

The Best of Italy from \$90 a Day

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Two authors. One country. A myriad of experiences. Deciding what to see and do in Italy is not easy—especially if you're on a budget. Here, we've put our heads together and come up with the best of what this diverse country has to offer.

1 The Best Travel Experiences for Free (or Almost)

- **Enjoying Rome's Best Nighttime Panorama:** After a leisurely 3-hour dinner at a tiny trattoria in Rome's working-class neighborhood of Trastevere, stroll the cobblestone alleyways, then climb the Gianicolo hill for a moonlit panorama of the Eternal City. See chapter 3.
- **Listening to the Vespers in San Miniato (Florence):** This is one of the few places left in Italy where Gregorian chant is still sung. Here, in one of Florence's oldest churches, late-afternoon vespers transport you back to the lost centuries of the hilltop Romanesque church's 11th-century origins. See chapter 4.
- **Biking Through the Town and on the Walls of Ferrara:** For spectacular views, bike on the wide paths along Ferrara's medieval walls, which encircle the city with an aerie of greenery. Many hotels offer guests free use of bicycles. See chapter 6.
- **Taking a Vaporetto Ride on the Grand Canal (Venice):** For a fraction of the cost of a gondola ride, the nos. 1 and 82 *vaporetti* (motor launches) ply the Grand Canal, past hundreds of Gothic and Byzantine *palazzi* (palaces) redolent of the days when Venice was a powerful and wealthy maritime republic. Angle for a seat on the open-air deck up front. See chapter 7.
- **Cruising Lake Como (Lake District):** Board a lake steamer for the pleasant trip from Bellagio to other picturesque small villages on the section of the lake known as the Centro Lago. To the north, the lake is backed by snowcapped Alps, while the shorelines are lush with verdant gardens. As the steamer heads from one port to another, ocher- and pastel-colored villages will beckon you to disembark and explore their ancient streets and *piazze* (squares)—a good reason to purchase a day pass. See chapter 9.
- **Climbing the Flanks of the Matterhorn in the Valle d'Aosta:** An excellent trail leads from Cervina-Breuil up the flank of this impressive mountain. A moderately strenuous uphill trek of 90 minutes will get you to the breathtaking Lac du Goillet. From there, it's another 90 minutes to the Colle Superiore delle Cime Bianche, a

plateau with heart-stopping views. See chapter 10.

- **Walking in the Cinque Terre** (Italian Riviera): While away your time in the Cinque Terre by strolling from one lovely village to another along the Mediterranean on trails with views that'll take your breath away. See chapter 11.
- **Exploring the Land of the Trulli** (Apulia): The Valle d'Itria is a lush, surreal landscape carpeted with vineyards and speckled with one of Europe's oddest forms of vernacular architecture: *trulli*, pointy whitewashed houses constructed without mortar and roofed by a cone of dark stones stacked in concentric circles. The capital of the region is Alberobello, a UNESCO World Heritage town made up of more than 1,000 *trulli*—you can even spend the night in one. See chapter 12.
- **Driving the Magnificent Amalfi Coast:** The 48km (30-mile) ride down the Amalfi Drive is one of the most awe-inspiring, character-building, and hair-raising experiences on record. This two-lane road clings to cliffs sometimes hundreds of feet high, twisting and plunging past verdant gorges, tiny fishing villages, posh resort

towns, and sparkling isolated beaches washed by bright azure waters. SITA buses make the winding and wonderful journey from Sorrento to Amalfi for a mere 2€ (\$2.30). Don't forget to bring Dramamine. See chapter 12.

- **Sailing the Amalfi Coast Through the Eyes of Anthony Minghella** (Ischia): In the film *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Ischia's Castello Aragonese, the rock at Sant'Angelo, and the magnificent waters served as a backdrop for the unspoiled Italian coastal experience of a bygone era. For 15€ (\$17) per person, the island's cooperative water taxi will take you on a tour that circles this stunning island. When you're done, a dip in a thermal pool awaits. See chapter 12.
- **Taking a Sunset Picnic to the Valley of the Temples** (Agrigento, Sicily): The setting is humbling, the view is inspiring, and, when you're propped up against an ancient column, the experience is unparalleled. The setting sun bathes the temples in a mystical warm glow; then, in succession, floodlights illuminate the valley's temples. See chapter 13.

2 The Best Small Towns

- **Lucca** (Tuscany): Protected from the new millennium by its remarkable swath of Renaissance ramparts (said to be among the best preserved in Europe), Lucca evokes the charm of an elegant small town. Within these historic parameters, local matrons tool around on bicycles (everyone does—Lucca is like a quaint hill town without the hill), young mothers with strollers walk the ramparts' promenade beneath the shade of centuries-old plane trees, and exuberant examples of

Pisan-Romanesque architecture draw visitors to the Duomo and San Michele in Foro. Hometown boy Puccini would have no problem recognizing the city he always held close to his music-filled heart. See chapter 5.

- **Gubbio** (Umbria): This proud, austere, no-nonsense mountain town has only recently figured on the maps of the intrepid off-the-beaten-path trekkers. Blessedly hard to get to, Gubbio has slumbered through the centuries and today offers one of the country's

best-preserved scenarios of medieval architecture and ambience. Because Gubbio is built into the side of the forest-clad Monte Igino, a funicular up to the Basilica of its beloved patron, St. Ubaldo, provides a stunning panorama and a chance to consider the centuries-old serenity of the time-locked outpost that poet Gabriele D'Annunzio called the "City of Silence." See chapter 5.

