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The Best of Italy

From ancient ruins to tasty *trattorie* and from urban verve to rural charm—how do you choose?

by Reid Bramblett

WHEN IT COMES DOWN TO IT, NEARLY EVERY REGION IN ITALY HAS QUIANT hill towns, picturesque countryside, magnificent art cities, ancient ruins, exquisite food, sublime wines, and just about any other travel cliché you want to throw in there. It's wonderful, it's incredible, and it's why Italy remains one of the most popular destinations on the planet—but it's not going to help you plan your trip.

You probably have only 1 or 2 precious weeks of vacation time, and we suspect you have your own ideas about how to spend it. That's why we're going to cut through the brochure-speak and help you home in on the best of the best, right from the start.

THE BEST OF THE BEST

While there are **ancient ruins** across the peninsula, from the Alps of the Valle d'Aosta to the very southern tip of Sicily, the real showstoppers lie in the southern half of the country. You'll find the best Roman remains in—surprise, surprise—Rome (the Colosseum, Roman Forum, Imperial Fora, and several top museums), and get the best sense of what life was like 2 millennia ago in the ancient ghost towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum, both just outside Naples, or in Ostia Antica, just a subway ride from the center of Rome.

What few folks realize is that, before the Romans, everything from Naples south was actually part of Greece (back in the 5th c. B.C., when *Magna Graecia* was much, much bigger), and that some of the best-preserved ancient Greek ruins anywhere are actually in Sicily (Agrigento, Siracusa, Segesta, Selinunte), and on the coast south of Naples (Paestum).

When it comes to **medieval hill towns**, you have plenty of options. However, the hill-town heartland really is central Italy, particularly in Tuscany (Siena, Montepulciano, Montalcino, and especially San Gimignano, bristling with stone towers like a medieval Manhattan) and neighboring Umbria (from its capital, Perugia, to smaller cities and towns such as Gubbio, Todi, and Spoleto).

Of course, you can't swing a paintbrush in Italy without spattering it on some of the finest **Renaissance art** in the world. This is where Italy's Big Three—Rome, Venice, and Florence—really live up to their reputations. Florence (the Uffizi and Pitti Palace), Rome (the Vatican), and Venice (the Accademia) collectively have more works by Old Masters like Michelangelo, Donatello, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Botticelli, and Titian than you could hope to see in three lifetimes. And the artwork is not limited to just the major museums. There are dozens of smaller

collections, as well as countless churches where the walls (not to mention the ceilings—Sistine Chapel, anyone?) sometimes seem to be little more than grand settings on which to display masterpieces of fresco, painting, and sculpture.

LIVING LA DOLCE VITA

Perhaps all that's simply too much sightseeing. An endless litany of ruins, churches, and museums can make for a dull vacation. You've come to sample that Italian *dolce vita* (sweet life)—or even better, *la dolce far niente* (the sweetness of doing nothing). And with Italy's 8,475km (5,264 miles) of coastline, there are few better places to find that sweetness than at the **beach**. You just have to pick which kind of seaside vacation—or 2-day break from the relentless sightseeing—you want. Do you want to hang with the jet-set (the Amalfi Coast), join the ever-increasing tourist hordes that hike from one fishing village to the next (the Cinque Terre), grab an umbrella and beach chair alongside vacationing Italian families (the Italian Riviera), or get off the beaten path and see what all those places looked like before they were discovered (Puglia's Gargano Peninsula)?

Or, you can opt for an **island**—no, not Sicily: the tiny islands. Now you just have to decide: Will you follow the Americans and Brits to the storied isle of Capri and its Blue Grotto; the Germans to Capri's lesser-known neighbor, Ischia; or the Italians down to the string of Aeolian Islands off the north coast of Sicily, where the isle of Stromboli erupts regularly throughout the day and night like some kind of volcanic Old Faithful?

Then again, there are always the elaborate villas and sumptuous gardens of the **Lake District**—Lake Como, Lake Maggiore, Lake Garda—where the plains of Lombardy meet the Italian Alps. Speaking of which, plenty of people prefer to seek *la dolce vita* at a higher altitude. It doesn't get any higher than 3,300m (11,000 ft.) at Punta Hellbrunner atop Monte Bianco, Europe's tallest **mountain**, shared by France (which calls it Mont Blanc), and the northwestern Italian region of Valle d'Aosta. On the other side of the country, just a few hours north of Venice, rise the craggy peaks of the Dolomites, into which are tucked tony ski resorts such as Cortina d'Ampezzo.

