



FROM ITALIA WITH LOVE

Blessed with unending coastlines, romantic landscapes and elegant towns, Marian McGuinness guides you through the temptations of Italy.



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After viewing the magnificent St Mark's Basilica, indulge in fine dining in Caffè Florian, sitting in the same spot as Casanova and Dickens, or head around the corner to the famous Harry's Bar, haunt of Ernest Hemingway, where you can sip a Bellini and contemplate getting lost in Venice.

Charms of the Riviera

A few hours away in Milan, there's plenty to explore in Italy's capital of chic. Whether it's being inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, or taking in the view from the roof of the gothic Duomo, leave time to experience Teatro alla Scala, the world's most famous opera house, with its layers of red velvet and gilded balconies.

Shop in style under the glass and iron dome of Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II,

Throughout Italy, *la passeggiata* is that magical moment of the evening when time is taken to relax, stroll and celebrate the wonders of the day.

Embarking on our *la passeggiata* throughout Italy, be prepared to fall in love with *il bel paese*, the beautiful country, with its majestic lakes, lyrical countryside and sandy-rocky shores.

Queen of the Adriatic

Italy has its fair share of seductive towns, but few can capture your heart as the water goddess of Venice.

Driven to the swamps of the Adriatic by Attila the Hun, the first settlers began linking the 117 small islands with bridges. Today, you can discover the beauty of Venice's limestone city built atop a petrified forest by romantic gondola, a luxury private boat or by chugging *vaporetto*, that takes you on its 40-minute ride along the most exquisite avenue in the world: the Grand Canal.

As the canal curves, the alabaster, rouge and ochre palazzos and churches slide past, ornamented with Moorish windows, Baroque façades and Byzantine domes. They have housed

popes and doges and the superstars of writers, artists and musicians.

Little wonder George and Amal Clooney chose the exquisite 16th-century palazzo, Aman Venice, in the heart of historic San Polo, as their wedding venue.

While in Venice, make sure to explore the glass-blowing and lace-making islands of Murano and Burano, and if you happen to be there during the weeks of Carnevale, the city transforms into a festivity of candle-lit boat parades, concerts and masquerades.



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01 Belmond Hotel Splendido, Portofino 02 Aman Venice 03 Prada's Milan flagship 04 View from Belmond Hotel Cipriani, Venice 05 Italian style at Principe Forte dei Marmi 06 Prada is an icon



and take time to wonder at its magnificent marble and mosaic floors. Sitting alongside Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Armani and Versace is the first-ever Prada store, opened in 1913. And don't forget a visit to Via Monte Napoleone, the most famous street in Milan's 'golden' rectangle of fashion.

Further south, on the coastal edge that forms the Italian Riviera, is the perfectly formed harbour village of Portofino.

"It is impossible to speak of the landscape," wrote Sigmund Freud in 1905, "without being a poet or quoting one." Originally a fishing village, Portofino has long been the playground of the rich and famous. It's a place of film stars and fashionistas, and seafood restaurants spilling across the marina lined with superyachts.

Whether it's zipping around on a Vespa, or padding around on foot, take time to view the Benedictine Abbey of Cervara, surrounded by the formal, botanical 'garden of simples', and dwell on the fragrance of Florentine lemon and Chinese mandarin trees.

Legend has it that Saracen pirates retired ashore in Borgio Verezzi, a quartet of terraced villages rising up and away from the water north of Portofino. The pink stone buildings nestled along the *crêuza de mä* (path to the sea), with their Arab-Islamic architectural style, certainly make the story seem credible.

Five lands beside the sea

In the arc of coastline south of Portofino are the coves and promontories that cradle the five hamlets of Cinque Terre. With its ripples of bright, tumbling villas, this rugged land is a heart stealer.



07 Villa del Balbianello, Lake Como 08 Palazzo Avino, Amalfi Coast 09 Ferrari drive 10 Public gardens of Villa San Michele, Capri 11 Belmond Hotel Caruso, Amalfi

The most northern village, Monterosso, reclines along her heart-shaped beach striped with blue and white umbrellas. Her medieval centre of castles and churches is scattered with wine shops and those of the local artisans.

The next village, Vernazza, is the drama queen of Cinque Terre with her cascading villas, stone-arched stairways and tiny marina, where buff men in skimpy bathers attend their double-ended fishing boats, called *gozzi*. *Trofie* (chestnut pasta) and pesto are the local specialities, along with Vernaccia, the crisp white wine of the region.

The only village not clasping the coast is Corniglia; it hovers high on the ridge, reached by climbing 33 flights of steps.

Manarola sits as if a crevice in a rock pool at low tide. Instead of exotic anemones, gelati-hued villas clamp like limpets to its ravine. In its wedge-shaped main street, fishing boats are parked like cars.

Take the 20-minute coastal walk to the last village of Riomaggiore along the Via dell'Amore, named long ago when young lovers from both villages clandestinely met by moonlight and crashing waves. Riomaggiore is ravishing. Dive shops are anchored into the dripping rock for those wishing to explore the coral grottos of its jade and lapis water.

Feasting on Tuscany's treasures

Changing pace, direction and landscape, the combed vineyards and hill towns of Tuscany beckon.

Brambles and grape vines make up her hair, the wind is her breath, sparkling streams reflect her eyes, wine flows in her veins and rolling hills are the contours of her body.

Who could resist this image to describe the enigmatic region of Chianti?

Cypress trees wind up hills like dark sentinels, roosters crow from the valleys, donkeys walk around olive groves and church bells toll. Wild fig trees, laced at their bases with plump blackberries, are there for the picking. With such





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beauty, it's not unusual to see a Ferrari commercial being made on these hills of braided vineyards, where hamlets sometimes have more cat inhabitants than human.

Combining the ambience of a 12th-century castle with modern comforts, Castello del Nero offers the perfect stay to further explore the wine-treasures of Chianti. Sitting in its own 263 hectares of Tuscany, the thought of truffle hunting or sipping wine in the cellar before reclining on the terrace to drink in the countryside sounds appealing.

Bread, olive oil and wine. The Holy Trinity of Tuscany. Add wild boar, pecorino and shavings of truffles and you have celestial cuisine.

It seems to match the stellar architecture in Barga, an idyllic medieval

village home to hearty minestrone and the Romanesque Duomo. The intricate acanthus-leaf embellished facade of the Duomo justifies the five-century-long construction, especially when admired with the Apuan Alps in the background.

The natural surroundings of Barga are only rivalled by Pitigliano. Built entirely from tufa rock, the town fits into the landscape with such perfection that it is almost impossible to separate the work of the people from the one of nature.

Building an empire

Go no further than Siena to experience the fruits of Tuscany. No matter how little or how long you stay in Siena, it seeps into your soul. It is a city of historical, cultural and gastronomic discovery. Being car-free, everything is



12 Castello del Nero 13 Castello di Casole 14 Supercars at Castello del Nero 15 Civita di Bagnoregio



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“BREAD, OLIVE OIL AND WINE. THE HOLY TRINITY OF TUSCANY. ADD WILD BOAR, PECORINO AND TRUFFLE AND YOU HAVE CELESTIAL CUISINE.”

within walking distance of the ancient walls that encircle it. With its rivulets of lanes flowing into the shell-shaped amphitheatre of the Piazza del Campo, find time to sit with a macchiato or a glass of the local vino and people watch.

For more than a thousand years, a single horse race has drawn myriad visitors to Siena: the famous Palio, the breathtaking, bareback race around the piazza's perimeter.

Held twice a year, it's a time of rivalry, bribery and danger. During the weeks leading to the Palio, festivities abound with costumed drummers and flag-throwers parading noisily through town. Parties abound as visitors and locals are swept up in the revelries.

On a nearby hill, San Gimignano is a town of rich dimensions and is often called the Medieval Metropolis as it sits crown-like above the Val d'Elsa. Built on the Via Francigena, the pilgrims' route, it became a stopover for 10th-century merchants and wayfarers walking from Canterbury to Rome.

Up until the 14th century, tower-building kept warring families busy as they tried to outdo each other. The Black Death in 1384 ended their empire

building. The 72 towers fell into disrepair as three-quarters of the townsfolk died. The town, made wealthy on trading saffron that grew on its hillsides, soon collapsed, as did many of its towers. Only 14 honey-stoned high-rises remain today. San Gimignano became a town caught in time, where 21st-century tourists are the new pilgrims.

While there, explore the ceramic shops and Aladdin’s caves of gourmet goods. Pick up a bottle of locally-produced Vernaccia, a wedge of pecorino and local honey to drizzle over it. Add some crusty bread and head to the hillside for a Tuscan picnic.

Staying nearby, in the historic estate of Castello di Casole, you will be rewarded with being privy to one of the largest private landholdings in Italy, with its thousands of hectares of vineyards, olive groves and décor that is true to the soul of Tuscany.

Another hamlet built out of the earth and teetering on a volcanic rock pedestal is Civita di Bagnoregio, a grand old dame 1200 years old. Slightly northwest of Rome, Bagnoregio has been described as a fairytale town for its delicate appearance. Locally called ‘the dying town’, it has been crumbling off its cliff for thousands of years.

Its only access is by a suspended footbridge high above the valley. There is no list of must-see attractions; it’s more the chance to wander and wonder at its quiet charms, to sit in the piazza, where wild donkey races take place in summer, and to enjoy a slice of bruschetta toasted over an open fire.

Further inland is Norcia, a gastronomic paradise where Italian produce reigns supreme; the prized black truffle and mouth-watering prosciutto are among the best in Italy.

Continue towards the east coast and the oft-overlooked Le Marche region. Beside the sea, the bronzed resort town of Pesaro is best known as the birthplace of composer Gioacchino Rossini, whose music echoes through the old town every August during the opera festival dedicated to his most popular works. Experience Rossini and the open-air spectacles of nearby Macerata on an 11-day Opera and Food Tour with Vita Italian Tours.

Drawn to Amalfi

Surrender to the siren call of one of Italy’s most scenic drives. Ravello, set like an eagle’s eyrie above the Amalfi Coast, is a medieval village of winding cobblestone streets, terraced gardens and lemon groves.

With its heart-stopping views over the inlet of villages far below, Palazzo Avino has historic palace pedigree. A hotel of dreamy indulgence, it is perfect for romance or rambling the lanes of Ravello. Also nestled on the clifftop is Belmond Hotel Caruso, another haven of tranquillity with its infinity pool that suspends you over the landscape.

The scenic stretch along the Amalfi Coast, with its steep, kinked hairpin turns, sets a challenge of where to visit. Positano, Sorrento and Amalfi are all pearls complementing the Perrier-green waters. Perhaps shop for linen clothing, jewellery or ceramics or, during the quiet time of *la passeggiata*, sample the local liqueur, Limoncello.

Grace Kelly, Jackie Onassis, Clark Gable – all names from a time of bygone

elegance – shared a love of Capri. Rising abruptly from the sea, it’s often called an island in the sky. Follow the bougainvillea-lined paths of upper Anacapri, to the white-pillared Villa San Michele with its lush Mediterranean gardens. A jaunt to the Blue Grotto, used by Emperor Tiberius as his personal swimming pool, is a must. Just be prepared for a traffic jam of rowing boats vying for their space in the caverns.

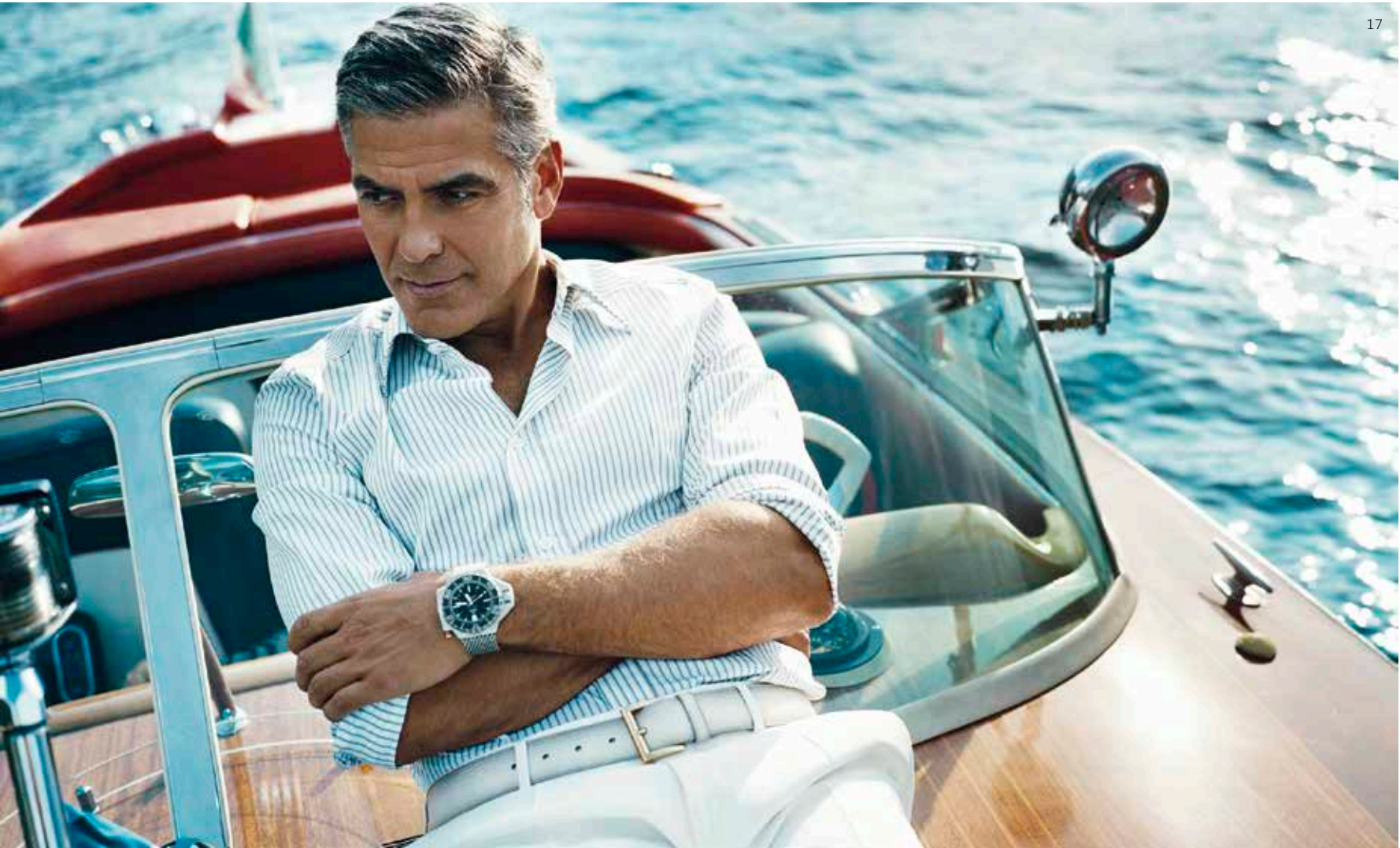
Where the glitterati go

Beginning our *la passeggiata* in Italy’s north, it’s time to go full circle and flit back for a final fling and to steal a slice of *la dolce vita* in one of Italy’s most famous settings. Of all Italy’s lakes, there are three famous northerners: Lake Garda, Lake Maggiore and, the one that hits the tourist jackpot for beauty and romance, Lake Como.

With its Y-shaped geography, Lake Como offers spectacular views from every shore. Steep wooded hills plunge into deep glacial waters, and there’s often a veil of haze across the hillsides.



16 Grand Hotel Tremezzo 17 Hotel view over Lake Como 18 Como’s famous resident, our cover star George Clooney © Omega 19 Drive the Amalfi Coast





What's not to swoon over? Vineyard-covered hills, olive groves, monasteries, yachting, golf and garden walks. There's even Moto Guzzi – motor cycle heaven in a museum.

The lakeside villages trip off the tongue: Bellagio, Menaggio, Tremezzo, Varenna.

The Art Nouveau-styled Grand Hotel Tremezzo, with its floating pool, sculptures and fountains, offers sophistication and glamour while Villa del Balbianello, perched on its personal peninsula, watches the lake go by. With its turrets, ivy-covered walls and ornate stone loggia, it is one of the most photographed villas in Italy.

Lake Como was a favoured retreat for the glitterati of old: Romantic poets, Byron, Shelley and Wordsworth, and composers, Liszt, Verdi and Bellini. Nothing has changed. Her filmic beauty offers celebrity spotting of our modern-day glitterati.

With so much beauty to embrace, there's one last time to sit and enjoy *la passeggiata* in Bella Italia. With a Campari Spritz on the table and a pen in hand, it's time to write: *Non disturbatemi, sto ascoltando il suono dell'acqua e il sorriso del sole*. Don't disturb me, I'm listening to the sound of the water and the smile of the sun.

I'm also looking for George. You know who I mean. ♦

Travel file

Information

visitaly.com.au

Accommodation

www.aman.com

www.castellodelnero.com

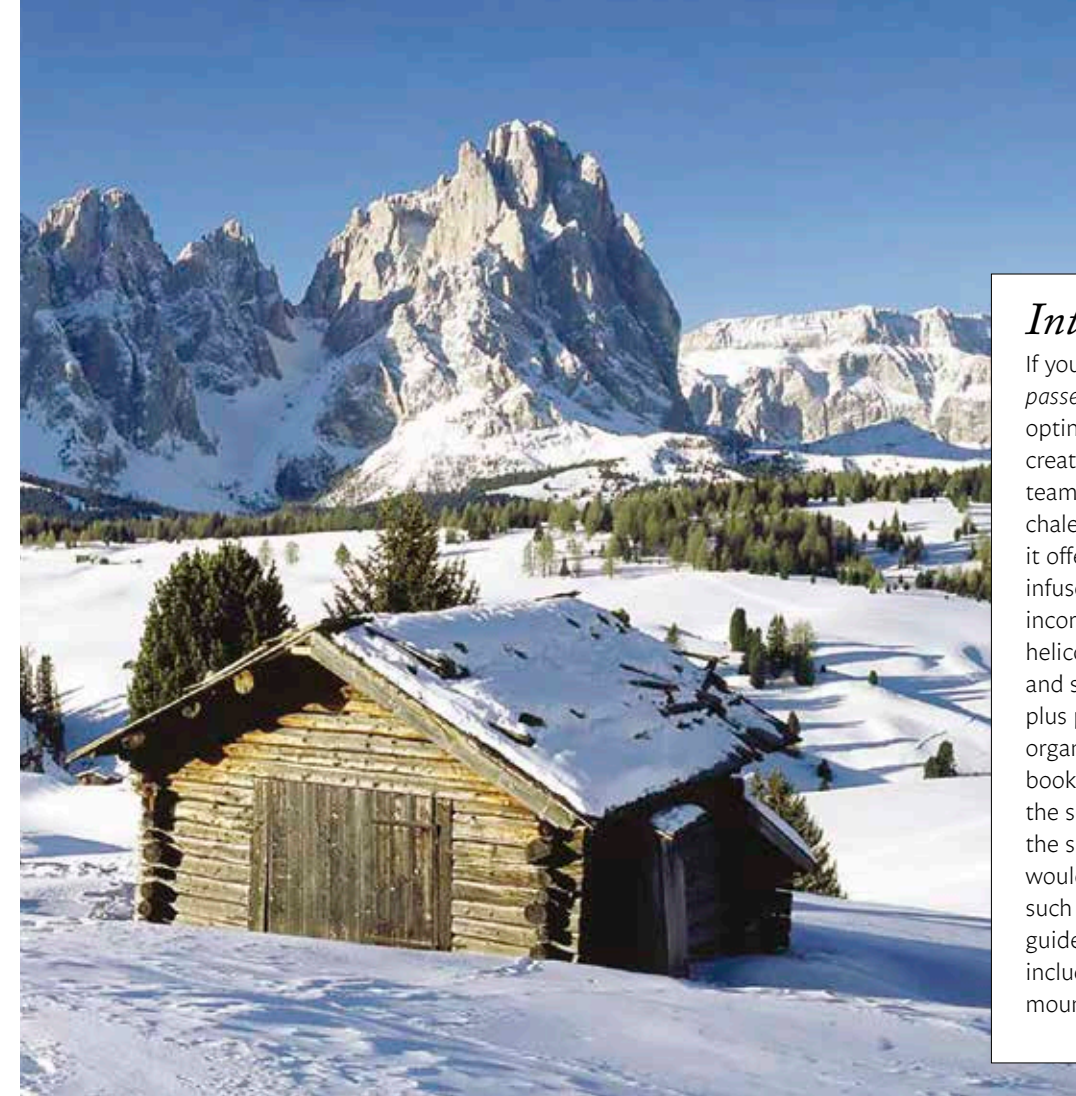
www.castellodicasole.com

www.palazzoavino.com

www.belmond.com

www.villasanmichele.eu

www.grandhoteltremezzo.com



Into the mountains

If you're a snow-lover, continue your *passeggiata* into the majestic Alps, opting for a tailor-made itinerary created by Tania Peccedi and her expert team at Ski Italy. Each luxury lodge or chalet is carefully selected to ensure it offers guests a taste of *la dolce vita* infused with fresh mountain air. Trips incorporate transfers, on land and via helicopter, as well as personal guides and ski instructors fluent in English, plus professional local staff to help you organise rental, lift passes and restaurant bookings. Whether you seek to explore the slopes of the Dolomites (including the spectacular Sellaronda circuit) or would like to soak up the style of villages such as Livigno and Bormio, your Ski Italy guide will help arrange après-ski delights, including night skiing and dinners on the mountain. www.skiitaly.com.au

#italianvillages

Small places, great beauty



Historical villages & hamlets are scenic places, filled with poetry, history & culture with a Medieval & Renaissance atmosphere. Some of these are almost considered secret escapes & are often located off the beaten track. Once you get here, you can visit mysterious castles, ancient churches, beautiful squares & experience traditional local cuisine in small cosy restaurants.



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