- **Bressanone (Brixen)** (South Tyrol): It's hard to believe that this quaint town was the center of a large ecclesiastical principality for almost 800 years. It is rich in history and natural beauty, and you can explore vineyards, mountains, and impressive museums and monuments, as well as amble past the town's pastel-colored houses on narrow cobblestone streets. See chapter 8.
- **Bellagio** (Lake District): The prettiest of all the towns in Italy's lake country, Bellagio was peaceful enough for Franz Liszt to use as a retreat—and because it hasn't been inundated with throngs of tourists, it could work for you, too. See chapter 9.
- **Ravello** (Campania): The Amalfi Coast could be described as a parody of itself, particularly in

August, but only 4.8km (3 miles) up into the hills is a lush retreat worlds away from the tourist crush below. Perched at the lip of the verdant Valley of the Dragon, the quiet beauty and sculpted gardens of Ravello provide the perfect venue for public concerts throughout the year, tempting newcomers to explore the scenery that inspired Wagner's *Parsifal*. See chapter 12.

- **Ostuni** (Salento, Apulia): It's easy for the uninformed to bypass this enchanting little town on the way through to the "major" stops in Apulia. So be informed: Ostuni is so much more than a day at the beach—an afternoon spent walking through the whitewashed medieval alleyways of the "White City" makes for serious poetry. See chapter 12.
- **Erice** (Sicily): Sitting on a cliff top that soars well above the cloud line, Erice is a medieval town that frequently meets thick tufts of fog that engulf the cobbled streets in a mysterious and romantic mist. This sacred city was established as a religious center in honor of the Earth goddess centuries before the Greeks and later the Romans showed up and renamed her Venus. See chapter 13.

3 The Best Cathedrals

- **Basilica di San Pietro** (Rome): A monument not only to Christendom but also to the Renaissance and baroque eras, this cathedral was designed by Bramante, decorated by Bernini, and crowned with a dome by Michelangelo. Within its walls are some of the world's most renowned treasures: *St. Peter*, by Arnolfo di Cambio; and Michelangelo's haunting *Pietà*, a masterpiece representation in marble of Christ in the arms of Mary at the deposition, carved

when the artist was only 19 years old. If that's not humbling, then a glimpse of the pope will be. See chapter 3.

- **Pantheon** (Rome): This consecrated church is more like a cathedral to architecture, with its perfect hemispheric dome and flawless proportions. Expertly engineered by Emperor Hadrian in the 2nd century A.D., the Pantheon survived the test of time, until Pope Urban VIII had the bronze tiles of the portico melted

down to make the baldacchino for St. Peter's and 80 cannons. Today you can pay your respects to genius, as well as to Raphael, whose tomb resides within. See chapter 3.

- **Duomo (Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore; Florence):** The red-tiled dome of Florence's magnificent Duomo has dominated the skyline for 5 centuries. In its day, it was the largest unsupported dome in the world, dwarfing the structures of ancient Greece and Rome. In true Renaissance style, it was and still is considered a major architectural feat and was the high point of architect Filippo Brunelleschi's illustrious career. In 1996, an extensive and elaborate 15-year restoration was finally completed on the colorful 16th-century frescoes covering the inside of the cupola and depicting the world's largest painting of the *Last Judgment*. See chapter 4.
- **Duomo (Siena, Tuscany):** Begun in 1196, this black-and-white marble-striped cathedral sits atop Siena's highest hill and is one of the most beautiful and ambitious Gothic churches in Italy. Its exterior's extravagant zebra-striped marble bands borrowed from Pisan-Lucchese architecture continue indoors. Masterpieces here include a priceless pavement of masterful mosaics; 56 etched and inlaid marble panels created by more than 40 artisans (now uncovered for public viewing in late summer and early fall); the octagonal pulpit, carved by master Tuscan sculptor Nicola Pisano; and the lavish Libreria Piccolomini, frescoed by Pinturicchio in the late 15th century with the life of the Siena-born Pope Pius II, quintessential Renaissance man and humanist, and still housed with that pope's important

illuminated manuscript collection. See chapter 5.

- **Duomo (Orvieto, Umbria):** Begun in 1290 and with a bold, beautiful, and intricately ornamented facade that stands out among Italy's Gothic masterpieces, Orvieto's Duomo is also known for one of the greatest fresco cycles of the Renaissance in its Chapel of San Brizio. The cycle, begun by Fra Angelico and completed by Luca Signorelli, depicts in vivid detail the *Last Judgment*, one that was said to have influenced Michelangelo in his own interpretation for the Sistine Chapel. See chapter 5.
- **Basilica di San Marco (Venice):** Surely the most exotic and Eastern of the Western world's Christian churches, the onion-domed and mosaic-covered San Marco took much of its inspiration from ancient Constantinople's Hagia Sophia. Somewhere inside the mysterious candlelit cavern of the 1,000-year-old church, which began as the private chapel of the governing doges, are the remains of St. Mark, revered patron saint of Venice's ancient maritime republic. His "mascot," the winged lion, is linked to the city as closely as the "quadriga," the four ancient magnificent chariot horses that decorate the open loggia of St. Mark's Basilica overlooking one of the world's great squares. See chapter 7.
- **Duomo (Milan, Lombardy):** It took 5 centuries to build this magnificent Gothic cathedral—the fourth-largest church in the world. It's marked by 135 marble spires, a stunning triangular facade, and some 3,400 statues flanking the massive but airy, almost fanciful exterior. The interior, lit by brilliant stained-glass windows, is more serene. Lord

Tennyson rapturously wrote about the view of the Alps from the roof. See chapter 9.

