

The 50 best holidays in Italy

Article

In pictures



Annabelle Thorpe
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2 The gardens and villas of Lake Como

Best for art and culture

1 Botticelli's Florence

One of Florence's most famous artists will be celebrated in an exhibition at the V&A (March 5-July 3) and in this new tour from Art Tours Abroad. The six-day tour, led by Dr Paula Nuttall, a specialist in Italian renaissance art, takes in the city's most beautiful churches, museums and gardens, with a focus on the work of Botticelli. It departs on October 26.

Details Six days' B&B cost from £1,890pp, including flights, some meals and guided visits (01280 820521, artpursuitsabroad.com)

2 Houses and gardens of Lake Como

Discover the art-filled villas and beautiful gardens around Lake Como on this package from the iconic Grand Hotel Tremezzo. The three-night break includes entry to the gardens at Villa Carlotta and Villa Melzi, a guided tour of the house and gardens at Villa Balbianello and three hours' private hire of the hotel's water limo to explore the lake in style.

Details Three nights' B&B cost from £735pp, including excursions but not flights to Milan (00 39 0344 42491, grandhoteltremezzo.com)

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3 City break in Mantua

Mantua is Italy's capital of culture this year, in recognition of its beautiful medieval old town — a Unesco World Heritage site — and the region's literary claim to fame as the birthplace of the Roman poet Virgil. Cobbled piazzas are lined with spectacular architecture, most notably the Palazzo Ducale, home for 400 years to the Gonzaga family, who helped to make Mantua a cultural and artistic hub.

Details Five-night breaks cost from £580pp, including flights, B&B and a city tour (020 3733 0190, westernoriental.com)

4 Opera in Le Marche

A new region for Expert To Italy, Le Marche's 180km of coastline, hilltop towns and glorious countryside remain mainly the preserve of Italians. Stay at the Hotel Leone, an elegant, eight-bedroom country hotel, and you are ideally placed for the summer opera festival in the historic town of Macerata (July 22-August 13; sferisterio.it/opere/), and Ascoli Piceno, with its fine piazza.

Details Doubles cost from £140 B&B (expertoitaly.com). Fly to Rome

5 Renaissance Venice

This four-day tour with the art historian Richard Stemp focuses on Renaissance art and architecture, going behind the scenes and gaining access to places such as the Cini Foundation, with its beautiful courtyards, and a unique evening visit to the St Mark's Basilica and its chapels.

Details Three-night breaks cost from £1,295pp, including flights, B&B, some meals and excursions (020 7873 5000, coxandkings.co.uk)

6 Opera in Verona

New flights with Ryanair from Birmingham and Stansted will make Verona more accessible for opera lovers from the spring. Fares are from £19.99 one way (starting dates yet to be announced). Stay at Relais Fra' Lorenzo, an elegantly restored palazzo that is new to Kirker for 2016, in the hills above the city with spectacular views and a pool.

Details Three-night breaks cost from £549pp, including flights and B&B (020 7593 2283, kirkerholidays.com)

Best for activities

7 Guided walking in Basilicata

One of the most under-the-radar regions of Italy, Basilicata features the ancient sites of Magna Graecia, the Lucanian Dolomites and a cliff-edged coastline. This new luxury escorted walking tour includes walks along pilgrim tracks, hill climbs and strolls through meadows. The longest trek is about ten miles. There is one free day in the picturesque town of Maratea. Luggage is transferred.

Details Eight days' full board costs from £2,395pp, including transfers, excursions and the services of a guide (01865 315678, atg-oxford.co.uk). Fly to Naples

8 Yoga in the Cilento

Two hours south of the Amalfi coast, the Cilento is a quiet corner of southern Italy with unspoilt beaches and peaceful countryside. New to Expert to Italy, the seven-room Locanda San Fantino is a self-sufficient farm estate that offers yoga classes, and cooking and foraging courses. The pretty harbour town of Scario and Paestum are near by.

