



Welcome to Italy

"Out of nowhere we saw a pod of about 50 bottlenose dolphins. They just wanted to play in the water. They jumped, dived and loved riding the bow wave of the boat. We followed them for three hours and they were absolutely beautiful. It was definitely worth it."

Once the centre of Western civilisation, Italy is birthplace to Renaissance art, pasta, ice cream and la dolce vita. Ancient, delicate cities are set amongst overwhelming and dramatic landscapes, filled with turbulent and extraordinary history and culture. Italy has become synonymous with quality and refinement, earning its place over the centuries as one of the most influential European countries in the world.

Know your History

Pre-history

Recent excavations in Italy have revealed that human presence dates back around 200,000 years to the Palaeolithic period. It wasn't until the 7th and 8th Centuries B.C. that Italy truly came into being; Greek colonies were formed along the coast of Sicily, and the southern Italian peninsula was known as Magna Graecia.

Ancient Rome

The legend of Rome is that the city was founded and built by brothers Romulus and Remus; descendants of the Trojan prince and refugee Aeneas, fathered by the god Mars or demi-God Hercules, and left by their uncle in the wild to die. They are found by a she-wolf, who suckles them. The story goes that the brothers are restored to their birthright, and decide to build a city; Rome.

Rome began as a small agricultural community around the 8th Century B.C., growing to an empire that encompassed the whole of the Mediterranean Sea. Once a complex autocratic Republic, Rome was ravaged by civil wars. The Republic lasted from 509 B.C. with the overthrow of the Roman monarchy, 482 years until its subversion. The transition from a Republic to an Empire is commonly believed to be marked by events such as Julius Caesar's appointment as perpetual dictator in 44 B.C. and the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C. The expansion of the Empire itself, begun when it was a Republic, was at its peak under Emperor Trajan, occupying around 6.5 million km² of land. The Empire's influence is still seen today – in language, art, religion, architecture, philosophy, law, and government.

The power of the Roman Empire began to weaken when, in the late 3rd Century A.D., Diocletian established the method of four co-emperors in an attempt to control its vast territory. The following

decades saw a divide along an east/west axis, and the last division was upon the death of Theodosius I in 395. However, it wasn't until 476 that the Western Roman Empire collapsed, forcing Romulus Augustus to abdicate. The Eastern Roman Empire (or Byzantine Empire) survived until 1453, when it toppled after the death of Constantine XI and the capture of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks.

Middle Ages

The fall of the Roman stronghold on Europe heralded centuries of feudal city states and petty tyrannies and foreign invasions in Italy, whilst countries north of the Alps new nation-states formed. In the anarchic city states, people looked to strong men to restore order, offering women to those perceived as strongest, including to the Della Scala family in Verona, the Visconti of Milan and the Medici of Florence.

Four Maritime Republics emerged from the mêlée – Venice, Genoa, Pisa, and Amalfi. These Republics monopolised the disorder of Italy, forming strong merchant-based regions. Venice and Genoa offered Europe the chance to trade with the East, and each Republic offered unique trade; Venice was home to the renowned Venetian glass and Florence produced silk, wool, banks and jewellery. During the late Middle Ages, Italy was divided into the kingdom of Naples in the south, the Republic of Florence and Papal States in central Italy, the Genoese and Milanese controlling the north and west and the Venetians controlling the east.

Renaissance

The factionalism of Middle Ages Italy was not all bad. Its unique political structures, lively social climate, and flourishing trade gave rise to unique cultural progression. It was late 13th Century Florence that the ideas that epitomised the Renaissance emerged.

15th Century Italy was one of the most urbanised places in the whole of Europe. With the birth of the Renaissance, Italy flourished. The writings of Dante Alighieri (1265 to 1321) and Francesco Petrarca (1304 to 1374), and the paintings from masters such as Giotto di Bondone (1267 to 1337) proved that the Renaissance (known as the "rebirth" of many classical ideas) was the start of true Italian sophistication. The Renaissance brought with it political, philosophical, literary, cultural, social, and religious reforms, that were felt not just in Italy, but across Europe.

