

NORTHERN ITALY

Rome, Florence & Venice

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Rome

Today we arrive in Rome and transfer to our hotel.

Few cities in the world are as beautiful as Rome, and few are as glamorous. The Eternal City's ancient monuments and spectacular galleries are looking more magnificent than ever after an extensive restoration program.

Overnight in Rome.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Rome: City Tour

We begin our guided tour at the 2,000-year-old Colosseum, built to seat 55,000 spectators for Rome's most brutal gladiatorial combats. We walk through the Roman Forum where we see the Curia, Rostra, Temple of Vesta, Basilica of Constantine, and Arch of Titus. Continuing upward, we reach the Campidoglio (Capitoline Hill), seat of the Roman Senate since the 12th century and the city's original citadel. This beautiful square was redesigned by Michelangelo in the 16th century.

We arrive at Piazza Navona where we can break for lunch at restaurants and cafes surrounding the square. Here we admire the impressive Fountain of the Four Rivers, with detailed figures representing the Nile, Ganges, Danube, and Plate rivers.

We continue to the famous Trevi Fountain, designed by Nicholas Salvi in 1732, its water supplied by one of Rome's earliest aqueducts. Throwing a coin ensures your safe return to Rome. We also visit the temple-turned-church Pantheon and admire its perfect proportions on our way to the Spanish Steps, where we finish today's tour.

NOTE: Due to traffic problems and the fact that today's sites are reasonably close to each other, much of today's tour will occur on foot and with Rome's efficient public transit system (cost of tickets included). Any sightseeing not accomplished today will be moved to tomorrow afternoon.

Overnight in Rome

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

We travel by metro to the west side of the Tiber River and begin our visit to Vatican City with a guided tour through the immense Vatican Museums. This amazing collection houses some of the world's most important Greek and Roman sculptures, Renaissance paintings, Flemish tapestries, and mosaics. Understandably, this collection attracts more than 3 million visitors annually. We also visit Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel to absorb its breathtaking frescoes.

Entering the cavernous interior of St. Peter's Basilica, we appreciate its many treasures, including Michelangelo's Pietà. At the Vatican tour's conclusion, we visit the elegantly symmetrical Piazza St. Pietro.

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

NOTE: The timing/order of today's sightseeing can vary depending on seasonality. Early spring and late fall tours can often begin in the morning due to lighter crowds. Busier times often dictate an afternoon/evening visit to avoid morning crowds; indeed, we may include lunch instead of dinner today to expedite our activities. Your Tour Leader will advise of any adjustments upon your arrival in Rome.

Overnight in Rome

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Rome - Assisi - Siena

We drive from Rome to Siena, a region famous for its wines, stopping first at Assisi. Despite millions of tourists and pilgrims it attracts yearly, St. Francis's hometown remains a beautiful and tranquil refuge. Born here in 1182, Francis renounced his father's wealth in his late teens to pursue chastity and poverty, founding the Order of Minors (Franciscans after his death), which attracted huge European followings.

St. Francis's Basilica serves as the city's, and possibly Umbria's, primary attraction. After a guided tour of the basilica, we depart for Siena, arriving later in the afternoon.

Overnight in Siena

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Siena & San Gimignano

Siena is best explored on foot—the city council was Europe's first to ban motor traffic from the city centre. Siena today seems frozen in time, traditionally Florence's rival as Tuscany's art and architecture centre. While Florence showcases Renaissance art and buildings, Siena transports us directly to the Middle Ages. Perhaps by preserving its original character more than any other Italian city, Siena perfectly showcases Italian Gothic style. This walled city occupies three hilltops and contains rich artistic heritage.

Our guided walking tour of Siena's charming medieval streets includes the Palazzo Pubblico (Town Hall), a famous example of Italian medieval architecture with Gothic influences. Also famous for its frescoes, the best-known are Ambrogio Lorenzetti's secular series on government in the Hall of the Nine (Sala della Pace), collectively known as "Allegory and Effects of Good and Bad Government."

We visit the Duomo, this huge cathedral built in bands of black and white marble dating from the 12th century. Built in Romanesque and Italian Gothic styles, it features a dramatically painted façade—partly designed by Giovanni Pisano—and a soaring black and white bell tower. The inlaid marble floor depicts Biblical scenes, and the cathedral contains a glass-enclosed box with an arm tradition maintains belonged to John the Baptist and was used to baptise Christ.

This afternoon we drive to San Gimignano, called the "Manhattan of Tuscany." This medieval town preserves 13 noble brick towers, creating a skyscraper skyline. Today its fortress-like severity is softened by quiet, harmonious squares, with many palaces and churches enhanced by Renaissance frescoes.

Our afternoon drive back to Siena takes us through the wine-growing region of Chianti.

