

## Chapter 1

# Discovering the Best of Italy

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ From museums to ruins
- ▶ From churches to tchotchkes
- ▶ From hotels to dining

**I**taly's variety attracts all sorts of visitors. Art lovers flock to its great museums and wonderfully decorated churches and palaces, the faithful make pilgrimages to the Vatican, and gourmands devour its glorious cuisines. In *Italy For Dummies*, 4th Edition, we give you our vision of the best Italy has to offer. Here's a taste of what's ahead:

### *The Best Museums*

Art in Italy is everywhere, but the museums, of course, enjoy the advantage of high concentrations of artwork in one place. If your itinerary takes you to any of the following cities, don't miss the selections later — even if you are not a serious museum-goer.

- ✔ You'll need several days if you want to see the whole art collection of the **Vatican Museums** in Rome. Not only does this include dozens of rooms dedicated to painting and sculpture, but it's also home to the **Sistine Chapel**, decorated with Michelangelo's frescoes — the most famous artwork in all of Italy, and, after the *Mona Lisa*, probably the most famous single artwork in the world. Don't forget your binoculars. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ Also in Rome, the **Galleria Borghese** is smaller, but houses one of the best art collections in the world. It's known especially for its Caravaggio paintings and breathtaking Bernini sculptures. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ The **National Roman Museum** in Rome's **Palazzo Massimo alle Terme** holds an astounding collection of ancient Roman artifacts, including unique mosaics and frescoes of rare beauty (entire rooms of Roman villas are reconstructed!). See Chapter 12.

- ✓ Florence's **Galleria degli Uffizi** is a required stop on any Italian itinerary for its superb pageant of Renaissance art. Only between the covers of a book could you find so many Italian masterpieces in one place. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ The **Gallerie dell'Accademia** in Venice houses the greatest collection of Venetian painting in the world, from the incandescent works of Bellini to monumental pieces by Tintoretto and Veronese. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ Often overlooked by tourists who go to Milan principally for the excellent shopping, the **Brera** is a beautiful 17th-century palace that contains the principal painting gallery in northern Italy. The collection of the **Pinacoteca** stretches from the 15th to the 20th century, including unique masterpieces. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ The **Museo di Capodimonte** houses its huge painting collection — the best in southern Italy — in an enormous palace high above Naples and surrounded by a beautiful park. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ The **Archaeological Museum**, also in Naples, is Italy's foremost museum of the art of antiquity. The splendid collection includes treasures of Pompeii that were removed from the buried city for safekeeping. See Chapter 18.

## The Best Churches

Over the ages, churches in Italy have been decorated with the best works of art and built according to the designs of the greatest architects. Here are our absolute favorites from among the thousands of options.

- ✓ **St. Peter's Basilica** in Rome is justly the most famous church in a country filled with magnificent churches. Its majestic colonnade and soaring dome create a symbol of Rome as well as of the Catholic Church; inside are unique art treasures that include Michelangelo's *Pietà*. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ Among Italian churches, Florence's **Duomo**, with Brunelleschi's red-tiled dome soaring over it, is second in size only to St. Peter's Basilica. This architectural masterpiece is also known for its artworks, bell tower, and the famous doors of the nearby baptistry. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ Venice's **Basilica di San Marco** is as dreamlike and magical as the rest of the city. Decorated inside with 3,717 sq. m (40,000 sq. ft.) of gilded mosaics, it contains a host of marvels and has been the focus of the *piazza* that bears its name since the 11th century. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ The **Duomo** of Milan is a fabulous example of Italian Gothic architecture that took half a millennium to build. With its 135 towers, it may look like a whimsical construction — and to some, it resembles a sand castle. See Chapter 17.

- ✓ The churches of Naples are many and splendid, but if you have time for just one, make it the **Duomo**. It's actually three churches in one, from the paleo-Christian Santa Restituta (with the oldest western baptistry in the world) to the late baroque Cappella di San Gennaro. Don't miss the splendid array of artwork here. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ The **Duomo di Monreale**, located on a hill dominating Palermo, is a 12th-century Romanesque church whose austere exterior makes the 5,111 sq. m (55,000 sq. ft.) of Byzantine mosaics inside even more awe-inspiring. See Chapter 21.

