

FODOR'S ESSENTIAL ITALY, 3RD EDITION: A GREAT ITINERARY

Rome, Florence, Venice, and Highlights in Between

This itinerary works like an accordion: it can expand or contract, depending on the amount of time you have and where your interests lie. If your top priority is seeing Italy's most famous sights, extend your visits to the great cities of Rome, Florence, and Venice. If you're more drawn by beautiful landscapes, exceptional food and wine, and the Italians' knack for living well, then devote a good part of your trip to the other stops along the way, where the pace of life is more relaxed.

Getting there: Rome and Milan have Italy's busiest international airports, but there are also direct flights between the United States and Venice. To follow the itinerary outlined here, look into "open-jaw" tickets, with which you fly into one city (in this case Rome) and out of another (Venice). You could also finish up your trip by making the three-hour train ride from Venice to Milan, where you'll have more return-flight options (and you can see yet another side of Italy). Or you could go back to Rome (one-way plane tickets for flights within Italy are surprisingly inexpensive; the train takes about five hours), and fly home from there.

Getting around: Your main decision is whether to rent a car or to use Italy's efficient, reasonably priced railway system. The smartest strategy may be to do some of both. Within the cities, a car is a liability: both driving and parking are generally worse in Italian cities than anything you'll find in the United States. Outside the cities, though, a car has its clear advantages: it gives you the freedom and flexibility to go places not served (or poorly served) by public transit. Particularly in Tuscany, there are significant limits on what you'll be able to see and do without a car.

Stop 1: Rome (2–4 Days)

Rome is a large, bustling city that lives in the here and now, yet there's no other place on earth where you'll encounter such powerful evocations of a long and spectacular past. Take a few steps from Piazza del Campidoglio, designed by Michelangelo, and you're looking down upon the ruins of ancient Rome, smack-dab in the middle of the city. Exit a baroque church housing a masterpiece by Caravaggio, turn the corner, and find yourself face-to-face with the Pantheon. Such mind-bending juxtapositions are everywhere.

If you're arriving on an international flight, you'll settle into your hotel in the afternoon. Resist the temptation to nap; instead head outside and spend some time getting to know the surrounding neighborhood. In the evening, check out **Piazza Navona** and the **Trevi Fountain**—the energy of the city at night will perk you up like a shot of good espresso. For your first dinner, you can't miss with one of Rome's exceptional pizzerias.

In the morning, head to the Vatican to see **St. Peter's Basilica** and Michelangelo's glorious Sistine Chapel at the **Vatican Museums**. Have lunch back in Rome proper in the area around the Pantheon, then visit the **Pantheon** itself and spend the afternoon wandering the cobblestone streets of the neighborhood, taking time for a break at one of the famous coffee shops in the area.

Begin the next day at **Campo de' Fiori**, where you'll find Rome's most colorful open-air market in full swing. Then head to the **Campidoglio**, and from there explore the ruins of ancient Rome, topped off by a visit to the **Colosseum**. In the afternoon, hop across town to **Piazza di Spagna**, a good place to shop, lick gelato, and watch the sunset.

On further days here, follow the same basic strategy: devote mornings to significant sights (**Galleria Borghese** is a great choice; note that it requires a reservation) and afternoons to exploring neighborhoods (such as **Trastevere** and the **Jewish Ghetto**). In the evening, do as the Romans do: make a long, relaxed dinner the main event.

Extend your stay if: you're fascinated by Rome's mix of the ancient and the modern, and you love city life. You won't encounter such an intensely urban environment anywhere else on this trip.

Keep your visit short if: an urban environment is what you're on vacation to get away from.

Stop 2: Perugia (1–2 Days)

Perugia is about 2½ hours north of Rome by car or train, but consider a short detour along the way to **Orvieto**, a town with an impressive hilltop setting and one of Italy's great Gothic cathedrals. Both towns are in the largely rural **Umbria** region. The more relaxed pace of life makes a nice contrast to the energy of Rome.

Perugia is Umbria's largest city, but with a population of about 150,000 it's far from overwhelming, and it has a well-preserved medieval core. The pedestrian-only street through the heart of town, **Corso Vannucci**, is a classic place for a *passaggiata* (evening stroll), and there's a cluster of sights along the street that are worth checking out the next morning—particularly the **Collegio del Cambio**, a Renaissance guild hall frescoed by Perugia's greatest artist, Perugino.

Extend your stay if: you want to make a day trip to **Assisi**, the city of St. Francis, which is about half an hour (by car or train) east of Perugia.