- **Cattedrale di Monreale** (Sicily): Nothing short of jaw-dropping, this awesome church stands as a testament to the craftsmanship of imported Greek artisans from Byzantium, who carpeted the

interior with 28,900 sq. m (311,077 sq. ft.) of glittering mosaics. In the cathedral's serene cloisters, you can while away the hours contemplating the hundreds of one-of-a-kind twisted and inlaid minicolumns. If you see anything in Sicily, make it Monreale. See chapter 13.

4 The Best Museums

- **Musei Vaticani (Vatican Museums; Rome)**: Centuries of collections and “indulgences” had to come to something: one of the wealthiest collections of art and historic artifacts in the world. The Vatican Museum's origins are humble, beginning in 1503 with Pope Julius II della Rovere's placement of a statue of Apollo in the courtyard of the Belvedere Palace and culminating in a showpiece of 12 galleries and papal apartments filled with a veritable catalog of civilization. There's everything from the Raphael Rooms, with their *School of Athens* fresco, to Michelangelo's incomparable Sistine Chapel, with its fingers-almost-touching depiction of *God Creating Adam*. In between, you'll find that statue of Apollo, plus a surfeit of Greek and Roman statues, medieval tapestries, illuminated manuscripts, ancient Egyptian and Chinese art, Etruscan artifacts, and a painting gallery covering everyone from Giotto and Leonardo to Caravaggio's *Deposition* and Raphael's final work, the magnificent *Transfiguration*. See chapter 3.
- **Galleria Borghese** (Rome): Never has such a small space packed such an amazing punch: Reopened in 2002 after a 14-year restoration, the Galleria Borghese elicits an audible “wow” at every step. The Pinacoteca is a shrine to

Renaissance painting, with works by Andrea del Sarto, Ghirlandaio, Pinturicchio, Fra Bartolomeo, and Lorenzo di Credi. Raphael makes an entrance with his *Deposition*, and Botticelli is represented by his *Madonna col Bambino e San Giovannino*, while Caravaggio's works simply provide a tease for his tour de force in the Sculpture Gallery. Here, along with some of Caravaggio's most poignant works, is a collection of marble masterpieces by Gianlorenzo Bernini, including the *Rape of Persephone*, *Apollo and Daphne*, and the life-like *Pauline Bonaparte as Venus*. See chapter 3.

- **Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia** (Rome): This is the single greatest museum devoted to the ancient, pre-Roman Etruscan culture. These guys left behind painted vases and beautiful funerary art, including a terra-cotta sarcophagus lid bearing life-size—and remarkably lifelike—full-body portraits of a husband and wife, smiling enigmatically and wearing their finest togas, sitting back to enjoy one final, eternal feast together. See chapter 3.
- **Museo Nazionale Romano** (Rome): After languishing behind the closed doors of the Baths of Diocletian for years, the most extensive and comprehensive collections of Roman art anywhere in

the world are finally open to public viewing, housed in four of the city's top museums: Palazzo Altemps, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, the Aula Ottagona, and the restored Baths of Diocletian. This reorganization of exhibitions allows you to appreciate not only an astounding collection of sculpture, mosaics, coinage, jewelry, and never-before-seen frescoes, but also the glorious spaces, ancient and modern, in which they reside. See chapter 3.

- **Uffizi Gallery (Galleria degli Uffizi; Florence):** When the Medici were the affluent men about town, this was the headquarters of the Duchy of Tuscany. For today's visitor, it is the riverside repository of the greatest collection of Renaissance paintings in the world—Giotto's *Maestà*, Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Allegory of Spring*, Michelangelo's *Holy Family*—bequeathed to Florence with the understanding that the collection would never leave the city of the Medici nor these hallowed walls. “Stendhal's Syndrome,” the peculiar malaise of vertigo from the sheer overload of unparalleled culture, most likely was first experienced here. See chapter 4.
- **Museo Nazionale del Bargello (Florence):** The harsh, fortresslike Bargello, incarnated as the constable's headquarters and local prison, among other things, is to Renaissance sculpture what the Uffizi is to Renaissance painting. Within this cavernous medieval shell lies a handsomely displayed collection without equal in Italy, with early works by Michelangelo and magnificent pieces by the early Renaissance master Donatello. See chapter 4.
- **Galleria dell'Accademia (Florence):** Michelangelo's *David*, one of the world's most recognized statues, looms in stark perfection beneath the rotunda of the main room built exclusively for its display when it was moved here from the Piazza Signoria for safekeeping. After standing in awe before its magnificence, many visitors leave, drained, without seeing the museum's other Michelangelos, particularly four never-finished *Prisoners* (or *Slaves*) struggling magnificently to free themselves. See chapter 4.
- **Palazzo Pitti's Galleria Palatina (Florence):** The former residence of the Medici, the enormous Palazzo Pitti is home to seven museums, the largest collection of galleries in Florence under one roof. The Galleria Palatina section, 26 art-filled rooms on the first floor of the palace, is the star attraction, home to one of the finest collections of Italian Renaissance and baroque masters in Europe. The art of the 16th century is the forte of the Palatina, in particular that of Raphael and his many Madonnas. The museum's treasures also include a large collection of works by Andrea del Sarto, Fra Bartolomeo, Rubens (superb), Tintoretto (canvases), Veronese, Caravaggio, and Titian (stunning portraits). See chapter 4.
- **Galleria dell'Accademia (Venice):** The glory that was Venice lives on in the Accademia, the definitive treasure house of Venetian painting and one of Europe's great museums. Exhibited chronologically from the 13th through the 18th centuries, the collection is said to have no single hallmark masterpiece; rather, this is an outstanding and comprehensive showcase of works by all the great master painters of Venice—Veronese, Tintoretto, Titian—the largest such collection in the world. Most of all,

