

Planning Your Trip to Florence

The capital of Tuscany is **Florence**, one of Italy's most famous cities. It was once the home of the colorful Medici dynasty, which actively encouraged the development of the Renaissance by sponsoring masters such as Donatello, Leonardo, and Michelangelo. Art treasures such as those found at the Accademia (Michelangelo's *David*), the Uffizi Galleries (Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*), and the Pitti Palace (Raphael's *La Velata*) draw millions of visitors every year. Throw into the mix fabulous architecture (the Duomo with Brunelleschi's dome, Giotto's campanile, Santa Croce), fine restaurants and earthy *trattorie*, and leading designer boutiques and bustling outdoor markets, and the city of the Renaissance becomes quite simply one of the world's must-see sights.

Planning a trip doesn't have to be hard work. This chapter will help you smooth out most of your preparations for a trip to Florence.

1 Visitor Information & Maps

TOURIST OFFICES

For general information in your home country, try your local branch of the **Italian Government Tourist Board (ENIT)** or **www.italian-tourism.com**. Some Frommer's readers have reported that the office isn't really that helpful.

In the United States: 630 Fifth Ave., Suite 1565, New York, NY 10111 (☎ **212/245-4822** or 212/245-5618; fax 212/586-9249); 500 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 2240, Chicago, IL 60611 (☎ **312/644-0996** or 312/644-0990; fax 312/644-3019); and 12400 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 550, Los Angeles, CA 90025 (☎ **310/820-1898** or 310/820-9807; fax 310/820-6357).

In Canada: 175 Bloor St. E., Suite 907, South Tower, Toronto, Ontario M4W 3R8 (☎ **416/925-4882**; fax 416/925-4799; enit.canada@on.aibn.com).

In the United Kingdom: 1 Princes St., London W1B 2AY England (☎ **020/7399-3562**; italy@italiantouristboard.co.uk).

For more specific details on Tuscany, contact the regional tourist office in Florence: APT, Via Manzoni 16, 50121 Firenze (☎ **055-23-320**; fax 055-234-6286; www.firenzeturismo.it). For Umbria, contact the **Ufficio Promozione Turistica**, Corso Vannucci 30, 06100 Perugia (☎ **075-50-41**; fax 075-504-2483). To get even more details, put yourself in contact with the regional and city tourism offices, listed in each chapter section (or you can get a list from the ENIT).

Local tourist offices are the best places to pick up a free map of that city, and they are usually very good. For a map of Tuscany and/or Umbria, your best bet is to check out the wide selection at any downtown *edicola*, or news kiosk. This will be especially important if you are driving around the countryside, as maps from rental-car agencies are far from adequate. For basic navigation around Italy, I rely on country maps from Michelin, which are sometimes available at news kiosks, and almost always sold at Autogrill highway rest stops. They are not very useful, though, for backcountry roads.

USEFUL WEBSITES

Websites and e-mail addresses are included throughout this guide for everything from tourist offices, hotels, and restaurants to museums and festivals.

The official site for Tuscany is **www.turismo.toscana.it**, with links to every provincial tourist office site. The official Florence information site, **www.firenzeturismo.it**, contains a wealth of up-to-date information (events, museums, practical details) on Florence and its province. Included is a searchable “hotels” form that allows you to specify amenities, categories, and the like; it responds by spitting out a list of comparable hotels, and it lists contact info and current room rates. The official site for Umbria is **www.umbria-turismo.it**.

Firenze by Net (www.mega.it/florence), **Firenze.Net** (<http://english.firenze.net>), and **FlorenceOnLine** (www.fol.it) are all Italy-based websites with English translations and good general information on Florence. Also check out **The Heart of Tuscany** (<http://nautilus-mp.com/tuscany>), and **Chianti Doc Marketplace**. And of course there's **Frommer's** (www.frommers.com), where you'll find excerpts from this guide, occasional updated information, and links to travel packages.



2 Entry Requirements

U.S., Canadian, U.K., Irish, Australian, and New Zealand citizens with a **valid passport** don't need a visa to enter Italy, if they don't expect to stay more than 90 days and don't expect to work there. If, after entering Italy, you find you want to stay more than 90 days, you can apply for a permit for an extra 90 days, which, as a rule, is granted immediately. Go to the nearest *questura* (police headquarters) or your home country's consulate.

Allow plenty of time before your trip to apply for a passport; processing normally takes 3 weeks but can take longer during busy periods (especially spring). And keep in mind that if you need a passport in a hurry, you'll pay a higher processing fee.

For Residents of Australia: You can pick up an application from your local post office or any branch of Passports Australia, but you must schedule an interview at the passport office to present your application materials. Call the **Australian Passport Information Service** at ☎ 131-232, or visit the government website at www.passports.gov.au.

For Residents of Canada: Passport applications are available at travel agencies throughout Canada or from the central **Passport Office**, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Ottawa, ON K1A 0G3 (☎ 800/567-6868; www.ppt.gc.ca).

For Residents of Ireland: You can apply for a 10-year passport at the **Passport Office**, Setanta Centre, Molesworth Street, Dublin 2 (☎ 01/671-1633; www.irlgov.ie/iveagh). Those under age 18 and over 65 must apply for a 3-year passport. You can also apply at 1A South Mall, Cork (☎ 021/272-525), or at most main post offices.

For Residents of New Zealand: You can pick up a passport application at any New Zealand Passports Office or download it from their website. Contact the **Passports Office** at ☎ 0800/225-050 in New Zealand, or 04/474-8100; or log on to www.passports.govt.nz.

For Residents of the United Kingdom: To pick up an application for a standard 10-year passport (5-year passport for children under 16), visit your nearest passport office, major post office, or travel agency; or contact the **United Kingdom Passport Service** at ☎ 0870/521-0410, or search its website at www.ukpa.gov.uk.

For Residents of the United States: Whether you're applying in person or by mail, you can download passport applications from the **U.S. Department of State** website at <http://travel.state.gov>. To find your regional passport office, either check the U.S. Department

of State website or call the **National Passport Information Center** toll-free number (☎ 877/487-2778) for automated information.

CUSTOMS

WHAT YOU CAN BRING INTO ITALY

Foreign visitors can bring along most items for personal use duty-free, including fishing tackle; a sporting gun and 200 cartridges; a pair of skis; two tennis racquets; a baby carriage; two hand cameras with 10 rolls of film; and 200 cigarettes or 50 cigars or pipe tobacco not exceeding 250 grams. There are strict limits on importing alcoholic beverages. However, limits are much more liberal for alcohol bought tax-paid in other countries of the European Union. For more information regarding Customs, visit the Italian-language website **www.agenziadogane.it** and follow links to “carta doganale del viaggiatore,” the travelers’ custom charter.

WHAT YOU CAN TAKE HOME

FOR AUSTRALIAN CITIZENS A helpful brochure available from Australian consulates or Customs offices is *Know Before You Go*. For more information, call the **Australian Customs Service** at ☎ 1300/363-263, or log on to **www.customs.gov.au**.

FOR CANADIAN CITIZENS For a clear summary of Canadian rules, write for the booklet *I Declare*, issued by the **Canada Border Services Agency** (☎ 800/461-9999 in Canada, or 204/983-3500; www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca).

FOR NEW ZEALAND CITIZENS Most questions are answered in a free pamphlet available at New Zealand consulates and Customs offices: *New Zealand Customs Guide for Travellers, Notice no. 4*. For more information, contact **New Zealand Customs**, The Custom-house, 17–21 Whitmore St., Box 2218, Wellington (☎ 04/473-6099 or 0800/428-786; www.customs.govt.nz).

FOR U.K. CITIZENS For information, contact **HM Customs & Excise** at ☎ 0845/010-9000 (from outside the U.K., 020/8929-0152), or consult their website at **www.hmce.gov.uk**.

FOR U.S. CITIZENS For specifics on what you can bring back and the corresponding fees, download the invaluable free pamphlet *Know Before You Go* online at **www.cbp.gov**. (Click on “Travel,” and then click on “Know Before You Go! Online Brochure.”) Or contact the **U.S. Customs & Border Protection (CBP)** by mail at 1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20229 (☎ 877/287-8667) and request the pamphlet.

3 When to Go

The best times to visit Florence are in the spring and fall. Starting in late May, the **summer** tourist rush really picks up; and from July to mid-September, Italy is teeming with visitors. August is the worst month to visit. Not only does it get uncomfortably hot, muggy, and crowded (the lines for the Uffizi and the Accademia can stretch for blocks), but the entire country goes on vacation at least from August 15 until the end of the month, and many Italians take off the entire month. Many hotels, restaurants, and shops are closed—except at the spas, beaches, and islands, which are where 70% of the Italians are headed. In **winter** (late Oct to Easter), most sights go to shorter winter hours or are closed for restoration and rearrangement, many hotels and restaurants take a month or two off between November and February, spa and beach destinations become padlocked ghost towns, and it can get much colder than most people expect—it may even snow on occasion.

WEATHER

It can get uncomfortably hot at the height of August in Florence, a valley city. The long spring is temperate and very comfortable, with occasional showers. Fall is also fairly mild, with lots of rainfall being the only drawback. Winter, though mild for most months, can get quite cold in late December or January; it can drizzle a great deal, and snowfall isn't impossible.

HOLIDAYS

Official state holidays include January 1, January 6 (Epiphany), Easter Sunday and Monday, April 25 (Liberation Day), May 1 (Labor Day), August 15 (Ferragosto and Assumption Day), November 1 (All Saints' Day), December 8 (Day of the Immaculate Conception), December 25, and December 26 (Santo Stefano). Florence also shuts down to honor its patron, St. John the Baptist, on June 24.

Hot Tickets

For major events where tickets should be procured well before arriving on the spot, check out **Box Office** at ☎ **055-210-804** or www.boxoffice.it. They will only deliver tickets to an Italian address, but you can buy ahead of time and have tickets held for you.

4 Getting There

BY PLANE

FROM NORTH AMERICA

No carrier flies directly from the United States to Florence. Still, most airlines and their affiliates connect through a handful of European cities to the small international airports at Pisa or Florence. Aside from a new route on Delta, which flies nonstop from New York to Pisa (in Tuscany), usually the most convenient way to get here is to fly to Rome and connect by plane (a bit over 1 hr.) or by train (close to 3 hr.).

THE MAJOR AIRLINES Italy's national airline, **Alitalia** (☎ 800/223-5730; www.alitalia.it), offers more flights daily to Italy than any other airline. It flies direct to both Rome-Fiumicino (FCO) and Milan-Malpensa (MXP) from New York, Newark, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Miami. You can connect in Rome or Milan to any other Italian destination, including Florence (FLR). If you're flying from the New York City area and planning to connect directly to Florence, note that itineraries that route you through Milan often have a layover that's 3 hours shorter than one that routes you through Rome's airport.

Delta (☎ 800/241-4141; www.delta.com) now flies four times a week from New York JFK nonstop to Pisa—the only direct U.S.-to-Tuscany flight available. It also flies daily out of JFK to Rome and Milan, where it's possible to change to one of Delta's local partner airlines (Lufthansa, Iberia, and so on) for the last leg to Tuscany. From either city you can take a train to Tuscany, or from Rome you can connect to an Alitalia flight to Florence or Pisa.

British Airways (☎ 800/247-9297; www.ba.com) flies direct from dozens of U.S. and Canadian cities to London, where you can get connecting flights to Pisa, Rome, or Milan. **Air Canada** (☎ 888/247-2262 or 800/361-8071; www.aircanada.ca) flies daily from Toronto and Vancouver to Rome. **Continental** (☎ 800/231-0856; www.continental.com) doesn't fly to Italy itself, but it's partnered with Alitalia for the Newark-to-Rome and New York JFK-to-Milan flights, so if you're a Continental Frequent Flyer you can reserve through Continental and rack up the miles.

Possibly less convenient alternatives are **American Airlines** (☎ 800/433-7300; www.aa.com), whose flights from the United States to Milan and Rome usually go through Chicago, but they do offer seasonal daily nonstops between New York and Rome from April to October; **United** (☎ 800/528-2929; www.ual.com), which

flies once daily to Milan out of New York, Newark, and Washington, D.C., Dulles; or **US Airways** (☎ 800/622-1015; www.usairways.com), which offers one flight daily to Rome out of Philadelphia. (You can connect through Philly from most major U.S. cities.) Discount carrier **Eurofly** (☎ 800/459-0581; www.euroflyusa.com) offers nonstop, thrice-weekly seasonal (June–Sept) service between New York and Bologna.

FROM GREAT BRITAIN & IRELAND

British Airways (☎ 0845/773-3377; www.ba.com) flies twice daily from London's Gatwick to Pisa. **Alitalia** (020/8745-8200; www.alitalia.it) has four daily flights from London to both Rome and Milan and three daily from London Gatwick into Florence. **KLM UK** (formerly Air UK; ☎ 08705/074-074; www.klm.com) flies several times per week from London Heathrow to Milan (both airports) and Rome. In each case, there's a layover in Amsterdam. No-frills **Ryanair** (☎ 0871/246-0000 in the U.K.; www.ryanair.com) has hubs in the U.K. and on the Continent; you can fly from London to Pisa (as well as to Rome, Milan, Bologna, Ancona, Turin, and other Italian destinations); its competitor **EasyJet** (☎ 0871/244-2386 in the U.K.; www.easyjet.com) flies from many locations in the U.K. (as well as from a few hubs on the Continent) to Italy, including London to Milan, Bologna, Turin, Venice, and Rome and Bristol to Pisa. Another U.K.-based, low-cost carrier, **BMI** (☎ 0871/246-0000 in the U.K., or 800/788-0555 from the U.S.; www.flybmi.com), flies from London to Venice and Milan.

FROM AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND

Alitalia (☎ 02-9922-1555; www.alitalia.it) has a flight from Sydney to Rome every Thursday and Saturday. **Qantas** (☎ 13-13-13 in Australia, or 0649/357-8900 in Auckland, NZ; www.qantas.com) flies three times daily to Rome via Bangkok, leaving Australia from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, or Cairns. Qantas will also book you through one of these Australian cities from Auckland, Wellington, or Christchurch in New Zealand. You can also look into flying first into London and connecting to Italy from there. (There are more flights, and it may work out to be cheaper.)

GETTING TO TUSCANY OR UMBRIA FROM ROME'S AIRPORTS

Most international flights to Rome will arrive at **Fiumicino Airport** (officially named **Leonardo da Vinci International Airport**, but

Tips The Milan Connection

Note that if you find yourself **flying into Milan**, the domestic airport (Linate) is separate from the international one (Malpensa), and transferring planes to a connecting flight to Florence or Pisa requires switching airports (a 9€/12 bus connects the two airports), sometimes changing airlines, and an innate trust in the gods of luggage transfer. If you fly into Milan, a train to Tuscany is probably your best bet. This isn't a problem for flights on Alitalia, however, which uses Milan's Malpensa airport for both international arrivals and domestic departures—a blatantly nationalistic protectionist scheme which has all other major airlines, European and American, up in arms.

few, including the airlines themselves, call it that). Some inter-European and transatlantic charter flights may land at **Ciampino Airport**, which is closer to the center, but not connected by an express train. You can connect to a plane at either to take you to Florence's airport, but it's often simpler, almost as fast in the long run, and cheaper to take the train.

Fiumicino (☎ 06-659-51; www.adr.it) is 30km (19 miles) from Rome's center. You can take the **express train** (9.50€/13) from Fiumicino to Rome's central train station, Termini. A taxi to the station costs about 40€ (\$52). From Termini, you can grab one of many daily trains to Florence. If you happen to fly into **Ciampino Airport** (☎ 06-7934-0297), 15km (9 miles) south of the city, a none-too-frequent COTRAL bus will take you to the Anagnina Metro station, where you can take the Metro to Termini, the entire trip costing around 3€ (\$3.90). A taxi to Rome's center from Ciampino is 30€ (\$39).

GETTING TO FLORENCE FROM MILAN'S AIRPORT

Your flight may land at either **Linate Airport** (☎ 02-7485-2200; www.sea-aeroportoimilano.it), about 8km (5 miles) southeast of the city, or **Malpensa Airport** (☎ 02-2680-0613), 45km (28 miles) from downtown—closer to Como than to Milan itself.

From **Malpensa**, a 40-minute express train heads half-hourly to Cadorna train station in western Milan rather than to the larger and more central Stazione Centrale from which most trains onward to Tuscany will leave (you'll have to take the Metro to get there). The Malpensa Express train costs 11€ (\$14). To grab a bus instead,

which will take you directly to the central downtown rail station, take the **Malpensa Shuttle** (☎ 02-5858-3185) for 5€ (\$6.50), which leaves two or three times per hour for the 50-minute ride to the east side of Milan's Stazione Centrale. A taxi to the city center runs about 70€ (\$91).