## *The Best Ruins and Archaeological Areas*

Say "Italy," and most people think of the ancient Romans. The country, and especially its southern half, is chock-full of archaeological remains — mostly Roman, but also Greek, including a number of the world's best. Here are our favorites.

- ✓ Rome's symbol and most famous ruin, the **Colosseum**, is still majestic even after centuries of decay. See for yourself where the Romans watched "sports" (read: fights to the death). Nearby are the archaeological areas of the **Roman Forum** and the **Palatine Hill**, and of the **Imperial Forums**; together they were the administrative and business center of ancient Rome. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ In the small town of Verona lies a great **Roman Amphitheater**, second only to the Colosseum in its state of preservation. Used as a performance hall for decades, it is still a living ruin, with a full season of concerts and opera. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ Who hasn't heard of **Pompeii**? The city — buried whole by Mount Vesuvius's A.D. 79 eruption — was an extremely wealthy resort during Roman times, famous for the beauty of its abodes; its frescoes are among the best in the world. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ Less famous than Pompeii is **Herculaneum**, a smaller town also buried by Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79. It was a VIP resort in Roman times and remains a superb archaeological site today; many houses still have their second story preserved. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ The glorious Greek temples of **Paestum** lie out of the way — not far from Salerno, south of the Amalfi Coast — and are therefore often overlooked by tourists in a hurry. Try not to miss them if you're in the area. See Chapter 20.
- ✓ The **Valley of the Temples** at Agrigento in Sicily is the most dramatic archaeological site in Italy. A series of majestic Greek temples dominated this city, which was founded in the sixth century B.C. The ruins stand on their own in a dramatic, unspoiled landscape, and include one of the largest temples of antiquity, the **Temple of Jupiter**, which was over 30m (110 ft.) tall. See Chapter 22.

### *The Best Luxury Hotels*

Okay, so maybe you can't afford to stay in luxury hotels every night . . . but if you want to splurge, then pick one of our favorite dream places for a special night — it will be a cherished memory for the rest of your life.

- ✓ In Rome, the **Hotel de Russie** holds its own against all the competition, thanks to its incomparably romantic setting and unique style. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ With its stylish yet welcoming interior and special children's programs, the **Hotel Savoy** tops our list in Florence. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ The **Brufani** in Perugia is a rare gem, boasting old-fashioned charm and courtesy coupled with modern amenities. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ Staying at the **Cipriani and Palazzi** on the Giudecca island in Venice will let you experience the city's grandeur in a manner that hasn't been topped since the 18th century. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ Housed in a former 15th-century convent, the **Four Seasons** hotel in Milan will overwhelm you with its charm and its perfect location. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ In Naples, the **Grand Hotel Parker's** and the **Grand Hotel Vesuvio** have very distinct personalities and so many fine qualities that both have won us over. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ Capri is a dream island — and the **Capri Palace** in Anacapri is the hotel to match, beginning with its ideal perch at the top of the island. See Chapter 20.
- ✓ The **Hotel San Pietro** in Positano and the **Palazzo Sasso** in Ravello are two jewels along the most beautiful stretch of coast in Italy, each approaching perfection in its own way. See Chapter 20.
- ✓ Sicily has captured our hearts, and the **San Domenico Palace** and the **Grand Hotel Timeo** in Taormina will take yours. A stay at either hotel is a feast for the senses. See Chapter 22.

### *The Best Gourmet Restaurants*

Italians take food very seriously. Dining in one of the country's best restaurants is like a near-mystical experience: Not only is the food superlative, but nothing that surrounds you will be less than perfect, from your chair down to your napkin. Foodie or not, you won't eat in one of the following restaurants every day — few people could afford to do so — but do choose one of these places for a very special meal.

- ✓ For fantastic views over the Eternal City, with wonderful food to match, try **La Pergola**. This elegant restaurant will be one of your most romantic experiences in Rome. See Chapter 11.