though, the works open a window onto the Venice of 500 years ago. Indeed, you'll see in the canvases how little Venice, perhaps least of any city in Europe, has changed over the centuries. See chapter 7.

- **Collezione Peggy Guggenheim** (Venice): Considered one of the most comprehensive and important collections of modern art in the world, these paintings and sculptures were assembled by eccentric and eclectic American expatriate Peggy Guggenheim in her own home. She did an excellent job of it, showing particular strengths in Cubism, European Abstraction, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism since about 1910. See chapter 7.
- **Museo Archeologico** (Naples): If you've come all this way just to pass through Naples on your way to Pompeii, you're missing half the show. Anything that hadn't already been carted off from the ruins by looters is housed here, including a special exhibit of

erotic art in the *Gabinetto Segreto*, or Secret Chamber. Not to be overshadowed is an extensive collection of ancient sculptural masterpieces, including the *Farnese Bull*, a 4m-high (13-ft.) ancient narration carved out of one gargantuan block of marble. See chapter 12.

- **Museo Archaeologico Paolo Orsi** (Siracusa): Inaugurated in 1988 to pick up the slack left by the now defunct archaeological museum in Piazza Duomo, this museum, home to about 18,000 artifacts, is the most extensive archaeological collection in Sicily and among the largest of its kind in Europe. It's also one of the most coherent. With many of the treasures displayed in their proper historical context, the collection details Sicily's prehistoric era, the period of Greek colonization, and all of the principal subcolonies of eastern and central Sicily, including large hauls from both Gela and Agrigento. See chapter 13.

5 The Best Ancient Ruins

- **Foro Romano** (Rome): This poetic collection of architectural detritus marks the spot where an empire ruled the ancient civilized world. You can explore the Roman Forum in an hour or two, but whether you pack a picnic lunch or simply gaze down over the zone from street level, the Forum's allure will call you back. See chapter 3.
- **Colosseo** (Rome): A well-known symbol of the Eternal City, the Colosseum for many *is* Rome. That's a heavy responsibility to bear, but this broken yet enduring structure succeeds admirably. Built over Nero's private lake (see *Domus Aurea*, below), the arena accommodated up to 50,000 Romans who came for bloody gladiator matches

and wild beast massacres. Practically speaking, it's the largest amphitheater in the world and a study for the classical orders of architecture. See chapter 3.

- **Domus Aurea** (Rome): After 20 years of study and excavations, the *Domus Aurea*, or "Golden House," is finally open to the public, revealing frequently mind-blowing testament to how the richer half lived. No expense was spared in the construction of this 150-room palace that surveyed four of Rome's hills and included Nero's private lake, hunting grounds, pastures, and vineyard. Completely swathed in gold, jewels, and works of art, *Domus Aurea* is a brilliant masterwork of

megalomania in ancient Rome. See chapter 3.

- **Arena di Verona** (Verona): One of the best-preserved Roman amphitheaters in the world and the best known in Italy after Rome's Colosseum, the elliptical Arena was built of a slightly pinkish marble around the year A.D. 100 and stands in the middle of town in the Piazza Brà. Its perfect acoustics have survived the millennia and make it one of the wonders of the ancient world, as well as one of the most fascinating venues today for live moonlit performances (opera here is fantastic) conducted without microphones. See chapter 8.
- **Pompeii & Herculaneum** (Campania): One of the most tragic events in recorded history occurred in A.D. 79, when Mount Vesuvius blew its top 19km (12 miles) into the air, claimed the lives of thousands, and annihilated two thriving and prosperous cities. In Pompeii, it was a high-speed tidal wave of volcanic ash and superheated gases that violently hurled itself upon the city; in Herculaneum, it was a steady flow of scalding mud that scorched the victims' bodies down to the bone. The quick, devastating burials, however, did preserve two ancient cities, with villas, shops, public baths, and brothels uncovered much as they were almost 2,000 years ago. See chapter 12.
- **Greek Temples at Paestum** (Campania): Who'd expect to see such awesome ancient Greek temples in the middle of mozzarella country? Only an hour south of Naples stands the 9th-century-B.C. Greek colony of Paestum, founded when *Magna Graecia* extended into Southern Italy. Actually, Paestum has something even Greece can't claim: the only known examples of ancient Greek frescoes in the world. See chapter 12.
- **Greek Temples of Sicily** (Segesta, Selinunte, and Agrigento): These shockingly poignant remnants left by Greek colonies in the age of *Magna Graecia*, or the "Greater Greece," reside in some of the most spectacular settings in Sicily. The temple of **Segesta** glows in tones of warm gold, sitting on the edge of a deep ravine surrounded by rolling hills covered with jasmine and aloe. **Selinunte** retains much of its original mystery, with an anonymous jumble of re-erected temples stretched out over two hills that flow gracefully into the Mediterranean. Settled along a man-made ridge below the modern city of **Agrigento** is the Valley of the Temples, a string of Doric temples awash in olive groves and pink almond blossoms in spring. The exquisite Temple of Concord ranks as one of the two best-preserved Greek temples on Earth. See chapter 13.
- **Villa Romana del Casale at Piazza Armerina** (Sicily): In the little hamlet of Casale outside the town of Piazza Armerina lie the most extensive, intact, and colorful ancient mosaics in all of the Roman world. The grounds of the villa, probably built as a hunting lodge for Emperor Maximus, include a peristyled main house, a triclinium, a bath complex, and a vast number of rooms for entertaining and regurgitating. With the stables and kitchen yet to be excavated, the 11,500 sq. m (123,785 sq. ft.) of mosaics are just the tip of the iceberg. See chapter 13.

