

The Best of Italy



Passionate, gorgeous, generous Italy is bursting with "bests." The abbreviated list here includes the sights, places, tastes, and moments in our Italian travels that have made us smile the most. From laying eyes on the Colosseum at night, to slurping gelato on a sweltering summer day, to feeling the electricity in the stadium during a big Italian soccer match, these have been our most stimulating experiences and the fondest memories, the things we've spent hours at the local Internet cafe e-mailing home about, and the stories we'll tell for years to come.

For each destination that we've covered in this book, you'll find individual city and regional "bests" that meet the same criteria: Whether they're famous tourist attractions or more under-the-radar cultural experiences, these are the aspects of this wonderful boot-shaped country that have lodged themselves in our hearts (and in some cases, on our hips), and that we most look forward to repeating on our next trip.

With her glamorous good looks, illustrious history, and in-your-face passion for life, the sun-kissed, sea-washed *bel paese* has something for everyone, and then some. In Italy, the hits just keep on comin', and there are still plenty to be discovered. *Buon viaggio*, and here's to creating your own amazing travel experiences!

Most Awesome Ancient Ruins

The power and the glory of the Roman Empire are best summed up in the towering travertine arcades of the mighty **Colosseum**, where gladiators and wild animals tore at each other before 65,000 crazed spectators for over 400 years. Nearby, the marble and brick skeletons

of downtown ancient Rome haunt the historic valley of the **Roman Forum**. The fragmentary columns, arches, and walls can be difficult to read, but we've given you a comprehensive guide to the Forum (p. 152) that should help you make sense of it all. Both the Colosseum and Forum take on an otherworldly splendor after dark, when they're

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illuminated by dramatically placed floodlights. For a fascinating, hands-on look at the way the ancient Romans lived, the vast archaeological site of **Pompeii** (p. 618) is always amazing, visit after visit. In this once-wealthy Roman town that was buried by the apocalyptic eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79, you can explore the remarkably modern-seeming vestiges of sumptuous villas, baths, theaters, even a brothel. For those who can't make it down to Pompeii, the ruins at **Ostia Antica** (p. 204), the port town of ancient Rome, offer an equally interesting (and much less crowded) encounter with sophisticated public and private buildings from imperial times. **Hadrian's Villa** (p. 204) in Tivoli is another great day trip from Rome, where emperor Hadrian tricked out his country estate with fake canals and islands and other inventive design features that today's hottest architects only wish they'd thought of first. For a truly mystical, transporting experience, don't miss the **Valley of the Temples** (p. 683) in Agrigento, Sicily. The evocative amber-toned skeletons of these six Greek temples, situated along a dramatic rocky ridge, dotted with olive and almond trees, are among the most memorable archaeological ruins in the world.

All-Star Churches

From a lineup of thousands of hopeful houses of God, we've picked three Hall-of-Famers: No matter where you travel on the planet Earth, you'll never find a more impressive church than **St. Peter's Basilica** in the Vatican (Rome; p. 180). While we admit the exterior of St. Peter's is a bit of a cliché, the vastness of the interior catches everyone by surprise. It's the biggest church in the world, and it's filled with incomprehensible amounts of gold, bronze, and marble, including Michelangelo's justly celebrated *Pietà*. In the case of the **Duomo in Florence** (p. 257), it's all about the exterior: Brunelleschi's massive

dome is like a red-skinned monster that looms over the quintessential Renaissance city. Catching a glimpse of the candy-striped marble walls of the immense cathedral, down a narrow alley, when you least expect it, is one of the most breathtaking sights in all of Italy. A view of **St. Mark's Basilica** (p. 487) in Venice is enhanced by the romantic mist that often hangs over the Venetian lagoon, but on a clear day, when the afternoon sun hits the basilica, the gilded domes and façade shimmer like a mirage, and the interior of St. Mark's is filled with near-horizontal shafts of light.