Keep your visit short if: you're a thrill seeker. Umbria is a beautiful region, but it's not as likely to quicken your pulse as much as some of the other stops on the itinerary.

Stop 3: Chianti (1–2 Days)

To the northwest of Umbria is the region of **Tuscany**, which is rightly famous for having Italy's most gorgeous landscapes. Most beautiful of all is the Chianti district, between Florence and Siena, where vineyards and olive groves blanket rolling hills as far as the eye can see. To make the most of the experience, stay in the countryside at a converted villa or *agriturismo* (a farm taking overnight guests). Though Chianti is Tuscany's most idyllic location, you can hardly go wrong in the surrounding districts as well—particularly outside Siena and in the hills to its west.

Siena itself is a magnificent hill town that shouldn't be missed. With the exception of Florence, it has more to see than anywhere else in Tuscany, and its **Piazza del Campo** is one of Italy's most appealing town squares. If you leave Perugia in the morning, you can make the 1½-hour

drive west to Siena and spend the afternoon there. Tuscany is also a great place for winery tours; the **Strada Chiantigiana**, the beautiful road through the heart of Chianti, takes you past visitor-friendly vineyards and *enoteche* (wineshops).

Extend your stay if: *il dolce far niente* (the sweetness of doing nothing) is a concept you find appealing. Tuscany has some spectacular sights, but the greatest pleasure here is relaxing and unwinding.

Keep your visit short if: you're dead-set against driving. The only town south of Florence that's easily accessible by train is Arezzo, which is worth a visit but won't give you the full Tuscan experience.

Stop 4: Florence (2–4 Days)

It's hard to think of a place that's more closely linked to one specific historical period than Florence. In the 15th century the city was at the center of the artistic revolution that would come to be known as the Renaissance. Five hundred years later, the Renaissance remains the main reason people visit Florence—the abundance of art treasures is mind-boggling. Begin your first day here at the heart of the city, the **Piazza del Duomo**. Check out Ghiberti's famous bronze doors on the **Battistero**, then climb the 463 steps to the top of Brunelleschi's splendid cathedral dome, from where you have an unbeatable view of the entire city and the hills beyond.

Back on solid ground, take some time to visit the **Museo dell'Opera del Duomo**, which now holds much of the art that was once in the Duomo. Following lunch, spend the afternoon at the **Galleria degli Uffizi** (reserve your ticket in advance), which houses one of the world's greatest art collections. When you're through there, step outside into the neighboring **Piazza della Signoria**, Florence's most impressive square. You'll find there a copy of Michelangelo's David, standing in the spot that was occupied by the original for centuries.

The following morning, visit the real David at his indoor home, the **Galleria dell'Accademia**. (Reserve your ticket here as well.) A few steps down the street are the works of another, completely different Renaissance master: the **Museo di San Marco**, a former convent, is decorated with simple, ethereal, occasionally bizarre frescoes of Fra Angelico. You can get another dose of Michelangelo before lunch a few blocks away at the **Capelle Medici**. After a day and a half of walking and art gazing, if a post-lunch nap appeals to you, don't resist. Later in the afternoon, use your revived energy to make the trip up to the **Piazzale Michelangelo**, high on a hill above Florence, from which you have a sweeping view of the city. Stick around for sunset, then head down to the Oltrarno neighborhood below and feast on a famed *bistecca alla fiorentina* (grilled T-bone steak with olive oil).

You'll have seen a lot by this point, but you've just scratched the surface here. Must-sees for additional days are the **Santa Croce** and **Santa Maria Novella** cathedrals and the **Bargello** sculpture museum. And Florence isn't exclusively about art; some visitors come just for the shopping, from the food stalls of the **Mercato Centrale** to the showrooms of the exclusive boutiques along **Via Tournabuoni**.

Extend your stay if: you want to make a side trip to **Lucca**, **Pisa** (home of the leaning tower), or

the gorgeous coastal villages of the **Cinque Terre**, all west of Florence.

Keep your visit short if: you put a premium on getting off the beaten path. After several hundred years of steady tourism, almost every path in Florence has been pretty well beaten.

Stop 5: Bologna (1–2 Days)

A one-hour trip by train north from Florence, or 1 1/2 hours by car, brings you to Bologna, a city that doesn't have Florence's abundance of sights but will give you more of a taste of the pleasures of day-to-day life in Italy. With a population of about 375,000, Bologna is the largest city in **Emilia–Romagna**, a region famed for its cuisine. Many of Italy's signature food products originate here, including Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese (aka Parmesan), prosciutto di Parma, and balsamic vinegar. The pasta is considered Italy's finest—a reputation the region's chefs earn every day. If you're going to splurge on one over-the-top meal, this is the place to do it.

But a visit here is about more than food: Bologna is home to Europe's oldest university, making it a cultural and intellectual center, and it has rows of street arcades winding through grandiose towers. After you've settled into your hotel, take a walk around **Piazza Maggiore** at the heart of the city. Following dinner, you can check out some of northern Italy's best nightlife—one of the by-products of the university. The next day, continue your exploration of the city center, including a visit to the basilica of **Santo Stefano** and a climb up Bologna's own leaning tower, the **Torre degli Asinelli**.

Extend your stay if: you're lured by a day trip east to see the glorious Byzantine mosaics in **Ravenna**.

Keep your visit short if: your priority is seeing Italy's most spectacular sights. Bologna's sights are impressive—they just don't rank with the treasures of Rome, Florence, and Venice.

Stop 6: Verona (1–2 Days)

North from Bologna (1 1/2 hours by train, a little longer by car) is Verona, a charming midsize city with a distinctly northern Italian air. Standing alongside the fast-flowing River Adige, gazing at the rows of old palazzi along its banks and the rolling hills of cypress and beyond, it's easy to fall for this city of Romeo and Juliet. Spend your time here wandering the medieval piazzas; skip the touristy so-called House of Juliet, but don't miss the stunning ancient Roman **Arena**, the **Castelvecchio** (old castle), and **San Zeno Maggiore**, possibly Italy's finest Romanesque church.

Verona is often mentioned in the same breath with **Vicenza** and **Padua**, two other cities of similar size located in the **Veneto** region, on the green plains to the west of Venice. Vicenza is best known for its palaces designed by Andrea Palladio, one of history's most influential architects; Padua's star attraction is the **Cappella degli Scrovegni**, a chapel decorated with landmark Giotto frescoes. Both towns are well worth a visit as you make your way toward Venice.

Extend your stay if: you're here in the summer and have a chance to see an opera at Verona's Arena—a truly grand spectacle.

Keep your visit short if: you're impatient to see Venice.

Stop 7: Venice (2–4 Days)

Venice is one of the world's most novel cities, with canals where streets should be and an atmosphere of faded splendor that practically defines the word *decadent*. Once a great seafaring power, Venice now lives for tourism, prompting cynics to compare it to Disneyland. It's true that **Piazza San Marco**, the magnificent main square, is frequently packed with sightseers, and there are plenty of kitschy souvenirs for sale in the heavily trafficked area around the **Rialto Bridge**. But Venice is no Mickey Mouse affair: it has a rich history, it's packed with artistic treasures accumulated over a thousand years, and despite the crowds it remains inescapably romantic.

Allow yourself some time to get acclimated. If you have a rental car, return it to the offices on the city's western edge, then find your hotel (be sure to get directions in advance), and if all goes well, you'll have time left in the day for sightseeing.

Rather than making a beeline for Piazza San Marco, check out some of the other spectacular attractions, such as the church of **Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari** and the **Scuola Grande di San Rocco**, or just spend a couple of hours getting lost in the city's back canals before finding your way to a seafood dinner. Afterward, consider a nightcap around the **Campo San Luca** or **Campo Santa Margarita**.

Begin the next morning *vaporetto* (water bus) cruise along the **Grand Canal**, then make your visit to **Piazza San Marco**, home to the Byzantine splendor of the **Basilica di San Marco** and the imposing **Palazzo Ducale**. After lunch, perhaps at a traditional Venetian *bacaro* (wine bar), take the Accademia footbridge across the Grand Canal and see the **Gallerie dell'Accademia**, Venice's most important art gallery. Wander through the **Dorsoduro** neighborhood, finishing up with a romantic sunset stroll along the **Zattere** boardwalk before proceeding to dinner.

On subsequent days, make your sightseeing priorities the **Rialto fish market** (a foodie highlight), **Ca' Rezzonico** and **Ca' d'Oro** (classic Venetian palaces), and **Santa Maria dei Miracoli** and **Santi Giovanni e Paolo** (two spectacular churches).

Extend your stay if: you want to discover Venice beyond the crowds. Exploring the neighborhoods east of Piazza San Marco and the quieter outer islands will take you to another world.

Keep your visit short if: you don't have a tolerance for getting lost. Navigating the streets of Venice can feel like working through a maze.