6 The Best Wine-Tasting Experiences

- **Montalcino** (southern Tuscany): This less-trod area south of Siena is sacred ground to wine connoisseurs for its unsurpassed **Brunello di Montalcino**. The picturesque hill town has *enotecas* (wine bars) and cantinas right in town; Montalcino's mighty Medici fortress has been reincarnated as a rustic wine bar. With a rental car, you can head into the highly scenic countryside outside of Montalcino to the Fattoria Barbi, one of the area's most respected wine-producing estates, for a tasting and country-style dinner, even an overnight stay. See chapter 5.
- **Enoteca Italiana** (Siena, Tuscany): Siena sits to the south of the Chianti-designated area, so there could be no better setting to showcase Italy's timeless wine culture. Set within the massive military fortress built by Cosimo dei Medici in 1560, this wine-tasting bar provides a wide selection. The emphasis is on Tuscan wines—many made in the fabled Chianti area of Siena's backyard—but this enoteca is a national concern owned and operated by the government to support the Italian wine tradition. See chapter 5.
- **Verona** (Veneto): The epicenter of the region's important viticulture (Veneto produces more D.O.C. wine than any other region in Italy), Verona hosts the annual VinItaly wine fair held every April, a highly prestigious event in the global wine world. A number of authentic old-time wine bars still populate the medieval back streets of the fair city of Romeo and Juliet fame. First opened in 1890, the **Bottega del Vino** boasts a wine cellar holding an unmatched 80,000-bottle selection. Belly up to the old oak bar and sample from five dozen good-to-excellent wines for sale by the glass, particularly the Veronese trio of Bardolino and Valpolicella (reds) and Soave (white). **Masi** is one of the most respected producers, one of many in the Verona hills whose cantinas are open to the public for wine-tasting visits. See chapter 8.
- **Barolo** (Piemonte Wine Country): This romantic town is full of shops selling the village's rich red wines, held by many to be the most complex, powerful reds in Italy. The highlight is the **Castello di Barolo**, which houses a wine museum and enoteca in its cavernous cellars. See chapter 10.
- **Monterosso** (Italian Riviera): At the **Enoteca Internazionale** in this small, charming town in the Cinque Terre, you can taste local wines from the vineyards that cling to the nearby cliffs. See chapter 11.

7 The Best Hotel Deals

- **Navona** (Rome; ☎ 06-68211391): The rooms at the Navona are not only pristine, tasteful, and decorated with limited-edition artworks, but they are located a stone's throw from the baroque wonders of Piazza Navona and right in the center of the historic quarter. Doubles begin at 135€ (\$155). See chapter 3.
- **Albergo Firenze** (Florence; ☎ 055-268301): A former student crash pad and today a renovated two-star choice that appeals to all age levels, the Firenze is ideally situated between the Duomo and the Piazza della Signoria. A fresh overall look, great bathrooms for the price range, and an address that beats the best put this hotel