Best Carbs

Screw Dr. Atkins and the South Beach Diet: If you're coming to Italy, you eat flour and sugar, or you miss out big time. In Ravenna, Rimini, and Riccione, don't miss a chance to taste a fresh-baked **piadina** (flatbread made with pork lard). In Rome, indulge in the regional pasta specialties of **rigatoni alla carbonara** (with egg, *pecorino* cheese, and pancetta) and **bucatini all'amatriciana** (tomato, pancetta, and onion). Campania is the birthplace of **pizza** and mozzarella, and a dough pie is de rigueur when you're in Naples. For dessert, spike your blood sugar with **cannoli** in Sicily, or **gelato** anywhere in Italy.

Best Party Zone

Champagne spray-downs, beach volleyball tournaments, sand-castle contests, bonfires, and all-night dance parties await summer revelers in the anything-goes Riviera Romagna towns of **Rimini** and **Riccione**, on the Adriatic Coast (east of Florence and Bologna). A word to the wise, however: This is a sporty, sun-loving scene, so show up toned and tanned, or you'll feel like a fish out of water. Speaking of fish out of water, the leaping bottlenose dolphins at the Rimini Delfinario put on one hell of a show. See "Rimini & Riccione: Partying On Italy's Adriatic Beaches."

Best Secret Island Getaways

If only they were a little easier to get to, the islands of **Ponza** (off the Roman coast; p. 206) and **Panarea** (in the Aeolian Islands, off the north coast of Sicily; p. 705) would have been exploited by international tourism long ago. As it is, they're just small enough and remote enough that they've stayed insider, yet totally happening, Italian vacation spots—and that's how we like them. With just a bit of planning, you can work in a detour to either one (Ponza from Rome or Naples; Panarea from Naples or Milazzo, in Sicily). When you get there, rent a small motorboat—there's nothing quite as fabulous as a DIY island circumnavigation, with on-board picnic and frequent dips in spectacular coves, in the middle of the Mediterranean.

Best College Towns

You might be surprised at the young, international vibe that reigns on the medieval streets of **Perugia**, the capital of Umbria, but Perugia's Università per Stranieri has long been the most effective (and most fun) place in Italy for foreigners to study the Italian language. Crack open a Peroni and mix with Swedish, Japanese, and Italian students around the fountain at the end of Perugia's main drag, Corso Vannucci. See our Umbria chapter. Even more venerable than Perugia, hip and elegant **Bologna** is home to the oldest university in Europe, with all the lively pubs, cultural happenings, and heated intellectual discussions you'd expect from such a well-established college town. In the 17th-century campus of the university, you can visit the Anatomical Theater, an ornate chamber where medical students dissected thousands of cadavers on a fancy marble slab. Read about Bologna in the "Bologna & Emilia-Romagna" chapter.

Best Bars for Abandoning All Pretense of Blending In

When, in the course of your Italian vacation, you just want to party 'til you, well . . . (you

know), look no further than the **Drunken Ship** (p. 131) in Rome and the **Red Garter** (p. 243) in Florence, where body shots and Power Hour drink specials are only the beginning of a trip down memory lane to spring breaks and frat basements past. . . .

Best Bars, Period

Whether it's the fun-loving clientele, the laid-back atmosphere, the great tunes, or the hook-up potential that draws us there, we've plunked down many a euro on the wooden counters of these watering holes. At the **Vineria Reggio** (p. 132), on Campo de' Fiori in Rome, glasses of wine start at 1.50€ and the mood at *aperitivo* time is always festive. Grab a table on the cobblestones for great people-watching on Rome's party piazza par excellence. **Rock Castle** (p. 335) in Perugia is an awesome place to hang out and drink with the international student population, and the music on the PA never lets you down. **Corto Maltese** (p. 389) is a funky, divey Bologna institution, whose dance floor, pool table, and crowded bar are all eminently fertile zones for sowing the seeds of love (or a hook-up, anyway) with a local. In Milan, where most bars and lounges are busy trying to woo high-roller fashionistas and financiers, **Bar Magenta** (p. 546) is a more down-to-earth choice, where Motown, rock, and R&B classics play on the speakers. It's also the first stop for any scarf-wearing *tifoso* headed toward San Siro for an Inter or AC Milan soccer game. Late at night, soak up that super-fluous pint with Magenta's legendary sandwiches crafted by old men and an even older, hand-cranked meat slicer.

