

TRAVEL

# The Best Places to Visit in Italy

BY NICOLE KLIEST

March 12, 2024



A view of the Amalfi Coast. Photo: Getty Images

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Making an argument for traveling to Italy is like convincing a pasta lover to eat a bowl of bucatini—it isn't necessary. But choosing *where* to visit is another matter. After all, the country's diversity is one of its strongest selling points. From high-altitude regions sharing borders with the likes of France and Switzerland in the north, to sun-drenched sea villages dotted along the wild coastlines of the south, one could spend an entire lifetime exploring Italy and still have only just gotten started.

A country informed by its impassioned people, arresting landscapes, ancient history, and about a million other things. Italy is an intensely rich tapestry of culture. Ernest Hemingway put it best when he wrote: "We only half live over here. The Italians live all the way." Indeed, *la dolce vita* imbues just about everything in Italy, with tourists flocking to all corners of the country to bask in the afterglow of their immersive slow living.



So, why not adopt the Italian mindset and embrace a leisurely approach to traveling here this year? Pick a destination, savor it, and savor it some more. Continue below for your guide to some of the best places to visit in Italy this year, with a mix of both iconic and lesser-known locales (including beautiful hotels to book as your home base).

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## Road Tripping Through Puglia



Photo: Getty Images

Sun-soaked afternoons in pursuit of hidden swimming holes and spritz-fueled aperitivi are standard fare in Puglia. Six distinct provinces puzzle together Italy's "heel of the boot," which warrants renting a car and languidly exploring the region at your own pace. Keen to check out those iconic whitewashed cities? Ostuni is famous for that (though lesser-known Martina Franca and Locorotondo are both just as striking). In search of fresh cheese and wine? Burrata originates from Puglia, as does the flavorful indigenous grape variety, Primitivo. The region's architecture spans from 17th- and 18th-century examples of Baroque architecture to traditional styles such as the *masseria* (fortified farmhouses, often converted into hotels) as well as those charming trulli in the Itria Valley. And for days by the sea, head further south to beaches like Torre Sant'Andrea and Baia Dei Turchi for turquoise-hued dips (the former is reached via a short hike through the woods).

*Stay Here:* Masseria Calderisi is a boutique hotel situated on a 17th-century farm that sprawls across 24 acres of ancient olive groves and citrus trees. While here, try to spot the two adopted rescue donkeys, Rosie and Momo.

## Culinary Conquests in Modena



Photo: Getty Images

While Bologna is arguably Emilia-Romagna's most well-known city, the region is also home to another destination that's of particular interest to foodies. "I spent a good deal of time over the winter in the small city of Modena, which has such an exciting and thriving food scene," [Bellini Travel](#) Founder and CEO Emily FitzRoy says. Her top picks for a memorable meal? A couple of standouts come to mind. "Dinner at Franceschetta 58 cooked by young chef Francesco Vincenzi, or a modest bowl of tortellini in brodo at Aldina, a tiny osteria on the first floor of a building overlooking the buzzing Mercato Albinelli, which also has to be my favorite food market in all of Italy."

*Stay Here:* Less than an hour away from Modena's city center is [Casa Conoscenti](#) in Bologna. Set in a former 14th-century mansion and replete with historic finishes like original frescoes, this boutique property is understated yet striking.

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## Outdoor Adventure in the Dolomites

Photo: Getty Images

Whether during the wildflower-bloomed days of summer or in the powdery ski season, the Dolomites in northeastern Italy are an underrated Alpine paradise. “This mountainous area is a natural wonder, with amazing food and a mix of culture and history,” Alison Duray of luxury tour operator Abercrombie & Kent says. Outdoor experiences are the cornerstone of a visit to any of the villages, with common activities including *via ferrata*, hiking, and skiing in dramatic landscapes. “German is spoken in some towns right alongside Italian, and the food scene incorporates the same cultural mix, with hearty dumpling pasta and fresh mountain food products,” Duray says.

Wine lovers should also take note of Trentodoc sparkling wines, which are made in the picturesque vineyards of Trentino-Alto Adige.

*Stay Here:* Forestis is a luxury eco-friendly wellness resort enveloped by nature, offering staggering views of the sawtoothed mountain peaks and forested valleys.

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## Wine Tasting in Montalcino



Photo: Getty Images

A quaint hilltop town in Tuscany's countryside, Montalcino appears frozen in time with its rolling pastures, cobblestone streets, and medieval architecture. The region is famed for its prestigious wine—Brunello di Montalcino—which is made from the Sangiovese grape and draws in oenophiles from around the world to experience its complex, elegant flavors. “Experience this picturesque town with tastings at a family-run wine estate,” Duray suggests. Montalcino is arguably best experienced by bicycle, with views of hilly vineyards and meandering farm animals serving as your peripheral scenery while en route to a visit to Fortezza di Montalcino. This fortress was constructed in 1361 by the Sieneese and its many nearby side streets are worth taking the time to get lost in. (Tip: While in town, swing by Bottega d'arte on Via Boldrini for a hand-painted ceramic to take home.)

*Stay Here:* Castello Banfi Il Borgo is a boutique property that's owned and operated by one of the region's most iconic wineries, Banfi. The sprawling property dates back several centuries and is surrounded by ancient olive groves and hilly vineyards.