- on every insider's shortlist. But don't expect a staff that's too professional or accommodating, or you'll leave disappointed. Starting at 83€ (\$95) for a double with a bathroom, this is one of the *centro storico's* best values. See chapter 4.
- **Piccolo Hotel Puccini** (Lucca, Tuscany; ☎ **0583-55421**): If you're planning a stay in Lucca, Giacomo Puccini's hometown, look no further than this charming three-star hotel in a 15th-century palazzo in front of the building where the great composer was born. Some of the hotel rooms overlook the small piazza and its bronze statue of Puccini. Paolo and Raffaella, the young and enthusiastic couple who run the place, have lightened and brightened it up and do everything to make this a perfect choice for those who appreciate tasteful attention and discreet professionalism. Piazza San Michele, one of Lucca's loveliest squares, is two steps away. Doubles start at 80€ (\$92). See chapter 5.
 - **Piccolo Hotel Etruria** (Siena, Tuscany; ☎ **0577-288088**): This recently refurbished hotel is lovely enough to be your base in Tuscany—at 78€ (\$90) for a double, it's too great a find to be used as a mere 1-night stop. The proud Fattorini family oversaw every painstaking detail of its most recent renovation, and the taste and quality levels are something you usually find in hotels at thrice the cost. See chapter 5.
 - **Borgonuovo Bed & Breakfast** (Ferrara, Emilia-Romagna; ☎ **0532-211100**): Outstanding hospitality and charm is the name of the game here. Starting at 85€ (\$98), you can stay on a medieval palazzo in a guest room decorated with an eclectic mix of antiques. The breakfasts served in the garden are feasts. See chapter 6.
 - **Cappello** (Ravenna, Emilia-Romagna; ☎ **0544-219813**): This hotel is a true deal, considering what you get for 93€ (\$107) per double. The best rooms have been carved out of grand salons and are enormous. The bathrooms are clad in marble or highly polished hardwoods, with luxurious stall showers and tubs, and, like the bedrooms, are lit with Venetian glass fixtures. See chapter 6.
 - **La Cascina del Monastero** (La Morra, Piedmont Wine Country; ☎ **0173-509245**): What better way to spend your time in the wine country than to stay at a bed-and-breakfast at a farm that bottles wine and harvests fruit? Housed in a converted old and charismatic farm building, the rooms have exposed timbers and brass beds. Doubles run about 70€ to 76€ (\$80–\$87). See chapter 10.
 - **Da Cecio** (Cinque Terre, Italian Riviera; ☎ **0187-812138**): After walking through the Cinque Terre, relax in your room at this old stone house in the countryside as you gaze out at the ocean, olive groves, and the nearby hilltop town of Corniglia. Doubles cost just 55€ (\$63). See chapter 11.
 - **Bella Capri** (Naples; ☎ **081-5529494**): Bella Capri is a clean, simple budget hotel ideally located for exploring Naples. Your touring plans will be a snap because the welcoming staff has gone out of its way to see that everything you could possibly get at the tourist information office is right here at the reception desk. You can also take breakfast on a private terrace overlooking the docks, all for as low as 62€ (\$71) for a double. See chapter 12.

- **Il Monastero** (Ischia; ☎ 081-992435): Pretend you're Rapunzel in this converted convent atop a medieval rocky fortress. Evening and nighttime access to the hotel is via a long corridor and elevator, plus the short walk past the Chiesa dell'Immacolata to the hotel entrance. It's like having an entire castle to yourself. All rooms enjoy a sweeping panorama of Ischia Ponte and the sea. Doubles start at 110€ (\$126). See chapter 12.
- **Trullidea** (Alberobello, Apulia; ☎ 080-4323860): Some hotels are clearly a destination in themselves, especially when UNESCO has declared them a national monument. Trullidea, a series of independent efficiencies under the conical stone roofs of the ancient *trulli* (beehive-shape dwellings), truly offers a peek into the lifestyles of the Alberobellese without requiring us to sacrifice even a whit of comfort. When the tour buses clear out, there's nothing left but you, a chatty neighbor, and an infinite cluster of twinkling stars. Doubles cost about 78€ (\$90). See chapter 12.
- **Gran Bretagna** (Siracusa, Sicily; ☎ 0931-68765): No longer the intimate family-owned pensione of days gone by, the Gran Bretagna may have sacrificed character but not quality. Some rooms are frescoed, some are unusually spacious, and all are charming. It's still as warm and welcoming as before, only now all rooms have bathrooms, air-conditioning, TVs, and plenty of water pressure. Check out the old Spanish fortress walls beneath the ground floor on your way down to breakfast. Doubles are 100€ (\$115). See chapter 13.
- **Villa Nettuno** (Taormina, Sicily; ☎ 0942-23797): For the best price-to-quality ratio in Taormina, the Nettuno wins, with doubles as low as 50€ (\$58) off season. Grab a room with garden-terrace access for 'round-the-clock enjoyment of the postcard-perfect vistas of Taormina's cliffs and turquoise coast. See chapter 13.

8 The Best Affordable Hideaways by the Sea

- **La Camogliese** (Camogli, the Riviera Levante; ☎ 0185-771402): Call it a hideaway by the sea. Not only is this popular hotel near a beach, but the owner will also direct you to more hideaways along the nearby coast. Its location near the train station makes this attractive hotel especially convenient, and double rooms cost only 70€ to 75€ (\$80–\$86). See chapter 11.
- **Villa Rosa** (Positano; ☎ 089-811955): Aside from the great prices and kindly family management at this former *affittacamere*, the real attraction here is the view from your own bougainvillea-arbored sitting terrace across the inlet to a postcard-perfect shot of Positano's most photogenic quarter, the whitewashed and pastel cube houses climbing the headland in a jumble of balconies and flowers. The best part is realizing that you're paying only about 140€ (\$160) for your double. You're getting a better view than the one from the famous Hotel Sireneuse across the street, for less than one-fifth the price. See chapter 12.
- **Villa Eva** (Anacapri; ☎ 081-8371549): Located in the hills above Anacapri and nowhere near Capri center, Villa Eva is the Isle of Capri's slice of paradise—a lush, exotic jungle thick with

flowering vines and vegetation. If you don't stay here, you'll be sorry, even if the sea is a 20-minute walk away, just close enough for that pretwilight swim in the Blue Grotto. Doubles begin at 85€ (\$98). See chapter 12.