- ✔ Don't miss **Cibreo** if you're visiting Florence. The restaurant's creative chef puts a unique spin on the best of Tuscan cuisine. You'll also get to taste a huge variety of the region's best wines. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ Hidden away from the main tourist haunts, yet within walking distance from San Polo, **Osteria da Fiore** in Venice is an address for connoisseurs. Do not miss it if you want to discover the best of Venetian cuisine. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ Whether you're a fan of risotto or not, visit **CraccoPeck** in Milan. Gourmands flock to this elegant restaurant just a few steps from the Duomo, as it's simply the best in the city. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Il Desco** in Verona is not only a great chef's restaurant, but also a very pleasant place where you'll feel welcome and taken care of in a wonderfully friendly way. Many foodies will tell you this is the best restaurant in Italy. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ The **San Pietro** in Positano — inside the hotel of the same name — is one of the best and most beautiful places to dine on this equally beautiful stretch of coast. See Chapter 20.

## *The Best Travel Experiences*

If you love Italy, it will reward you with your own unforgettable and unpredictable experiences. Below is a small selection of our own favorites.

- ✔ The **Pantheon** is the most perfectly preserved building of ancient Rome. Built in 27 B.C., it was spared the looting that befell other Roman structures because it had been turned into a Christian church. It doesn't feel like a church, however. From its soaring dome (with a round opening through which you see the Roman sky) to its marble pavement, it is a stunning, airy space where you can literally walk through antiquity. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ Siena's **Palio delle Contrade** is more than a horse race: It's a grudge match between the city's neighborhoods that's been going on for hundreds of years. It's still carried out with all the pomp, ceremony, and costumes of Renaissance Siena. The race (quite dangerous) is held in the main square of the town — which is filled with dirt for the occasion. Imagine the Kentucky Derby being held in Times Square. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ Taking a **gondola ride** through Venice may be expensive and "touristy," but — especially at dusk — it is an enchanting experience. You must see for yourself the water shimmering with reflections, the imposing yet whimsical Venetian architecture, and the stillness and sheer unbelievability of it all. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ Crossing the **Gulf of Naples** coming from Capri or Sorrento, and entering Naples at sunset, with Mount Vesuvio in the background

and the city's lights starting to come up in front of you, is truly magic: You'll now understand the old adage, "See Naples and die." See Chapter 18.

- ✓ Walking the streets of **Pompeii** is an awe-inspiring experience. Buried beneath volcanic ash by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79, Pompeii was a flourishing Roman town caught in amber. Even corpses were turned into human statues. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ The **Teatro Greco-Romano (Greco-Roman Theater)** at Taormina in Sicily would be special enough as the best-preserved antique theater in Italy, where plays were staged starting in the third century B.C. But to see a play performed here today is truly amazing. See Chapter 22.

## The Best Traditional Italian Souvenirs

Although you wouldn't expect to find "ethnic" gifts in Italy, there is a small selection of high-quality handcrafted goods that have been traditionally produced in Italy for centuries. They make splendid gifts.

- ✓ The beautiful, extensive selection of **marbled paper goods** at Giulio Giannini & Figlio in Florence are worth checking out; they make perfect gifts and come in many price levels. See Chapter 13. You can also find a large selection of marbled paper at Piazzesi in Venice. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ Invest in some **Murano glass** artwork or find smaller blown-glass gift items. If it's authentic Murano, then even the most inexpensive item will appreciate in value. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ In Naples, select a set of **hand-modeled figurines** for the *presepio* (crèche) for someone who will appreciate them, or start your own collection. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ Make a gift of a beautiful **cameo jewel**, the finely carved coral or shells that have been the pride of Torre del Greco (near Naples) since antiquity. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ Check out the colorful **hand-painted porcelain** — dinnerware, pitchers, tiles, vases — traditionally produced according to local historical patterns in Deruta, near Perugia (see Chapter 15); in Vietri, on the Costiera Amalfitana (see Chapter 20); and in the Sicilian towns of Caltagirone, Santo Stefano, and Sciacca (see Chapter 22).
- ✓ And, of course, take your pick of **fashion accessories** — scarves, leather gloves, handbags, wallets, watches, sunglasses — from the many local designers in Rome, Florence, Milan, Naples, Capri, and Positano. See Chapters 12, 13, 17, 18, and 20.