Viator Insider’s Guide

Italy

THE TOP ATTRACTIONS, TIPS, & THE BEST THINGS TO SEE & DO
Ciao, Italia!

Italy may have perfected the art of “la dolce far niente,” the sweetness of doing nothing, but chances are you have more than “doing nothing” on your Italy wish list. You’re in luck, because from the top to the toe of the boot, Italy offers countless ways to engage all your senses.

From the major cities to the small towns and every beautiful rural point in between, Italy charms and seduces. Rome is eternally grand and pivotal to world history. Florence is home to both art and gelato worth swooning over. Venice is ever-changing and coy, inviting you to stay longer than you ever can. Milan is a world powerhouse of fashion and banking, and still supremely Italian underneath.

During any trip through Italy, you’ll discover over and over again why this is one of the most popular vacation destinations in the world, no matter what makes your traveling heart tick. In this guide, we’ll help steer you toward the best of what this unforgettable country has to offer, so you can travel like an insider in Italy.

Meet the Insiders

Jessica became an Italophile on her first trip to Italy—landing in Venice will do that to you—and the canal city remains one of her favorite places on earth.

A native of Austria, Melanie got hooked on the Italian dolce vita at an early age. Her favorite region is Tuscany where she loves exploring the extraordinary countryside and tasting its wine.
See Vatican City Like a VIP
Visiting Vatican City, the world’s smallest independent nation, is a must when in Rome. Touring Vatican City like a VIP is an excellent way to do that, too. You’ll see the museum’s treasures, its secret rooms and the beautiful Sistine Chapel, all without fighting the crowds.

Dine with a View of the Colosseum
The Colosseum, the world’s largest amphitheater, is a monument to ancient engineering methods. A visit is a must-do in Rome, and you can now enhance the experience with a romantic pre-tour dinner with a view overlooking Italy’s most famous attraction.

Unravel the Mysteries of the Pantheon
The Pantheon combines history, engineering, and artistry to help you understand all three. See the tomb of Raphael, one of the few buried inside, and solve the mystery of the small hole in the domed ceiling.

Step Back in Time at the Roman Forum
Walking through the ruins of the Roman Forum is an exercise in time travel to the heart of one of the world’s great ancient empires. A good guide will help make sense of the ruins, and there’s no denying the thrill of setting foot on the Roman Empire’s main street.

Throw a Coin in the Trevi Fountian
Rome is full of fountains, but most famous is the Trevi Fountain. Whether your touchstone is Anita Ekberg wading through the water in La Dolce Vita or simply throwing in a coin to make sure you return to Rome, you can’t leave the city without seeing this landmark.
Best Way to See the Vatican: Like a VIP

For the world’s smallest country, Vatican City has one of the most popular attractions within Rome – the Sistine Chapel. Normally, you’re stuck seeing Michelangelo’s heavenly frescoes while standing elbow-to-elbow with hundreds of other visitors. With a VIP tour of the Vatican, however, you get private time in the Sistine Chapel to truly appreciate this sacred space.

The tour includes “secret rooms” which most tourists never get to see and concludes with an after-hours visit to the Sistine Chapel, allowing you to experience its grandeur completely empty except for your small tour group.

“This was absolutely a once-in-a-lifetime experience! The quiet time spent in the Sistine Chapel was incredible.”

-Martha L.
Vatican Experiences

**Best for: Small Groups**

Every skip-the-line tour gives you priority access, but not all of them give you personalized attention. This [small group tour of the Vatican](#) ensures that you not only get to waltz past the lines at the museum entry, your group is limited to no more than 12 people. In a small group, your guide will have time to address your questions and interests. Plus, you’ll be at the Vatican Museums first thing in the morning to beat the heat and the crowds.

**Best for: Flexible Scheduling**

Despite the wisdom in early-morning visits to the Vatican Museums to avoid crowds, not everyone is an early riser – especially when we’re on vacation and supposed to be relaxing. This [skip-the-line Vatican walking tour](#) has several departure options to choose from that will suit any schedule. During this three-hour tour, you’ll see the Vatican Museums, Sistine Chapel, and St. Peter’s Basilica – and this tour includes priority access, letting you sleep in and still avoid lines.