From **Linate, STAM buses** (☎ 02-717-100) make the 25-minute trip to Milan's Stazione Centrale, every 20 to 30 minutes daily from 7am to 11pm, and cost 2€ (\$2.60; buy on bus). The slightly slower city bus no. 73 leaves hourly for the S. Babila Metro stop downtown (1€/\$1.30 for a regular bus ticket bought from any newsagent inside the airport, but not onboard). From Milan's Stazione Centrale, you can get trains to Florence (see "Arriving," in chapter 2).

BY CAR

You'll get the **best rental rate** if you book your car from home instead of renting direct in Italy—in fact, if you decide to rent once you're over there, it's worth it to call home to have someone arrange it all from there. You must be older than 25 to rent from most agencies (although some accept ages 21 and up).

Though it once was smart shopping to see what rates Italian companies were offering, they're all now allied with the big agencies in the States: **Avis** (☎ 800/230-4898, in Italy toll-free 199-100-133; www.avis.com), **Budget** (☎ 800/527-0700; www.budget.com), **Hertz** (☎ 800/654-3131 or 800/654-3001; www.hertz.com), and **National** (☎ 800/227-7368; www.nationalcar.com).

You can usually get a better rate by going through one of the rental companies specializing in Europe: **Auto Europe** (☎ 888/223-5555; www.autoeurope.com), **Europe by Car** (☎ 800/223-1516 or 212/581-3040; www.europebycar.com), **Kemwell** (☎ 800/678-0678; www.kemwell.com), and **Maiellano** (☎ 800/223-1616 or 718/727-0044). With constant price wars and special packages, it always pays to shop around among all of the above. Also, if you're planning to rent a car in Italy during high season, you really should book well in advance: It's not at all unusual to arrive at the airport in Milan or the train station in Rome in June and July to find that every last agent is all out of cars, perhaps for a week.

When offered the choice between a compact car and a larger one, always choose the smaller car (unless you have a large group)—you'll need it for maneuvering the winding, steeply graded Italian roads and the impossibly narrow alleyways of towns and cities. Likewise, if you can drive a stick shift, order one; it'll help you better navigate

the hilly terrain. It's also a good idea to opt for the **Collision Damage Wavier (CDW)**, which, for only \$10 to \$20 a day, gives you the peace of mind and nerves of steel that driving in Italy requires; you can pay only \$7 per day for this service if you buy it through a third-party insurer such as **Travel Guard** (www.travelguard.com). Although the 19% IVA value-added tax is unavoidable, you can do away with the government airport pickup tax of 10% by picking up your car at an office in town.

BY TRAIN

Every day, up to 14 **Eurostar** trains (reservations in London ☎ **0875/186-186**; www.eurostar.com) zip from London to Paris's Gare du Nord via the **Chunnel** (Eurotunnel) in a bit over 4 hours. In Paris, you can transfer to the Paris Gare de Lyon station or Paris Bercy for one of three daily direct trains to **Milan** (from which you can transfer to Florence), two to **Pisa**, or two to **Florence**. Some of the Milan runs are high-speed TGV trains, a 6½-hour ride requiring a seat reservation. At least one will be an overnight Euronight (EN) train, with reservable sleeping couchettes; the Euronight leaves Paris around 10pm and gets into Milan around 8:45am. The two Euronight trains going directly from Paris to Pisa take about 10 hours; to Florence, it takes 12½ hours.

The definitive 500-page book listing all official European train routes and schedules is the ***Thomas Cook European Timetable***, available in the United States for \$28 (plus \$4.50 shipping and handling) from Forsyth Travel Library, P.O. Box 2975, Shawnee Mission, KS 66201 (☎ **800/367-7984**), or at travel specialty stores. You can also order the schedule online at **www.thomascooktimetables.com**.

5 Money & Costs

Euro coins are issued in denominations of .01€, .02€, .05€, .10€, .20€, and .50€ as well as 1€ and 2€; bills come in denominations of 5€, 10€, 20€, 50€, 100€, 200€, and 500€.

Exchange rates are established daily and listed in most international newspapers, and websites such as **www.xe.com**. To get a transaction as close to this rate as possible, pay for as much as possible with credit cards and get cash out of ATMs.

Traveler's checks, while still the safest way to carry money, are going the way of the dinosaur. The aggressive evolution of international computerized banking and consolidated ATM networks has led to the triumph of plastic throughout the Italian peninsula—even if cold cash is still the most trusted currency, especially in smaller

What Things Cost in Florence	US\$	UK£
Taxi (from the train station to Ponte Vecchio)	7.80	3.90
Public bus (to any destination)	1.20	0.60
Local telephone call	0.15	0.07
Double room at Hotel Helvetia and Bristol (very expensive)	429.00– 611.00	215.00– 306.00
Double room at Il Guelfo Bianco (moderate)	156.00– 250.00	78.00– 125.00
Double room at Pensione Maria Luisade' Medici (inexpensive)	96.00– 114.00	52.00– 62.00
Continental breakfast (cappuccino and croissant, standing at a bar)	3.00	1.65
Lunch for one at Nerbone (inexpensive)	7.80	3.90
Dinner for one, with table wine, at La Giostra (expensive)	72.00	36.00
Dinner for one, with table wine, at Il Latini (moderate)	30.00– 36.00	15.00– 18.00
Dinner for one, with table wine, at Le1 Mossacce (inexpensive)	6.80	8.40
Glass of wine	1.30– 7.80	0.65– 3.90
Coca-Cola (standing/sitting in a bar)	2.60/ 3.90	1.30/ 1.95
Cup of espresso (standing/sitting in a bar)	1.00/ 1.50	0.50/ 0.75
Admission to the Uffizi Galleries	7.20	3.90
Movie ticket	10.00	5.00

towns or cheaper mom-and-pop joints, where credit cards may not be accepted.