THE BEST EATS

And, of course, there's the **food**. Don't ask us to single out just one place in Italy for its cuisine. We can't do it. That would be like choosing a favorite child. With extremely rare exceptions (usually around the biggest tourist sights and in beach resorts), it's nearly impossible to have a bad meal in Italy. These people live to eat. Their idea of an ideal evening out is not dinner, a movie, and maybe dancing; it's appetizer, main course, and dessert—preferably strung out over 3 or 4 hours. Wherever you go, you'll find regional specialties to knock out your taste buds: pizza in Naples, spaghetti carbonara in Rome, Adriatic fish in Venice, juicy steaks in Florence, swordfish in Sicily, *osso buco* in Milan, prosciutto and parmigiano in Parma, calamari in Puglia, polenta in Alpine villages, and pasta absolutely everywhere you turn. Oh, and for dessert: gelato, which makes every other frozen dairy treat ashamed to call itself ice cream. (Here's a fun travel game: Race to see who can be the first to sample all three kinds of Italian gelato—the ice milk of Sicily, often delicately flavored with fresh fruits and nuts; the dense milk-and-egg-yolk-based

product of Florence, which gives new meaning to the phrase “death by chocolate”; and the cream-and-custard-based gelato of Northern Italy.)

To wash it all down? **Wine** from the folks who taught the French how to tend grapes. Again, every region in Italy produces phenomenal wines, from the earthy, purple-black *Salice Salentino* in Puglia to the light, fruity *tocai* in the Friuli. But, if you had to pick just two regions that are constantly trying to outdo each other in the prodigious production of truly great wines, those would have to be Tuscany (the short-short list of varietals includes Chianti, Brunello di Montalcino, and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano) and the northern region of Piemonte (from which the mighty Barolo, Barbera, Barbaresco, and Nebbiolo hail—not to mention Asti spumanti, the champagne of Italian sparkling whites).

Now let’s get down to specifics. You will, of course, tailor your trip to your own tastes and interest, but there are a few things no one should miss. What follow are the greatest Italian attractions and experiences—plus ways to get off the beaten path and discover the “other Italy.”

THE BEST CHURCHES

ST. PETER’S & THE VATICAN (ROME) The capital of Christendom and the Pope’s personal pulpit is St. Peter’s Basilica, one of the most spectacular assemblages of art and architecture on the planet, and a pilgrimage point for Catholics from around the world. The world’s smallest country—Vatican City—is also home to one of the grandest museum complexes in Europe, of which Michelangelo’s ceiling in the Sistine Chapel is just a teensy part. See p. 67.

THE DUOMO (FLORENCE) Florence’s cathedral is a study in the origins of the Renaissance, from the doors on the baptistery out front, which set the tone and style for all later Renaissance art; to the frescoes in the church by Paolo Uccello, one of the first masters of perspective; to Brunelleschi’s ingenious dome, which revolutionized architecture. Bonus: You can climb up between the two layers of that dome and see Brunelleschi’s genius up close as well as the brilliant panorama of the city. See p. 119.

ST. FRANCIS’S BASILICA (ASSISI) This massive home of the Franciscan order is a major pilgrimage destination, both for devout Catholics and art aficionados, who arrive in droves and tour buses to view the famous frescoes by Giotto—though don’t miss the equally brilliant frescoes by early Siennese masters Simone Martini and the Lorenzetti brothers in the lower church of this double-decker basilica. See p. 211.

ST. MARK’S BASILICA (VENICE) Grafted together from bits of military plunder, coated inside with golden mosaics, and sporting a quintet of vaguely Eastern-looking domes, the cathedral of Venice epitomizes this city’s obsession with beauty and religious ritual, and its style reflects its ancient trading connections with the Oriental world. See p. 309.