Details B&B doubles cost from £125 (expertoitaly.com). Fly to Naples

9 Beach and hike in Liguria

Covering some of Italy's most beautiful coastline, this group walking week is based in the seaside town of Moneglia, so there's the chance for chilled-out beach time alongside the programme of walks. Hikes include a stretch of the Ligurian Blue Path that winds through terraced vineyards along old mule tracks, and a walk to the picturesque town of Portofino. On the walk-free day there is an option to kayak or visit Lucca or Genoa. Train rides are also offered.

Details A week's B&B costs from £999pp, including flights (exodus.co.uk)

10 Golf in Sicily

Kirker Holidays has added the Donnafugata Golf Resort & Spa on Sicily, with its two championship courses. The spectacular medieval towns of Noto, Modica and Ragusa are close by. There's also a private beach and spa.

Details Three nights' B&B cost from £648pp, including flights (020 7593 1899, kirkerholidays.com)

11 Ski in Sauze

Take advantage of Neilson's new free ski guide and coaching offer with a week at the Hotel Edelweiss. The hotel is simple but cosy, 50m from the Jouvenceaux Sportinia lift and a short stroll from the heart of town. Sauze is the only resort in Italy to offer Neilson's new mountain expert service, which includes a free reintroduction to skiing, coaching sessions and guided touring.

Details A week's club-board accommodation costs from £399pp, including flights (neilson.co.uk)

12 Sardinia by bike

Although known for its beaches, Sardinia is more than its coastline, and this new self-guided tour reveals the olive groves, oak-wooded valleys and archaeological remains of the southwest corner. Reward yourself with stops at wineries, farms that produce organic cheeses and meats, and bakeries — all listed on the detailed itinerary — with overnight accommodation at B&Bs.

Details A week's B&B costs from £820pp, including transfers, some meals, bike hire and maps, but not flights to Cagliari (hfcycling.co.uk)

13 Snowshoeing and spa in Stelvio

If rocketing down the Alps is not for you, experience the stunning scenery at a more manageable pace with this group snowshoe week. Based in the village of Valfurva, you can snowshoe through lush forests, along the foot of the Forni Glacier and the trail to the spa town of Bormio, where there's time to enjoy the thermal waters. You also get the chance to spot eagles, chamois and vultures.

Details A week's full board costs from £795pp, including transfers but not flights to Milan (keadventure.com)

14 Cycling in Puglia

This new ten-night group tour offers the chance to discover the sun-drenched region of Puglia, with an itinerary that takes in five-star hotels as well as a night in a traditional trullo. The route begins in the coastal town of Monopoli, before heading inland past orchards and vineyards to the Unesco World Heritage site of Alberobello. Days on two wheels are combined with evenings in atmospheric medieval towns such as Lecce and Otranto.

Details Ten nights' B&B cost from £1,486pp, including flights, luggage transfers, three dinners and bike hire (01606 828090, headwater.com)

Best for food and drink

15 Chocolate in Modica

Couples with a sweet tooth should head for Villa La Grotta, a townhouse with an interior carved out of rock in the historic centre of Modica — a town famous for its chocolate. Visit the Antica Dolceria Bonajuto (bonajuto.it), which has been making chocolate since 1880; chilli flavour is the house speciality. Modica is one of the locations for *Inspector Montalbano*, now filming its tenth series.

Details A week's self-catering for two at Villa La Grotta costs from £481 (massimovillas.com). Fly to Catania

16 Venice and prosecco

A bubble-fuelled, gastro extravaganza through the heart of prosecco country, this Saga-escorted tour combines wine and food tastings with trips to fortified cities, such as Castelfranco Veneto, and historic market towns, plus time in Venice. There's a short hop across the border to Velden in Austria, and accommodation in four hotels.

Details Ten nights' B&B costs from £1,099pp, including flights, some meals and excursions (saga.co.uk)

17 Cooking in Sicily

This addition to Expert to Italy's programme offers the highest level of teaching. Antico Convento Ibla is a former convent in Ragusa Ibla, now converted into a stylish hotel with its own cookery school, Nosco. Although primarily for professional chefs, it is also open to amateur cooks who can choose from a range of half or full-day courses. Away from the kitchen, the Unesco-listed Ragusa Ibla is worth exploring.

Details B&B doubles cost from £90 a night, half-day confectionery-making classes from £35pp (experttoitaly.com). Fly to Catania

18 Piedmont gastro tour

Inntravel is launching a new programme of “slow-motion breaks”, and this week-long tour of Piedmont is the perfect foodie choice. Starting in Turin, the self-guided tour includes a visit to Bra, which has no supermarkets, only family-run shops selling local produce. Also included is a chocolate-tasting and wine seminar in Cherasco, and a visit to the Marchesi di Barolo wine estate.

Details A week’s B&B is from £980pp, including three dinners and trains but not flights to Turin (inntravel.co.uk)

19 Walk prosecco’s hills

Prosecco may be growing in popularity, but the land that produces it – in the foothills of the Dolomites, just north of Venice – remains relatively undiscovered. This new group walking tour follows the “prosecco road”, combining visits to local producers with walks to medieval villages. There’s also an excursion to Treviso. The holiday is based at Hotel Villa Soligo, an elegant 18th-century mansion.

Details A week’s B&B costs from £1,049, including flights, some meals and a guide (0845 2877606, exodus.co.uk)

20 Dine out in Canavese

Canavese is a little visited region to the north of Turin. Dotted with medieval castles and monasteries, the countryside encompasses Italy’s oldest national park, the Parco Nazionale Gran Paradiso. The area is renowned for its “slow food” and there are some fantastic restaurants in the towns of Rivarolo Canavese and Pavone, with its imposing fortress. Stay at the Relais Villa Matilde to get a sense of Canavese history; the building is filled with impressive frescoes and antiques.

Details Three-night breaks cost from £549pp, including flights and B&B (020 7593 1899, kirkerholidays.com)

21 Michelin-starred South Tyrol

The South Tyrol is one of Italy’s foodie regions, with three new Michelin winners making a grand total of 23 stars in 19 restaurants. A new two-star place to try is the Gourmetstube Einhorn in Campo di Trens, with the Alpenroyal Gourmet in Selva and the Dolce Vita Stube in Naturno both winning one star. Citalia has two hotels in Merano and one in Bolzano.

Details A week at the City Hotel in Merano costs from £974pp, including flights, transfers and B&B (citalia.com)

22 Walk and eat in Amalfi

Pizza in Naples, pasta-making in Amalfi, seafood straight from the sea in Positano – this new tour from Explore combines a gastro-tour of the Amalfi coast with walks to work off some of the foodie indulgence (and work up an appetite for the next round). The base for the week is an agriturismo, perched high on the Amalfi coast near the village of San Lazzaro.

Details A week costs from £1,174pp, including flights, B&B and most meals (01252 883692, explore.co.uk)

Best for history

23 Art and architecture in Tuscany

This new ten-day tour is led by Dr Flavio Boggi, a renowned Italian art historian. The itinerary, based first in Lucca and then San Gimignano, combines the beautiful Romanesque architecture of Tuscany's smaller towns with historic frescoes and small art galleries in Volterra and Certaldo. But it also offers the chance to see a different Tuscany, to step away from the crowds and into still-thriving hilltop villages.

Details Ten days from September 1 cost from £2,630pp, including flights, transfers, B&B, some meals and excursions (martinrandall.com)

24 Explore Rome

For those who want to get under the skin of the Eternal City, this new tour offers the chance to discover historical, artistic and architectural sites with two expert guides. Places visited include the Roman architecture at Trajan's Market, Hadrian's sprawling villa at Tivoli, the Vatican Museums and Sistine Chapel.