You'll get the best rate if you **exchange money** at a bank or one of its ATMs. The rates at "cambio/change/wechsel" exchange booths are invariably less favorable but still a good deal better than what you'd get exchanging money at a hotel or shop (a last-resort tactic

only). The bill-to-bill changers you'll see in some touristy places exist solely to rip you off.

ATMs

The easiest and best way to get cash away from home is from an ATM (automated teller machine), referred to in Italy as a "Bancomat." The **Cirrus** (☎ 800/424-7787; www.mastercard.com) and **PLUS** (☎ 800/843-7587; www.visa.com) networks span the globe. Go to your bank card's website to find ATM locations at your destination. Be sure you know your daily withdrawal limit before you depart. **Note:** Many banks impose a fee every time you use a card at another bank's ATM, and that fee can be higher for international transactions (up to \$5 or more) than for domestic ones (where they're rarely more than \$2). In addition, the bank from which you withdraw cash may charge its own fee, although this is not common practice in Italy. For international withdrawal fees, ask your bank.

Note: Banks that are members of the **Global ATM Alliance** charge no transaction fees for cash withdrawals at other Alliance member ATMs; these include Bank of America, Scotiabank (Canada, Caribbean, and Mexico), Barclays (U.K. and parts of Africa), Deutsche Bank (Germany, Poland, Spain, and Italy), and BNP Paribas (France).

Be sure to check with your bank that your card is valid for international withdrawal and that you have a four-digit PIN. (Most ATMs in Italy will not accept any other number of digits.)

If at the ATM you get a message saying your card isn't valid for international transactions, don't panic: It's most likely the bank just can't make the phone connection to check it (occasionally this can be a citywide epidemic) or else simply doesn't have the cash. Try another ATM or another town.

CREDIT CARDS

Credit cards are another safe way to carry money. They also provide a convenient record of all your expenses, and they generally offer relatively good exchange rates. You can withdraw cash advances from your credit cards at banks or ATMs but high fees make credit-card cash advances a pricey way to get cash. Keep in mind that you'll pay interest from the moment of your withdrawal, even if you pay your monthly bills on time. Also, note that many banks now assess a 1% to 3% "transaction fee" on **all** charges you incur abroad (whether you're using the local currency or your native currency).

Visa and **MasterCard** are almost universally accepted at hotels, plus most restaurants and shops; the majority of them also accept

American Express. Diners Club is gaining some ground, especially in Florence and in more expensive establishments throughout the region. **Note:** It is an unfortunately common practice among many restaurants in Italy to claim that the credit card machine is down when, in fact, it is more often the case that the owner simply doesn't want to pay the merchant fees. On more than one occasion I've insisted that they try it just in case, as I had no cash, and—surprise—it's been instantly fixed! The best way to avoid this chicanery is to inform the waitstaff upfront that you intend to use a credit card. If they tell you it's broken, you have the option of finding a restaurant where the machine actually “works.”

TRAVELER'S CHECKS

You can buy traveler's checks at most banks. They are offered in denominations of \$20, \$50, \$100, \$500, and sometimes \$1,000. Generally, you'll pay a service charge ranging from 1% to 4%.

The most popular traveler's checks are offered by **American Express** (☎ 800/807-6233, or 800/221-7282 for card holders—this number accepts collect calls, offers service in several foreign languages, and exempts Amex gold and platinum cardholders from the 1% fee); **Visa** (☎ 800/732-1322)—AAA members can obtain Visa checks for a \$9.95 fee (for checks up to \$1,500) at most AAA offices or by calling ☎ 866/339-3378; and **MasterCard** (☎ 800/223-9920).

Be sure to keep a record of the traveler's checks serial numbers separate from your checks in the event that they are stolen or lost. You'll get a refund faster if you know the numbers.

American Express, Thomas Cook, Visa, and MasterCard offer **foreign currency traveler's checks**, useful if you're traveling to one country or to the euro zone; they're accepted at locations where dollar checks may not be.

Another option is the new prepaid traveler's check cards, reloadable cards that work much like debit cards but aren't linked to your checking account. The **American Express Travelers Cheque Card**, for example, requires a minimum deposit, sets a maximum balance, and has a one-time issuance fee of \$15. You can withdraw money from an ATM (for a fee of \$2.50 per transaction, not including bank fees), and the funds can be purchased in dollars, euros, or pounds. If you lose the card, your available funds will be refunded within 24 hours.

Frankly, however, the practice of using traveler's checks in Italy is so infrequent these days that most waiters and hotel staff will squint

at one and have no idea what it is. In name, at least, some places do accept traveler's checks, but it is not advisable to depend on them in Italy.

6 Travel Insurance

The cost of travel insurance varies widely, depending on the destination, the cost and length of your trip, your age and health, and the type of trip you're taking, but expect to pay between 5% and 8% of the vacation itself. You can get estimates from various providers through **InsureMyTrip.com**. Enter your trip cost and dates, your age, and other information, for prices from more than a dozen companies.

U.K. citizens and their families who make more than one trip abroad per year may find an annual travel insurance policy works out cheaper. Check **www.moneysupermarket.com**, which compares prices across a wide range of providers for single- and multi-trip policies.

Most big travel agencies offer their own insurance and will probably try to sell you their package when you book a holiday. Think before you sign. **Britain's Consumers' Association** recommends that you insist on seeing the policy and reading the fine print before buying travel insurance. **The Association of British Insurers** (☎ 020/7600-3333; www.abi.org.uk) gives advice by phone and publishes *Holiday Insurance*, a free guide to policy provisions and prices. You might also shop around for better deals: Try **Columbus Direct** (☎ 0870/033-9988; www.columbusdirect.net).

TRIP-CANCELLATION INSURANCE Trip-cancellation insurance will help retrieve your money if you have to back out of a trip or depart early, or if your travel supplier goes bankrupt. Trip cancellation traditionally covers such events as sickness, natural disasters, and Department of State advisories. The latest news in trip-cancellation insurance is the availability of **expanded hurricane coverage** and the **"any-reason"** cancellation coverage—which costs more but covers cancellations made for any reason. You won't get back 100% of your prepaid trip cost, but you'll be refunded a substantial portion. **TravelSafe** (☎ 888/885-7233; www.travelsafe.com) offers both types of coverage. Expedia also offers any-reason cancellation coverage for its air-hotel packages.

For details, contact one of the following recommended insurers: **Access America** (☎ 866/807-3982; www.accessamerica.com); **Travel Guard International** (☎ 800/826-4919; www.travelguard.com);

Travel Insured International (☎ 800/243-3174; www.travelinsured.com); and **Travelex Insurance Services** (☎ 888/457-4602; www.travelex-insurance.com).

MEDICAL INSURANCE For travel overseas, most U.S. health plans (including Medicare and Medicaid) do not provide coverage, and the ones that do often require you to pay for services upfront and reimburse you only after you return home.

As a safety net, you may want to buy travel medical insurance, particularly if you're traveling to a remote or high-risk area where emergency evacuation might be necessary. If you require additional medical insurance try **MEDEX Assistance** (☎ 410/453-6300; www.medexassist.com) or **Travel Assistance International** (☎ 800/821-2828; www.travelassistance.com; for general information on services, call the company's **Worldwide Assistance Services, Inc.**, at ☎ 800/777-8710).

Canadians should check with their provincial health plan offices or call **Health Canada** (☎ 866/225-0709; www.hc-sc.gc.ca) to find out the extent of their coverage and what documentation and receipts they must take home in case they are treated overseas.

LOST-LUGGAGE INSURANCE On international flights (including U.S. portions of international trips), baggage coverage is limited to approximately \$9.07 per pound, up to approximately \$635 per checked bag. If you plan to check items more valuable than what's covered by the standard liability, see if your homeowner's policy covers your valuables, get baggage insurance as part of your comprehensive travel-insurance package, or buy Travel Guard's "BagTrak" product.

If your luggage is lost, immediately file a lost-luggage claim at the airport, detailing the luggage contents. Most airlines require that you report delayed, damaged, or lost baggage within 4 hours of arrival. The airlines are required to deliver luggage, once found, directly to your house or destination free of charge.

7 Health

There are no special health risks you'll encounter in Italy. The tap water is safe—excellent, even—and medical resources are high quality.

GENERAL AVAILABILITY OF HEALTH CARE

With Italy's partially socialized medicine, you can usually stop by any hospital emergency room with an ailment, get swift and courteous service, receive a diagnosis and a prescription, and be sent on your

way with a wave and a smile—without filling out a single sheet of paperwork.

Pharmacies offer essentially the same range of generic drugs available in the United States, plus a lot of them that haven't been approved yet by the Federal Drug Administration. Pharmacies are also the only place you'll find simple stuff such as aspirin and run-of-the-mill cold medicines: You won't find Tylenol at any old corner store (even if there were such a thing as a corner store).

Strangely, though, I have found it very hard to locate decongestants in Italy the way you can in other countries. If you regularly suffer from a stuffy nose, it is best to pack a good supply of Sudafed with you before you leave.

Travel Health Online (www.tripprep.com), sponsored by a consortium of travel medicine practitioners, may also offer helpful advice on traveling abroad. You can find listings of reliable medical clinics overseas at the **International Society of Travel Medicine** (www.istm.org).

8 Specialized Travel Resources

TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Most disabilities shouldn't stop anyone from traveling. There are more options and resources out there than ever before. In Italy, a few of the top museums and churches have installed ramps at the entrances, and a few hotels have converted first-floor rooms into accessible units by widening the doors and bathrooms.

Other than that, don't expect to find much of Tuscany and Umbria easy to tackle. Builders in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance didn't have wheelchairs or mobility impairments in mind when they built narrow doorways and spiral staircases, and preservation laws keep modern Italians from being able to do much about this. Buses and trains can cause problems as well, with high, narrow doors and steep steps at entrances. There are, however, seats reserved on public transportation for travelers with disabilities.

Luckily, there's an endless list of organizations to help you plan your trip and offer specific advice before you go. Many travel agencies offer customized tours and itineraries for travelers with disabilities. Among them are **Flying Wheels Travel** (☎ 507/451-5005; www.flyingwheelstravel.com); and **Accessible Journeys** (☎ 800/846-4537 or 610/521-0339; www.disabilitytravel.com).

Flying with Disability (www.flying-with-disability.org) is a comprehensive information source on airplane travel. **Avis Rent a Car**

(☎ 888/879-4273) has an “Avis Access” program that offers services for customers with special travel needs. These include specially outfitted vehicles with swivel seats, spinner knobs, and hand controls; mobility scooter rentals; and accessible bus service. Be sure to reserve well in advance.

Also check out the quarterly magazine *Emerging Horizons* (www.emerginghorizons.com), available by subscription (\$16.95 year U.S.; \$21.95 outside the U.S.).

The “Accessible Travel” link at **Mobility-Advisor.com** (www.mobility-advisor.com) offers a variety of travel resources to persons with disabilities.

British travelers should contact **Holiday Care** (☎ 0845-124-9971 in the U.K. only; www.holidaycare.org.uk) to access a wide range of travel information and resources for elderly people and those with disabilities.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Italy as a whole, and Northern and Central Italy in particular, are gay-friendly. Homosexuality is legal, and the age of consent is 16. Luckily, Italians are already more affectionate and physical than Americans in their general friendships, and even straight men occasionally walk down the street with their arms around each other—however, kissing anywhere other than on the cheeks at greetings and goodbyes will certainly draw attention. As you might expect, smaller towns tend to be less permissive and accepting than cities. Florence has the largest and most visible homosexual population (not that that’s saying much), though university cities such as Pisa also take gayness in stride. Elba’s beaches are Tuscany’s big gay-vacation destination.

Italy’s national association and support network for gays and lesbians is **ARCI-Gay/ARCI-Lesbica**. The national website is www.arcigay.it, but they’ve recently launched a Tuscany-specific one at www.gaytoscana.it, and the new head regional office is in **Siena** at Via Massetana Romana 18, 53100 Siena (☎ 0577-288-977; fax 0577-271-538; www.gaysiena.it). There are other offices in **Pisa** (**Arcigay Pride!**), Via San Lorenzo 38 (☎ 050-555-618; fax 050-831-0605; www.gay.it/pride), **Pistoia** (☎ 333-667-6873; www.gaypistoia.it), and **Grosseto**, Via Ravel 7 (☎ 339-440-9049 or 347-078-8972; www.grossetogay.it). Their cousin association in **Florence** is called **Ireos** (☎/fax 055-216-907; www.ireos.org), in the Oltrarno at Via dei Serragli 3, 50124 Firenze.

The International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (**IGLTA**; ☎ 800/448-8550 or 954/776-2626; www.iglta.org) is the

trade association for the gay and lesbian travel industry, and offers an online directory of gay- and lesbian-friendly travel businesses and tour operators.

Many agencies offer specific tours and travel itineraries for gay and lesbian travelers. **Above and Beyond Tours** (☎ 800/397-2681; www.abovebeyondtours.com) are Australian gay-tour specialists. San Francisco-based **Now, Voyager** (☎ 800/255-6951; www.nowvoyager.com) offers worldwide trips and cruises, and **Olivia** (☎ 800/631-6277; www.olivia.com) offers lesbian cruises and resort vacations.

Gay.com Travel (☎ 800/929-2268 or 415/644-8044; www.gay.com/travel or www.outandabout.com), is an excellent online successor to the popular *Out & About* print magazine. It provides regularly updated information about gay-owned, gay-oriented, and gay-friendly lodging, dining, sightseeing, nightlife, and shopping establishments in every important destination worldwide. British travelers should click on the “Travel” link at **www.uk.gay.com** for advice and gay-friendly trip ideas.

The Canadian website **GayTraveler** (gaytraveler.ca) offers ideas and advice for gay travel all over the world.

The following travel guides are available at many bookstores, or you can order them from any online bookseller: *Spartacus International Gay Guide, 35th Edition* (Bruno Gmünder Verlag; www.spartacusworld.com/gayguide); *Odyssey: The International Gay Travel Planner, 17th Edition* (www.odysa.com); and the *Damron* guides (www.damron.com), with separate, annual books for gay men and lesbians.

SENIOR TRAVEL

Italy is a multigenerational culture that doesn't tend to marginalize its seniors, and older people are treated with a great deal of respect and deference throughout Italy. But there are few specific programs, associations, or concessions made for them. The one exception is on admission prices for museums and sights, where those ages 60 or 65 and older will often get in at a reduced rate or even free. There are also special train passes and reductions on bus tickets and the like in various towns. As a senior in Italy, you're *un anziano* (*una anziana* if you're a woman), or “ancient one”—consider it a term of respect, and let people know you're one if you think a discount may be in order.

Members of **AARP**, 601 E St. NW, Washington, DC 20049 (☎ 888/687-2277; www.aarp.org), get discounts on hotels, airfares,

and car rentals. AARP offers members a wide range of benefits, including *AARP: The Magazine* and a monthly newsletter. Anyone over age 50 can join.

Many reliable agencies and organizations target the 50-plus market. **Elderhostel** (☎ 800/454-5768; www.elderhostel.org) arranges worldwide study programs for those ages 55 and over. **ElderTreks** (☎ 800/741-7956 or 416/558-5000 outside North America; www.eldertreks.com) offers small-group tours to off-the-beaten-path or adventure-travel locations, restricted to travelers 50 and older.

Recommended publications offering travel resources and discounts for seniors include the quarterly magazine *Travel 50 & Beyond* (www.travel50andbeyond.com) and the best-selling paperback *Unbelievably Good Deals and Great Adventures That You Absolutely Can't Get Unless You're Over 50 2005–2006, 16th Edition* (McGraw-Hill), by Joann Rattner Heilman.

FAMILY TRAVEL

Italy is still a family-oriented society, and kids have free rein just about anywhere they go. A crying baby at a dinner table is greeted with a knowing smile rather than with a stern look. Children under a certain age almost always receive discounts, and maybe a special treat from the waiter, but the availability of such North American accouterments as child seats for cars and dinner tables are more the exception to the rule than the norm.

To locate accommodations, restaurants, and attractions that are particularly kid-friendly, refer to the “Kids” icon throughout this guide.

WOMEN TRAVELERS

It is hard not to notice that, on the streets of Florence, young foreign women far outnumber any other category of people. Women feel remarkably welcome in Italy—sometimes a bit too welcome, actually. It seems every young Italian male is out to prove himself the most irresistible lover on the planet; remember, this is the land of Romeo and Casanova, so they have a lot to live up to. And with most every Italian woman playing the especially hard-to-get Juliet, well, you see what's coming next for attractive foreign women.