**Best for: Most Comprehensive**

The highlights of Vatican City can be seen in a few hours, but there are three Vatican Basilicas elsewhere in Rome, too. Leave the logistical planning to your expert guide on a [Vatican in One Day tour](#), during which you’ll see the Basilicas of Santa Maria Maggiore, St. John Lateran, and St. Paul in Rome – plus you’ll get a walking tour of the Vatican Museums, Sistine Chapel, and St. Peter’s Basilica within Vatican City. It’s the most comprehensive Vatican tour, and ensures you see everything in one well-organized day.
Best Unusual Attraction:
The Catacombs

For a unique look at Rome’s past, you have to go underground – into the Roman Catacombs, the ancient cemeteries. There’s a vast network of tunnels under the city, which can’t be explored without a guide (you really don’t want to get lost). To continue the theme, take a tour of the Roman Catacombs combined with crypts underneath two churches – including the Capuchin Crypt, decorated with the bones of thousands of monks.

Best Romantic Experience:
Dinner with a Colosseum View

For the ultimate romantic evening in Rome you need a view of the city’s most famous monument. With a rooftop dinner in Rome and a Colosseum night tour, you’re in for a truly memorable evening. Enjoy a four-course meal on a terrace overlooking the Colosseum after an introductory historic overview from a guide (while you sip prosecco, of course). After dinner, join your guide for an exclusive night tour of the Forum and the Colosseum, including the underground chambers.

Best Museum for Art Lovers:
The Borghese Gallery

Rome has much to satisfy the art lover, from the immense collections of the Vatican Museums to the modern masterpieces at MAXXI. The museum that no art lover in Rome should miss, however, is the Borghese Gallery. This former villa houses work by Caravaggio, Raphael, Titian, and Bernini (among others). With a skip-the-line tour of the Borghese Gallery and Gardens you won’t miss a thing – and you’ll avoid the often-long lines.
Best Way to See it All: Hop-On, Hop-Off Bus Tours

Rome is a huge city, and the historic center is full of famous sights. To get a handle on the layout of the city, take a hop-on hop-off bus tour in Rome at the start of your visit. You’ll see the layers of history spreading out from the center, and can jump off at any time to explore further. Combine that overview with walking tours of ancient Rome and the best of modern Rome for a comprehensive understanding of the Italian capital.

Best Unique Transportation: A Vintage Fiat

Sightseeing in a vintage Fiat 500 adds an especially Italian flair to your visit. There are multiple itineraries to choose from, so you’ll see just what interests you. And don’t worry about negotiating Roman traffic – you get to relax while your local guide chauffeurs you through the city, including some hidden sights most visitors miss. For a more open-air experience, hop on the back of a Vespa for a tour of Rome.

Best Active Adventure: Biking in Rome

There are lots of good reasons to take a bike tour of Rome. You’ll cover more ground than you would on foot, allowing you to see more in a day. You’ll get away from the crowds and see a different side of Rome. Plus, you’ll have the perfect justification for another helping of gelato or pizza. If running is more your thing, sign up for a small-group running tour of Rome. Not in the mood for so much exercise? Try a Segway tour of Rome instead.
The Best of Venice

Take a Gondola Ride
No matter how famous Venice is, you still feel like you’re walking into a mythical place when you first set eyes on the Grand Canal. If you’re lucky, that ethereal quality never quite goes away. Set the scene with a romantic gondola ride through the city’s waterways (go at sunset for maximum heart palpitations).

Visit St Mark’s Basilica and Square
Tour the exquisite St Mark’s Basilica, with its onion domes and spectacular Byzantine mosaics. Then spend time in the piazza that Napoleon called “Venice’s drawing room,” St Mark’s Square, listening to competing orchestras on either side of the vast piazza.

Understand History at the Doge’s Palace
Until 1797, the Doge’s Palace was the seat of the Venetian Empire’s ruler, and home to Venice’s prisons. Now it’s filled with art, though relics of its past remain. Take the secret itineraries tour to check out the old prisons.

View the Masterpieces of the Guggenheim Collection
Set in Peggy Guggenheim’s former private palazzo, the Guggenheim contains a world-class collection of early 20th century art from masters like Picasso, Magritte, Kandinsky and Pollock.

Explore the Colorful Islands of Murano, Burano, and Torcello
Don’t miss a chance to explore the lagoon islands of Murano, Burano and Torcello—known for their colorful houses and glass-blowing and lace-making crafts—for a half-day break from Venice.
See David and Other Famous Works at the Uffizi and Accademia Galleries

Begin your art education in Florence, the birthplace of the Renaissance, with a VIP tour of the Uffizi Gallery and an exclusive tour of the Accademia Gallery, and leave with your head absolutely crammed with critical information (not to mention a new appreciation for Botticelli).

