

NORTHERN ITALY

Rome to Venice, the Long Way Round

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Rome

Welcome to Rome, the Eternal City, where millennia of history converge in breathtaking splendour. After transferring to your hotel, you'll gather with fellow travellers for our first evening meal together. Few cities match Rome's intoxicating blend of ancient grandeur and modern vitality—a place where every cobblestone whispers stories of emperors, artists, and saints. Over the coming days, we'll peel back layers of history dating from the Republic through the Renaissance, discovering why Rome remains one of the world's most captivating destinations.

Tonight marks the beginning of our journey through Italy's treasures, from Rome's imperial monuments to Venice's shimmering canals.

Overnight in Rome.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Rome: City Tour

We begin at the Colosseum, where 55,000 spectators once roared as gladiators fought for survival above a labyrinthine underground of trapdoors and animal pens. Still dominating the cityscape nearly 2,000 years on, it unsettles as much as it impresses — because it was designed to. We then walk through the Roman Forum, heart of ancient civic life, where the Curia housed the Senate and the Arch of Titus commemorated the sacking of Jerusalem in AD 70. Among weathered columns and temple foundations, we stand at the physical centre of an empire that shaped Western civilisation.

Ascending to Capitoline Hill, we reach the Campidoglio — Rome's original citadel, redesigned by Michelangelo in the 16th century with the kind of harmonious geometry that would have pleased the ancients he admired. It is a fitting place to consider what separates Rome from other great cities: here, the ancient and the Renaissance don't merely coexist — each made the other possible.

We continue to Piazza Navona for lunch, surrounded by Baroque splendour. Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers — the Nile, Ganges, Danube, and Plate — asserted papal authority across continents as much as it delighted the eye. From here we walk to the Trevi Fountain, fed by an aqueduct built in 19 BC and still flowing, then proceed to the Pantheon. Its unreinforced concrete dome — wider than St. Peter's — was the largest in the world for thirteen centuries and remains a quiet provocation to everything built since.

NOTE: Due to traffic constraints and the proximity of today's sites, we travel primarily on foot and by Rome's efficient public transit system (tickets included). Any sightseeing not completed today continues tomorrow afternoon.

Overnight in Rome.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Rome: the Vatican Museums & St. Peter's

We travel by metro across the Tiber River to Vatican City, the world's smallest sovereign state. Our guided tour begins in the vast Vatican Museums, where corridors seem to stretch infinitely, lined with humanity's greatest artistic achievements. Here we discover Greek and Roman sculptures that influenced Renaissance masters, Flemish tapestries depicting biblical narratives, and glittering mosaics assembled tile by precious tile. More than three million visitors journey here annually to witness this extraordinary collection.

The museums' crowning glory awaits in the Sistine Chapel, where Michelangelo's frescoes transform ceiling and walls into a theological masterpiece. Created between 1508 and 1512, these paintings revolutionised art history—their anatomical precision and emotional depth remain unsurpassed. We then enter St. Peter's Basilica, Christendom's largest church, its cavernous interior housing treasures including Michelangelo's tender Pietà, carved when he was just 24 years old. Outside, the elegantly symmetrical Piazza San Pietro embraces visitors in Bernini's colonnade arms.

After a break for lunch, we continue with any sightseeing carried over from yesterday.

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NOTE: The timing and order of today's sightseeing may vary depending on seasonality. During lighter periods, we often begin in the morning; busier times may require an afternoon or evening visit to avoid crowds. We may include lunch instead of dinner today to optimise our schedule. Your Tour Leader will advise upon arrival.

Overnight in Rome.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Rome - Assisi - Siena

We depart Rome for Tuscany, stopping first in Assisi – a hilltop town of pink limestone and cypress shadows that receives millions of pilgrims annually yet somehow retains the stillness its most famous son prescribed. Born here in 1182 to a prosperous cloth merchant, Francis renounced his inheritance as a young man and embraced radical poverty, founding the Order of Friars Minor in a gesture that reverberated through medieval Europe. What made his message so durable wasn't only its simplicity – it was that he lived it without compromise.