The more exotic you look—statuesque blondes, ebony-skinned beauties, or simply an American accent—the more irresistible you become to these suitors. And, as everyone around the world knows from watching Hollywood movies, American women are uninhibited and passionate sex kittens. That this isn't always true doesn't make much of a dent in Italian boys' fantasies.

Flirting back at these would-be Romeos, even mildly, only convinces them that you're ready to jump into bed. Heck, mere eye contact encourages them to redouble their efforts. Unless you want all this attention, take your cue from Italian women, who may wear tight skirts and fishnets but, you'll notice, usually ignore the men around them entirely unless it's someone they're already walking with.

Note that much of the attention is kept to verbal flirtation and that occasional inappropriate touching deserves a slap in the face. These men want to conquer you with their charm, not their muscles. Rape is much rarer in Italy than in the United States—but it does happen, mostly by non-Italian men, if you believe the newspapers. Though most foreign women report feeling far safer wandering the deserted streets of an Italian city to their hotels at 2am than they do in their own neighborhoods back home, use some common sense. You'll probably get tons of ride offers, mostly from would-be chivalrous knights atop their Vespa or Fiat steeds, but remind yourself that criminals do exist in this romantic part of the world, just as anywhere else.

Check out the award-winning website **Journeywoman** (www.journeywoman.com), a “real life” women’s travel-information network where you can sign up for a free e-mail newsletter and get advice on everything from etiquette and dress to safety. The travel guide ***Safety and Security for Women Who Travel*** by Sheila Swan and Peter Laufer (Travelers’ Tales Guides), offering common-sense tips on safe travel, was updated in 2004.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN TRAVELERS

Italy for centuries was and, to a large degree, still is a homogenous culture. Add to that the fact that issues of race here are discussed so frankly and openly—there’s apparently no taboo to saying, in a loud voice, “That black guy over there . . .” Moreover, the reality is that most people of African descent in Italy are working as street vendors, not bankers. All this may make travelers with darker skin feel—correctly at times—as if they’re being singled out.

Pockets of racism do exist in Italy (primarily in the Northeast) just like anywhere else in the world, but on the whole, it is an extremely warm and racially tolerant country. As one Pakistani friend of mine put it, “They’re just curious, that’s all.”

Black Travel Online (www.blacktravelonline.com) posts news on upcoming events and includes links to articles and travel-booking sites. **Soul of America** (www.soulofamerica.com) is a comprehensive

Getting Your VAT Refund

Most purchases have a built-in **value added tax (IVA)** of 20%. Non-E.U. (European Union) citizens are entitled to a refund of this tax if they spend more than 154.94€ (before tax) at any one store. To claim your refund, request an invoice from the cashier at the store and take it to the Customs office (*dogana*) at the airport to have it stamped *before* you leave. **Note:** If you're going to another E.U. country before flying home, have it stamped at the airport Customs office of the last E.U. country you'll be visiting (so if flying home via Britain, have your Italian invoices stamped in London).

Once back home, mail the stamped invoice back to the store within 90 days of the purchase, and they'll send you a refund check. Many shops are now part of the "Tax Free for Tourists" network. (Look for the sticker in the window.) Stores participating in this network issue a check along with your invoice at the time of purchase. After you have the invoice stamped at Customs, you can redeem the check for cash directly at the tax-free booth in the airport, or mail it back in the envelope provided within 60 days. For more info, check out www.globalrefund.com.

website, with travel tips, event and family-reunion postings, and sections on historically black beach resorts and active vacations.

Agencies and organizations that provide resources for black travelers include **Rodgers Travel** (☎ 800/825-1775; www.rodgerstravel.com); the **African American Association of Innkeepers International** (☎ 877/422-5777; www.africanamericaninns.com); and **Henderson Travel & Tours** (☎ 800/327-2309 or 301/650-5700; www.hendersontravel.com), which has specialized in trips to Africa since 1957.

Go Girl: The Black Woman's Guide to Travel & Adventure (Eighth Mountain Press) is a compilation of travel essays by writers including Jill Nelson and Audre Lorde. ***The African-American Travel Guide*** by Wayne C. Robinson (Hunter Publishing; www.hunterpublishing.com) was published in 1997, so it may be somewhat dated. ***Travel and Enjoy Magazine*** (☎ 866/266-6211; www.travelandenjoy.com) is a travel magazine and guide. The well-done

Pathfinders Magazine (☎ 877/977-PATH; www.pathfinderstravel.com) includes articles on everything from Rio de Janeiro to Ghana to upcoming ski, diving, golf, and tennis trips.

STUDENT TRAVEL

The **International Student Travel Confederation** (ISTC; www.istc.org) was formed in 1949 to make travel around the world more affordable for students. Check out its website for comprehensive travel services information and details on how to get an **International Student Identity Card (ISIC)**, which qualifies students for substantial savings on rail passes, plane tickets, entrance fees, and more. It also provides students with basic health and life insurance and a 24-hour help line. The card is valid for a maximum of 18 months. You can apply for the card online or in person at **STA Travel** (☎ 800/781-4040 in North America; www.statravel.com), the biggest student travel agency in the world; check out the website to locate STA Travel offices worldwide. If you're no longer a student but are still under 26, you can get an **International Youth Travel Card (IYTC)** from the same agency, which entitles you to some discounts. **Travel CUTS** (☎ 800/592-2887; www.travelcuts.com) offers similar services for both Canadians and U.S. residents. Irish students may prefer to turn to **USIT** (☎ 01/602-1904; www.usit.ie), an Ireland-based specialist in student, youth, and independent travel.