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# Pastoral Leisure in Umbria

Photo: Getty Images

Escape the droves of tourists in Florence with a trip a couple of hours south to Umbria. This underrated region in central Italy is peppered with countless small

villages oozing with charm, which makes both a road trip or train journey appealing modes of transit. (You can train here directly from Milan, Florence, and Rome.) Similar to other picturesque Italian countrysides, your days can be spent popping into old churches, roaming around puzzle-like cobblestone streets, and sampling local fare such as crostini with black truffles, porchetta, or *fichi girotti* (dried figs filled with flavors like toasted almonds or cocoa).

*Stay Here:* Borgo dei Conti Resort opens this summer under the direction of the hoteliers behind The Place in Florence and Londra Palace in Venice. This 13th-century property will now serve as a 50-room boutique hotel with an outdoor swimming pool overlooking the undulating Umbrian hillside.

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## Coastal Charm in Abruzzo

Just two hours east of Rome lies Abruzzo— a rustic region with rich culinary traditions and natural splendor. With the staggering Apennine Mountains serving as a gateway on one end and the gleaming Trabocchi Coast on the other, it's no wonder Abruzzo is considered an underrated gem by locals and in-the-know travelers alike. While in the countryside, discover the local cuisine at Reale, an innovative restaurant at the helm of three-starred chef Niko Romito that honors terroir and tradition. Interested in sampling the region's famous wines? Head for a tasting at Masciarelli's striking estate situated in a 17th-century fortified palace. Then, you'll need to make your way to the Adriatic to see a *trabucco*; a large wooden fishing machine. Some of these also function as restaurants, like Trabocco San Giacomo, which makes for an immersive, magical meal suspended above the sea.

*Stay Here:* Sextantio Santo Stefano di Sessanio is located in a restored fortified medieval village. An *albergo diffuso* (or 'scattered hotel'), its rooms are spread across the village surrounded by local artisans in an effort to recreate what life was like here hundreds of years ago.

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## Pristine Swims in Sardinia

Photo: Getty Images

“Sardinia is another world, with a whole other language even, on the second largest island of the Mediterranean,” Duray says of the idyllic ‘blue zone’ (regions of the world where life expectancy is claimed to be longer than average). The island is beloved for its mountain villages as much as it is for the rocky coastline, with archeological sites and natural wonders at every turn. “The interior has an ancient history, visible through the *nuraghi* (stone constructions) going back millennia,” Duray says, adding that the famed beaches in the north are becoming more accessible “while not detracting from its gorgeous Emerald Coast.”

*Stay Here:* Gallicantu Stazzo Retreat is a lovely farmhouse retreat in the countryside with five rooms and two suites that overlook an almond grove. Take a dip in the pool beneath the shade of leafy trees and enjoy a wine tasting in the cavern with meats and cheeses from nearby farms.

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# Running Through Ruins in Rome

Photo: Getty Images

To say Rome is having a moment may feel trite—the nearly 3,000-year-old city doesn't need much publicity these days. But a boom of notable hotel openings in the last couple of years has sharpened travelers' attention toward the Eternal City, with Six Senses Rome, The Rome Edition, and Bulgari Hotel Roma as leading examples. While here, go off-the-beaten path with activities like an architecture stroll through the eccentric Quartiere Coppedè, a bespoke food tour with a local, or lacing up your sneakers for a colosseum tour with ArcheoRunning on a path not typically open to the public (bookable through Sofitel Rome Villa Borghese).

*Stay Here:* Bulgari Hotel Roma is a visual feast, with note-perfect interiors by the Milanese studio Antonio Citterio Patricia Viel. Particularly special is the spa's 20-meter indoor pool punctuated by eight arabesque marble columns.

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# Thermal Springs in Pantelleria

Photo: Getty Images

Sandwiched between two continents and off the coast of both Sicily and Tunisia, Pantelleria is one of Italy's most enigmatic islands, requiring several flights to reach its craggy shores. Rent a small car or Vespa to zip around the narrow roads, discovering vineyards with volcanic soil, prehistoric villages, and underwater caves along the way. Pantelleria is also home to several hot springs where you can slather volcanic mud across your skin for a detoxifying holiday under the sun.

*Stay Here:* Luca Guadagnino's 2015, *A Bigger Splash* was filmed on the island and visitors can rent the stunning villa it was filmed at, enjoying the 12 hectares of surrounding trees and vineyards and views overlooking the azure sea. (If you're traveling with a smaller group, the individual, smaller *dammusi* are also available for rent.)

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# Art Hunting in Venice

Photo: Getty Images

With a ban on cruise ships entering its historic center, a proposal to limit day-trippers, and a goal of becoming a global sustainability leader, Venice is working toward a brighter future. If you're planning a visit, support these efforts by not engaging with the 'eat-and-go' tourist flow and, instead, settling in for several days to more deeply appreciate the culture. "The art biennale in Venice looks to be the biggest one ever," FitzRoy says, who points to the Zeng Fanzhi exhibition as a noteworthy highlight. "It includes a structure by Tadao Aando at the magnificent Misericordia which was one of the eight Scuole Grandi in the city and is one of my favorite buildings in Venice." *Stay Here:* [The Venice Venice Hotel](#) is within a restored palazzo in the historic city center and takes design cues from contemporary Venetian style with art peppered throughout the property (which required a five-year restoration).

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