- **La Tonnarella** (Sorrento; © 081-8781153): Terraced below the quiet road leading out of town, La Tonnarella enjoys a stunning position high above the Bay of Sorrento, with views of the Sorrento headlands from almost every corner. Access to the beach at the base of the cliff is by elevator or via a lovely wooded path, and the grounds feature pine-shaded terraces and gardens for wandering about or enjoying a quiet meal. The hotel retains a 19th-century feel, with Oriental runners, loads of wood, and plenty of ceramic tile that give even the humblest of hotels a crisp elegance. Doubles cost 145€ (\$167). See chapter 12.
- **Arathena Rocks Hotel** (Giardini-Naxos/Taormina, Sicily; © 0942-51349): Set dramatically on the extreme tip of Punto Schisò, the Arathena Rocks Hotel is comfortably removed from the resort

crowds of Giardini-Naxos, enjoying its private and jagged lava “beach.” The terrace pool, set in a traditional sculpted Italian garden, provides an alternative to the rugged lava stones. It's only a 20-minute bus ride up to the colorful gardens and medieval streets of hilltop Taormina, where a hotelier would balk at the 55€ (\$63) per person you're paying for such luxury, dinner included. See chapter 13.

- **Villa Nettuno** (Taormina, Sicily; © 0942-23797): One of the last family-owned gems remaining in overdeveloped Taormina, Villa Nettuno retains its genteel, 19th-century character. The kindly Sciglio family is able to keep prices down—doubles are easy to take at 50€ to 70€ (\$58–\$80)—because they refuse to work with agencies and thus avoid having to pay commissions. The private and overgrown gardens climb the terraced hillside to an isolated stone gazebo, with its perfect panorama and savory solitude. With the cable car across the street, it's a quick and easy descent to the beaches of Mazzarò and Isola Bella. See chapter 13.

9 The Best Affordable Restaurants

- **Fiaschetteria Beltramme** (Rome; no phone): If you can find an empty table at this ultra-traditional seven-table bistro, it won't take long for you to become a parody of the 1950s caricature on the wall—the one of the rotund man pronouncing in Italian, “I can't believe I ate all that!” The recipes are hallowed, the service is consistent, and the decor is humble. See chapter 3.
- **Ditirambo** (Rome; © 06-6871626): Run by a group of affable and handsome entrepreneurs, Ditirambo deviates from

the nuts and bolts of traditional Roman cuisine, opening its palate to innovative and outstanding dishes representative of Italy's regional cooking. Reservations are essential. See chapter 3.

- **Il Latini** (Florence; © 055-210916): Il Latini works hard to keep the air of an archetypal trattoria—long shared tables, hammocks hanging from the beamed ceiling—even if it has expanded to multiple rooms and tourists now know to flock here to join the local regulars in line for a table. There's no official set-price

menu—the waiters are inclined to simply serve you as much as you can eat and drink of their delicious crostini, thick soups and pastas, platters of roasted meats, desserts, bottomless wine and mineral water, even after-dinner grappa, and then just charge everyone at the table 28€ (\$32) a head, an amazing price for a meal that will leave you stuffed for days and filled with fond memories for years. See chapter 4.

- **Da Giulio** (Lucca, Tuscany; ☎ 0583-55948): Delighted foreigners and locals in uncompromising allegiance agree that this big, airy, and forever busy trattoria is one of Tuscany's undisputed stars. Although casual, it's not the place to occupy a much-coveted table for just a pasta and salad. Save up your appetite and come for a full-blown home-style feast of *la cucina toscana*, trying all of Giulio's traditional rustic specialties. Waiters know not to recommend certain local delicacies to non-Italian diners, unless you look like the type that enjoys tripe, *tartara di cavallo* (horse-meat tartare), or veal snout. See chapter 5.
- **Osteria le Logge** (Siena, Tuscany; ☎ 0577-48013): This convivial and highly recommended Sienese trattoria is two steps off the gorgeous Piazza del Campo and a well-known destination for locals and well-informed visitors who join the standing-room-only scenario of those who keep this place packed. Its delicious *pasta fresca* (fresh homemade pasta) launches each memorable meal, with entrees that are all about the simple perfection of grilled meats. The excellent choice of extra-virgin olive oil is enough to confirm the affable owner's seriousness, seconded by a small but discerning wine list that

is topped by his own limited production of Rosso and Brunello di Montepulciano. See chapter 5.

- **Olindo Faccioli** (Bologna; ☎ 051-223171): This intimate, inconspicuous restaurant has a limited but delightful menu. The specials lean toward a light, vegetarian cuisine, but the starter of tuna carpaccio will satisfy fish eaters as well. You can linger here as you decide which of the 400 vintages of wine will go best with your meal. See chapter 6.
- **Al Brindisi** (Ferrara; ☎ 0532-209142): This just may be the oldest wine bar in the world—it's been around since 1435. The two timbered dining rooms are stacked to the ceiling with wine bottles, and, for 1.50€ (\$1.70) and up, you can choose a glass from this overwhelming selection. Have some appetizers, sausage, or pumpkin ravioli with your wine, or go for the whole shebang with one of the many tourist and tasting menus, which include a feast of appetizers, a special main course of the day, dessert, and a carafe of wine, all for 9€ to 40€ (\$10–\$46). See chapter 6.
- **Osteria dal Duca** (Verona; ☎ 045-594474): There are no written records to confirm that this 13th-century palazzo was once owned by the Montecchi (Montague) family, and thankfully the discreet management never considered calling this place the "Ristorante Romeo." But here you are in "fair Verona," nonetheless, dining in what is believed to be Romeo's house, a characteristic medieval palazzo, and enjoying one of the nicest meals in town in a spirited and friendly neighborhood ambience fueled by the amiable family that keeps this place abuzz. It will be simple, it will be delicious, you'll probably make

friends with the people sitting next to you, and you'll always remember your meal at Romeo's restaurant. See chapter 8.