The Black Death

In 1348, a Black Death pandemic devastated Italy, killing one third of the population. But, upon recovery, Italy found itself once again the centre of Western civilisation. The resurgence of cities, trade, economy, and Humanism and Renaissance (15th–16th Centuries), as well as courts like Este in Ferrara and De Medici in Florence meant that Italy began to impact on European countries once more.

The Plague returned repeatedly until the 17th Century, the last epidemic occurring in Naples in 1656.

Florence

Florence became the capital of the Renaissance. It was home to artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and Botticelli. Between the 14th and 16th Century, Florence was one of Europe's greatest cities, with numerous museums, palazzo, and churches, and buildings such as the Pitti Palace and the Uffizi described as "works of art themselves".

Rome

It wasn't just Florence who benefited from the rise-and-rise of the Renaissance. Under Pope Julius II, and his successors Leo X and Clement VII (both members of the Medici family), Rome saw its transition into a true Renaissance city.

In this 20-year period, Rome established itself as one of the greatest centres of art in the world. Michelangelo helped to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica (first built Emperor Constantine the Great), started the decoration of the Sistine Chapel, and frescoes such as Cappella Niccolina made him one of the most famous painters in Italy. Rome began to lose some of its religious character – seeing a boom in feasts, horse races, parties, intrigues and licentious episodes.

Foreign rule

In 1494, French king Charles VIII invaded Italy. The past century of fragmented states meant that the invasion was little defended, and the last half of the 16th Century saw several invasions as France and Spain battled for control of the country. Eventually, Spain won, and the following two centuries were under Spanish occupation. Strong alliances between Habsburg Spain and the Holy See meant a mass prosecution of Protestants, leaving Italy a predominantly Roman Catholic country to this day. Spanish influence is still seen today in southern Italy, where the social consequences of a slow and inefficient rule can still be felt. The Spanish Empire imposed heavy taxation and maintained a tight grip on affairs in the Vatican.

When Austria succeeded Spain as hegemon in Italy after the Peace of Utrecht, thanks to the Enlightenment Habsburgic emperors were currently embracing, Italy began to recover some of its intellectual fervour. Leopold I, Grand Duke of Tuscany, abolished the death penalty and torture in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, seen as a huge leap forward in Italian modernisation.

The Grand Tour

In the 1700s, aristocrats – mostly British – toured France, Italy, and Greece to admire their arts, cultures, and monuments in what was known as the Grand Tour. Popular spots were Venice, Rome, Naples, Florence, Turin, Sicily, and Milan. In 1748, the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum were unearthed, and the restoration of surviving ancient monuments in Rome, encouraged visitors such as Goethe, Shelley, Keats and Byron. After his visit, Keats said: "Italy is the paradise of exiles".

Napoleonic Wars

The French revolution and the Napoleonic Wars (1796 to 1815) planted the idea that Italy could (and eventually did) build national unity in the Italian people. Many in Italy endorsed the ideas of equality, democracy, law, and nation that the French were so fiercely campaigning for. However, unity in Italy didn't come until the last half of the 19th Century.

Unification

The Kingdom of Italy came about from the efforts of Italian nationalists and monarchists who were loyal to the House of Savoy. Giuseppe Garibaldi led the drive in southern Italy, whilst the monarchy of the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia led the campaign in the north, under the watchful eye of Camillo Benso, conte di Cavour. The Kingdom liberated the Lombardy-Venetia with the help of Napoleon III, challenging the Austrian Empire in the Second Italian War of Independence. Turin was initially made the capital, but this was moved to Florence in 1865.

In 1866, the Kingdom joined Prussia in the Austro-Prussian War, and waged the Third Italian War of Independence, annexing Venice. France abandoned its positions in Rome during the catastrophic Franco-Prussian War in 1870. Rushing to take over the Papal State, Italy at last achieved unification, and moved the capital from Florence to Rome. Although the monarchy was kept, Italy's government became a parliamentary system run by liberals.

As northern Italy industrialised and modernised, southern Italy and agricultural regions remained under-developed, stagnating, causing mass migration. In 1861, the Sardinian Statuto Albertino, provided basic freedoms, but non-propertied and uneducated classes remained excluded from laws and unable to vote. Male universal suffrage was adopted in 1913 in response to the exclusion, and the Italian Socialist Party increased in strength as they challenged traditional liberal and conservative institutions.

World War One

During World War One, Italy remained neutral, but signed the Treaty of London in 1915, entering Etente (the triple alliance between France, Britain and Russia) when promised they would receive Trento, Trieste, Istria, Dalmatia and parts of the Ottoman Empire. During the war, the economy collapsed, and around 600,000 Italians died. Under the Peace Treaty of Saint-Germain, Italy was handed Bolzano-Bozen, Trento, Trieste and Istria, though the victory was described by the public as "mutilated".

Inspired by the Russian Revolution, and disaffected by the devastation of World War One, Italy turned to anarchy, descending into turmoil. Fearing a socialist revolution of their own, the liberals began to endorse the National Fascist Party, led by Benito Mussolini. In 1922, king Victor Emmanuel III instructed the army not to intervene with the coup led by the fascists (Marcia su Roma, "March on Rome") and instead entered an alliance with Mussolini. Over the next few years, Mussolini established a dictatorship, banning all political parties and halting personal liberties.

Mussolini & World War Two

In 1935, after a unexpectedly lengthy campaign, Mussolini subjugated Ethiopia, resulting in the expulsion from the League of Nations and international alienation. In 1936, and again in 1938, Mussolini entered a pact with Nazi Germany, and although opposed to Adolf Hitler's annexation of Austria, made no interference. Mussolini also supported Franco during the Spanish civil war.

On 7th April 1939, Italy occupied Albania, and entered World War Two in 1940, taking part in the last stages of the Battle of France. Keen to follow Hitler's quick victories in the Blitzkriegs in Poland and France, Mussolini invaded Greece in October 1940, but was defeated in a matter of months. At the same time, an Allied counter-attack to his conquering of British Somalia saw the loss of all Italian possession in the Horn of Africa. Italy's forces were also defeated in North Africa, saved only by the German Africa Corps (led by Erwin Rommel).

Italy's campaign in World War Two ended in June 1943 when the Allies invaded, arresting Mussolini and ensuring the collapse of the fascist regime. In September 1943, Italy surrendered, but the country remained a battlefield as the Allies moved north, pushing back loyalist Italian fascists and the Nazi forces. The Nazis left Italy on 25th April 1945, and the remaining Italian fascists disbanded. Between June 1940 and May 1945, an estimated half a million Italians – including civilians – died; around 200,000 partisans took part in the Resistance; German or fascist forces killed roughly 70,000 partisan and civilian Italians for Resistance activities; and at least 54,000 Italian prisoners of war died in the Soviet Union.

Italian Republic

In 1946, Umberto II (son of Victor Emmanuel III) was forced to abdicate, and Italy once again became a Republic after a referendum held on 2nd June 1946. It was also the first time Italian women were granted the vote. The new Republican Constitution came into force on 1st January 1948. Italy also changed its borders at this time; under the Paris Peace Treaties of 1947, the eastern border was ceded to Yugoslavia, and the free territory of Trieste was divided between the two states.

In the first universal suffrage elections, on the 18th April 1948, the Christian Democrats (DC) under Alcide De Gasperi, won with 48% of the vote.

In the 1950s, Italy joined NATO and allied itself with the United States. The Italian economy was revived under the Marshall Plan, and the country enjoyed sustained economic growth known as the "Economic Miracle". In 1957, Italy became a founding member of the European Economic Community (EEC), now known as the European Union (EU).

Years of Lead

In the late 1960s, Italy experienced a hard economic crisis, lasting until the late 1980s, and the Years of Lead – characterised by widespread social conflicts and acts of terrorism by extra-parliamentary movements. In 1978, DC leader Aldo Moro was assassinated, ending the "Historic Compromise" between the DC and the Communist Party.

For the first time since 1945, government was led by non-DC premiers – republican Giovanni Spadolini, followed by socialist Bettino Craxi. The Socialist Party, led by Craxi, became increasingly critical of the communists and the Soviet Union. Craxi himself was in favour of US president Ronald Reagan's positioning of Pershing missiles in Italy.

1992 – 2009

Between 1992 and 2009, voters disenchanted with past political stagnation, massive governmental debt and extensive corruption (nicknamed Tangentopoli after being uncovered by Mani pulite, "Clean Hands"), demanded political, economic and ethical reforms. Between 1992 and 1994, due to the scandals that rocked all political parties, the Christian Democrats suffered a severe crisis and were dissolved, and the Socialists and other minor governing parties were also dissolved.

In 1994, media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi was elected prime minister, but was forced to step down in December the same year when the Lega Nord Party withdrew support. In 1996, a centre-left coalition under Romano Prodi won the national elections, but lost a vote of confidence by three votes in 1998. Massimo D'Alema formed a new government, but resigned in 2000.

In 2001, Silvio Berlusconi became prime minister once again, leading a centre-right coalition. Berlusconi remained in power for a complete five-year mandate, although with two different governments – the first, between 2001 and 2005, was the longest surviving government since World War Two, and it was also under this government that Italy joined the US-led military coalition in Iraq.

Berlusconi

In 2006, Prodi took power once more with the centre-left, but once again lost a confidence vote in 2008 and resigned. In 2008, Berlusconi won the elections to form a third government. Berlusconi himself has a large record of criminal allegations – including mafia collusion, false accounting, tax fraud, corruption, and bribery of police officers and judges. He has been tried in Italian courts several

times, but so far has been acquitted of all but one, leaving him with a clean record.

Money Talks

Both the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank ranked Italy as the 7th largest world economy in 2009, based on nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and the world's 10th ranking economy in Purchasing Power Parity GDP. Italy also belongs to the Group of Eight (G8) industrialised nations, the European Union (EU) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Italy, the world's 18th most developed country (surpassing the UK and Germany), is divided between a developed industrial north, and an agricultural, state-assisted south. According to The Economist, Italy has the world's 8th highest quality of life index and a very high standard of living. The industrialised north is dominated by large privatised companies, and is home to six of the world's 100 biggest companies. Italy also has the world's 7th highest exports – at a huge US\$ 546,900,000,000 in 2008 – and is the world's 5th largest industrial good producer. Italy is considered the 11th greatest national power.

Exports

Although Italy concentrates on the secondary and tertiary economic sectors, the country is an important agricultural exporter – it is the biggest exporter of kiwi fruits, grapes, and artichokes worldwide, as well as averaging 1,793 tonnes of wine each year (around one fifth of world wine production in 2005 came from Italy).

Italy also surpasses France and China in gold reserves, falling just behind the USA and Germany, coming 4th with 2,451.8 tonnes.

Tourism is a major industry in Italy, as one of the fastest growing and most profitable sectors of the national economy. Italy is the 5th major tourist destination in the world, and the 4th highest tourist earner.

Money

Italy's currency is the Euro (EUR), adopted in 2008. ATM machines are present in Italy and other major towns, though withdrawals may have a small surplus charge although this is likely to be similar to traveller's cheque commission rates. Credit and debit cards (MasterCard and Visa) are accepted for cash withdrawal at most banks but rarely for general payments. However a credit card will come in useful in the event of an emergency.

Get Culture Savvy

Architecture

Italian architecture is famous the world over. Architecture finds inspiration from Italy's huge historical and cultural diversity, ranging from Classical Roman and Greek, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Neo-Classical, Art Nouveau to Modern. Monuments such as the Pantheon, the Colosseum, and the Leaning Tower of Pisa are synonymous with the Italian image, as well as countless palazzo, gardens, villas and Basilicas. Architects who changed the course of architectural history have come

from Italy too – Andrea Palladio, who founded Palladianism, Renzo Piano and Filippo Brunelleschi.

Arts

Italian paintings are instantly recognisable by their warmth of colour and light (exemplified by Titian and Caravaggio), a fixation with religious figures and motifs, and are especially renowned for being the expert in all things Renaissance. Artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Donatello, Botticelli, and Raphael epitomise the breadth and depth of Italian art, their works influencing and changing the face of art even today. More modern artists – the work of Umberto Boccioni and Giacomo Balla – have recaptured some of Italy's artist glory with the development of Futurism, and Giorgio de Chirico's influence on the surrealists has influenced the new wave of artists.

Literature

Florentine poet Dante Alighieri created the basis of the modern Italian language. His biggest work, the "Divine Comedy", is considered one of the greatest literary statements to come out of the Middle Ages.

Sport

The most popular sport in Italy is football, gathering a following of fans with almost religious fervour. Italy's football team is second in the world only to Brazil, having won four World Cups.

Music

Music has always played an important role in Italian culture – the piano and violin were invented in Italy – and the 16th and 17th Century in Italy gave rise to music forms such as the symphony, concerto, and sonata. Italy is also the birthplace of opera. Founded in the early 1600s, opera came from cities such as Mantua and Venice, and the 19th and 20th Centuries gave rise to composers such as Verdi, Rossini, and Puccini, who wrote some of the most famous operas ever written. In Milan, La Scala opera house is considered the best in the world, and Italian opera singers such as Alessandro Bonci, Luciano Pavarotti, and Andrea Bocelli, are unmatched in skill.

In the 1920s, jazz became a more popular form of music in Italy, and Milan, Rome and Sicily remain notable centres of jazz music. In the 1970s, Italian bands such as PFM and Goblin were at the forefront of the progressive rock scene. The Italian Sanremo Music Festival inspired the Eurovision song contest and the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto.

Fashion

Italian fashion is considered amongst the most important traditions in the world. Milan was named fashion capital of the world in 2009, and Vogue Italia is widely accepted as the most influential fashion magazine in the world. Many famous fashion houses have come from Italy: Gucci, Prada, Versace, Valentino, Armani, Dolce & Gabbana, Missoni, Fendi, Moschino, Max Mara and Ferragamo are amongst the best design institutions in the world. Italian leather has made a worldwide reputation of being of the best quality you can find.

Food

Much of Italy's food – originating back to the 4th Century – have become world famous, and hugely popular. Cheese and wine are major parts of Italian cuisine, each region boasting their own specialities and nuances. Popular Italian foods are: pasta, pizza, lasagne, focaccia bread, and gelato (ice cream). Coffee – more specifically espresso – has also become an Italian staple. However, Italian food anywhere but Italy is never quite as good as real Italian food! To truly enjoy the taste of Italy, you must visit the country.

Customs

Italy abides by most European customs and etiquette. Italians place huge importance on la bella figura – making a good impression by dressing elegantly. Food is also a major part of Italian etiquette – good table manners are important, and dinner is a central part of family life.

Religion

Since the 16th Century, Roman Catholicism has become the dominant religion in Italy, though it is no longer a state religion. Most Italians identify themselves as Roman Catholic, and many believe in a God, though not all practice it.

Holidays

1st January New Years Day (Capodanno)

6th January Epiphany (Epifania)

Varies Easter Sunday (Pasqua)

Varies (Monday after Easter) Easter Monday (Lunedì dell'Angelo, Pasquetta)

25th April Anniversary of Liberation (Festa della Liberazione)

1st May Labour Day (Festa dei Lavoratori)

2nd June Republic Day (Festa della Repubblica)

15th August Assumption Day (Ferragosto and Assunzione)

1st November All Saints (Ognissanti or Tutti i santi)

8th December Immaculate Conception (Immacolata Concezione)

25th December Christmas Day (Natale)

26th December St. Stephen's Day (Santo Stefano)

Learn the Lingo

Italians are renowned for their passion and zest for life, and the passionate Italian language reflects that. Italian is spoken as the first language of around 70 million people, and between 120 and 150 million people speak it as a second language. Most native speakers are bilinguals of both universal Italian and a regional dialect. It is also the official language of Vatican City.

Knowing a few words and phrases before you visit a country can greatly deepen your understanding of the local culture. Here are a few phrases to get you started.

Lay of the Land

Italy is in southern Europe, a boot-shaped peninsula jutting into the Mediterranean Sea. Italy also contains the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, to the west of the peninsula. The Apennine Mountains run down the peninsula's spine, with Rome to the west around halfway down, and the Alps create a

northern border with the rest of Europe.