The Basilica of St. Francis is Umbria's supreme artistic monument, but it is also the beginning of a thread that will run through our entire journey. Giotto di Bondone decorated the Upper Basilica's nave with a celebrated cycle of frescoes depicting the life of Francis – and in doing so, changed Western painting. Where medieval artists rendered sacred figures as flat, symbolic, and remote, Giotto's figures have weight, gesture, and something recognisable as grief or joy. The revolution you will see completed in Padova's Scrovegni Chapel begins here, on these walls, in this quiet Umbrian hillside town.

The drive south to Siena passes the shores of Lake Trasimeno – serene today, but the site of one of Rome's most catastrophic defeats, where Hannibal's Carthaginian army ambushed and destroyed a Roman force of 30,000 in 217 BC. This medieval gem awaits our exploration tomorrow.

Overnight in Siena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Siena & San Gimignano

Siena reveals itself best on foot—indeed, its council pioneered Europe's first traffic ban in the city centre. Traditionally Florence's great rival, Siena chose a different path: whilst Florence embraced Renaissance innovation, Siena clung to medieval traditions. This preservation makes Siena the finest showcase of Italian Gothic architecture, its walled city sprawling across three hilltops, each connected by steep, winding streets that seem frozen in the 13th century.

Our guided walking tour explores Siena's atmospheric medieval quarters, beginning at the Palazzo Pubblico, Italy's finest example of Gothic civic architecture. Inside, Ambrogio Lorenzetti's remarkable frescoes in the Hall of the Nine depict good and bad government—medieval political philosophy rendered in vivid colour. We then visit the magnificent Duomo, its alternating black and white marble bands creating dramatic visual rhythm. Built from the 12th century in Romanesque and Gothic styles, this cathedral features a façade partially designed by Giovanni Pisano. Inside, the inlaid marble floor depicts biblical narratives, whilst a glass-enclosed reliquary contains an arm believed to have belonged to John the Baptist.

This afternoon we proceed to San Gimignano, nicknamed "Manhattan of Tuscany" for its remarkable skyline. Thirteen noble brick towers survive from the medieval era when 72 such structures proclaimed family wealth and power. Today the fortress-like severity softens in harmonious squares adorned with Renaissance frescoes. Our return journey winds through Chianti's vine-covered hills, where some of Italy's finest wines mature in ancient cellars.

Overnight in Siena.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Siena - Volterra - Pisa - Lericci

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We journey through quintessential Tuscan countryside—cypress-lined roads, rolling hills dotted with farmhouses—to Volterra, an Etruscan city perched on a high plateau commanding sweeping views. Ancient walls still encircle much of the town, testament to the mysterious Etruscans whose origins remain debated. Their civilisation flourished between modern Rome and Florence from the 8th to 6th centuries BC, reaching sophisticated heights before Rome's rising power gradually absorbed their culture, adopting Etruscan religious practices and engineering techniques.

We explore the city walls and Etruscan Gate, its basalt heads of Etruscan deities dating to the 6th century BC—faces that gazed upon a world Rome had yet to conquer. Nearby, Roman and Etruscan cisterns survive beneath a working bar — a characteristically Volterran arrangement, ancient infrastructure repurposed without ceremony. Before departing, we view the remarkably preserved Roman amphitheatre from the 1st century BC, its original structure so intact that reconstruction proves relatively simple. During free time, you might visit the excellent Museo Guarnacci, housing 600 Etruscan funerary urns depicting their beliefs about death and the afterlife.

We then proceed to Pisa, concentrating on the town's architectural jewels in the Campo dei Miracoli—the Duomo, Baptistery, and the gravity-defying Leaning Tower. Begun in 1173, the tower started tilting during construction due to unstable subsoil; by completion, the lean exceeded 5 metres (17 feet). We allow ample time for photographs of this beloved landmark. Later we continue to Lerici, dramatically positioned on a beautiful bay where the Ligurian coast meets the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Before departing Pisa we visit the Camposanto — the monumental cemetery adjoining the Campo dei Miracoli, its cloistered walls lined with medieval frescoes and soil reputedly brought from Golgotha by Crusaders. It is one of the most atmospheric and least-visited spaces in a city that rarely lacks for visitors.

Overnight in Lerici.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Lerici - Cinque Terre - Florence

This morning we travel by boat (weather permitting) along the stunning Ligurian coast to Riomaggiore, first of the Cinque Terre villages. This spectacular Italian Riviera section rivals the Amalfi Coast for dramatic beauty, where colourful houses cling to impossibly steep cliffs above azure waters. From Riomaggiore, we follow the easy half-hour Via dell'Amore—Lover's Walk—to Manarola, then continue approximately one hour to Corniglia.

