

## NORTHERN ITALY

### Rome, Florence & Venice

**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 in Rome's most brutal spectacles. Constructed nearly 2,000 years ago, this engineering marvel still dominates the cityscape. We then walk through the Roman Forum, heart of ancient civic life, where the Curia housed the Senate and the Arch of Titus commemorated military triumph. Among weathered columns and temple foundations, we witness the centre of an empire that shaped Western civilisation.

Ascending to Capitoline Hill, we reach the Campidoglio, Rome's original citadel and seat of government since the 12th century. Michelangelo redesigned this elegant square in the 16th century, creating harmonious symmetry from medieval chaos. We continue to Piazza Navona, where we break for lunch surrounded by baroque splendour. Here stands Bernini's magnificent Fountain of the Four Rivers, its figures representing the Nile, Ganges, Danube, and Plate—symbolising papal power across continents.

Next we visit the Trevi Fountain, its waters flowing from an aqueduct built in 19 BC. Legend promises that tossing a coin ensures your return to Rome. We then proceed to the Pantheon, Rome's best-preserved ancient building, where perfect proportions create an almost spiritual experience. Our day concludes at the Spanish Steps, where Romans and visitors alike gather as evening approaches.

**NOTE:** Due to traffic constraints and the proximity of today's sites, we'll travel primarily on foot and via Rome's efficient public transit system (tickets included). Any sightseeing not completed today will continue 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.

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, birthplace of one of Christianity's most beloved figures. Despite attracting millions of pilgrims annually, St. Francis's hometown retains remarkable tranquillity. Born to wealth in 1182, Francis renounced his inheritance as a young man, embracing poverty and founding the Order of Friars Minor—later called Franciscans—whose message of simplicity resonated across medieval Europe.

The Basilica of St. Francis serves as Assisi's spiritual heart and Umbria's premier artistic treasure. After our guided tour of this two-tiered masterpiece adorned with Giotto frescoes, we continue through rolling countryside to Siena, arriving late afternoon. 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 - Lerici

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. 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, Baptistry, 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.

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 Sciacchetta 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 acetaia—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)**

We depart Ravenna, driving through the Euganean Hills—Colli Euganei in Italian—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 romantic ambience that inspired the Bard's tragic love story. The town preserves many Roman monuments, including the first-century Arena, now Verona's opera house and the third-largest such structure surviving from antiquity. The Teatro Romano continues hosting performances, particularly Shakespeare plays.

Our walking tour begins at Piazza Bra, the vibrant centre of Veronese life. We wander rosy streets admiring Renaissance palaces and medieval townhouses, discovering why Verona captivates visitors beyond its literary associations. We visit the Gothic mausoleum of the Scaligeri family, who ruled Verona during the 13th and 14th centuries—their elaborate tomb monuments exemplify Gothic funerary

architecture. We also explore the family's fortified riverside residence and the bridge bearing their name, both testament to their power and artistic patronage. This afternoon we continue to Padova, our base for exploring the Veneto region.

Overnight in Padova.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 12 Padova: Town Tour - Venice

We begin our walking tour at the towering Basilica of Saint Anthony, patron saint of lost things and one of Christianity's most venerated figures. With minaret-like towers and Byzantine cupolas, this architectural hybrid blends Eastern and Western influences, creating constant pilgrimage flow. When we step inside its precincts, we technically enter Vatican State—this is Italy's only extra-territorial Vatican property outside Rome itself, granted special status due to the basilica's importance.

We then visit the extraordinary Scrovegni Chapel, commissioned by wealthy banker Enrico Scrovegni to atone for his father's sin of usury. Giotto decorated this modest chapel between 1303 and 1305 with frescoes depicting biblical narratives in revolutionary naturalistic style. Before Giotto, medieval painting was flat and symbolic; his figures possess weight, emotion, and humanity that transformed Western art. The chapel's blue-vaulted ceiling, studded with golden stars, creates an intimate sacred space that many consider Giotto's masterpiece.

After a short walk, we reach Piazza Bo, scene of Italy's liveliest daily markets where locals shop for fresh produce much as they have for centuries. We then travel to Venice, where after a brief orientation, you'll have free time for independent exploration. This evening you might choose a gondola ride through lamp-lit canals, visit the casino, or perhaps attend the theatre.

Overnight in Venice.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 13 Venice: City Tour

Our guided walking tour concentrates on St. Mark's Square, which Napoleon called "the drawing room of Europe." We begin at the Doge's Palace, former seat of Venetian power featuring Europe's second-largest wooden room. Walking through council chambers, we admire Tintoretto's Paradise above the Grand Council Chamber—alleged to be the world's largest oil painting. The palace connects to the prison via the Bridge of Sighs, so named because prisoners crossing it would glimpse their last view of freedom. From these cells, built in the late 16th century to replace darker dungeons, Casanova made his famous rooftop escape in 1755.

The square's highlight is St. Mark's Basilica, a Byzantine masterpiece begun in 830 to house relics of St. Mark the Evangelist, stolen from Alexandria by Venetian merchants. Inside, walls gleam with precious art, rare marbles, and magnificent mosaics covering nearly every surface. Behind the altar stands the famous Palla d'Oro, a gold altarpiece representing medieval craftsmanship's pinnacle. Due to lengthy queues, we don't include interior tours; however, we encourage independent visits this afternoon. Your ticket includes both the Doge's Palace and the combined museums of Piazza San Marco.

Later we board the vaporetto—Venice's public water bus—travelling the Grand Canal before exploring the maze of canals, bridges, and narrow walkways that define Venice's unique character. At Rialto Bridge, we visit the bustling market where locals buy mainland produce and fresh Adriatic seafood. The name Rialto derives from "high bank"—this area occupied one of the islands' highest points, making it a safe gathering place when Venice was first settled. The market's energy and colour provide authentic glimpses of Venetian daily life beyond tourist spectacle.

Overnight in Venice.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 14 Departure

Departure from Venice.

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BUON VIAGGIO! Arrivederci!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

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