- **Cantine Sanremese** (San Remo, Italian Riviera; ☎ 0184-572063): Old habits die hard at the Cantine Sanremese, so come here to sample traditional, homemade Ligurian cuisine. Instead of ordering main dishes, sample the *sardemaira* (the local focaccia-like bread), *torte verde* (a quiche of fresh green vegetables), or any of their delicious soups, including minestrone thick with fresh vegetables and garnished with pesto. See chapter 11.
- **De Mananan** (Corniglia, Italian Riviera; ☎ 0187-821166): In this intimate restaurant, which is carved into an ancient stone cellar, the owners/chefs use only the finest ingredients to prepare homemade specialties such as pesto, *funghi porcini* (wild porcini mushrooms), mussels, grilled fish, fresh anchovies stuffed with herbs, and *coniglio nostrano* (rabbit roasted in a white sauce). See chapter 11.
- **Cucina Casareccia** (Lecce, Apulia; ☎ 0832-245178): Dining at this tiny trattoria makes you feel as if you should have brought along a bottle of wine: Concetta Cantoro treats customers as if they were guests in her own home, and

husband Marcello is a fine host. Leave the menu selection to the experts, and sit back and enjoy. See chapter 12.

- **Antica Focacceria San Francesco** (Palermo, Sicily; ☎ 091-320264): "Slumming it" has never been so fun. This over-lit, high-ceilinged joint resembles a waiting room more than a restaurant and serves up some of the heaviest, greasiest, finger-lickingest food I've ever eaten (though I'll probably pass on the spleen next time). You won't get much more authentic Palermitano then this. See chapter 13.
- **La Forchetta** (Agrigento, Sicily; ☎ 0922-596266): Every inch the traditional neighborhood trattoria, La Forchetta has true Sicilian character and excellent home cooking. Matriarch Mamma Giuseppa is a genuine blast, haranguing the waitstaff (often her sons) one minute and graciously greeting you the next. See chapter 13.
- **Zza** (Siracusa, Sicily; ☎ 0931-22204): I will never have the opportunity to thank the train conductor for recommending this overlooked gem. The authentic fare—detailed in local dialect (with translations)—provided one of my most memorable meals in Sicily, at a price so low I'm sorry they don't ship overnight. See chapter 13.

10 The Best Cafes

- **Sant'Eustachio** (Rome): Famed for its froth, Sant'Eustachio is consistently packed at least three deep at the bar, with everyone clamoring for a shot of the special blend. No one ever leaves, and it's no wonder: There's so little coffee beneath all that foam that you have to keep getting refills to get a decent amount of coffee! While

you wait, the shop obliges with a tiny glass-case display of delectable coffee paraphernalia, all reasonably priced. See chapter 3.

- **Caffè Rivoire** (Florence): The pudding-rich hot chocolate of Florence's premier historical cafe is second to the real reason for a visit: its dead-on view of the city's greatest piazza and a front-row

seat for people-watching. The ambience is Old World inside and out: The stately Palazzo Vecchio looms in front of outdoor tables and the piazza's most celebrated statue, a copy of Michelangelo's fabled *David*. Inside it's cozy and elegant, and no one raises an eyebrow if you nurse a tea for several hours. See chapter 4.

- **Historic Cafes of Piazza San Marco** (Venice): The nostalgic 18th-century **Caffè Florian** is the most famous cafe on this stunning piazza. But the truth is, if the weather is lovely and the other three cafes have moved their hundreds of tables outdoors, the piazza becomes one big Bellini-sipping, people-watching stage, with St. Mark's Basilica as its singular backdrop. Around the corner, just in front of the Palazzo Ducale, is the **Caffè Chioggia**, the only cafe with a view of the water and the Clock Tower, whose bronze Moors began striking the hour again after a 5-year renovation in 1999. Each of the piazza cafes has its own three- or four-piece orchestra, but the music at the Chioggia is held to be the best and least

commercial (no "New York, New York" here). See chapter 7.

- **Antico Caffè Dante** (Verona): The interior of Verona's oldest cafe is rather formal and expensive, but set up camp here at an outdoor table in Verona's loveliest piazza, named for the early Renaissance man of letters whose statue commemorates his love for the city and the ruling Scaligeri family who hosted him during his years of exile. If you're lucky enough to hold tickets for the opera in the city's 2,000-year-old Arena amphitheater, this is the traditional spot for an after-opera drink to complete, and contemplate, the evening's magic. See chapter 8.
- **Antica Pasticceria Gelateria Klainguti** (Genoa): Verdi enjoyed Genoa's oldest and best bakery. You probably will, too, for its Falstaff (a sweet brioche) and stupefying selection of pastries and chocolates. See chapter 11.
- **Gran Caffè Gambrinus** (Naples): This courtly 19th-century bastion of Neapolitan society recaptures the golden age of Naples. See chapter 12.