Overnight in Siena

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Siena - Volterra - Pisa - Lericci

We drive through beautiful and quintessential Tuscan rolling countryside to Volterra, situated like many Etruscan cities on a high plateau offering uninterrupted views over surrounding hills. In many places, the town's ancient Etruscan walls still stand. The exact origins of the Etruscans and their arrival in Italy remain unknown. Their civilisation centred between present-day Rome and Florence, experiencing its Golden Age from the eighth to sixth centuries BC. After this period, the rising power of Rome gradually superseded the Etruscan empire, though Romans incorporated many Etruscan cultural aspects into their own society and beliefs.

We visit the city walls and Etruscan Gate with its basalt heads of Etruscan gods dating to the sixth century BC. Before leaving Volterra, we view the Roman amphitheatre from the first century BC, one of Italy's best-preserved Roman theatres with enough original structure surviving to allow almost complete reconstruction. During free time, we suggest visiting Volterra's famous Museo Guarnacci, containing one of Italy's best Etruscan artifact collections, with pride of place going to 600 Etruscan funerary urns depicting many aspects of Etruscan

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customs and beliefs.

We then proceed to Pisa, concentrating on the town's principal monuments—the Duomo, Baptistery, and the most famous structure, the gravity-defying "Leaning Tower." We take ample time to view and photograph the tower from outside (climbing requires advance reservations and considerable queuing time; time constraints make this impractical for our tour).

We continue to Lerici, set dramatically on a beautiful bay on the Ligurian coast.

Overnight in Lerici

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Lerici - Cinque Terre - Florence

We leave Lerici and travel (weather depending) by boat along the Ligurian coast to Riomaggiore village in the Cinque Terre. Here we begin our easy-paced walk between coastal villages. This spectacular Italian Riviera section rivals the Amalfi Coast for stunning views and gorgeous sunsets. From Riomaggiore, we take an easy half-hour walk on Via D'Amore (Lover's Walk) to Manarola. The next section (about 1 hour) takes us to Corniglia.

Those not wishing to continue with the next two more difficult sections may walk up to Corniglia centre to sample this delightful town with wonderful panoramic views. It's also possible to take a local train to nearby Vernazza to enjoy this village jewel. Those wishing to continue may start the 2-hour hike to Vernazza. The rugged coast's hills are covered in vineyards growing grapes for local Morasca, Chiaretto del Faro, and Sciacchetta wines.

We continue by train to Monterosso Al Mare, named for the area's red colour, where we find a large statue carved into cliffs and a lovely beach.

PLEASE NOTE: Due to past flooding in the region, our day may need adjustment depending on which trails are open or under repair.

Tonight we arrive in Florence.

Overnight in Florence

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Florence: Walking Tour

Florence is a city steeped in history and art. Our walking tour begins with a guided tour of the Accademia, Europe's first Academy of drawing, today housing a superb art collection including Michelangelo's David, probably the world's most famous statue.

We then proceed to the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (commonly known as the Duomo), complete with its magnificent red dome. Upon completion in 1436, the dome was hailed as the greatest architectural achievement of its day, equalling, perhaps even surpassing, antiquity's monuments. The cupola's diameter exceeds St. Peter's in Rome, and the nave ranks as Christendom's third largest. Because the building's most interesting part is the exterior, and because we'll see other church interiors that are more ornate and interesting elsewhere (ie Siena), we do not tour the inside. If you'd like to visit independently, we suggest perhaps visiting tomorrow afternoon during your free time when crowds and queues tend to settle down (consult your Tour Leader for current advice).

We continue along the pedestrian mall to Ponte Vecchio, Florence's oldest bridge and the city's only one to survive World War II. Built in 1345, the Ponte Vecchio was lined with butchers' shops, now replaced by rows of gold and silver shops on both sides. At Piazza Santa Croce, we stop to admire the facade of the Franciscan church of the same name. Inside we see tombs of Michelangelo and Galileo Galilei and chapels covered in Giotto frescoes.

Balance of the day at leisure.

Overnight in Florence

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Florence: Uffizi Gallery

We visit the Uffizi Gallery, Giorgio Vasari's extraordinary administrative buildings designed for Cosimo I Medici in the mid-sixteenth century. These galleries contain the greatest collection of Italian artworks, including hundreds of paintings by great artists such as Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian, and Caravaggio. The galleries also contain one of the world's most famous paintings—Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus.'

The afternoon is free to absorb the atmosphere of this sophisticated city.

Overnight in Florence

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Florence - Ravenna: Town Tour

From Tuscany we drive into Emilia Romagna, an area of fertile plains surrounding the Po River. This region is known for balsamic vinegar, and today we'll visit an acetaia where balsamic vinegar is produced. We see the machinery, cellar, barrels—indeed the whole process and all resulting products.