Most Jaw-Dropping Natural Scenery

The waterfront of **Lake Como** is the only place in the world where palm trees flourish at the base of the foothills of the Alps. The fact that George Clooney hangs out here (he has a villa in Laglio) only adds to the visual

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splendor of this preposterously gorgeous place. See "Milan & the Lakes." In Liguria, the hikes between the five villages of the **Cinque Terre**—with sweeping sea views and dense woods along the way—are a wonderful way to get back to nature. Just watch out for the flailing "hiking sticks" of the middle-aged tour groups who often monopolize the trails. (See "Cinque Terre: Five Breathtaking Towns" in the Liguria chapter). For all out Mediterranean fabulousness, there's a good reason why **Capri** and the **Amalfi Coast** (see Naples chapter) are as famous as they are. Verdant cliffs plunge vertiginously to the sea, and the water is a shade of cerulean blue that you probably didn't know Nature had in her box of crayons.

Best Piazzas for Hanging Out

By day, **Campo de' Fiori** in Rome (p. 128) is a picturesque fruit, vegetable, and trinket market; by night, it's drink central. Almost every other shop front on the cobblestoned pedestrian square is an alcohol purveyor of some kind, so whether you're in the mood for raucous American-themed pubs, or more chill, sophisticated wine bars, or back-to-basics open container with the punk kids on the steps of the statue, the possibilities are endless. The de facto living room of Bologna is the L-shaped **Piazza Maggiore** (p. 390), surrounded by imposing medieval palaces and towers; along one edge of the piazza, the Sala Borsa is a library, cafe, and general meeting point; on the opposite side, the draped arcades of the gorgeous portico known as the Pavaglione offer shopping and shade. You won't be the first one to have made **Piazza San Marco** (p. 483) your hangout in Venice. Its eternal popularity means prices are steep, but it's worth having at least one drink here for the legendary setting and view of St. Mark's Basilica. A more under-the-radar choice in Venice, **Campo San Giacometto** (p. 476) has cool restaurants and wine bars frequented by hip locals. A few of the bars

here have outdoor seating on an astonishingly bare esplanade facing the Grand Canal. In student-ruled Perugia, it all goes down on **Piazza IV Novembre** (p. 322). By early evening, everybody who's anybody convenes around the fountain at the end of Corso Vannucci for several rounds of drinks. A friendly bar nearby will give you a plastic cup for your beer and let you use their bathroom, even if you're not a paying customer. Amid the chaotic and sometimes seedy streets of Naples, **Piazza Gesù Nuovo** has emerged as a hip hangout; the square and its immediate side streets are home to some of the most popular bars and lounges in town. It's not really a piazza, but in Milan, **Corso Como** is the strip of restaurants and nightclubs where models, moguls, and wannabes (i.e., you and I) come to strut their stuff.

Best Hostels

You're guaranteed to meet fellow English-speaking travelers and receive a warm welcome at **Archi Rossi** (p. 225) in Florence, **The Beehive** (p. 91) and **Colors** (p. 95) in Rome, and **Hostel of the Sun** (p. 604) in Naples.