Details A week costs from £2,895pp, including transfers, accommodation, most meals, entrance fees and the services of a guide, but not flights (01600 888220, petersommer.com)

25 Antiquity in the Apennines

Discover a different side of Rome on this holiday with Andante Travels, which explores the history of the Samnite tribes, who lived high in the Apennine mountains, and fought with the Romans until their defeat. The itinerary includes time in Rome, mountaintop villages and former fortress cities.

Details A week's full board costs from £1,975pp, departing May 30, including flights, excursions and the services of a guide (andantetravels.co.uk)

26 Wine and archaeology in southern Italy

Wine specialist Arblaster & Clarke has joined forces with Andante to create holidays that combine architectural highlights with visits to vineyards. This eight-day trip, departing on September 24, includes trips to Pompeii and Herculaneum with an archaeologist, along with visits to some of the region's best wine estates for tastings.

Details A week's full board costs from £2,750pp, including flights and wine with dinner (winetours.co.uk)

Best for special interests

27 Learn the lingo in Puglia

This new trip from Real Holidays breaks up classes with bike excursions along the eastern coast of Puglia. The intensive language course takes up 20 hours, with lessons among olive groves or on the terraces of local *agriturismos*, while the cycling itinerary takes in baroque towns, tranquil lakes and unspoilt beaches.

Details Nine nights' half-board, departing on July 1 or September 9, costs from £1,420pp, including bike rental, language classes and guiding, but not flights to Bari (realholidays.co.uk)

28 Cruise with class

Regent's Seven Seas's new *Explorer* accommodates 750 guests and promises to be its most luxurious ship yet, with facilities including a kitchen for cookery classes. The ship's second voyage will be a ten-night cruise from Venice to Rome, departing August 3, tracing Italy's east and west coastline. Stops include Bari, Taormina, Sorrento and Positano.

Details A ten-night cruise costs from £5,250pp full board, including flights and excursions (itcluxurytravel.co.uk)

29 Lake Garda painting

Painting In Italy has added Lake Garda for 2016, with six nights in traffic-free Torri del Benaco, and one night in Verona, with the chance to attend the opera. Course tutor is Adrian Wiszniewski of The New Glasgow Boys School. The price includes five mornings of tuition.

Details A week's half-board is from £1,599pp, excluding flights to Verona or Brescia (paintinginitaly.com)

30 Lake Maggiore trains

Discover the spectacular scenery around Lake Maggiore by train on a tour that begins with a guided visit to Milan, before boarding the Centovalli Railway, which winds through lush valleys and across deep ravines. The route crosses into Switzerland, with a night in Zermatt, before heading back to Milan.

Details A week's half-board costs from £895pp, including flights, transfers, rail travel and excursions (0800 138 6300, raildiscoveries.com)

31 Painting in Venice

Venice is one of the world's most paintable cities, and this new week-long painting tour with Grahame Booth offers the chance to mix time at the easel with time exploring its atmospheric streets. The week is at a small hotel on the Lido, where there will be a chance for one-to-one tuition and daily masterclasses, with much of the day left free for painting.

Details A week's B&B costs from £1,550pp (£900 for non-painting partners) including transfers, dinners with wine, tuition and equipment but excluding flights (paintingineurope.com)

32 Knitting in Tuscany

Knitting has had a renaissance in recent years and this new holiday at the Watermill in Posara offers the chance to upgrade your skills, including knitted lace, in the Italian tradition, and cable stitch aran-knitwear. The weeks run on May 21 and 28 and September 10, with classes led by designers for the Rowan brand. Alongside workshops and masterclasses there are excursions to the nearby villages of the Cinque Terre and the town of Fivizzano on market day.

Details A week's full board is from £1,345pp, with tuition and excursions, but not flights to Pisa (watermill.net)

33 Solo Sicily

Singles holiday specialist Friendship Travel has added the glamorous Sicilian resort of Taormina to its programme, offering Hotel Isabella on Corso Umberto, Taormina's main street. Guests can hop on a shuttle to the Isabella's sister property, Hotel Caparena, which has a beach and pool, or join in the day's group plan, decided at breakfast.

Details A week's B&B for single occupancy of a double room costs from £845pp including flights, transfers and four dinners (friendshiptravel.com)

34 Lake Garda's gardens

Green-fingered Italophiles will find much to love on Saga's new Gardens of Lake Garda tour, which departs on April 16. The trip is by rail, with a visit to the University of Basel's botanic garden before seven nights in Milan, exploring the spectacular gardens dotted around Lake Garda. Excursions include the Andre Heller Botanic Garden, the classical gardens of Isola del Garda and the Acro Arboretum.

Details Eight nights' half-board costs from £1,299pp including train travel, transfers and seven garden visits (0800 300 500, saga.co.uk)

35 Wellness retreat near Milan

If Christmas indulgence is weighing heavily, a week at Ti Sana — a secluded wellness retreat near Milan and Lake Como — may be a good choice. Each guest has a wellness programme catering to a specific aim, whether weight-loss, detox or improving flexibility and muscle strength. Spa treatments are mixed with yoga classes and cooking lessons.

Details A week's full board costs from £2,198pp including flights and choice of programmes (020 3397 8891, healthandfitnesstravel.com)

Best new places to stay

36 Masseria stay in Puglia

Masseria Trapanà officially opens in March, after careful restoration that has revealed historic frescoes in the 16th-century farmhouse. The nine suites mix Italian style with Asian touches. Outside are lush gardens and 60 acres of olive groves, plus a vast pool.

Details B&B doubles cost from £180 a night (00 39 0832 1832101, trapana.com). Fly to Bari

37 Il Sereno, Lake Como

Opening on the eastern shore in summer, Il Sereno has the Clooney end of the market firmly in its sights, bringing a hit of contemporary style to Italy's most famous lakeside. Guests will arrive at the all-suite hotel by boat, and can spend their days by the 60ft infinity pool, or on the beach. Natural materials — wood, stone and wools — give the building a zen-meets-Fifth-Avenue feel.

Details Doubles cost from £575 a night (lesereno.com). Fly to Milan

38 San Luis, Merano

San Luis is a clutch of wooden chalets and treehouses on the shores of a tranquil lake near Merano. Rooms mix simple wooden design with lux furnishings, while the treehouses have wonderful canopy views. Opened in December, the spa offers an indoor pool with open fire in cooler months; in summer you move to an outdoor pool and hydromassage area.

Details Doubles cost from £116 (sanluis-hotel.com). Fly to Bolzano

39 Arty stay in the Tiber Valley

This stay for 2016 combines works of art and design — by the Rome-based owner — with the exposed stone walls and heavy beams of a traditional Umbrian cottage. Paintings and sculpture dot the three bedrooms and light, airy living space of Casale Loredana, while two pools and a solarium are surrounded by shady terraces and lawn. The house is about half an hour's drive from Todi.

Details A week costs from £1,295, sleeping six (01954 261431, vintagetravel.co.uk). Fly to Rome

40 Beach Villa in Sicily

British Airways flights start from Heathrow to Palermo in May, and Villa Renata is right on the beach in the small resort of Fontane Bianche. Its four bedrooms sleep seven, with an airy kitchen-living space, but Renata is about the location, with the sea lapping gently just beyond the garden. The house is near bustling Syracuse and the baroque town of Noto.

Details A week for seven is from £792 (wishsicily.com). Fly to Catania

41 Large villa in Umbria

A new property from Scott Williams that is ideal for two families, Posabile has a playroom with toys, trampoline, table tennis-table and a large pool. There are four double bedrooms and a vast kids' bedroom, which can sleep up to four. It's a great base for exploring Umbria, with some mountain-bike trails near by. A cook and babysitter can be arranged.