We arrive in Ravenna, an incomparable treasure-store of Byzantine monuments. Ravenna became capital of the Western Roman Empire in AD 402 as Rome was threatened by unstoppable Barbarians. Later in the fifth century, Ravenna also succumbed but was recaptured in 540 by Byzantines under emperor Justinian. From the sixth to eighth centuries, Ravenna flourished as a great centre of Byzantine (Eastern Orthodox) culture and religion. Its influence came not from the rest of Italy but from Constantinople (today's Istanbul); indeed, Ravenna's humble-looking churches house the most spectacular Byzantine mosaics outside of Istanbul (if you are a keen aficionado of mosaics, your Tour Leader can point you in the right direction for your free time, ie the Church of San Vitale and/or the Basilica of Sant Apollinare in Classe).

We'll have a walking tour of Medieval Ravenna's charming streets, visiting the spectacular mausoleum of Galla Placidia, a Roman princess who married a Barbarian chief. The walls, floor, and ceiling of her tomb are completely covered in dazzling decoration. The Mausoleum of Theodoric, built in AD 520 to house an enlightened ostrogothic ruler's mortal remains, has a dome cut from a single stone block weighing almost 336 tonnes (300 tons)!

Overnight in Ravenna

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Ravenna - Verona - Padova (Padua)

We drive from Ravenna to Verona via the Colli Eugani region, known in English as the Eugenic Hills. This glorious area is well-known for thermal springs and terrific wines.

We proceed to Verona, setting for Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet.' With pink marble Roman structures and rose-painted buildings, Verona ranks among Italy's most appealing towns. The town contains many Roman ruins, including the first-century Arena now used as Verona's opera house, the third-largest such structure in existence. The Teatro Romano often hosts performances of plays, particularly those of William Shakespeare.

During our time in Verona, we'll have a walking tour starting with Piazza Bra, the centre of Veronese life. We'll wander rosy-hued streets admiring palaces, townhouses, and churches. We see the Gothic mausoleum of the Scaligeri rulers of the 13th and 14th centuries. We also visit the family's fortified residence on the River Adige and a bridge named after them.

We continue to Padova.

Overnight in Padova

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Padova: Town Tour - Venice

We begin our walking tour of Padova with a visit to the towering Basilica of Saint Anthony, patron saint of lost things. With minaret-like towers and byzantine cupolas, this structure blends eastern and western elements and serves as a focal point for a constant flow of pilgrims. When we step inside its precincts, we leave Italy and enter Vatican State—this is the only Vatican property (apart from Vatican City) in Italy that is extra-territorial. We also visit a unique structure—Europe's oldest permanent anatomy theatre, built in 1594, with viewing balconies so narrow that when students fainted they would be prevented from falling. After a short walk from the university, we come to Piazza Bo, scene of one of Italy's liveliest daily markets.

We then travel the rest of the distance to Venice by road. After a brief orientation by your Tour Leader, you'll have free time this afternoon for independent exploration. This evening you may choose to visit the casino, take a gondola ride, or perhaps spend an evening at the theatre.

Overnight in Venice

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Venice: City Tour

On our guided walking tour this morning, we concentrate on St. Mark's Square, surrounded by elegant, historic buildings. Napoleon called Piazza San Marco "the drawing room of Europe." We start with a tour of the Doge's Palace, this former seat of Venetian power featuring Europe's second-largest wooden room. Of interest as we walk through council rooms is Tintoretto's Paradise over the Grand Council Chamber—alleged to be the world's largest oil painting. The palace connects to the old prison by the 'Bridge of Sighs.' In the late 16th century, new airier prison cells were built to replace original dark dungeons. It was from this new prison that Casanova made his daring escape across rooftops in 1755.

The square's highlight is St. Mark's Basilica, a Byzantine masterpiece. This cathedral was begun in 830 to house St. Mark's tomb, whose relics were stolen from Alexandria in Egypt. Inside walls are encrusted with precious art, rare marbles, and magnificent mosaics. Behind the altar is the famous gold altarpiece, 'Palla d'Oro,' one of the finest examples of gold craftsmanship.

(We do not include a tour of the basilica's interior as lengthy queues usually make this impractical for our program. We encourage you to visit during your free time this afternoon. Your ticket is valid for the Doge's Palace and the combined itinerary of Museo Correr, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, and Monumental Rooms of the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana.)

Later we take the vaporetto, or public water bus, on the Grand Canal and then walk along the maze of canals, sidewalks, and bridges that are uniquely Venice. At the Rialto Bridge, we visit the market area. The name Rialto derives from 'high bank' because this area was one of the highest points on the islands that make up Venice's core and was thus considered a safe gathering point. The market here vibrates with locals buying fruit and vegetables brought from the mainland, and a vast array of fish caught fresh in the Adriatic.

Overnight in Venice

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

Departure from Venice.

BUON VIAGGIO! Arrivederci!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast