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The Insider's Guide to Traveling Italy

The best of each region — in the most romantic country on earth.



BY TOM MARCHANT / OCT 22, 2021

For centuries, Italy was the preferred destination for poetically-minded nobles from across northern Europe. The “grand tour” was an exercise in communing with the ancient Roman world at a time when it was considered the height of culture to contemplate its romantically crumbling relics and vine-clad temples. But these “grand trippers” gave little thought to Italy beyond its artifacts and ghosts. For them, Italy—as a living, breathing culture—was an afterthought.

But today, in-the-know travelers seek deeper pleasures than the (still beguiling) ruins of ancient Rome. Italy is a country of 20 provinces, each of them proudly distinct, offering their own unique culinary, architectural, art, history, fashion, sightseeing, and cultural scenes. Ahead, our guide to the very best of Italy, divided by region. *Buon viaggio!*



ABRUZZO

Across the saddle of the Apennine Mountains, Abruzzo—a calm and historic region of national parks and rugged, tumbling landscapes—is a breath of fresh air after the more metropolitan west. Parco Nazionale D’Abruzzo is Italy’s second-oldest national park and one of its most ecologically rich (both the Italian wolf and endangered Marsican brown bear can be found there). After a refreshing hike, you can do little better than staying at Sextantio Albergo Diffuso (rustic but resplendent, and beautifully sprawling) and stopping for a bite in one of its remarkable restaurants. Abruzzo is muscling up as a powerhouse culinary region in its own right, with a whopping eight three-Michelin-starred eateries.



The gardens of Palazzo Margherita.
GUNDOLF PFOTENHAUER

BASILICATA

Head away from the Adriatic, and you enter a landscape of hills and forests. This is Basilicata, a hidden territory bordering the better-known environs of Calabria and Puglia. Secrecy is paramount here: the hillside towns are dotted with warren-like cave dwellings, many of which go back thousands of years. Of them, Matera is the most famous (and most spectacular). Francis Ford Coppola even debuted his own distinct hotel in this compellingly concealed region: [Palazzo Margherita](#).

CALABRIA

Go for the ancient Greek mythology; stay for the local charm. The beaches of this region are well known—and you won't want to miss them—but there are countless little fishing villages to explore too. Of the list, we recommend Chianalea di Scilla; it's here that you'll get a true, authentic taste of the Italian south, right at the tip of the boot, with boats bobbing in the harbor and fishermen tending their nets.



Chianalea di Scilla, fishing village in Calabria.
BLACK TOMATO

As far as hotels, we love [Villa Paola](#), a truly gorgeous sea-facing setup with minimal yet sublime decor. A reminder: The food here leans toward the excitingly spicy (thanks to the region's famous chiles), and you'll not be short of places to dine. Scilla, a charming fishing village facing the island of Sicily by a hair's breadth, is a particular gem.

CAMPANIA

Best known for the Amalfi Coast and its iconic "Path of the Gods," the region of Campania is a photographer's dream. A swell of romantically crumbling cliffs decorated with pastel-painted towns and threaded with beguiling alleyways, this is the Italy you've seen in films and dreamed about.



The view of the village of Praiano, Amalfi Coast.

BLACK TOMATO

Praiano is our go-to; this sun-drenched stretch of western Italy is sublime not just for the sunsets but for its proximity to the beachside bars in Vivaro and Fioriere. You'd be missing out if you didn't post up at heavenly [Casa Angelina](#), whose crisp decor and serene views will leave you floating on cloud nine. To eat, you'll want to set yourself up at the low-key, laid-back [Da Armandino](#) in Praiano. Ori Kafri, CEO and founder of [J.K. Place Hotels](#), speaks warmly of Capri (home to namesake [J.K. Place Capri](#))—an island located just off the Bay of Naples. Here is [Da Gelsomina](#), a restaurant of simple but delicious virtue. "It's a very simple, family-run place that produces their own wine," Kafri explains. Enjoy it "with wonderful handmade ravioli. To get there, they come to pick you up in a little car to take you to a narrow street where the restaurant is located. It has a spectacular view of the sea."

EMILIA-ROMAGNA

Home to a staggering eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Ravenna is hardly under the radar—but some places are famous for a reason. Combine the historical city with a killer food scene and a stunning classical music festival, and you get a sense of classic Italia as you switch your phone off and forget emails for a few days.



A view of the city of Bologna.
BLACK TOMATO

In Bologna, you'll want to stay at the [Grand Hotel Majestic](#), which is, as its name suggests, utterly regal in feel. Think classic Italian style, exquisite views across the city, rooms furnished with antiques, enormous beds, marble bathrooms—the works. Located centrally, it's just a stone's throw from Piazza Maggiore and Due Torri, making it an ideal base for a culture-packed weekend.

FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA

This little-known gem is located in the very northeast of Italy. Its regional capital is Trieste, a favored haunt for artists and musicians throughout the 20th century—James Joyce among them. Give its proximity to central and eastern Europe, its culture and character are often informed by those of its neighbors, and you'll feel that through the wine, food, and architecture. The Carnic Alps—black-stoned, snow-cruled—jut up mightily from forests of dense green pine. For bon vivants, there's the exceptional Collio wine route. For the historically minded, there's the UNESCO-protected [Aquileia](#), with its sublime basilica. Until the 18th century, this was the very heart of Christianity in central Europe, and its thousand-year-old ruins and relics are a sight to behold.

ROME



Castel Sant'Angelo, Rome
BLACK TOMATO

All roads—so they say—lead to Rome. The timeless city moves at its own pace, but it's truly bursting with life (after all, few would forget the bawdy, thrilling antics of Federico Fellini's *Roma* of 1972). To sleep, try [Hotel de la Ville](#) from Rocco Forte, a vibrant and modernist refurbishment of an 18-century palazzo located at the very top of the Spanish Steps. It's at the center of everything and is the best possible place from which to feel the pulse of the city — the epitome of Roman romance and contemporary cool (in that way, it's a lot like Fellini).

But where to eat? Trust us, it's a long list. Legendary architect and designer [Achille Salvagni](#) recommends “the Market at Piazza Campo de’ Fiori, where the food is Italian, local, and incredibly fresh. Restaurant [Il Sanlorenzo](#) should be on your list for the absolute best seafood and traditional Roman fare. Dinner at [La Trattoria al Moro](#) is a must; they serve earthy and beautiful Italian cuisine.” Salvagni adds, “I also have a soft spot for the [Bakery Roscioli](#) on the piazza, where I cannot help but purchase the many types of breads, cakes, and desserts they bake daily.”



Hotel de la Ville, Rome
HOTEL PHOTOGRAPHY SRL

Also not to miss: [Trattoria da Danilo](#) (for the *cacio e pepe*), [Retrobottega](#) (for the moody laboratory vibes), [Luciano Cucina Italiana](#) (for its truly unforgettable pasta), and [Le Mani in Pasta](#) (for its classic Italian casualness). To walk it off and get inspired, Salvagni recommends, “a visit to [Capucci](#) on Via della Fontanella di Borghese. Mr. Capucci is the most famous Roman designer, and I have always been awestruck by his creations. His work is always a great source of inspiration, and I admire the boldness of his vision.”

LIGURIA

Liguria, home to the famed Cinque Terre, is typified by statuesque mountains, verdant hills, and stunning coastal views of the Ligurian Sea. Cinque Terre tends to draw endless crowds. Instead, opt for Santa Margherita, a jumble of pastel buildings overlooking a sea of geraniums and bougainvillea. It feels like a scene straight out of a 1950s postcard.



Santa Margherita
BLACK TOMATO

Then there's Camogli, the riviera that the world forgot. You'll find the same steep hillsides and pastel-hued homes of the Cinque Terre, but what you won't find are the tourists in droves. Just sleepy enough to feel undiscovered but with enough local life and quaint trattorias to help you while away the days, this is a place to go before everyone else. Stay at the incomparable [Belmond Splendido Mare](#), a discreet but glamorous grand villa nestled in the wooded hills above Portofino. Impeccable service, exceptional views, and a legendary restaurant make this one of the very best hotels in Italy.

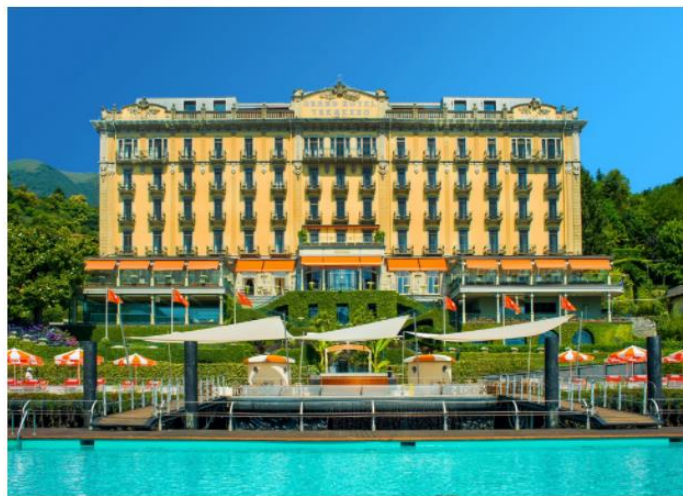
LOMBARDY



Brera district, Milano
BLACK TOMATO

Get ready: There's a lot to see in this one region alone. Italy's fashion capital of Milan can sometimes be sidelined as an entry point, but it's grossly underrated and definitely deserves deeper discovery. This bustling metropolis is best explored on foot for the world-class shopping (explore the Brera area), inspired cuisine, and extraordinary art. Trust us: It's the perfect base for a luxurious Italian getaway. Just a short car ride away is [Fondazione Prada](#) housed in a former gin distillery in the industrial outskirts of Milan. Helmed by its namesake, Miuccia Prada, this institution is dedicated to showcasing the finest contemporary arts through a packed program of permanent and temporary exhibitions. Austere yet intimate, this breathtaking complex houses the colorful [Bar Luce](#), whimsically designed by filmmaker Wes Anderson.

The [Mandarin Oriental Milan](#), quietly hidden away but minutes from the action, is one of the finest places to stay in town. Choose a suite with balconies and soak it all up in this veritable oasis, unwinding in the subterranean spa and pool. The newly opened [Galleria Vik Milano](#), from the stylish Vik family, should top lists, too; it's beautiful and full of character with every room designed by a different artist.



COURTESY

Italy's sun-drenched Lake District is synonymous with glamour—and not a little bit of history. Gently, calmly buzzing, this is a place of mesmerizing vistas, of lush, manicured gardens, and legendary villas. It's easy to see why this Y shape of lakes has inspired countless poets, writers, and painters, among them Ernest Hemingway. Nowhere epitomizes la dolce vita quite like Lake Como. Simply put: It's absolutely stunning. Regal but easygoing, this is where the well-heeled come, year after year, to rest and play. The lake has a rich history, playing host to nobility and celebrities alike; you can easily spot George Clooney's villa when you take a boat cruise, as well as [Villa Sola Cabiati](#), which houses a suite designed for Napoleon himself. Valentina de Santis, CEO and owner of [Grand Hotel Tremezzo](#), encourages boat sightseeing. "I love to watch the sunset from a boat," she says. "It is such a different and special perspective of my beloved lake."

When asked where to dine on a lake that isn't short of places to eat, de Santis recommends a hot spot in the must-visit village of Bellagio. "I take my friends to [Darsene di Loppia](#), a restaurant located in a historic hamlet of the same name. Speaking of Tremezzo's grand hotel, there are few places to stay as iconic in this or any part of the world. Perched in the shadows of the Grigne Mountains and boasting every five-star facility you could ever dream of, this is the place to rest your head on the lake. From its elegant mix of period and modern decor to its luxurious suites, lavish alfresco dining, this hotel is straight-up legendary. It's also quite close to two must-visit restaurants on Lago di Como: [Al Veluu](#), located just up the hill from the hotel, and [Locanda La Tirlindana](#), in nearby Sala Comacina.



A harbor on Lake Garda
BLACK TOMATO

A short ride down the road is [Villa D'Este](#). This regal, 16th-century estate feels very palatial indeed, with a jet-setting buzz, opulent rooms, a floating pool, and 25 acres of well-kept parklands. Jackets are expected at dinner, a nod to its Old World glamour, so embrace it and outfit yourself while in town. A more remote option on the other side of the lake in Torno, [Il Sereno](#) is a breathtaking, more contemporary option and in a sense its own little, modern island. There's only one way to explore its breathtaking surrounds—which is on board one of its three custom-built Cantiere Ernesto Riva boats.

Situated on the edge of the Dolomites is tranquil and stylish Lake Garda, Italy's largest lake. This beautiful and relaxing setting is also best explored by boat. Take in the lake's most iconic vistas, charming villages, tiny islands, and, of course, villas, all framed by the dramatic backdrop of snowcapped peaks. Stop by the historic Riviera dei Limoni, with a guide in tow, and learn about the citrus-scented history of this stunning lake. Lake Garda is also a spectacular setting for a hike, especially Monte Baldo, which has some of the most impressive views. Stay at wellness-focused [Lefay Resort & Spa](#), tucked away on a hillside under azure skies. Or check in at the historic [Villa Feltrinelli](#), which is a palace in its own right. Just a short walk away are the cobbled streets of charming Gargnano, where vibrant orange trees line the shore; this part of the world is hard to beat.



Isola San Giulio, Lake Orta
BLACK TOMATO

The best beaches have always been those accessible only by boat, and Spiaggia delle Due Sorelle in Marche is no exception. Years of being overlooked in favor of the Cinque Terre and Amalfi Coast has left this strip of coastline untouched and unspoiled. Pack a picnic; you won't find anything else on this serene stretch of sand, but it is very much worth a visit.

