

Chapter One

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THE BEST OF ITALY IN AN INSTANT

Italy has more style per square mile than you can shake a *formaggio* at, especially in the northern regions. The south has more *limoncello*, that delectable lemon liqueur that makes me tipsy after one thimbleful. Wherever your travels take you, I know you'll find a lot to buy and a lot more to enjoy.

Things are expensive, though. Yup, even that glass of limoncello is dear. (I paid \$20 for a Bellini at Harry's Bar!) Prices have gone up, while meanwhile the dollar has gone to a new low against the euro. Thankfully, there's still plenty to buy—and even a few bargains to be had.

If you're in a hurry, you may want to breeze through what I consider some of the highlights of the whole country, crammed into these pages up front, so when you stop by these places, you can worship and shop and feel like you've indulged in a tiny taste of Italy.

By no means is my list comprehensive; it will take years for me to perfect it, so bear with me while I shop, shop, shop.

The Best Store in Italy

10 CORSO COMO
10 Corso Como, Milan.

No, that's not a typo; the store's name is its address. And it's even added on a three-room hotel called, you guessed it, Three Rooms.

There's much more written about this store in the Milan chapter (see chapter 8), but suffice it to say that this is a bazaar, a magic act created by one of Italy's most famous fashion editors and stylists who turned to retail and hasn't looked back.

The store is well bought, but for people who shop a lot, there are no surprises in terms of merchandise. What's yummy is the way it's laid out and presented and served on your platter. You can gawk and enjoy and not buy a thing, but don't miss it. Note the cafe (speaking of served on a platter), the furniture in the garden, and the upstairs bookstore. © 02/2900-2674. www.10corsocomo.com.

The Second-Best Store in Italy

VENETIA STUDIUM

Multiple locations in Venice.

Fortuny-inspired pleated silks made into wraps, bags, flowers, tassels, and treasures . . . a wonderland of fairy tales and dreams in colors that will make you swoon. There are several shops in Venice and one in London (go figure). Studium sells clothes and Fortuny chandeliers as well. © 041/522-9281 or 041/522-9859. www.venetiastudium.com.

The Best Grand-Scale Shopping City

MILAN

Milan may not be adorable or overwhelmingly charming or flashy, but the shopping is divine. One reason is that Milan offers high-quality goods in many different price ranges. The city has excellent alternative retail—street markets, jobbers who sell discounted designer clothing, and more—all of which help you to make do with less. Less is always more, as Mother used to say.

The Best Small Shopping City

DERUTA

Italy is filled with tiny cities, devoted to craftspeople and artists, where shopping has been elevated to an art form. But the best

Suzy's Five Best Buys in Italy

- Yohji Yamamoto blazer, from outlet store, \$300.
- Ferragamo bronze suede slip-on mocs, from outlet store, \$200.
- Armani men's sports coat for my beloved, from outlet store, \$165.
- Tablecloth from Lisa Corti, Florence, \$90.
- Crystal drop earrings from Astolfo, Venice, \$60.

of them all is the city of Deruta, in Umbria, where every store sells hand-painted faience (a style of ceramics). Deruta is about 2 hours from Florence.

The Best Port City for a Quick Spree

VENICE

Venice is not included on every Mediterranean cruise, but if you can get here, even if only for a day, do—it is magic. The shopping isn't bad either.

The Best Factory Outlet: North

FACTORY STORE (GIORGIO ARMANI)

Vertemate.

There are Armani outlets dotted all over Italy, but this one is the best. It's a tad hard to find, situated near Bregnano (which is between Milan and Como), and once you get there the building is marked only with the words FACTORY STORE (seriously), but once inside you are talking clothes for men, women, and children, plus lingerie and home style and accessories—all at very affordable prices. © 031/887-373.

The Best Factory Outlet: South

THE MALL

Via Europa 8, Leccio.

About 45 minutes outside Florence and not far from the Prada outlet, you get an outlet mall with the unfortunate name of The Mall. But it's got big-name designer outlets such as Gucci, Pucci, Burberry, Yohji, Ferragamo, and Tod's—to name just a few. © 055/865-7775. www.outlet-the-mall.com.

The Best Outlet Malls

Eeeny, meeny, miney, moe . . . I'm going with **Barberino Designer Outlet** (© 055/842-161; www.mcarthurglen.it) because it knocked my socks off. Also, it's not far north of Florence—it's actually midway between Florence and Bologna—so you are well situated for all sorts of bargains in a number of different outlets and malls.

As runner-up, I have to name **Serravalle Designer Outlet** (© 0143/609-000; www.mcarthurglen.it), the mother of all Italian outlets. This large village-style mall is between Milan and Genoa.

Sarah's Five Best Buys in Italy

- Frette Euro-size pillow shams, from the Piazza VIII Agosto market in Bologna, \$13.
- Gold sparkly ballet slippers, from the Centrale train station in Milan, \$25.
- Tod's suede driving mocs, from The Mall outlet village outside Florence, \$150.
- Silk-and-velvet flower pins, from Venetia Studium, Venice, \$30 each.
- 36-inch Murano glass and crystal necklace, from Murano, \$100.

The Best Airport Shopping

LEONARDO DA VINCI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT
Rome.

It's a virtual shopping mall, with all major designers represented. Furthermore, a guide to its shops, which lists prices, is made available once a year. Use it to comparison-shop. Not everything is a bargain, but you'll have a great time finding out which items are well priced.

The Best Sales

FENDI
Via Borgognona 39, Rome.

You haven't lived until you've wandered into the Fendi store in Rome at sale time—twice a year, January and July. There are mounds of goodies (some of them a few seasons old) selling at a fraction of their regular price. Affordable luxury goods!

While Fendi sales are good at all Fendi shops, the best sale is in this Rome location. From a design perspective, it is the most fun-to-look-at shop in the Spanish Steps luxury shopping district; to get a sale and an eyeful of glamour at one time is indeed to see the face of bliss. © 06/696-661. www.fendi.com.

The Best Department Store

LA RINASCENTE
Piazza del Duomo, Milan.

In response to competition, La Rinascente has redone its image and redone its interior. The store is a lot like an American department store and may not impress you at first. But wait until you experience the details—that's where its greatness lies. The store offers non-Italian-passport holders a flat 10% discount on health, beauty, and makeup treatments on the first floor. And there's a tax-free office upstairs, as well as a travel agency, hair salon, and full-service bank. The cafe overlooks the

Duomo and will drench you with magic and memories.
© 02/88-521. www.rinascente.it.

The Best Historic Shopping Experience

ANTICO SETIFICIO FIORENTINO

Via Bartolini 4, Florence.

You will step back in time when you enter this 18th-century silk factory that was renovated by the Pucci family. It still produces damasks, silks, and cottons on looms that have hummed for hundreds of years. © 055/213-861. www.setificiofiorentino.it.

The Best Street Market

MERCATO DI VIALE PAPINIANO (SAN AGOSTINO MARKET)

Tuesday and Saturday on Viale Papiniano, Milan.

Fun? It just doesn't get much better than this! Two days a week, you have a chance to enjoy this fabulous street market, which sells fruits and vegetables in one part and designer goods in the other. Arrange your visit to Milan so that you're in town for one of the market days!

The Best Weekly Market (Runner-Up to Best Street Market)

SIENA MARKET

Wednesday in Siena.

I have been to a fair number of markets in my life, and celebrated market day in a large number of cities all over the world, so when I say this is one of the best, I really mean it.

It helps if the sky is blue, the sun is shining, the temperature is not too high, and the crowds aren't too bad. Yeah, sure. If you come by car, it also helps if you can find a parking space.

But any way you slice it, this is a market for locals, filled to overflowing with everything from shoes to tractors. It takes up a half-moon area at the top of town and is thoughtfully

organized by category of goods, with foodstuffs to one side and dry goods on the other. Sometimes you find name-brand closeouts for low prices. But you go for the glory, not the shoes.

The Best Affordable Clothes

OVIESSE

Multiple locations in cities all over Italy.

Owned by the department store Coin, Oviessa is the Italian fashion version of Target, with clothes and accessories for all members of the family. There's a good plus-size department for women, too. On the last visit, I bought one of my best outfits of the summer here: beige drawstring linen trousers with a linen blazer—\$100 for the two pieces. www.oviesse.it.

The Best Hotel Gift Shop: North

VILLA D'ESTE

Via Regina 40, Cernobbio (near Como).

It's rare for a gift shop to so perfectly sum up both the clients and their aspirations, but the shops at Villa d'Este do that, with their own branded merchandise as well as a store of men's and women's clothing from nearby mills such as Lora Piana. © 031/3481. www.villadeste.it.

The Best Hotel Gift Shop: South

EMPORIO LE SIRENUSE

Via Colombo 30, Positano.

Emporio Le Sirenuse, across from the hotel of the same name, is attuned to both sophistication and a relaxed lifestyle, offering handpicked resort wear as well as home style. This is where I first fell in love with Lisa Corti's colorful fabrics. There is also a catalog and online business. © 089/812-2026. www.emporiosirenuse.com.

The Best Gifts for \$10 or Less

- **Designer pasta in fashion colors:** Find it in all sorts of brand names, in all Italian cities, in grocery stores, *enotecas* (wine/food shops), and TTs (tourist traps); \$6 to \$10 a package.
- **Regional pasta:** As an alternative to designer pasta, look for regional specialties of pastas. Barilla, which is the largest maker of pasta in Italy, creates specific “designs” for specific markets. In Venice, I bought Casarecce, a style only available there. Go figure. For less than \$2, I look like a genius to a foodie.
- **Chocolate postcards:** I wouldn’t try mailing these as I suspect they will crumble, but they are darn cute gifties. Caf-farel, a mass maker of chocolates, does a series of postcards called “Italy’s Treasures” that depict famous historic sites. I found a selection of “cards” representing five different cities, all for sale in the main Milan train station.
- **Bellini mix:** Sold in delis, wine shops, and street market stalls, this peach purée mixes with Champagne or Prosecco to make classic Bellini cocktails. Available in two sizes, the small 20cl bottle costs \$8 (less than half the price of a Bellini at Harry’s Bar) and makes four cocktails.
- **Limoncello liqueur:** Sold most readily in southern Italy below Florence and in most supermarkets and airports, this is a wonderful souvenir. It’s like lemon vodka with a pucker; serve chilled.
- **Milk-frothing machine:** This battery-operated job looks like a small wand and makes the milk in your cappuccino stand up and smile. I found the old-fashioned ones in a market in Rome for \$10, and in an appliance store in Florence for \$15. Then I found a new, modern, and well-designed one for \$18 in Siena. Seek and ye shall froth.
- **Soap:** Try Weekend Soap from the Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella stores in Florence and Rome. The 9€ (\$12) package consists of three bars of soap, one each for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

Or pick up any of Rancé’s soaps sold from its free-standing store in Rome at Piazza Navona. Rancé sounds French

because the firm was started in France 100 years ago, but it's now Italian (although it does specialize in Marseille process soaps).

You can also buy Italian soaps in grocery stores or at any *erborista* (herbalist).

- **Lush gifties:** Yes, Lush is a British firm famous for its bath and beauty products, and yes, there are now Lush stores in the U.S., but the Italian Lush products are made with local ingredients, so you can buy limoncello soap or shampoo. There are branch locations all over Italy, often in mainstream tourist areas.
- **Cardinal's socks:** Sold only in Rome, at about 8€ (\$10) a pair. Fine cotton knits; they come only in red. Of course.

The Greatest Gift of Love

This was just too important to me to let common sense take over, so I bought three tall bottles of **olive oil** for Aaron and Jenny. Not any three, mind you, but samples of the Ligurian, Umbrian, and Tuscan oils so they could taste the difference.

Then I had to wrap each bottle in masking tape and then bubble wrap and then bag each in plastic and then wrap each in clothes that could be washed, just in case. I won't mention how much room they took up in the suitcase or what they weighed.

No greater love hath a foodie mother for her son who likes to cook.

Buyer Beware

When giving extravagant gifts of love, be sure that the recipient recognizes the value of the gift. We spent almost \$100 on a small bottle of balsamic vinegar for a business contact and I swear, despite the fact that he's Italian and should know better, his weak "thank you" seemed to say that he didn't know the grocery-store stuff from the blue-blooded stuff. A gift only works when the recipient appreciates it.

The Best Extravagant Gifts

- **Important art glass:** Venice or Murano. Expect to pay \$500 for a hefty vase. Shipping will be \$50 to \$100 more.
- **Jewelry from any of the new Venetian bead maidens:** Look for something in the \$100-to-\$200 range. Also consider jeweled or beaded sandals for the Cleopatra in your sole.
- **Gucci dog collar:** Hmm, Gucci anything. Gucci outlet, anyone? It's outside Florence.
- **Suede mocs in an oddball but divine color:** I bought a chrome-yellow pair a few years ago and this year got lime green. The odder the color, the better they go with everything. Try to buy at an outlet for \$125 to \$150 unless you are forced to go the distance and pay \$300 at regular retail.
- **Etro paisleys:** Silk or cashmere; in all Etro stores, in most major cities . . . but then, maybe you can find them at the Etro outlet in beautiful downtown Milano.