Check Out the View from the Duomo

Spend time gazing at the multi-colored facade of the Duomo, and then climb into its dome for an incredible Florence view. The dome is an engineering marvel, designed by Brunelleschi as a dome-within-a-dome; you climb to the top between the layers.

Go Wine Tasting in Tuscany

Tuscany’s wines are world famous, so why not spend a day on a wine tasting tour of the region with pit stops in charming towns like Siena. You can sample Chianti in its eponymous region and Brunello in the picturesque town of Montalcino.

Hike the Coastal Paths of the Cinque Terre

Need a break from the city? Get out of town for a hiking day trip to the Cinque Terre villages on the Ligurian coast, where you can walk past cliffside vineyards and olive groves, marveling at the tenacity of both the crops and the people who tend them.

Sample Fresh Gelato

Gelato’s history is inextricably tied to Florence—one account says the first frozen desserts were made for Catherine de’ Medici—so this is definitely the city in which to indulge. Avoid cases where the gelato is piled high, as that’s less likely to be freshly made.
The Best of Milan

See Da Vinci’s Last Supper

Spend your fifteen minutes with Leonardo da Vinci’s famous fresco, ‘The Last Supper.’ Tickets to see the fragile work sell out months in advance, so plan ahead or reserve a spot on a guided tour that includes a visit to the fresco.

Shop and Taste Your Way Through the Brera District

Milan’s status as a fashion capital is quickly confirmed strolling through the Brera District, where window shopping is as fun as people watching. It’s also a great place to scope out aperitivo options on a food tour.

Walk on the Roof of Milan’s Duomo

There’s no better place to start your Milan visit than at the city’s iconic Duomo, covered in spires and exceptionally regal looking. The best way to visit the Duomo is to take the elevator to the top and walk around on the roof.

See a Show at La Scala

Get cultured with a visit to the La Scala Opera House to see a show or visit the excellent museum. If you’re lucky and the theatre is empty when you tour the museum, you can even look inside one of the red velvet boxes.

Visit Lake Como and Lake Garda

Lake Como, with its picturesque hub of Bellagio, is very close to Milan and makes an excellent day trip option. For a break that’s a bit further afield, try Lake Garda; in addition to the lovely scenery, it’s also home to Italy’s most popular theme park, Gardaland.
Visit Mt Vesuvius and the Ruins of Pompeii
History is underfoot nearly everywhere in Italy, and nowhere is that more clear than at Pompeii. Take a day trip to the Pompeii excavation site to get an idea of what an ancient Roman city looked like. Then hike up to Mt Vesuvius; the volcano that buried Pompeii in 79 CE is still active and looms over the entire landscape.

Honor the City’s Patron Saint at the Naples Cathedral
The Duomo di San Gennaro is the sacred heart of Naples, dedicated to the city’s patron saint and home to a vial of his blood; it’s said to liquefy a few times a year and bring good fortune to the city.

Take a Tour Through History at the Castel dell’Ovo
There are three castles in Naples, but the Castel dell’Ovo (the Egg Castle) has the best name. Legend says that an egg was placed in the castle’s foundation by Virgil to fortify the structure.

Explore the Seaside Towns of Positano and Ravello
The beautiful beachfront town of Positano is one of the most popular places on the sparkling Amalfi Coast; away from the beach, the town of Ravello is set high on the cliffs overlooking the sea.

Enjoy Sun and Sand on the Island of Capri
Catch a boat out to the island of Capri to tour the Blue Grotto and Roman ruins. It’s most easily visited from Naples or the Amalfi Coast, but you can even make a day trip to Capri from Rome.
If “sampling Italy’s cuisine” isn’t on your to-do list, it probably should be. This is a country that loves food. Once you taste fresh pasta, handmade in the kitchen minutes before you eat it, you’ll never look at spaghetti the same way again. Wine tasting in Italy gives you a chance to sample famous wines where they’re made.

Having a progressive dinner in Venice means eating “cicchetti,” bite-sized goodies, from a few different spots. Go to a bar with a well-stocked buffet for aperitivo in Florence and you may not have room for dinner (though you should try to save room for gelato dessert!). Wherever you spend time in Italy, savor the local flavors with a food tour or a cooking class.
Being an interactive traveler is a great way to not only make lasting memories but also to dig a little deeper into what makes a place unique.

