Italy – Country Information

# General Information

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| Capital city | Rome (population 3.8 million) |
| Area | 301,230 sq km includes Sardinia and Sicily |
| Population | 58 million |
| Language | Italian (official), German, French and Slovene-speaking communities |
| Currency | Euro (EUR) € |
| Time zone | GMT +1 (Central European Time) +2 in summer |
| Dialing code | +39 |
| Daylight savings begins | Last Sunday in March |
| Daylight savings ends | Last Sunday in October |
| Electricity | Type C (European 2-pin), Type F (German 2-pin, side clip earth), Type L (Italian 3-pin) |

# Times to go

* The climate of Italy is a typical Mediterranean climate with mild winters and generally hot and dry summers.
* The most crowded periods are Easter, May and June, October and Christmas. July and August are less crowded because of the heat.
* Generally, the hottest months are July & August (where temperatures can reach 38°C); the coldest month is January; the wettest month is November, with an average rainfall of 129mm; while the driest month is July, with an average rainfall of 15mm.
* Tourists flock to Italy at all times of the year for regional festivals, for fun in the sun and even skiing, so no matter what time you choose to go, Italy is a great place to travel all year round.
* It is always advisable to bring warm clothes, as cold spells are common, even in summer.

# Accommodation

* We use a huge variety of accommodation in Italy from small family run properties, charming old stone buildings to international standard multi-story hotels
* Rooms and beds tend to be smaller than you would expect from similar standard hotels worldwide- space can be a premium in the ancient towns and cities in Italy
* Bathrooms are not always private - some hotels have shared bathrooms accessed from the hallway
* Bathrooms in Italy have showers and usually bidets, but rarely bathtubs
* Some of our accommodation in is old historic buildings which means there is a lot of charm and character , but also antiquated plumbing and sometimes things do not work like they used to
* Our local friends in our accommodation sometimes do not speak English so this is your chance to practise your Italian
* Please take note of the luggage limit since some accommodation does not have lifts so you will be hauling your luggage up several flights of stairs
* Air conditioning is a luxury in Europe and the Europeans have a very environmentally friendly attitude to energy consumption therefore we do not often have AC at our accommodation. Where it is available, it usually costs more and you are required to make a per day payment to the reception
* Continental breakfast (simply a hot drink and a croissant) is sometimes included at our hotels
* We choose accommodation based on convenience of location, sometimes that means we stay very centrally - meaning all the bars and restaurants are at your doorstep and other times it means we stay near the train station so we can catch that early train
* Towels and linen are always provided unless otherwise stated - there is rarely a need for sleeping bags
* But bring your own toiletries and hair drier since these are rarely provided at our accommodation
* Some accommodation has TVs, but there are no English channels
* Although rooms are cleaned every day, towels and sheets are only changed when a passenger vacates the room. Hot running water is sometimes not guaranteed throughout the day.
* Most hotels have a check in time of 14:00 and a check out time of 11:00

## Apartments in Lucca:

* On some trips we stay in private apartments with 2-3 rooms per apartment
* They are very centrally located in the historical centre of Lucca which means all the bars and restaurants are at your doorstep
* When using our apartment the group will not all be together in the same building as you would be in a hotel, so you may be separated from other member of the group an even your leader
* Each apartment has a fully equipped kitchens so you can cook up a feast
* This is a great way to experience what it is like to live like a local in the centre of town.

## Luggage Storage at our accommodation:

* Some hotels offer luggage storage but we do not advertise this as it is usually a very small space and is inconvenient for them
* Storing luggage can incur additional costs if luggage exceeds one piece per person and can normally be stored on departure day only and not for long periods of time
* Passengers should pay attention to the luggage limit that we outline in our trip notes
* If you must store luggage then you can do so at some train stations, for around EUR30 per week

# Transport

## Trains:

* We use a variety of transport from trains, coaches, local buses, trams, metro, walking, bicycle, boats and vaporetto
* We rarely use private charter transport because trains are comfortable with functional toilets and dining carts
* Trains vary in standard from Intercity to regional trains
* Sometimes the carriages are open with airplane style seating, other times they are closed cabins with 6-8 passengers
* There are non-smoking sections in all trains
* Trains do not usually have reclining seats
* Sometimes we have assigned seating and other times you can sit anywhere
* Trains sit quite high off the platform which means you should stick to our luggage limits as you will be required to lift your luggage onto trains and into overhead luggage storage

## Buses:

* On buses be wary of winding and narrow roads - there are many of these in Italy
* Some local buses we use are very crowded
* Luggage on buses is 'self-help' so drivers in Italy do not load your luggage for you- you are expected to lift your own luggage onto buses and ferries and trains
* Luggage sometimes goes on the bus with you and not in luggage lockers under the bus
* Toilets are not usually available on buses

## Public transport:

* You always need to validate your ticket in a stamping machine when entering the public transport system
* Keep the ticket on you until you exit the metro system
* You will be fined up to 200EUR if caught without a ticket and tourists are often targeted
* Never believe an inspector who says that the stamping machines are not working; this is a scam

# Events

## Public Holidays in 2020

**1 Jan** New Year's Day

**6 Jan** Epiphany

**5 Apr** Easter Monday

**25 Apr** Liberation Day

**1 May** Labour Day

**2 Jun** Anniversary of the Republic

**15 Aug** Assumption

**1 Nov** All Saints' Day

**8 Dec** Immaculate Conception

**25 Dec** Christmas Day

**26 Dec** St Stephen's Day

According to http://www.worldtravelguide.net/country/129/public\_holidays/Europe/Italy.html

# Food & Drink

## Meals:

* Eating out in Italy is an adventure and a delight but is very different to what you might be expecting. Italian cuisine has been adapted around the world so you can not expect the same meals as you would at home
* A cover charge is often added to bills and it is customary to tip approximately 10%
* Italy can be an expensive destination and so you should budget 35 EUR per day for meals alone
* Generally meals are not included on Intrepid trips in Italy other than Comfort or Family trips.
* A typical meal with cover charge will cost between 15-25 EUR. If you are on a budget there are many shops that sell local produce - great for picnics
* In Italy you pay for waiter service and views and you also may pay more for sitting on the sidewalk as opposed to inside. Generally if the view is nice- the prices will be inflated
* Often restaurants have a cover charge of about 10% or 2EUR per person on top of the bill.
* You should order your side dishes separately in Italy.
* Usually have to pay for water at restaurants and they will not provide tap water.
* Sometimes a light breakfast is included at our hotels (simply a hot drink and a croissant)

## Must try food in Italy:

There are some fabulous food experiences to be had:

* The original pizza in Naples
* Sitting in waterfront restaurants in Sorrento
* Eating Umbrian cuisine on a vine covered terrace of a medieval building in Gubbio
* Trying local produce and exclusive wines in an enoteca in Umbria
* Pesto making in Levanto on the Cinque Terre
* Having a local feast in an Agriturismo near Asti in Piedmont
* Joining in the aperitivi culture - where you buy a drink and can snack on finger food - this happens at local bars from about 6:30pm.
* Sampling local food and drink in the region of origin is a highlight such as Limoncello on the Amalfi Coast, Ribollita in Tuscany, Pizza in Naples and Bolognese sauce in Bologna
* Pasta plays a substantial part in Italian recipes, but nearly all regions have developed their own special dishes.
* Some of the best cheeses include mozzarella, caciotta romana (semi-hard, sweet sheep cheese), pecorino (hard, sharp sheep's milk cheese).
* Italy has over 20 major wine regions, from Valle d'Aosta on the French border, to Sicily and Sardinia in the south. Wines are named after grape varieties or after their village or area of origin. The most widespread is the Chianti group of vineyards, governed by the Chianti Classico quality controls (denoted by a black cockerel on the neck of each bottle).
* Risotto - Rice that has been sautéed and cooked in a shallow pan with stock. The result is a very creamy, and hearty dish. Meat, poultry, seafood, vegetables, and cheeses are almost always added depending on the recipe and the locale. Many restaurants, families, towns, and regions will have a signature risotto or at least style of ristotto, in addition or in place of a signature pasta dish (risotto alla Milanese is famous Italian classic).
* Arancini - Balls of rice with tomato sauce, eggs, and cheese that are deep fried. They are a southern Italian specialty, though are now quite common all over.
* Polenta - Yellow corn meal (yellow grits) that has been cooked with stock. It is normally served either creamy, or allowed to set up and then cut into shapes and fried or roasted.
* Gelato This is the Italian version of ice cream, The non-fruit flavours are usually made only with milk. The fruit flavours are non-dairy. It's fresh as a sorbet, but tastier. There are many flavours: coffee, chocolate, fruit, tiramisù... To try absolutely.
* Tiramisù Italian cake made with coffee, mascarpone, cookies and cocoa powder on the top. The name means "pick-me-up."

## Food and culture:

* It is fun to try and master the dos and don'ts of food customs such as when it is an appropriate time to have different types of coffee (for example cappuccino should be consumed before lunch only)
* Or parmesan is only provided with dishes that should be accompanied by it - for example not all pasta sauces should have parmesan
* Garlic bread is not an Italian dish, nor is Fettuccine Alfredo.
* Fruiterers don't appreciate self-service in fruit shops and squeezing fruit, like you may do at home, to test its ripeness is not appropriate

## Water:

* Tap water in Europe is considered safe to drink but to be sure to avoid any stomach upsets due to different chemicals or bacteria, bottled water is best a solution
* Bottled water is expensive in Europe and is available everywhere

# Communication

## E-mail:

* There is internet in almost all locations
* We are never more than 3 days between Internet locations
* Internet can cost up to 8EUR per hour but can be as cheap as 1EUR per hour in the big cities
* Hotels rarely have internet but usually internet cafes are open daily and into the evenings
* Due to new anti-terrorism laws, you are required to show photo ID when using the internet in cafes

## Telephone:

* There is excellent mobile coverage in Europe and mobiles with global roaming work very well - check with your provider in advance of departing your home country to ensure your mobile is able to access foreign networks
* We are rarely more than one day away from mobile reception
* Hotels do not always have telephones available
* All public phones operate on phone cards which need to be purchased in advance- they cost from 5EUR.   
  Each country has a different phone system so you need different local phone cards for each country.   
  It is possible to buy long distance phone cards which work in several countries

## Post:

* Receiving post is not convenient as we are usually doing something or travelling during the opening hours of most post offices
* Postage from Europe is generally reliable and usually takes about 7 days to reach destination
* Postage is approx. 0.65EUR for a postcard stamp and line-ups at post offices are usually long

# What to buy

* Avoid purchasing fake designer labels- anything cheaper than at home and NOT sold in a shop IS fake.
* There is a huge crack down on fake brands in Italy and passengers should be aware that purchasing fake brands off street vendors can result in a 5000EUR fine
* Care should be taken when buying antiques since Italy is renowned for skilled imitators.
* Prices are generally fixed and bargaining is not general practice, although a discount may be given on a large purchase.
* Florence, Milan and Rome are famous as important fashion centres, but smaller towns also offer good scope for shopping.
* Some places are known for particular products, e.g. Lake Como (Lombardy) for silk, Prato (Tuscany) for textiles, Empoli (Tuscany) for the production of bottles and glasses in green glass, Deruta (Umbria) and Faenza (Emilia-Romagna) for pottery, Florence (Tuscany) for leather, Venice (Veneto) for glass and lace.
* Check with your local customs officials to ensure that you are able to import some items back into your home country. Australia and New Zealand for example have strict quarantine laws.

# Culture

## Toilets

* Expect to pay between 0.30 and 1.50EUR to use a public toilet
* Almost all accommodation has western style toilets and sometimes bidets however squat toilets are common in Italy

## Museums:

* If you are interested in some museums on your trip it is worth keeping in mind that many Museums are closed on Mondays or Tuesdays. To avoid disappointment we recommend passengers prepare themselves. There is information in your trip notes about booking museums in advance where it is likely to be an issue.
* Some museums have huge line ups such as the Vatican and the Uffizi. Bookings can usually not be made while travelling since they need to be booked well in advance.
* The Last Supper in Milan needs to be booked up to 6 months in advance.
* The Uffizi needs to be booked up to 5 months in advance

## Smoking:

* Smoking is slowly being phased out of public enclosed spaces.
* Italy has banned all smoking on public transport, but not yet in restaurants.

# Reading

*Italy* by Lonely Planet  
*The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri.  
*Concise History of Italy* by Vincent Cronin.  
*The Penguin Book of the Renaissance* by JH Plumb.  
*The Travels of Marco Polo* by Marco Polo  
*Winter Stars* by Beatrice Lao  
*The Agony and the Ecstasy* by Irving Stone  
*Under the Tuscan Sun* by Frances Mayes