Italy also has a lot of volcanic activity (Pompeii was buried by a volcanic eruption from Vesuvius in 79 A.D.). Italy has 14 volcanoes, including Etna, Vesuvius, and Stromboli, and Vesuvius is the only volcano still active on mainland Europe. The only evidence of such seismic activity in Italy in more recent times is its abundance of thermal pools.

What's the Weather like?

Italy's climate is typically Mediterranean. You can expect hot summers and mild, wet winters with inland winds reducing the temperature in the winter. The average high for July and August is 29 to 30°C.

Biodiversity

In terms of biodiversity, Italy is one of the richest in Europe. Italy holds around 6,759 vascular plants and over half of Europe's non-vascular plants – which amounts to around 9,000 species. Over 57,000 species of fauna have been recorded in Italy – around a third of all Europe's fauna. This is most likely down to the variations between the alpine north and the Mediterranean climate in the south.

The cold northern mountains are home to trees such as the beech, fir, pine, ash, yew, and maple, and flowers like the Trumpet Gentian, Glacial Buttercup, Spring Pasque Flower, Alpine Crocus, and Alpine Pansy. These glacial heights also boast some of the most spectacular animals in Italy – Gold-ringed Dragonflies, Apollo Butterflies, Swallowtail Butterflies, Griffon Vultures, marmots, chamois, and ibex. Rarer species like Brown Bears, Ermines, Red Deer, Roe Deer, Blue Hares, lynxes and wolves have been spotted, but evidence shows they are in sharp decline. Birds include: the Peregrine Falcon, Goshawk, Eagle-owl, Golden Eagle, and a dotterel that only nests in these Italian mountains.

In the alluvial plains and valleys, you can find semi-tropical vegetation such as bougainvillea, palm trees, wild orchids and tropical flowers; anemone, ranunculi, red lilies, martagons, belladonna, and raspberry bushes are abundant in the forest undergrowth. The rare Loricato Pine is only found in these areas. Animals include: the Apennine Wolf, wild cat, wild boars, squirrels, chamois, and foxes, and the Paddled Salamander; and you can see birds like: the Great Spotted Woodpecker, the Woodpigeon, Alpine Accentor, and Water and Rock Pipits. Rare inhabitants are the Royal Eagle and the Capriol Deer.

Along the coastal regions, the plants are semi-tropical and tropical in nature, thanks to the humid climate of the Mediterranean, encouraging the growth of ferns, shrubs, herbs, vine, and palms. All in all, this area hosts around 700 different kinds of plants. Animals found in these areas are: the endangered Mufloni wild goat and Discoglossus Sardo frog, the Pellegrino hawk, the Imperial crow, the Royal seagull, the Corsican seagull and cormorants, as well as migratory Honey Buzzards, Black Kites, Marsh Harriers, kestrels and hobbies.

Along the south coast of Italy, marine life is varied and spectacular; multiple species of dolphin, including the endangered Short-beaked Common Dolphin, Bottlenose Dolphins, and whales such as the Fin Whale, Sperm Whales and Pilot Whales can be spotted from the coast of Italy, and such marine life has encouraged a growth in marine tourism such as dolphin watching.

Good Books

Guidebooks

- Italy. David Simonis. Lonely Planet Country Guides, 2010. ISBN 9781741792294
- The Rough Guide to Italy. Rob Andrews, Ros Belford, Jules Brown, & Jonathan Buckley. Rough Guide Publications, 2009. ISBN 9781848360310
- Italian (Lonely Plant Phrasebook). Karina Coates and Pietro Iagnocco. 2003. ISBN 9781740599818

Fiction/Travel Writing

- Eating Up Italy: Voyages on a Vespa. Matthew Fort. Harper Perennial, 2005. ISBN 9780007214815
- Made in Italy: Food and Stories. Giorgio Locatelli. Fourth Estate, 2008. ISBN 9781841157023
- Home to Italy. Peter Pezzelli. Kensington Publication Corporation, 2004. ISBN 9780758207685

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