CAPPELLA DEGLI SCROVEGNI (VENETO) For every 100 people who visit the Giotto frescoes in Assisi, maybe one makes it to the university town of Padova, which the Gothic master painter—widely considered to be the father of Western

art—also blessed with an amazing, colorful fresco cycle in this small chapel. Bonus: It's an easy day trip from Venice. See p. 347.

THE DUOMO (MILAN) The fourth-largest church in the world is also Italy's grandest Gothic structure, and even though it took 500-odd years to complete, the city fathers resolutely stuck by their original, medieval-looking plans. The result is stupendous: 135 marble spires, some 3,400 statues adorning the exterior, and a nave that feels like a forest of columns. The real treat is to clamber up onto the roof for close-up looks at the buttresses and a lovely city panorama. See p. 394.

THE CATHEDRAL OF MONREALE (OUTSIDE PALERMO) If you thought the mosaics of Palermo's churches were something else, wait until you get to this village above the city and see the sparkling golden interior of its cathedral—not to mention the amazing Romanesque carvings and inlay work on the columns surrounding its quiet cloisters. See p. 556.

THE BEST NON-ECCLESIASTICAL ARCHITECTURAL SIGHTS

THE COLOSSEUM (ROME) Every modern stadium in the world is but a feeble imitation of Rome's Colosseum. Wander amid its ramparts and imagine the cheering crowds, roaring beasts, and clash of swords as gladiators battled for the amusement of Caesar and the masses alike. See p. 53.

ROMAN FORUM (ROME) Walk in the footsteps of the Caesars amid the remnants and ruins of what was once the center of the Roman world, puzzling together a picture of the ancient city from the remaining fallen pillars, corners of temples, triumphal arches, and slices of statues that fill this (free) archaeological park in the heart of Rome. See p. 51.

THE CAMPO DI MIRACOLI (PISA) Sure, it's got a famous Leaning Tower—but the brilliant green grass of Pisa's Campo di Miracoli (Field of Miracles) is also backdrop to the massive cathedral that the titling tower goes with, an amazing Gothic baptistery with perfect acoustics and a brilliant carved pulpit, a serene holy cemetery with ruinous but fascinating frescoes, and two intriguing museums devoted to the church treasures of this once mighty maritime power. See p. 155.

IL CAMPO (SIENA) The main piazza in Siena is a gorgeous sloping semicircle of brick that, on nice days, is scattered with people sunning themselves, couples sipping cappuccino at cafes, kids playing soccer, and groups strolling and chatting. The whole thing is bounded at the bottom by Siena's medieval city hall, with its amazing Gothic frescoes and 100m (330-ft.) tower. See p. 173.

THE PALLADIAN ARCHITECTURE OF VICENZA (VENETO) Vicenza's hometown hero, Andrea Palladio, is generally considered the father of High Renaissance architecture in all its geometrically precise, classically inspired glory (think Monticello in Virginia, or the marble buildings of Washington, D.C.). Vicenza has done a superb job of preserving the cobblestone streets and fine buildings of its urban fabric, including several structures designed by the master

himself—though Palladio’s real masterpieces are the *palazzi* in the hills around town. See p. 354.

POMPEII & HERCULANEUM (CAMPANIA) The view of Mt. Vesuvius from the narrow streets of these ancient Roman ghost towns destroyed by the volcano in a.d. 79 is as eerie as it gets. You can almost smell the ashen lava, but concentrate instead on the remarkable glimpses into the daily life of those who lived—and died—here nearly 2,000 years ago. See p. 508.

THE LECCESE BAROQUE (LECCE) Often called the Florence of the South, Lecce is overflowing with churches and palaces built of honey-colored stone along the lines of the city’s unique, gorgeous take on baroque architecture—a profusion of symbolic animals, elaborate carved motifs, and complex curlicues. See p. 538.

CASTEL DEL MONTE (PUGLIA) Like a cut-stone wedding cake atop a barren hill, this old fortress of Frederick II is a lesson in octagonal geometry and medieval architecture, with unbeatable views across the gentle plains of olive groves. See p. 532.

NORMAN ARCHITECTURE (PALERMO) Sicily was Greek, Arab, Norman, French, and Spanish long before it ever became a part of Italy. The medieval Norman rulers in particular—yes, those Normans, the ones who came from northern France—adopted a syncretic style of architecture that freely mixed Byzantine mosaics, Arabic domes, and Romanesque details, to which later rulers often added baroque flourishes and facades. See p. 548.