Details A week for 12 costs from £2,980 (scottwilliams.co.uk). Fly to Perugia

Best for families

42 Sail in Sardinia

Holidays on the water are great if you have teenagers, and this new sailing itinerary from Intrepid Travel offers a hit of both Italy and France. It begins and finishes in Olbia, Sardinia, with stops on the Costa Smeralda and the unspoilt Maddalena archipelago. The ship is fully crewed, which means you can spend days snorkelling, lazing on deck or discovering the islands' history, with a day in 9th-century Bonifacio, Corsica, before you return to Sardinia.

Details A week costs from £837pp, including some meals and on-board accommodation, but not flights to Olbia (0808 2745111, intrepidtravel.com)

43 Ski in Champoluc

Making its debut for Inghams this year, Champoluc is the most popular resort in the Monterosa ski area with 110 miles of runs and an ice rink in the village. Ideal for families because the runs rarely get crowded, the resort has a new Inghams Chalet Hotel, next to the Crest gondola and the home-run piste. Many rooms can take extra beds and there is a games room, free wi-fi and Sky TV.

Details A week costs from £529pp, including flights, transfers and chalet board (01483 345663, ingham.co.uk)

44 Water mill in Arezzo

A new find for Natural Retreats, Il Torrente is a converted 16th-century mill surrounded by four hectares of woodland. It's great for active families; outside there is a spa bath, an area for tennis, volleyball or football, as well as two natural pools. The national park near Talla has 500 miles of trails, while the house has four big bedrooms, including one in its atmospheric tower.

Details From £87 a night, self-catering. Fly to Florence (naturalretreats.com)

45 Active Tuscany

Discover a different side of Tuscany on this new family week from Families Worldwide, which includes trips on zip wires and rope bridges, plus canyoning by the spectacular Pania Secca mountain. Your base for five nights is a cosy agriturismo near the village of Garfagnana.

Details A week's B&B costs from £1,199pp, including flights and excursions (familiesworldwide.co.uk)

46 Mountain stay in Abruzzo

The town of Pescasseroli — new to Inghams — makes a great summer base. Ideal for active, nature-loving families, the town is on the doorstep of the Abruzzo National Park, home to wolves, chamois deer and brown bears. The park can be explored on foot, bike or horseback, and there are 150 walking trails around the town.

Details A week's half-board costs from £469pp, including flights and transfers (01483 345702, ingham.co.uk)

47 Venetian Riviera on a budget

Al Fresco has introduced Portofelice camp site on the Venetian Riviera. It comes with a bar, restaurant, pool with slides, bike hire, tennis and volleyball, and is right on the beach in the bustling resort of Eraclea Mare.

Details A week for four is from £196, sleeping four, (0161 3328900, alfresco-holidays.com)

48 Sicilian volcanoes

This new family adventure from Exodus includes scaling the slopes of three active volcanoes, taking a dip in thermal springs, and kayaking along the black beaches on the volcanic island of Vulcano. The trip combines guided excursions with free time to spend on the beach or to explore the streets and markets of Catania. A night in a mountain lodge and a pizza-making class are also included.

Details A week costs from £1,149pp, including flights, most meals and activities (0845 2872451, exodus.co.uk)

49 Family villa in Puglia

Small family villas are hard to come by in Italy, so this contemporary house that sleeps four is a real find. New to CV Villas for 2016, Villa Egnazia's pared-down, clutter-free interiors make it a low maintenance option with younger children, while the outside area with huge pool and spacious lawn feels as if it belongs to a much larger house. There are two bedrooms, and the lounge opens on to a huge decked area, dotted with bean bags.

Details A week for four costs from £1,217, (020 3468 1474, cvvillas.com). Fly to Bari

50 Cycling in the Maremma

A cycling holiday can be a great family break, but the key is for the route not to be too taxing. Inntravel's new itinerary through the Maremma, Tuscany's quietest corner, is ideal — the roads are relatively peaceful and flat, with just the occasional rolling hill — and time in the saddle can be paired with cooling off in the sea on Maremma's pine-backed beaches. The tour takes in historic towns such as Marittima and Suvereto.