Soar over the Tuscan landscape in a hot air balloon to get a bird’s-eye view of all those hill towns you’ve heard about. Get behind the wheel of a vintage Fiat 500 for a self-driving tour of Tuscany. Get tickets to a papal audience for the kind of Vatican City memory you’ll be talking about for the rest of your life. Pick up a sword and shield and learn to fend off attackers at Gladiator School in Rome. Find out just how easy the gondoliers in Venice make it seem (and how hard it really is) by taking a lesson at Venice gondola school. And if you’re checking off a bucket list item to visit Venice during Carnival, don’t miss the unique opportunity to experience grand opera with a concert in a palazzo.
Don’t Overlook Small Towns and Lesser-Known Cities in Italy

Italy is full of smaller towns and cities well worth the detour from its more famous destinations.

Next door to Tuscany, the Umbria region is often overlooked; the pilgrimage town of Assisi with its beautiful cathedral is a highlight. Or go off the beaten path on the Amalfi Coast. Positano gets most of the press, but Amalfi and Ravello are good bases, too. After Florence, make time for the little hill town of San Gimignano with its many towers, or Lucca with its intact ancient city walls.

Colorful Portofino in Liguria isn’t exactly under the radar, but it’s a little harder to reach and that helps cut down on crowds. In Lombardy, the historic center of Bergamo is a relaxing escape from nearby Milan.

Turin isn’t exactly a small town, either, but the historic center is packed with former royal palaces and far less visited than other cities in Piedmont and northern Italy. Take a break from Puglia’s beaches to explore the historic city of Lecce, or check out the distinctive conical “trulli” homes of Alberobello.
**Bologna**

Bologna's stately elegance and rich history make it easy to love. Plus, the high-speed train zips from Milan to Bologna in just over an hour, and Bologna to Florence in 40 minutes, so it's more central than you think. Visit the oldest continuously operated university in Europe, the enormous San Petronio Basilica, and the tilting twin towers. And then eat – this is an epicenter of Italian cuisine, after all. Tortellini, Bolognese, Parmigiano-Reggiano and balsamic vinegar all originated in and around Bologna.

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**Genoa**

Genoa is a bustling port city with a historic center so charming and important it’s been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Visit the large aquarium, walk the waterfront promenade, explore the intricate network of narrow streets in the historic district, survey the scenery from atop the lighthouse, indulge at one of Europe’s oldest sweet shops, and see the rows of palaces-turned-museums along Via Garibaldi. And do it all with ease on a day trip from Milan.

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**Pisa**

Pisa is on most travel wish lists for one reason—the famous leaning tower—but the city has so much more to offer. Test the acoustics in Italy’s largest baptistery, peek inside the tiny Santa Maria della Spina church, enjoy the green of Europe’s oldest university botanic gardens, check out Pisano’s carved pulpit in the Duomo and find Keith Haring’s last public painting on the side of the Sant’Antonio church. Pisa is so much more than its tower.
Verona

Shakespeare called the city “fair Verona,” and made it the famous setting for one of the world’s most beloved tragic love stories. Romeo and Juliet may be fantasy, but Verona is truly captivating. Tour the impressive Roman arena (see an opera there in the summer), browse the market at Piazza delle Erbe, visit the church of San Zeno and make the pilgrimage to the so-called “Juliet’s House.” The balcony is recent, but the devotion of thousands of visitors is undeniable.

Sicily

The largest island in the Mediterranean, Sicily is the culmination of centuries of invading cultures. The art, architecture, cuisine, language – it all developed from a blending of influences to produce something utterly unique, beautiful and delicious. Explore Palermo’s myriad churches and creepy Capuchin catacombs, be wowed by the mosaics in Monreale Cathedral, visit the Valley of Temples, bask on sunny Sicilian beaches, see the stunning Greek Theatre in Taormina, and hike or ski on Mt. Etna (Europe’s largest active volcano).

Sorrento

Sorrento isn’t technically part of the Amalfi Coast, but its position between the fabled coastline and busy Naples makes it an ideal home base for visiting the area. Browse the many shops that line the pedestrian-friendly streets in town, poke your nose into the historic churches and former palaces, and toast the sunny weather with a glass of locally made limoncello. Then plan your excursions to nearby Pompeii, Capri, Positano, Amalfi and Paestum.
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