ANCIENT GREEK TEMPLES (AGRIGENTO) The 5th-century b.c. temples on a hillside of olives and cherry trees just below the southern Sicilian city of Agrigento are among the best-preserved ancient Greek ruins in the entire world—Sicily was once part of *Magna Graecia*, the ancient “Greater Greece.” See p. 563.

THE BEST MUSEUMS

THE UFFIZI GALLERIES (FLORENCE) The 16th-century offices of the Medici family, with frescoed halls lined by ancient statuary, house their collection of some of the Renaissance’s finest artworks. Don’t let this museum’s small size fool you: It’s right up there with the Louvre, Metropolitan, and Vatican, housing some of the greatest artistic masterpieces in the world, including Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, da Vinci’s *Annunciation*, and Michelangelo’s *Holy Family*. See p. 116.

THE ACCADEMIA (FLORENCE) The art academy of Florence always has a long line outside. Why? Because this is where they keep Michelangelo’s *David*—along with his unfinished (and far more fascinating) statues of slaves, the full-scale model for Giambologna’s *Rape of the Sabines*, and a passel of fine paintings. See p. 125.

THE BYZANTINE MOSAICS OF RAVENNA (RAVENNA) On an easy day trip from Bologna you can gaze at the glittering medieval mosaics slathered on the interiors of churches and tombs in Ravenna, Western Europe’s last bastion of the Byzantine empire. See p. 256.

GALLERIE DELL'ACCADEMIA (VENICE) The world's most extensive collection of Venetian art is kept in a glorious Venetian *palazzo* on the Grand Canal. From the Byzantine-inspired technique of using gold leaf for decorative effect, to the masterful embrace of color, mood, and movement by Titian, Tintoretto, and Veronese, the Accademia provides an opportunity to penetrate beneath the surface of a vast number of superbly rendered canvases. See p. 321.

THE PEGGY GUGGENHEIM COLLECTION (VENICE) The only truly worthwhile modern-art gallery in Italy is installed in Peggy Guggenheim's former (unfinished) *palazzo* on the Grand Canal. It's a who's who of 20th-century artists: Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, Constantin Brancusi, Marc Chagall, Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, Alberto Giacometti, Henry Moore, Marcel Duchamp, and René Magritte. See p. 320.

THE EGYPTIAN MUSEUM (TURIN) Who would've thought that the single greatest collection of Egyptian artifacts outside of Cairo is not London's British Museum or New York's Metropolitan, but this remarkable museum in the genteel Italian industrial capital of Turin? Hey, if nothing else, it makes for a nice break from all that Italian art. See p. 437.

NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (NAPLES) The artifacts housed in Naples's archaeological museum are among Western Civilization's most significant, including rare finds from the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum, and Greek, Etruscan, and Roman artifacts that are simply unmatched in historical significance. See p. 491.

THE BEST TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

DESCEND INTO THE CATACOMBS (ROME) The web of ancient Christian burial tunnels under the Via Appia Antica park just outside Rome's city walls is an important stop for religious pilgrims and the historically curious. There are miles upon miles of these earthen corridors stacked with tombs, underground mausoleums, and marble chapels—a bit spooky, and with cheesy tour guides, but endlessly fascinating. See p. 77.

ENJOY A MARATHON DINNER (FLORENCE) We already talked about the Italian penchant for lingering over a meal for 3 or 4 hours, with all the courses—*antipasto* (appetizer), *primo* (pasta, soup, or risotto), *secondo* (meat or fish), *contorno* (side dish), *dolce* (dessert)—plenty of wine to lubricate the meal, and a grappa and espresso to finish it off. You could experience that anywhere in Italy, but if we had to pick one place to set aside the whole evening (and all plans of eating again for 24 hr.) for that marathon meal, it'd be Florence—probably at Il Latini or Cibreo Ristorante. See p. 107.

