

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 vodka brew that makes me tipsy after one thimbleful . . . so wherever your travels take you, I know you'll find a lot to buy and a lot more to enjoy. You'll even find a few bargains to be had. If you're on a cruise with little time to shop, you'll still find specialty items to put a smile on your face—and your wallet. Welcome ashore, mates.

If you're in a hurry, I've collected some of the highlights of the whole country, so when you stop by these places, you can worship and shop and feel like you've indulged. By no means is this 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

Corso Como 10, Milan.

No, that's not a typo; the store's name is its address.

There's more about this store in chapter 8, but this bazaar is 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, the upstairs bookstore, as well as their own outlet store, around the corner.

THE RUNNER-UP STORE IN ITALY

VENETIA STVDIVM, VENICE

Multiple branches.

Fortuny-inspired pleated silks made into wraps, bags, tassels, and treasures . . . a wonderland of fairy tales and dreams in colors that will make you swoon. Two shops in Venice and one in London (go figure).

The Best Mass-Market Store in Italy

OVIESSE

Stores all over Italy.

Maybe it's my large heart that tells you this, perhaps my large bottom—never have I had so much fun in a series of cheapie clothing stores than when I discovered that the fashion-at-a-price chain, Oviessa, carries clothing up to size 52. While some cities have better stores, don't pass up an opportunity to shop here for men's, women's, and kids clothes and accessories.

The Best Grand-Scale Shopping City

Milan may not be adorable or overwhelmingly charming or flashy, but the shopping is divine. Milan offers high-quality goods in many different price ranges. Milan 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

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

of them is the city of **Deruta**, about an hour from Rome in Umbria, where every store sells hand-painted faience.

The Best Port City for a Quick Spree

Venice is not included on every Mediterranean cruise, but if you can get here, even if only for 1 day, do—it is magic. The shopping isn't bad either.

The Best Factory Town, North

Perhaps because **Como** is ever so much more than a factory town, it wins my vote for the best factory town in Italy. It's about 30 minutes from Milan by train, it's gorgeous, it's upscale, it's got a lake, it's got Switzerland nearby, and it's got silk factories galore. Prices are laughably low on the biggest names in designer fashion fabrics, including French names. Go home with fabric by the yard or ties, scarves, and shawls for at least half their regular retail price. The best factory in town? Ratti, on the Via Cernobbio.

FoxTown, one of the many outlet malls selling designer things at a discount, is located across the Swiss border between Como and Lugano (see chapter 8). Remember though that Switzerland does not use euros, and prices tend to be high.

The Best Factory Area, South

The area between Florence and the sea is filled with factories, whether you go south, toward Arezzo and the Prada outlet, or north, toward Lucca and the Pratesi outlet. Florence is so touristy—and expensive—that you may well want to take in all of Tuscany and enjoy your drive under the Tuscan sun with punctuation marks at various factories and outlet stores. Many are even in real factories, not in fancy malls.

The Best Outlet Mall

THE MALL

Via Europa 8, Reggello, Firenze.

The Mall! We've all seen some outlet malls in our time but, possibly, nothing like this one—a modern architectural structure worthy of Madison Avenue but located a half-hour from Florence. With good reason, this destination is the second-most-popular sightseeing locale in the Florence area, coming in right after the Uffizi. It's home to the best collection of big-name outlets in all of Europe. The Mall has stores representing every big name in design except Viktor & Rolf. Yohji? Did someone whisper Yohji? My all-time favorite, at a real price . . . quick, get me on a train.

THE BEST UP-AND-COMING OUTLET MALL

FIDENZA VILLAGE

Via San Michele Campagna, Fidenza.

Fidenza! Fidenza Village is expanding, and new contenders are opening up daily, but how can you not love a mall that is a village inspired by Verdi's operas? All that's lacking are elephants and music blaring from a loudspeaker system. "Grand March" from *Aida* makes excellent shopping music!

This mall is small, although stage two will be open just about as this book goes to press. What the mall lacks in sprawl it makes up for in location, good eats, and intimacy. There are enough stores for you to have fun, but not so many as to overwhelm you. Fidenza has some big names, but the orientation is on everyday needs.

Note: This mall is an hour's drive north of Bologna and 1½ hours south of Milan. Because it is open on Sundays—not much else in this area is—shop on Sundays, but leave time for the various food stores in the area. In fact, get to those first, and then hit the mall. Parma is also nearby, and that means a lot more than cheese.

The Best Airport Shopping

Rome's Leonardo da Vinci International Airport is virtually a 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 Fontanella di Borghese 57, Rome.

You haven't lived until you've wandered into the Fendi store in Rome at sale time (twice a year, Jan and July). Mounds of goodies (some of them a few seasons old) sell 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 new Rome store. 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.

The Best Department Store

LA RINASCENTE

Piazza del Duomo, Milan.

In response to competition, La Rinascente has redone its image in recent years, and a giant makeover is in the works. The store is a lot like an American department store and may not impress you at first. But wait till you experience its details, 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, a travel agency, a hair salon, and a full-service bank. Its cafe overlooks the Duomo and will drench you with magic and memories.

The Best Historical 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.

The Best Street Market

SAN AGOSTINO MARKET

Viale Papiniano, Milan.

Fun? It just doesn't get much better than this! On Tuesday and Saturday, you can 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

In my life, I have been to a fair number of markets in a large number of cities all over the world. When I say this Wednesday market is one of the best, I mean it. It helps if the sky is blue, the sun is shining, the temperature is not too high, and the crowds not too great—but any way you slice it, this is a market for locals, filled to overflowing with everything from shoes to tractors. Thoughtfully organized by category of goods—with foodstuffs to one side and dry goods on the other—this market takes up a half-moon area at the top of town. Sometimes you find factory close-outs with low prices on brand-name goods. But you go for the glory, not the shoes.

