See p. 406.

- **Royal Hotel** (San Remo): With such a small town and such a major pop festival, once a year you'll find a concentration of rock stars here rarely seen outside of a major benefit concert. The rest of the year, with doubles starting at $228, almost all of us can enjoy its private beach across the road, its cushy accommodations, its stuccoed bar, and the wonderful pool styled as if it were carved out of rock. See p. 388.

9 The Best Moderate Hotels

- **Pensione Accademia** (Venice): If you ever wanted to live like Katharine Hepburn, here's your chance. Well, not exactly, though her character did live in this 16th-century Villa Maravege (Villa of Wonders) in the 1955 film *Summertime.* It sits in an enviable position, a flower-filled garden at the confluence of two canals emptying into the Grand Canal, and the rooms are done in a tasteful antique style that makes you feel as if you're staying in the home of your wealthy Venetian relative rather than in a hotel. See p. 100.
- **Hotel San Cassiano Ca'Favretto** (Venice): It's one of the cheapest hotels on the Grand Canal—plus the rooms and bar terrace overlook the prettiest stretch of the canal, with the Ca d'Oro directly across the waters. Even most non–Grand Canal rooms at least overlook a side canal. All that and the hotel in the 16th-century villa retains much of its 18th-century ambience (though room decor is vintage 1970s repro antiques). See p. 102.
- **Hotel Majestic Toscanelli** (Padua): The management of the Toscanelli is always reinvesting in this gem of a hotel three quiet shop- and osteria-lined blocks from the central Piazza delle Erbe. Its latest refurbishment came in 1999, with burnished cherry furnishings gracing the spacious rooms. The reception is warm and helpful, and the location excellent. See p. 166.
- **Hotel Aurora** (Verona): Situated right on the central piazza and overhauled in 1996 to freshen the furnishings and fixtures, the Aurora enjoys a combination of prime location, low prices, and perfect simple comfort that keep guests coming back. See p. 199.
- **Antica Locanda Solferino** (Milan): The most wonderfully eclectic hotel in Milan exudes character. It sits in the heart of the fashionable Brera neighborhood, its quirky amalgam of furnishings fitted into generally spacious rooms. With one of the friendliest managements in town under Sig. Gerardo Vitolo, it's no wonder this delightful place stays booked by regulars, who enjoy its creaky, homey atmosphere. See p. 277.
- **Agnello d'Oro** (Bergamo): Bergamo may not quite be the Alps, but you're high up enough in their foothills that this tall, narrow ochre building with its flower-box windows, patio fountain, and sloping roof looks perfectly appropriate, offering a bit of Italianate Alpine charm smack-dab in the center of the pedestrianized medieval quarter. Furnishings are simple and serviceable, but the price and location can't be beat. See p. 295.
- **Du Lac** (Bellagio, Lake Como): Of the hotels lining Bellagio's little lakefront piazza, the Du Lac is the friendliest by a long shot. For over a century and a half, it has offered comfort and genuine hospitality,

from the panoramic dining room and rooftop sun terrace to the simple but fully stocked rooms and the bar tables tucked under the arcades of the sidewalk. They're also putting in a pool and tennis courts. See p. 319.

- **Verbano** (Stresa, Lake Maggiore): Why shell out hundreds of dollars for a hotel by the lake when you can have one *on* the lake for half the price? The dusty rose villa of the Verbano sits at the tip of Isola dei Pescatori, an island of colorful fishermen's houses in the midst of Lake Maggiore, with views over the landscaped Isola Bella, the lake, and the Alps beyond from most rooms and also from the gravelly terrace, where they serve excellent meals. See p. 328.

10 The Best Budget Gems

- **Hotel La Residenza** (Venice): Just off the highly fashionable Riva degli Schiavoni sits one of the great remaining cheap pensioni in Italy, a 15th-century palazzo converted into an inexpensive hotel. Hotels this cheap are hard to come by anywhere in Venice, let alone in such a prime location, and nowhere else with such remarkable decor and faded style. Its 15 rooms occupy the *piano nobile,* the high-ceilinged "noble floor" where the wealthy family once lived, so it sports 18th-century stuccoes over Venetian-style furnishings, 17th-century oil paintings, and Murano chandeliers. See p. 98.
- **Foresteria Valdese (Palazzo Cavagnis)** (Venice): If La Residenza (see above) is full, you may luck into even more decaying style (18th-century frescoes decorate the ceilings in several rooms) for less money at this 16th-century palazzo run as a hospice by the Waldesian and Methodist Church. The drawbacks are that it's a sort of hostel-type arrangement—many, but not all, of the accommodations are shared rooms—and the rooms lack amenities such as telephones and air-conditioning. The location isn't quite as sweet as that of La Residenza, but the rooms do have balconies over a lovely small side canal. See p. 96.
- **Hotel Galleria** (Venice): This place is remarkable: a 17th-century palazzo with double rooms for under $100, a half dozen of which open directly onto the Grand Canal, and it's next door to one of Venice's top sights, the Accademia Gallery. All that and you get breakfast (including freshly baked bread) in bed. See p. 99.
- **Pensione Guerrato** (Venice): This charming pensione is run by a pair of brothers-in-law in a converted 13th-century convent near the daily Rialto market. The furnishings are mismatched but lovely, a mix of antiques culled from markets over the years, and the breakfast is excellent. They also rent two great apartments at excellent prices near San Marco. See p. 101.
- **Hotel Bernardi-Semenzato** (Venice): The friendly Pepoli family runs this well-maintained palazzo hidden a block off the main drag about halfway between the train station and San Marco. It's surrounded by *osterie* and good restaurants patronized by locals, and the modernized rooms retain rough wood-beam ceilings and antique-style furnishings. They also rent simple but spacious rooms in two annexes nearby that make you feel as if you're staying in your own Venetian apartment; one room has a fireplace, another

overlooks a pair of side canals. See p. 104.

- **Due Mori** (Vicenza): Just off the central Piazza dei Signori lies this simple, no-frills, but comfortable hotel, the oldest in Vicenza, packed with genuine 19th-century antiques and a friendly reception. See p. 187.
- **Grifone** (Sirmione, Lake Garda): Would you believe a vine-covered hotel where the simple rooms enjoy views of the lake and access to a small beach for under $35 a person? Well that's what the Marcolini siblings offer at this gem of an inn around the corner from the little medieval castle. Book early. See p. 306.
- **Ostello La Primula** (Menaggio, Lake Como): If you don't mind hostel living (shared dorm rooms, bus your own table at dinner), you can get a bed overlooking the lake for $16 and some of the best fixed-price dinners in town for just $8. It's run by a family of ex–social workers, who also rent bikes and kayaks. See p. 325.
- **Fasce** (Santa Margherita Ligure): This little hotel a few blocks up from the harbor is now in its third generation of family management, which includes the incredibly helpful British-born Jane at the front desk. Not only are the bright guest rooms spacious and comfortable and the surroundings a lovely profusion of plants and flowers, but they pile on the extras, from free bicycles to Cinque Terre packets for guests who stay at least 3 nights (including a train ticket a day and all the info you need to explore the coast). See p. 401.

11 The Best Countryside Retreats

- **Cavallino d'Oro/Goldenes Rössl** (Kastelruth/Castelrotto, near Bozen): The village is a full-bore Tirolean mountain hamlet straight out of the Middle Ages, and this rambling hotel has sat at the cobblestoned center of town since the 1400s, its swinging shingle emblazoned with its Golden Horse moniker. It includes the corner bar where the locals hang out for lunch and a genuine, preserved 18th-century *Stuben* (beer nook) in the restaurant at back. It's a nice mix of new and old: The lounge has a widescreen TV with 300 digital channels set next to a picture window of the Alps; the rooms offer modern comforts amid hand-painted wood furnishings and four-poster beds. Best of all, the Urthaler family couldn't be more welcoming, and they happen to be Frommer's fans. See p. 220.
- **Hotel Castello Schloss Labers** (outside Merano): The road from town wends its way through vine-clad hills to the Stapf-Neubert family's 11th-century countryside castle, a hotel since 1885. The cozy hunting salons cluster around a magnificent central staircase that leads up to the eclectic collection of rooms tucked into towers, eaves, and high-ceilinged rooms. A statue-studded garden out back offers views across the valley to the surrounding peaks, and they also have a heated pool, tennis courts, and a Tirolean restaurant. See p. 226.
- **Villa Fiordaliso** (Gardone Riviera, Lake Garda): This Liberty-style villa was built in 1903 and immediately started attracting formidable owners, including poet Gabriele d'Annunzio and later Claretta Petacci, Mussolini's mistress (this is where they spent their final weeks in semi-hiding at the

end of World War II before being hunted down and killed). Things have calmed down considerably since then, the villa transformed in 1990 into one of the most popular high-end restaurants in the lake region (it even has a Michelin star now), with seven elegant guest rooms upstairs. See p. 309.

- **Villa La Meridiana/Az. Agrituristica Reine** (near Alba): An *agriturismo* is a working farm whose family opens their home and hospitality to guests. The Pionzo family runs this gracious *agriturismo* above the Piedmont wine town of Alba, with rooms in the main house and converted from the former stalls, almost all overlooking the vineyards that produce their Barbera wine, the surrounding village-capped hills, and the peaks of the Alps in the distance. The ample breakfast may include apricot preserves from their own orchard and sheep's milk cheese from the neighbors. See p. 353.
- **La Cascina del Monastero** (outside La Morra): The di Grasso family runs an *agriturismo* similar to Villa La Meridiana (see above), another vineyard and fruit orchard farm outside a Piemontese village with large guest rooms and apartments filled with comfortable rustic furnishings and exposed wood beams. This place would be worth staying at if only for the sumptuous breakfast spread, the only drawback to which is that you may have to cancel lunch plans and head back to your room for a nap. See p. 356.
- **Milleluci** (outside Aosta): Four matrilineal generations of hoteliers have turned this family farm into one of the coziest, friendliest hotels in the whole of the Valle d'Aosta. A fire crackles in the large lounge downstairs, and the rooms are done in woodsy, Alpine style with canopy beds in suites, traditional wood furnishings, and hand-hewn ceilings. In true country tradition, the breakfast here is overwhelming, with freshly baked pies, cakes, and breads every morning accompanied by farm-fresh cheese, milk, and preserves. Unlike most countryside retreats, the Milleluci sports plenty of facilities a four-star hotel would be jealous of: a heated outdoor pool, tennis courts, exercise facilities, hot tub, and sauna. See p. 362.
- **La Grange** (Courmayeur-Entrèves): Entrèves may not properly be countryside, but this tiny collection of Alpine chalets below the Mont Blanc cable-car station is so small it barely qualifies as a village, and the atmosphere is fully rustic. The Berthold family converted this hotel from a barn by fitting the rooms with a mix of antiques and sturdy country furnishings. It makes a refreshing (and far less expensive) alternative to the resort hotels of Courmayeur just down the road. See p. 366.

12 The Best Restaurants

- **Do Forni** (Venice): Though the menu is vast, they seem to devote equal attention to every single dish, making this one of the best (if most eyebrow-raisingly expensive) restaurants in Venice. The bulk of the place is done in a vaguely rustic style, but the best room is the front one, fitted out like a car from the luxurious Orient Express. See p. 110.
- **La Cusina** (Venice): One of the new stars on the Venetian restaurant scene is also one of the few hotel dining rooms worth singling out. In warm weather this becomes one of the most romantic dinner settings in town, the tables set on

terraces hanging over the Grand Canal. The location alone is worth booking ahead, but happily the cooking is as delicious as the view is stunning, offering an inventive take on Italian cuisine based on Venetian and Veneto traditions and using the freshest ingredients. See p. 111.

- **Le Bistrot de Venise** (Venice): The menu at this upscale bistro is split three ways to satisfy your appetite (or at least make your choice harder): Venetian/Italian, French, and ancient local recipes culled from historic cookbooks and documents. They attract hip artistic types by turning the back room into a coffeehouse-style performance space most nights, hosting poets, acoustic musicians, art exhibits, and cabarets. See p. 112.
- **Al Covo** (Venice): Texan Diane Rankin makes the pastries and chats with guests while husband-chef Cesare Benelli watches over the kitchen at this always-popular restaurant that mixes a warm welcome and excellent fresh seafood dishes with relatively reasonable prices (especially on the quality wine list). See p. 115.
- **La Milanese** (Milan): In a city with many fine restaurants whose stars rise and fall almost as soon as they make it onto the map, La Milanese is a stalwart survivor, a traditional trattoria that has never stopped offering typical Milanese dishes, smart service, and moderate prices, a formula that has kept it successful for almost 70 years now. See p. 282.
- **Antica Hosteria del Vino Buono** (Bergamo): This cozy restaurant is spread over two floors of a corner palazzo on the market square. The food is mountain-style, rib-sticking good, heavy on the game meats and thick polenta accompanied by hearty red wines. See p. 297.
- **Ochina Bianca** (Mantua): Mantuan cooking is somewhat more complex than most northern Italian cuisines, and the Venturinis put their own innovative spin on it at the "White Goose," marrying local ingredients with fresh fish from the Mincio and game in this elegant restaurant. See p. 303.
- **C'era Una Volta** (Turin): That you have to ring the bell and climb to the first floor gives this place a clubby air, but owner Piero Prete will instantly make you feel like a longtime member as he greets you warmly and comes back around to help you select your wine. The cooking is traditional Torinese, excellently prepared. See p. 344.
- **Lalibera** (Alba): Franco and Manuele reign over this stylish dining room on an alley off a pedestrian shopping street, with Marco in the kitchen crafting excellent variants on Piemontese cuisine by using only the freshest of ingredients, all locally produced, from the cheese to the fruit to the meats. See p. 354.

13 The Best Countryside Eateries

- **Al Camin** (outside of Cortina d'Ampezzo): This barnlike structure lies along the rushing Ru Bigontina mountain stream, 10 minutes outside of town, serving hearty Alpine food in a woodsy dining room around a stone fireplace. Some regional specialties that are hard to find elsewhere these days are staples on Al Camin's seasonal menus. See p. 237.
- **L'Osteria del Vignaiolo** (La Morra): This place is sophisticated rustic, simple rooms with pale-gold walls expanding to tables outside in summer. It's set amid the vineyards

that produce its excellent wines and provide the excellent views. The cooking, in the hands of chef Luciano Marengo, samples from the varied bounty of Piemontese regional cuisines, accompanied by choice cheese platters and, of course, some of the best fine wines in Italy. See p. 356.

- **La Maison de Filippo** (Entrèves): This is the never-ending meal to beat all feasts. I honestly tried to keep track of the courses, but after the seventh appetizer I had to give it up. But it's not just quantity (two words: pace yourself): The food actually manages to be fantastic as well, and it's served in an archetypal rustic-countryside dining room of low wood ceilings, open kitchens, and sometimes even a dog under the table. Book here, then plan to spend much of the next day merely digesting. See p. 367.

14 The Best Down-Home Trattorie & Osterie

- **Vino Vino** (Venice): Antico Martini is a pricey but good restaurant near La Fenice opera house; Vino Vino is its worst-kept secret, an inexpensive *osteria* branch that serves simple but tasty dishes that come out of the same kitchen. You choose from the daily chalkboard menu, stake out a table, and then carry your meal to it along with a wine from their excellent and extensive shared wine cellar. See p. 114.
- **Ai Tre Spiedi** (Venice): This is where I take my buddies for a blow-out Venetian meal at remarkably low prices—not the cheapest in town, but perhaps the best value for your money. The owners are jolly, and the food is excellent, including the fish (which is often dicey at the more inexpensive places in Venice). See p. 114.
- **Cantina do Mori** (Venice): Notwithstanding the recent change in management (and a slight price hike), the Cantina do Mori has remained one of the best *bacari* in Venice, a wine bar that serves exquisite *cicchetti* (tapaslike snacks) to a crowd of regulars nightly under the low-beamed ceilings that seem unchanged since the joint opened in 1462. After all, this is the place where even Casanova supposedly came to tipple between affairs. See p. 118.
- **Toni del Spin** (Treviso): Seventy years of satisfying Trevisani diners has imparted a patina of reliability to this down-home trattoria of crisscrossing beams, swirling fans, and chalkboard menus. The choices are limited, but each dish is excellent, mixing local traditions with experimental cooking and some international dishes. The wine list is stellar—they also run the wine shop across the street. See p. 173.
- **La Taverna di Via Stella** (Verona): The Vantini brothers and their buddies have successfully started a brand-new, laid-back *osteria* that instantly feels as if it's been around for centuries. Here, the local volunteer fire squad shows up to hang out in uniform and hit on girls, and office workers troop in to unwind over traditional Veronese dishes and wine (of their some 180 bottles, 10 varieties are opened nightly so that you can sample by the glass). See p. 202.
- **Osteria del Duca** (Verona): The ladies bustling around this old fave of a trattoria know to double-check with foreign visitors who have inadvertently ordered one of the many traditional Veronese dishes involving horse or donkey

meat. The setting is romantic in true Verona style: It's on the ground floor of a medieval palazzo that most likely belonged to the historical Montecchi family, immortalized by Shakespeare as the Montagues, whose son Romeo fell in love with Juliet of the enemy Capulet clan. See p. 202.

- **Vineria Cozzi** (Bergamo): Leonardo Vigorelli's wine bar is the turnstile around which Bergamo's upper city spins, a requisite stop for locals and visitors alike who enjoy his hospitality, good wine selection, and yummy panini, meat and cheese platters, and simple dishes. See p. 297.