Piedmont, home to the prized truffle, is a landscape of tranquil countryside, sleepy villages, and lively marketplaces. They take gastronomy *very* seriously here; if you time it right, you can go on the hunt (replete with dogs and a guide) in search of the Alba Madonna truffle—the holy grail of fungi. Hike through the Langhe, an area that feels almost designed for a slower pace of travel, and stay at the charming [Relais San Maurizio](#). This former 17th-century monastery has been lovingly restored with great sensitivity to its past roots, and this resulting hilltop respite is truly spellbinding. Enjoy its fragrant botanical gardens, a panoramic pool terrace, and a dreamy spa (that offers vinotherapy, of course). No surprise, there's also a Michelin-starred restaurant on the property.



Hike in the Langhe, Piedmont
BLACK TOMATO

Don't forget about Lake Orta, the Italian Lake District's best-kept secret. Italians have dubbed it Cinderella for the profound subtlety of its beauty. Make sure to post up at the contemporary and stylish Casa Fantini. Located on the stunning shores of Lake Orta, [Casa Fantini](#)'s 11 light-filled rooms look out over an intimate garden and pool to San Giulio Island, a postcard-like island home to a Benedictine monastery, stunning cathedral, and two Michelin-starred restaurants. The best place to watch the sunset with a glass of wine? From the vantage point of a Prestige Room at Casa Fantini, Daniela Fantini herself shares. "From up there, the view is stunning; there is peace, calm, tranquility, and you can spot special, enchanting, and protected corners of landscape far from the chaos, always accompanied by the presence of the crystalline water of Lake Orta."

PUGLIA



Borgo Egnazia, Puglia
COURTESY

Puglia—white-stoned, Adriatic, the heel or spur of the boot—is best known as the land of the olive tree. Every family seems to tend at least one, but there are tens of thousands more dotting the hills, slopes, and fields of this chilled-out corner of Italy. Puglia's most beautiful and prominent towns are pressed gorgeously against the coast or else located a matter of miles inland. For this, think Ostuni. Elsewhere, there's Locorotondo, a village whose name rolls bubbly off the tongue. Calm and quiet, it's the perfect place to lose yourself. For years, we've adored [Borgo Egnazia](#), a hotel that might better be considered a commune or a sprawling ancient village. The *masseria*-style hotel is typical in the region, but Borgo takes that sensibility to glorious new heights.

When it comes to where to dine in Puglia, Aldo Melpignano, co-founder of Borgo Egnazia, feels spoiled for choice. "There are so many options! If they are looking for true Puglian flavors, I would recommend the restaurant at [San Domenico Golf](#). It's a place with a very special "chef," Mimina. She has always been the cook of our family, she knows all the traditional recipes and her panzerotti are simply amazing! For a special dinner, I would suggest [Casa Ciaccia](#) in Ostuni; it's a new place, nice and delicious and Ostuni, the "white town" as we call it, is an unmissable place to visit in Puglia."

While in this region, hit the ground running and "catch the sunrise close to Otranto, Melpignano advises. There is a lighthouse, called Faro di Punta Palascia, which is definitely the easternmost point of the country; it is considered as the place where the days start in Italy. There's a special magic atmosphere when you see the first ray of light just surrounded by nature and the deep blue of the sea."

SICILY



Castellammare del Golfo, Sicily
BLACK TOMATO

Located at the very foot of Italy, Sicily—the largest of the Mediterranean islands—is dominated by the broad-shouldered massif of Mount Etna. Beneath it lies incredibly well-preserved ruins (not least the spectacular Valley of the Temples), Byzantine mosaics, bustling cities, and phenomenal cuisine. This is a bright, colorful, and deeply happy place. If you pressed us for our favorite things about this beautiful isle, we'd opt for Isola Bella, a pinprick of an island with more than its fair share of natural beauty. Known as the Pearl of the Ionian Sea, this is where you'll find hidden grottoes and pebbled beaches in sublime solitude. When it comes to sleep (and so much more), check out the newly opened [Four Seasons Taormina](#) and [Villa Igiea](#); they're both inspiring options on this paradisaical, balmy island.

THE DOLOMITES

The mighty Dolomite Mountains provide the dramatic backdrop for the region of Trentino-Alto Adige. Championed for its picturesque landscapes, exceptional cuisine, and legendary vineyards, this magnetic part of Italy has been shaped by its amiable proximity to nearby Austria and Switzerland.



Logo di Carezza, the Dolomites
BLACK TOMATO

Rosa Alpina, located in the beautiful South Tyrolean village of San Cassiano, is one of our favorite hotels the world over. A luxurious family-run enclave idyllic in both summer and winter, this sophisticated hotel blends classic alpine charm with contemporary luxury and boasts some of the best Michelin-starred cuisine in a region already lauded as a gastro wonderland. What's more: It was just adopted into the acclaimed Aman portfolio. It's also the perfect base for big adventure; hike alpine meadows in summer or ski UNESCO mountain ranges in winter. The wineries of Bolzano are an easy day trip and give a real sense of place to any trip to these mountains.

TUSCANY



The Florence skyline
BLACK TOMATO

This vast bite of Italy you've certainly heard of. Life feels like a never-ending harvest in this golden-hilled region. Its heart (undoubtedly) is Florence, home of the Medicis. Many will stop at the Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore (as would we), but you should also wander over to the smaller and more intimate Basilica San Miniato while in town. Clad in the same multicolored marble as its bigger sibling, it boasts a sweeping view from its doorway that truly sets it apart. Looking ahead, you'd do well to post up—once it opens in 2023—at Collegio alla Querce (part of Auberge Resorts Collection). Beyond the domes and palazzos of this ancient city, you'll want to book a room at Borgo Pignano, our Tuscan favorite. There's a warm euphoria that envelopes the entire place—romantic, intimate, authentic. Elsewhere, there's newly opened Casetta and La Fortezza; both are worth your time. The former is located in the mellifluous town of Montefioralle, a tiny, incomparable hilltop settlement that casts a spell over all who enter it.



A vineyard in the Chianti wine region, Tuscany
BLACK TOMATO

Annette Joseph of [La Fortezza](#) is right to recommend the sunsets from her sublime property (accompanied by a glass of their very own rosé). “We live in the Tuscan region known as the Lunigiana,” Joseph explains, “and it’s truly a spectacular vista here on top of the mountain. Every night, there is an astounding light show, just as the sunrise offers an incredible wake-up call.” And this particular wake-up, Joseph suggests, should be followed with a visit to [Albergo Pasquino](#), a restaurant located in nearby Aulla. “It’s family run, and the local fare is delicious. They cook on a giant wood-burning stove in the middle of the restaurant, which is lots of fun to watch, and they offer a local dish found only in the region named *panigacci*. It’s basically an Italian taco. It is served with the best selection of charcuterie and regional soft cheeses; it’s a specialty—so much so that it takes one year to apprentice and become a *panigacci* master.”

UMBRIA



Hotel Castello di Reschio
BLACK TOMATO

Poetically speaking, Umbria is known as Italy's green heart, a stunning region of medieval hill towns, ancient forests, truffle hunts, and vineyards. At its cultural center is Perugia, home to the Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria art museum. Spoleto, a favorite haunt among the Roman nobility, has held on to its authentic, historic charm and makes for a beautiful day trip into the Umbrian hillside. Start in the medieval upper town before paying a visit to the Duomo, then making your way to the modern lower town and its ancient city walls. When it comes to resting your head, try the newly opened [Reschio](#), a charming and authentic luxury hotel housed in a historic castle that draws on the best of Tuscan and Umbrian traditions. This ancient estate is comfortably nestled among the rolling, sunbaked hills with 1,500 acres of protected wilderness at its doorstep. Each of its nine historic farmhouses has its own unique character, while the thousand-year-old castle at its center is a marvel of design, restored and modernized with panache and wit.

VENICE

A city on stilts, Venice is an archipelagic townscape and the Queen of the Adriatic, spread across 118 individual islands. For all its fragility, the city—once a kingdom unto itself—feels immeasurably solid. History is here in every rubbed-round stone, stained-glass window, church bell, and labyrinthine alleyway. For poet Joseph Brodsky, Venice “resembles a gigantic orchestra, with dimly lit music stands of palazzi.” Continuity is obliterated in this tightly clustered space; a glimpsed alleyway might be impossible to find again. Take a peculiar turn from a busy palazzo, and you find yourself buried in a cacophony of silence, little side streets bending this way and that. If you're after the best place for dinner, head to [Ristorante da Ivo](#).



Aman Venice

COURTESY

Tucked away behind the Chiese Santa Maria della Salute, Dorsoduro awaits—and it's a taste of the real Venice, of *cicchetti* and half bottles of local wine. For art lovers, don't miss the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and the Gallerie dell'Accademia. Sleep at the stylish Ca' di Dio, which just opened this year and is already turning heads. Some choose to take a *vaporetto* (or water taxi) to the lagoon island of Mazzorbo, a restful break from the buzz of Venice proper. When in town, a Michelin-starred meal at Venissa is a must.

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