Best Museums

We're not talking yawn-inducing galleries that we're telling you to visit just because you "should." The collections in these world-class halls of art are important *and* highly entertaining. The mile-long galleries of the **Vatican Museums** (p. 185) in Rome are crowded and hot in summer, but the treasures of ancient statuary and Michelangelo's eye-popping frescoes in the Sistine Chapel make it worth the trouble. At the **Capitoline Museums** (p. 190), also in Rome, you can commune with hauntingly realistic portraits of emperors and gods and take in spectacular vistas over the Roman Forum from the 78 B.C. Roman archive hall, the Tabularium, which has recently been incorporated into the museums. Many argue that Rome's best museum is the small but star-studded

Galleria Borghese, (p. 191) where Bernini's extraordinary sculpture of *Apollo and Daphne* defies the physical properties of marble, and Caravaggio's strident paintings seem to want to jump out of their frames and pick a fight with you. When you're in Naples, before or after you've visited Pompeii (or even if you don't make it to Pompeii), a visit to **Museo Archeologico Nazionale** (p. 613) is a must. All the best artifacts from Pompeii ended up here, from everyday kitchen utensils, to monumental mosaics, to a very racy trove of ancient erotica in the Gabinetto Segreto wing of the museum. The main museum of Venice is the **Accademia** (p. 490), which is worth your euros and time as much for the vivid Venetian paintings on the walls as for the sumptuous setting itself—in a grand palace that gives you a wonderful sense of the utter opulence of Venice in its heyday. At the **Uffizi** (p. 254) in Florence, there are enough Madonna and Child paintings to make your head spin, but you might just levitate when you lay eyes on Botticelli's babes—not to mention a slew of Michelangelos, Da Vincis, and Caravaggios. Just be sure to book your visit in advance, or brave a bitch of a line to get in.

Most Fun Touristy Excursions

Just because they're hackneyed and overpriced, don't shy away from these truly enjoyable, totally worthwhile rites of Italian tourism passage: on Capri, board an old-school rowboat and lean back as your captain whisks you through the narrow opening to the **Blue Grotto**, where the gorgeous natural spectacle of pilot-light-colored water (and the boatmen who sing off-key sea chanteys inside the grotto) will have you grinning from ear to ear (p. 656). The best evening activity in nightlife-challenged Venice is a **gondola ride** (p. 466), which is more than romantic—it's sublime, and it's perhaps the most deservedly hyped European traditions. Yeah, it's expensive, but if you skip dinner

that night and bring a few friends, the cost isn't so bad. Just make sure you go at night, when the canals are virtually empty, and, if you're lucky, your gondolier might let you row a few strokes on the Grand Canal. Bring booze, because you'll want to toast the sweetness of life over and over.

Best Climbable Sights Worth Climbing

Don't be suckered into climbing more steps in Italy than you already have to; not every tower or church dome is worth the money and physical effort, but some should not be missed. At the top of the list, the **Leaning Tower** (p. 305) is an absolute must if you're going to Pisa, but it's not for the weak of stomach—the climb itself isn't terribly strenuous, but the spiral steps that wind around the off-kilter column do a number on your equilibrium. Advance booking is essential in high season, and watch your alcohol intake the night before, as puking off the Leaning Tower is a no-no. For views of Florence and Tuscany that keep going, and going, and going . . . you should definitely make the trek to the top of Brunelleschi's dome at the **Duomo in Florence** (p. 257). The most central panorama in Rome is at the top of the locally ridiculed **Vittoriano** (aka "The Wedding Cake"; p. 144), which is free to climb. In Bologna, a less famous leaning tower, the medieval **Torre Asinelli** (p. 392), gives you a great perspective over the city's wagon-wheel street plan. There's an elevator that goes to the top of the **Campanile in Venice** (p. 487), so you won't really exert yourself, but the views over the lagoon will take your breath away. Bad asses who want to get up close and personal with belching and hissing volcanoes can hike to the craters of **Mt. Vesuvius** (Naples; p. 624) and **Mt. Etna** (Sicily; p. 702). Vesuvius is considered "safe," but before climbing Etna, it's imperative that you check with local officials to find out the status of the volcano. If you

sneak up on Etna when it's in the middle of a bad bout of acid reflux, *arrivederci!*

