

NORTHERN ITALY**Venice, Florence, Cinque Terre, Siena & Rome****13 days**

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Day 1 *Arrival in Venice*

Today we arrive in Venice and transfer to our hotel.

Overnight in Venice.

Meal Plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 *Venice: City Tour*

We start our day at St Mark's Square, surrounded with 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 has the second largest wooden room in Europe. Of interest as we walk through the council rooms, is Tintoretto's Paradise over the Grand Council Chamber -- alleged to be the largest oil painting in the world. The palace is connected to the old prison by the 'Bridge of Sighs.' In the late 16th century the decision was made to build new airier prison cells to replace the original dark dungeons. It was from this new prison that Casanova made his daring escape across the rooftops in 1755.

The highlight of the square is St Mark's Basilica, a Byzantine masterpiece. This cathedral was begun in 830 to house the tomb of St Mark whose relics were stolen from Alexandria in Egypt. We do not include a tour of the interior of the basilica as lengthy queues usually make this impractical for our program. We encourage you to visit the site during your free time tomorrow morning. 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.

We'll then take a vaporetto, or public water bus, on the Grand Canal and 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 the core of Venice and was thus considered a safe gathering point. The market here is vibrant with locals buying fruit and vegetables brought in from the mainland, and a vast array of fish caught fresh in the Adriatic.

This evening you may choose to visit the casino, take a gondola ride, or perhaps spend an evening at the theatre.

Overnight in Venice.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 *Venice - Florence*

Today we'll travel by bus to Florence, with stops along the way.*

Depending on our time of arrival, your Tour Leader may take the group on an orientation stroll upon arrival.

Please note: For smaller groups we may accomplish this journey by fast train instead.

Overnight in Florence.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 *Florence: Duomo, Ponte Vecchio & Uffizi Gallery*

This morning we visit the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (Duomo), complete with its magnificent red dome. Upon its completion in 1436, the dome was hailed as the greatest architectural achievement of its day, equaling, perhaps even surpassing, the monuments of antiquity. The cupola's diameter is greater than that of St Peter's in Rome and thenave is the third largest in Christendom. The Romanesque Baptistery, famous for its decorated bronze doors (named the "Gateway to Paradise" by Michelangelo), and the 81 m (266 feet) Giotto's Bell Tower.

We continue along the pedestrian mall to the Ponte Vecchio, the oldest bridge in Florence and the only one in the city to survive World War II. The Ponte Vecchio was built in 1345 and used to be lined with butchers' shops which have now been replaced by rows of gold and silver shops on both sides. At the Piazza Santa Croce, we stop to admire the facade of the Franciscan church of the same name. Inside we see the burial places of some of the most illustrious Italians, such as Michelangelo, Galileo, Machiavelli, Foscolo, Gentile and Rossini.

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

Overnight in Florence.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 5 *Florence: The Accademia*

Today we we'll have a guided tour of the Accademia, Europe's first academy of drawing, today housing a superb art collection including Michelangelo's David, the archetype of male beauty set in marble.

The afternoon is free to take in the atmosphere of this sophisticated city. Florence is also famous for its shopping, especially for leather articles, fashion in general, and its large street market.

Overnight in Florence.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 6 *Florence - Lerici*

Today we travel from Florence to Lerici, located on the dramatic Ligurian coast. Time-permitting en route, we may be able to make a stop in Lucca.

Not so known outside Italy, Lerici (pronounced ler-EE-chee) is a jumble of pastel buildings that jockey for attention with its beaches, crescent-shaped coves and rocky cliffs that melt into the sparkling sea. The imposing medieval castle that looms above Lerici's main piazza is the town's defining feature, but the scenic mile-and-a-half-long promenade that stretches along the waterfront is its most dazzling. After passing boats bobbing lazily in the harbour and tracts of enormous rocks where sunbathers lie like sea lions, the promenade winds past a string of beaches en route to a smaller stone castle that anchors the neighboring village of San Terenzo.

On arrival you should have some time to explore this charming town before dinner.

Overnight in Lerici.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 *The Cinque Terre*

Today we travel by boat (+/- 90 min) along the Ligurian coast to village of Vernazza in the Cinque Terre (if weather does not permit, your Tour Leader will re-adjust our program to access the area by bus and / or rail). This spectacular section of the Italian Riviera is considered to rival the Amalfi Coast near Naples for its stunning views and gorgeous sunsets. Here we begin our easy-paced walk between the coastal villages.

Depending on variables such as group interest, weather, and trail conditions, we may walk as far as Corniglia, or continue to Manarola on foot or by train (included in our National Park entrance tickets). From Manarola we will walk the short and scenic (and easy) Via D'Amore -- Lover's Walk -- to Riomaggiore. Our day offers some flexibility whereby travellers not so keen on walking can opt out on certain sections, explore on their own, and meet up with the group later using their all-day train tickets.

From Riomaggiore we take the train 10 minutes to La Spezia where we meet up with our transport to take us back to neighbouring Lerici.

PLEASE NOTE: Due to the flooding that occurred in the region in late 2011, our day may need to be adjusted depending on what trails are open or under repair, and any repairs or re-construction occurring in the impacted villages.

Overnight in Lerici.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 8 *Lerici - Pisa - Volterra - Siena*

Today we make our way to Siena with a full-day of sightseeing en route and in Siena on arrival. We'll make a brief stop in Pisa, where we will spend most of our time concentrating on the town's principal monuments -- the Duomo, the Baptistry, and the most famous structure in Pisa, the gravity-defying "Leaning Tower." We will take ample time to view and photograph the tower from the outside -- to climb the tower requires advance reservations and a considerable amount of time to queue for entry; time constraints make this impractical for our tour. Plus the throngs of tourists here can be a bit offputting - selfie and GO!

We then continue through beautiful and quintessential Tuscan rolling countryside to Volterra. Situated like many Etruscan cities on a high plateau, Volterra offers uninterrupted views over the surrounding hills; in many places the town's ancient Etruscan walls still stand. The exact origins of the Etruscans and when they arrived in Italy, are unknown. Their civilization was centred in the area between present-day Rome and Florence, and had its Golden Age from the eighth until the sixth century BC. After this period the Etruscan empire was gradually superseded by the rising power of Rome, although in the process, the Romans incorporated many aspects of Etruscan culture into their own society and beliefs.

We visit Volterra's famous Museo Guarnacci, which contains one of Italy's best collections of Etruscan artifacts. Pride of place in the museum goes to the collection of 600 Etruscan funerary urns, depicting many aspects of Etruscan customs and beliefs. We also visit the city walls and the Etruscan Gate with its basalt heads of Etruscan gods dating back to the sixth century BC. Before leaving Volterra we view the Roman amphitheatre, dating to the first century BC. This is one of the best preserved Roman theatres in Italy and enough of the original structure has survived to allow an almost complete reconstruction.

Continue to Siena, queen of Tuscany's hill towns. On arrival we check in to our hotel and then enjoy Siena on a walking tour. Indeed, the Siena city council was Europe's first to ban motor traffic from the city centre. Siena today seems frozen in time; the town has traditionally been Florence's rival as the centre of art and architecture in Tuscany. While Florence is known for its Renaissance art and buildings, Siena takes us straight back to the Middle Ages. Perhaps by preserving its original character more than any other city in Italy, Siena is a showcase of the Italian Gothic style. The walled city of Siena occupies three hill tops and contains a rich artistic heritage. Included on our guided walking tour of Siena's charming medieval streets and squares is a visit to the Duomo.

Overnight in Siena.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 *Siena & San Gimignano*

This morning we drive to San Gimignano, often called the 'Manhattan of Tuscany.' The medieval town preserves 13 of its noble brick towers, which give it a skyscraper skyline. Today its fortress-like severity is softened by the subtlety of its quiet, harmonious squares, and many of its places and churches are enhanced by Renaissance frescoes.

Our drive back to Siena takes us through the grape growing countryside for which the region is famous. We stop at a local winery for a wine tasting and lunch (included today).

The afternoon is free to explore Siena on your own. Dinner on your own this evening.

Overnight in Siena.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Lunch

Day 10 *Siena - Rome*

Today we travel by road to Rome.*

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. Time and group interest-permitting, we may begin our Rome sightseeing today upon arrival.

* Please note that for smaller groups we may choose to travel this distance by public bus service. The journey/bus is very comfortable and quicker than train, which involves inconvenient connections.

Overnight in Rome.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 *Rome: The Vatican Museums & St. Peter's Basilica*

Today we begin our visit to Vatican City with a guided tour through the immense Vatican Museums.* This amazing collection houses some of the most important Greek and Roman sculptures, Renaissance paintings, Flemish tapestries and mosaics in the world. Understandably this collection is visited by more than 3 million people a year. We also visit Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel to take in the breathtaking frescoes. Heading into the cavernous interior of St. Peter's Basilica we can appreciate its many treasures including Michelangelo's Pieta. At the end of the tour we visit the elegantly symmetrical Piazza St. Pietro. The Vatican is a sovereign state with its own post office, broadcasting service and newspaper.

The afternoon is yours to explore this wonderful city on your own.

* 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).

Overnight in Rome.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 12 *Rome & the Colosseum*

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

We arrive at Piazza Navona where we can break for lunch at one of the many restaurants and cafes on or near the square. In the square itself we can admire the impressive Fountain of the Four Rivers, with detailed figures representing the Nile, Ganges, Danube and Palata rivers.

We continue to the famous Trevi Fountain, designed by Nicholas Salvi in 1732. It's water was supplied by one of Rome's earliest aqueducts. Throwing a coin into the fountain is said to ensure your safe return to Rome. We also visit the temple-turned church called the Pantheon, and have the opportunity to admire its perfect proportions on our way to the Spanish steps, where we finish our day's tour. Balance of the day at leisure.

Overnight in Rome.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 *Departure*

Departure from Rome.

BUON VIAGGIO!

Meal Plan: Breakfast