PICK A FESTIVAL, ANY FESTIVAL (TUSCANY & UMBRIA) The heart of Central Italy is a festival-happy place, hosting everything from pagan parties masquerading as Christian rites to modern music fests. Tops are Gubbio's 800-year-old race of saints' shrines; the contemporary music and arts festivals of Perugia, Spoleto, and Arezzo; and Perugia's delicious "Eurochocolate '06." See chapters 4 and 5.

TOUR THE CHIANTI VINEYARDS (TUSCANY) These vine-covered hills between Florence and Siena have dozens of wineries you can tour, usually for free (tippling of the product included), as well as plenty of picturesque hill towns where you can pick up picnic supplies to accompany the bottles you buy directly from the source. See p. 168.

RIDE THE VAPORETTO DOWN THE GRAND CANAL (VENICE) For a fraction of the cost of a gondola ride, you can ply the Grand Canal on the *vaporetti* no. 1 or 82—the motor launches that act as the public bus system in this city built on water. It’s like watching a scrolling postcard of hundreds of Gothic and Byzantine *palazzi*, redolent of the days when Venice was a powerful maritime republic. Angle for a seat on the open-air deck up front. See p. 272.

LEARN THE SECRETS OF THE DOGES (VENICE) The “Secret Itineraries Tour” of Venice’s Palazzo Ducale takes small groups of visitors into the many rooms in the palace normally locked to the public—and often hidden behind false walls, tapestries, and Renaissance paintings. This warren of secret rooms, passages, and stairways allowed the vast, often shadowy machinery of the Venetian state to continue to operate for 900 years behind the pretense of unhinged luxury that still greets visitors in the official spaces of the palace. See p. 314.

SKI THE DOLOMITES (CORTINA D’AMPEZZO) Italy’s top ski resort is a thoroughly Italian medieval village coupled with access to excellent slopes and top-notch facilities. For winter visitors, Cortina has eight ski areas; there are another ten within easy reach of the town. In summer, there’s mountain scenery and great sports facilities to keep active types engaged. See p. 375.

ATTEND THE OPERA (VENICE, MILAN, NAPLES & VERONA) Italy is home to some of the grandest opera houses the world has ever known—and two of the greatest each emerged in 2005 from many years of restoration. Venice’s Teatro La Fenice (The Phoenix) has risen from the ashes of a disastrous fire to reclaim its status as one of the world’s most spectacular operatic venues. Milan’s famed La Scala opera house—where Verdi was the house composer and Toscanini once waved the baton—has also finally reopened following years of restoration. Then there’s the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, where the term *prima donna* (which just means “first woman,” or, in other words, the female lead) was born, and the magnificent 2,000-year-old Arena in Verona, the world’s third-largest amphitheater, which has long since replaced gladiators with divas and become world-renowned for its productions of *Aida* under the stars. See chapters 7, 8, 9, and 12.

HIKE THE CINQUE TERRE (ITALIAN RIVIERA) While away your time on the southern end of the Italian Riviera by strolling from one lovely fishing village to another along old goat trails through terraced vineyards, gardens, and scrubby mountaintops with breathtaking views over the Mediterranean. See chapter 11.

EXPLORE THE ISLANDS OF LAKE MAGGIORE (THE LAKES) Ferry-hop your way from Isola Bella, with its ornate gardens; to Isola Madre, where peacocks stroll the exotic grounds around the Borromean palace; to Isola Superiore, a fishing

village where you can dine on fresh lake trout at a table not 1.5m (5 ft.) from the water. See p. 416.

HEAD TO THE TOP OF EUROPE (THE ALPS) Ride a series of cable cars up snowy slopes and ski gondolas dangling high above glaciers to arrive at Europe’s highest peak, Monte Bianco—and then continue on down the French side (call it “Mont Blanc” now) to the chichi resort of Chamonix and take a bus ride back to Italy through one of the world’s longest tunnels. See p. 440.

CLIMB MT. VESUVIUS (NAPLES) You may never again get this close to a natural disaster in waiting. Climb to the top of Mt. Vesuvius and stare down into the crater created in A.D. 79 when it destroyed Pompeii. Then turn to look out to the bay of Naples across the crusty lava fields overgrown with vineyards and dotted with houses and the Naples suburbs. All of it is smack in the path of the lava, should another major eruption occur . . . an event that’s long overdue. See p. 508.

ATTEND A PERFORMANCE IN AN ANCIENT THEATER (SICILY) The ancient theaters of Taormina (Greco-Roman), Siracusa (Greek), and Segesta (Greek) all host summertime series of concerts, operas, and ancient plays under the stars—and, since they’re all set atop hills, if you arrive before dusk, you get to watch the sun set over the Sicilian countryside (or, in the case of Siracusa, the city). See p. 568.

PICNIC (ANYWHERE) Some of your most memorable meals will undoubtedly be picnics, with wonderful (and cheap!) ingredients culled from the *alimentari* (deli/grocery store), *panetteria* (bakery), *fruttivendolo* (fruit-and-veggie shop), and *vineria* (wine shop) that line the streets of every city and village. Just pick an appropriate venue—church steps, stone wall around an olive grove or vineyard, bench by the beach, even just the terrace back at your hotel room—and get ready to have a feast fit for a king on a pauper’s budget. (Just don’t forget the corkscrew.)

THE BEST OF THE “OTHER” ITALY

SHOP THE PORTA PORTESE MARKET (ROME) Join the crowds of locals who religiously flock to this massive flea market each Sunday morning in search of elusive bargains or just to meet friends. See p. 83.

GET CAUGHT UP IN CALCIO (TUSCANY—OR ANYWHERE) Share the locals’ passion at a professional sports event—Florence and Siena have top division Serie A (first division) soccer teams, and Siena’s pro basketball team is a champion. See p. 178.

VISIT THE OLTRARNO ARTISANS (FLORENCE) Head to the Oltrarno neighborhood to see fifth-generation craftsmen at work in ceramics, woodcarving, goldsmithing, mosaics, cobbling, and other specialties. See p. 134.

TAKE COOKING LESSONS IN A TUSCAN VILLA (TUSCANY) You could simply rave about the food in Italy when you get home—or you can learn to re-create it for your jealous friends. Try your hand at a cooking class in a Tuscan villa or Florence restaurant—or stick around for a couple of weeks and attend a formal culinary school. See p. 166.

MAKE A PILGRIMAGE TO ASSISI (UMBRIA) Though most Italians are not overtly devout, faith remains one of the cornerstones of Italian culture and society, and there are few better places to see it in action than at the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi. Masses run constantly, and are best on a Sunday—and if you can swing it to be here on Easter, you just might have a transcendent experience. See p. 211.

LEARN TO MAKE THE PERFECT SPAGHETTI BOLOGNESE (BOLOGNA) Every Italian is proud of his or her local cuisine, but every Italian also agrees that the best cooking in Italy is done in Bologna. But don't just dine there; take a morning stroll through the food markets and gourmet shops, and then learn how to prepare its signature dishes with an afternoon cooking lesson. See p. 244.

MASTER AN ANCIENT CRAFT (VENICE) Tourists shell out big bucks for marbled paper in Italy, but instead of bringing home a trinket you can bring home a whole new skill learned from a master craftsman. And besides: How many teachers do you know who serve snacks and wine at the lessons? See p. 330.

GO BACK TO SCHOOL (ITALIAN RIVIERA) Genoa University's annual summer school is aimed at improving foreigners' spoken Italian and grammar, and also acts as a crash course on Italian culture and history, with guest speakers from various faculties lecturing on anything from Italian cinema and art to contemporary politics. Best of all, the course, which is usually 2 weeks in September, is held at the beautiful Villa Durazzo in Santa Margherita Ligure, with gorgeous vistas of the Ligurian sea. See p. 478.

GET INTO THE UNDERBELLY OF NAPLES (NAPLES) You need to dig deep to really understand a city's history, and Napoli Sotterranea (Underground Naples) does it better than anyone else. Take one of the winding tours through the complex of ancient underground aqueducts and cisterns that have been bomb shelters and modern-art venues. See p. 495.

SLEEP IN A TRULLO (PUGLIA) Every visitor spends half the time in central Puglia snapping endless photos of its iconic whitewashed round huts with conical stone roofs. But *trulli* can be more than just a postcard sight; you can actually set up temporary housekeeping in one and feel what it's really like to live in one of these ancient structures. See p. 534.