The Best Museum Shop

THE VATICAN

Vatican City, Rome.

No cheap pope scopes, but beautiful reproductions of precious treasures, puzzles of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, and more.

The Best Free Postcards

HOTEL EDEN

Via Ludovisi 49, Rome.

Postcards from Il Papiro created in medieval style with a bright blue background, lots of gold stars, flowing borders, detailed insets, and design-school whoop-de-do.

THE RUNNER-UP FREE POSTCARDS

LISA CORTI

Via Conchetta 6, Milan; Via de' Bardi 58, Florence.

This artist is known for her splash of vibrant colors on cotton. Yes, the goods are made in India, but the feel is true south-of-Italy. She gives away free postcards created from several of her prints.

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, *entocas* (wine/food shops), and TTs (tourist traps); 5€ to 8€ (\$6–\$10) a package. For something extra, team that bag or box of pasta with a wooden pasta measuring spoon.
- Regional pasta. Barilla, which is the largest maker of pasta in Italy, creates “designs” for specific markets. In Venice, I buy Casarecce, a style only available there. Go figure. For less than a couple of bucks, I look like a genius to a foodie.
- Caldo Caldo coffee. Or coffee with grappa, or hot chocolate, all in a “magic” cup that heats itself when you employ

(or deploy) the push-in bottom; about a dollar a cup. *Note:* The best source for these hard-to-find items is the Milan Centrale train station grocery store.

- Chocolate postcards. I wouldn't try mailing these, but they are darn cute gifties. Caffarel, a mass maker of chocolates, does a series of postcards that pictures famous historical sites in what's called Italy's Treasures Collection. I found a selection of "cards" representing five different cities in the main Milan train station.
- Soap. A package of "Weekend Soap" from Santa Maria Novella consists of three bars of soap, one each for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. It's available at Farmacia Santa Maria Novella stores in Florence and Rome and costs 8€ (\$10). The soap maker Rancé has a freestanding store in Rome at Piazza Navona. If Rancé sounds French, the firm started in France 100 years ago but is now Italian, although it specializes in Marseille-process soaps. You can also buy Italian soaps in grocery stores or at any of the *erboristas* (herbalists).
- Limoncello liquor. Sold 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.

Jenny's Five Best Buys in Italy

1. Black squid-ink pasta (2.80€//\$3.50) at Free Shop, Milan Centrale train station. See p. 219.
2. Caldo Caldo "Magic Coffee" (.95€//\$1.20) at Free Shop, Milan Centrale train station. See p. 219.
3. Necklace and other jewelry (15€–38€//\$18–\$47) at Kalos, Milan. See p. 230.
4. Venetian glass necklace (5.70€//\$7.10) throughout Venice. See chapter 7.
5. Pratesi beachwear and shoes (18€–48€//\$23–\$60) at Pratesi Factory Outlet, in Pistoia near Florence. See p. 155.

Aaron's Five Best Buys in Italy

1. Fedora hat (10€/13) off the street in Florence. See chapter 6.
2. H&M (14€/18) and Diesel (38€/47) jeans at Mercato delle Cascine, Florence. See p. 140.
3. Prada suit (190€/237) at Space Outlet (the Prada outlet store), near Florence. See p. 145.
4. Ruggeri notebooks (less than 10€/12) at Free Shop, Milan Centrale train station. See p. 219.
5. Gola sneakers (28€/35) at Mercato delle Cascine, Florence. See p. 140.

- LUSH gifties. Yes, LUSH is a British firm famous for its bath and beauty products, and yes, there are now nearly 50 LUSH stores in the U.S. and Canada, but the Italian LUSH products are made with local ingredients, so you can buy limoncello soap or shampoo. LUSH stores are 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.
- 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 6€ (\$7.80) and in an appliance store in Florence for 8€ (\$10), and I found a new and well-designed one in Siena for 13€ (\$16).

The Best Extravagant Gifts

- Mantero scarf, in the shawl size. Printed with so many screens of gorgeous color, you will weep for its beauty and finesse. Come to think of it, anything from Mantero will tickle any extravagance bone. Buy yours at the outlet store in Como for savings.

- Important art glass. Venice or Murano.
- Leather handbag. Nothing says you care more than a Birkin-style handbag made in pebble leather. You can get a good-quality bag in any major Italian city for less than 240€ (\$300).
- 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.

Maria Teresa's Three Best Finds in Italy

Maria Teresa is my secret spy in Italy; she runs Tuscany by Tuscans tour service; I rely on her for news and finds. I often book her tours. It seemed only fair that she should have her own place to tell you about her Tuscan favorites.

BAGNI VOLPI NOEMI

Viale Europa 89, Castelguidi (Pistoia).

This bed linen firm has been in operation since 1925 and is competitive with big-name brands that you have heard about. Fine bed linen, bathrobes, elegant tablecloths—the best quality fabrics. You will pay about 80€ (\$100) per sheet here.

BRACCIALINI ACCESSORIES & BAGS

Corso Matteotti 54, Montecatini; Terme and Via Della Vigna Nuova 30r, Florence.

Colorful handbags and styled accessories that are produced near Florence and are so popular that you can often find copies of their distinctive designs in street markets.

GREVI MODE

Via della Spada 11, Florence.

Hat makers established in 1875 making the finest quality hats with the finest materials; this is the only Italian company remaining in the business that uses Italian product and methods.