

# Italy

Italy is the ultimate dream date: impossibly good-looking, impeccably cultured and obscenely good in the kitchen. Endlessly inspiring and naturally flirtatious, it will leave you swooning.

## CAPITAL

Rome

## POPULATION

61.5 million

## AREA

301,340 sq km

## OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

Italian

Italians really do know how to live well. Ever since the Etruscans came, liked what they saw and decided to stay and party, the locals have embraced the finer things in life. Here, family, faith, friendship, food and wine reign supreme, contributing to the famous Italian dolce vita (sweet life).

Travellers have been falling under Italy's spell ever since the days of the 18th-century Grand Tour, enticed by its sun-kissed landscape, delectable cuisine and extraordinary art. This is the home of gently rolling Tuscan hills and postcard-perfect coastlines; the place where simple dishes such as pizza and pasta attain culinary perfection. It's where Michelangelo shocked the establishment with his humanist sculptures and Caravaggio shocked everyone else with his criminal highjinks and darkly atmospheric paintings. So make like Julius Caesar. Come and see – you're sure to be conquered. If you get it right, travelling in the bel paese (beautiful country) is one of those rare experiences than cannot be overrated.

## Italy's Top Experiences

### 1 Virtuoso Venice

Imagine the audacity of people deciding to build a city of marble palaces on a lagoon. As you step through the portals of the Basilica di San Marco you may catch a glimpse of

what it might have been like for a humble medieval labourer gazing upon those glittering gold mosaic domes for the first time. It's not such a stretch – seeing the millions of tiny gilt **tesserae** (hand-cut glazed tiles) fuse into a singular heavenly vision can make every leap of human imagination since the 12th century seem comparatively minor.

## 2 Ghostly Pompeii

Nothing piques human curiosity quite like a mass catastrophe and few can beat the ruins of Pompeii, a once-thriving Roman town frozen in time 2000 years ago in the midst of its death throes.

Wander through Roman streets, snooping around the forum, the erotically frescoed brothel, the 5000-seat theatre and the sumptuous Villa dei Misteri, and ponder Pliny the Younger's terrifying account of the tragedy: 'Darkness came on again, again ashes, thick and heavy. We got up repeatedly to shake these off; otherwise we would have been buried and crushed by the weight'.

## 3 Eternal Rome

Once **caput mundi** (capital of the world), Rome was legendarily spawned by a wolf-suckled wild boy, grew to be Western Europe's first superpower, became the spiritual centrepiece of the Christian world, and is now the repository of over two and a half thousand years of art and architecture. From the Pantheon and the Colosseum to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, there's simply too much to see in one visit. So, do as others have done before you: toss a coin into the Trevi Fountain and promise to return.

## 4 Touring Tuscany

Italy's most romanticised region, Tuscany was tailor-made for aesthetes. According to Unesco, Florence contains 'the greatest concentration of universally renowned works of art in the world', from Brunelleschi's **Duomo** to Masaccio's **Cappella Brancacci** frescoes. Beyond its museums and flawless Renaissance streetscapes sprawls an undulating wonderland of regional delights, from the Gothic majesty of Siena, to the Manhattan-esque skyline of San Gimignano, to the vine-laced hills of Italy's most famous wine region, Chianti.

## 5 Tackling the Dolomites

Scour the globe and you'll find plenty of taller, bigger and more geologically volatile mountains, but few can match the romance of the pink-hued, granite Dolomites. Maybe it's their harsh, jagged summits, the vibrant skirts of spring wildflowers or the rich cache of Ladin legends. Then again, it could just be the magnetic draw of money, style and

glamour at Italy's most fabled ski resort, Cortina d'Ampezzo. Whatever the reason, this tiny pocket of northern Italy takes seductiveness to dizzying heights.

## 6 Living Luxe on Lago di Como

If it's good enough for George Clooney, well then it's good enough for mere mortals. Nestled in the shadow of the snow-covered Rhaetian Alps, dazzling Lago di Como is the most spectacular of the Lombard lakes, its vain Liberty-style villas home to movie moguls, fashion royalty and Arab sheikhs.

Surrounded on all sides by lush greenery, the lake's siren calls include the gardens of Villa Melzi d'Eril, Villa Carlotta and Villa Balbianello, which blush pink with camellias, azaleas and rhododendrons in April and May.

## 7 Amalfi Coast

Italy's most celebrated coastline is a bewitching blend of superlative beauty and gripping geology: coastal mountains plunge into milky blue sea in a prime-time vertical scene of precipitous crags, sunbleached villages and lush forests. While some may argue that the peninsula's most beautiful coast is Liguria's Cinque Terre or Calabria's Costa Viola, it was the Amalfi Coast that American writer John Steinbeck described as a 'dream place that isn't quite real when you are there and... beckoningly real after you have gone'.

## Calcio: Italy's Other Religion

Catholicism may be Italy's official faith, but the true religion is calcio (football). On any given weekend from September to May, Italian tifosi (football fans) are at the stadio (stadium), glued to the TV, or checking the score on their mobile phone. Come Monday, they'll be dissecting the match by the office water cooler. Like politics and fashion, football is in the very DNA of Italian culture. Indeed, they sometimes even converge. Silvio Berlusconi first found fame as the owner of AC Milan and cleverly named his political party after a well-worn football chant.

Fashion royalty Dolce & Gabbana declared football players 'the new male icons', using five of Italy's hottest on-field stars to launch its 2010 underwear collection. It's no coincidence that in Italian tifoso means both 'football fan' and 'typhus patient'.

Nothing quite stirs Italian blood like a good (or a bad) game; nine months after Italy's 2006 World Cup victory against France, hospitals in northern Italy reported a baby boom.