Those preferring gentler exploration may ascend to Corniglia's centre for panoramic views and local atmosphere, or take the train to picturesque Vernazza. More ambitious walkers can tackle the challenging two-hour hike to Vernazza through terraced vineyards producing local Morasca, Chiaretto del Faro, and Sciacchetra wines. The rugged hillsides, cultivated for centuries, cascade toward the sea in remarkable agricultural engineering feats. We conclude by train at Monterosso Al Mare, named for the area's distinctive red colour, where a giant statue carved into cliffs overlooks an inviting beach.

PLEASE NOTE: Due to past flooding, trail availability may require adjustments to today's itinerary. Your Tour Leader will confirm which paths are open.

This evening we arrive in Florence, cradle of the Renaissance.

Overnight in Florence.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Florence: Walking Tour

Florence transformed the world during the Renaissance, and today we begin discovering why. Our guided tour starts at the Accademia, Europe's first drawing academy, now housing an extraordinary art collection. Here stands Michelangelo's David, arguably the world's most famous sculpture—17 feet of anatomical perfection carved from a single marble block. Completed in 1504 when Michelangelo was just 29, David represents the Renaissance ideal of human potential.

We then proceed to the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore—the Duomo—crowned by Brunelleschi's magnificent red dome. Upon completion in 1436, this engineering marvel astonished Europe: its diameter exceeds St. Peter's in Rome, and the nave ranks as Christendom's third-largest. The cupola revolutionised architecture, proving that ancient Roman techniques could be rediscovered and surpassed. Because

the exterior showcases the building's finest features, and because we'll tour more ornate church interiors elsewhere, we don't include the interior today. However, you're welcome to visit independently tomorrow afternoon when crowds typically diminish.

We continue along pedestrian streets to Ponte Vecchio, Florence's oldest bridge and the city's only one surviving World War II. Built in 1345, it once housed butchers' shops; today goldsmiths and jewellers occupy both sides, their workshops overhanging the Arno River. At Piazza Santa Croce, we admire the Franciscan church façade before entering to see tombs of Michelangelo and Galileo Galilei, alongside chapels adorned with Giotto frescoes that pioneered naturalistic painting. The remainder of the day is yours to absorb this sophisticated city's atmosphere.

Overnight in Florence.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Florence: Uffizi Gallery

We visit the Uffizi Gallery, Giorgio Vasari's extraordinary Renaissance administrative buildings designed for Cosimo I de' Medici in the mid-16th century. Today these galleries house Italy's greatest art collection, representing humanity's creative pinnacle. We walk corridors lined with masterpieces by Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian, and Caravaggio—each painting a landmark in artistic evolution.

The collection's jewel is Botticelli's Birth of Venus, painted around 1485. This mythological scene—the goddess emerging from the sea on a shell—revolutionised art by depicting the nude female form as beauty itself rather than shame. The painting epitomises Renaissance humanism, celebrating classical antiquity whilst creating something entirely new. After our guided tour, the afternoon is free to explore Florence independently, perhaps visiting artisan workshops, enjoying cafe culture in elegant piazzas, or simply wandering streets where the Renaissance was born.

Overnight in Florence.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Florence - Ravenna: Town Tour

From Tuscany we drive into Emilia-Romagna, where fertile plains surrounding the Po River produce Italy's culinary treasures. This region claims balsamic vinegar among its gifts to gastronomy, and today we visit an acetia—a traditional vinegar producer—where we discover the intricate ageing process. Walking through cellars lined with wooden barrels, we understand why authentic balsamic vinegar commands premium prices and requires decades to perfect.

We arrive in Ravenna, an incomparable treasury of Byzantine art. When unstoppable barbarians threatened Rome in AD 402, the Western Roman Empire shifted its capital here. Though Ravenna eventually fell in the 5th century, Byzantines recaptured it in 540 under Emperor Justinian. For three centuries Ravenna flourished as Byzantium's western outpost, its artistic and religious influence flowing not from Rome but from Constantinople—today's Istanbul. Inside humble-looking churches we discover the Western world's most spectacular Byzantine mosaics outside Istanbul itself.