Best Place to See Real Modern Italian Culture

Churches and monuments are fine, but the real shrines of modern Italy are the **soccer** stadiums. It doesn't matter what team you see, or what city you see them in, but if you're in Italy during the *calcio* season (Aug–June), do yourself a favor and get tickets to a game. The passion of the fans is electric but rarely violent, and after the first 5 minutes of stadium choruses, you'll be chanting along with them and taunting the other teams' supporters with juvenile insults and hand gestures. There might even be a few sandwiches thrown. It's awesome. In this book, there are several cities where you can catch a Serie A (premier league) match: in Rome, **AS Roma** and **SS Lazio** (see box, p. 198) play at the Stadio Olimpico; in Milan, **Inter** and **AC Milan** (p. 550) play at Stadio Meazza in San Siro; in Florence, **La Fiorentina** (p. 263) plays at Stadio Artemio Franchi; in Genoa, **Sampdoria** plays at Stadio Ferraris; **Bologna FC** plays at that city's Stadio Renato dall'Ara; **FC Parma** plays at Stadio Tardini (see box, p. 440); and **Verona Hellas** and **Chievo Verona** play at Stadio Bentegodi.

Best Regions for Road Tripping

Renting a car and driving around Italy can be an absolute blast, but some regions are more scenic and automobile-friendly than others. The rolling hills of **Tuscany** and **Umbria**, for instance, are best explored with your own wheels, since many of the most picturesque little towns are not easily accessible by train or bus. Furthermore, you don't need to spend much time in any one place, so having your own car gives you the freedom to move on when you're bored. You'll also be served well by a car on **Sicily**—as long as you steer clear of central Palermo!—the island's distances

are manageable, the highways are well maintained and scenic, and there are a ton of worthwhile detours off the main bus and train routes that are really best reached by your trusty Fiat. In general, driving in Italy is less crazy than you've heard (once you're out of the cities, anyway). Signs are explicit and uniform throughout the country, and you'll get the hang of the fast-lane etiquette after your first day on the *autostrada*. Italian roads are not well lit, however, so don't get behind the wheel at night.

Most Relaxing Small Towns

The classic tourist trifecta of Rome–Florence–Venice can take its toll on your nerves. For a mellow overnight stop between Rome and Florence, consider recharging your batteries in **Orvieto** (p. 357), a medieval hill town with Etruscan grottoes, cozy wine bars, and splendid *duomo*. On the main train line between Florence and Venice (about an hour north of Bologna), **Ferrara** (p. 441) is an elegant little Renaissance city with a picture-perfect castle (with moat!), extensive bike paths (bikes are available for rent everywhere), and pumpkin ravioli in every restaurant!

Best Vino

In Rome, white **Falanghina** is supposed to bring good luck to all who drink it (and it goes wonderfully with all the fresh vegetables and seafood you'll be eating in summer). Medium-bodied red **Sangiovese** and **Lambrusco** are the perfect pairing for the comfort food of Emilia-Romagna. You may think that **chianti** is old news, but I swear it tastes a hundred times better in its native land, Tuscany. In the Bay of Naples region, drop a few peach slices in a glass of white **Lacryma Christi** for the quintessential Campanian summer quencher.

Best Next-Big-Thing Destinations

First, there was Tuscany; a few years later, international tourists started coming to

Umbria. In Italy, the hits just keep on coming, so pretty soon, another region is bound to be discovered, right? When you visit **Bologna** and its region, **Emilia-Romagna**, you'll scratch your head and wonder why they're not more known to tourists. The towns are lovely, the people are warm, and the food is outta control. (The shopping is some of the best in Italy, too.) **Sicily** is also amazingly undervisited for how much it has to offer a foreign tourist. There's sun and sea, ancient ruins, and again, warm people and fantastic food—the flavors of vegetables and seafood

that you find in Sicily are simply not found anywhere else in the world. Sicily shyness is partially explained by its separation from mainland Italy, and by people's irrational fear of the Mafia. Hogwash! Sicily is an easy hop from Rome, Venice, and Milan, and chances are Don Corleone will not order a hit on you for eating gelato made by a rival "family" in Siracusa. Who knows? Maybe Emilia-Romagna and Sicily will never be big tourist destinations—indeed, it's probably better than way!—but they have all the right stuff.