Our walking tour explores medieval Ravenna's charming streets, visiting the breathtaking Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, a Roman princess who married a barbarian chieftain. Her tomb is entirely covered in dazzling mosaics that shimmer in dim light, creating an almost otherworldly atmosphere. We also see the Mausoleum of Theodoric, built in AD 520 for an enlightened Ostrogothic ruler. Its dome was carved from a single stone block weighing an astonishing 336 tonnes—a feat of engineering that still puzzles experts. During free time, mosaic enthusiasts might visit the Church of San Vitale or the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe for further Byzantine splendours.

Overnight in Ravenna.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Ravenna - Verona - Padova (Padua)

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We depart Ravenna, driving through the Colli Euganei – the Euganean Hills – a region celebrated for thermal springs and exceptional wines. Our destination is Verona, setting for Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and one of Italy's most appealing cities. Pink marble Roman ruins and rose-tinted buildings create a romantic atmosphere that needs no literary association to justify it. The first-century Arena dominates Piazza Bra, the vibrant heart of Veronese life, and still hosts opera performances today – the third-largest Roman amphitheatre surviving from antiquity.

Our walking tour moves through Verona's layered history: the Gothic mausoleums of the Scaligeri family who ruled the city in the 13th and 14th centuries; Castelvechio and the elegant Ponte Scaligero spanning the Adige; Piazza delle Erbe, the old Roman forum now ringed with medieval buildings and market stalls; the Roman gate on Corso Porta where ancient stonework sits matter-of-factly alongside daily Veronese life; and Juliet's courtyard, where the famous balcony draws visitors from across the world.

This afternoon we continue to Padova, our base for the Veneto.

Overnight in Padova.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Padova: Town Tour - Venice

Giotto's frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel are among the most carefully protected works of art in the world, viewable only in small groups for strictly limited periods. Standing in the blue-vaulted interior, golden stars overhead and the full biblical narrative unfolding across every wall, it is easy to understand why this modest chapel is considered the most important painted room in Western art. This is where the revolution that began on the walls of Assisi's Upper Basilica reached its fullest expression.

We then visit the Basilica of Saint Anthony – entering Vatican City in the process, this being Italy's only extra-territorial Vatican property outside Rome – where the Cappella delle Relique contains the preserved tongue, jaw and vocal cords of the saint himself, still drawing pilgrims from across the world. We then proceed to the University of Padova, founded in 1222. We visit the world's oldest permanent anatomy theatre, built in 1594, its steeply raked viewing balconies so narrow that students who fainted were prevented from falling. Our guide unlocks the hall where Galileo Galilei once lectured, largely unchanged since.

The morning concludes with a stop at Caffè Pedrocchi, a Padovan institution whose tricolour rooms – white, red, and green – reflect the flag of a unified Italy that didn't yet exist when it opened in 1831. The outdoor market fills the Piazza della Frutta nearby, and lunch is yours among the surrounding streets.

This afternoon we drive to Venice – passing Prato della Valle, the largest public square in Europe – and begin two nights in the most improbable city ever built.

Overnight in Venice.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Venice: City Tour

Our guided walking tour begins at the Doge's Palace, for nearly a thousand years the seat of Venetian power. The council chambers – hung with paintings by Tintoretto, Veronese, and Titian – served as both workplace and theatre of legitimacy, and the palace connects to the prison via the Bridge of Sighs, where condemned men caught their last view of the lagoon before descending into cells from which Casanova made his famous rooftop escape in 1755.

We then enter St. Mark's Basilica, built to house relics of the Evangelist brought from Alexandria by Venetian merchants in 828. Its mosaics – assembled over centuries by craftsmen drawing on Constantinople – produce an effect unlike anything else in the Western Christian tradition. This is Byzantine art at its most opulent, and a reminder that Venice never really looked west for its inspiration.

Later we board the vaporetto and travel the Grand Canal, passing palazzi whose facades compress centuries of European architectural history. At the Rialto market – one of the oldest settled points on the islands – locals still buy fresh produce and Adriatic seafood much as they have for centuries. Beneath the spectacle, Venice remains a city people actually live in.

Overnight in Venice.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

We say farewell to Venice this morning — a city that has been confounding departures since the Republic first made itself indispensable to the known world. Whether you leave by water taxi across the lagoon or simply stand a moment longer at a canal bridge before heading to the airport, something of Italy tends to follow you home.

Buon viaggio!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast