

The top 10 cultural holidays in Italy

Our experts' pick of the top 10 cultural holidays in Italy for 2015, in destinations including Rome, Venice, Umbria and Milan

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For more general advice on booking a holiday in Italy, see our Italy summer holidays guide. Our guide features expert recommendations for city, beach, villa, culture, food and drink and activity holidays.

1. Aula Gotica, Santi Quattro Coronati, Rome

When the Normans rampaged through Rome in 1084, Santi Quattro Coronati was a huge church attached to an influence-wielding monastery – which may be why they all but destroyed it. The hotch-potch of buildings later tacked on to the miraculously preserved apse is a treasure trove of late medieval architecture and art. It wasn't until 1995 that centuries of plaster were stripped from an upstairs room, the Aula Gotica, to reveal spectacular 13th-century murals: depicting the seasons, months, zodiac signs and Solomon imparting justice. So wonderful is this hall that Santi Quattro Coronati it's worth timing a Rome trip to coincide with the rare openings. The stylish Hotel Capo d'Africa, just down the road from the church, organises group visits to the Aula Gotica when access is permitted.

Visits to the Aula Gotica can be booked through its website (aulagoticasantiquattrocoronati.it). Hotel Capo d'Africa: hotelcapodafrica.com). *Anne Hanley*

2. Castello di Masino, Piedmont

The FAI is Italy's equivalent of the National Trust – indeed, its foundation in 1975 was directly inspired by the UK charity. Among the 48 heritage sites it owns and runs, one of the most impressive is this feudal castle 35 miles north of Turin. For centuries the fiefdom of the rich and powerful Valperga dynasty, it is today a beautifully preserved historical palimpsest in which heraldic frescoes play off against Chinese-style papiers peints and one of Italy's most enchanting private libraries (open only on Saturdays), created in the Napoleonic era by the erudite abbot Tommaso Valperga. In early spring, the extensive grounds are a sea of daffodils, while

during the first weekend of May, the Castello hosts Italy's biggest garden fair, Tre Giorni per il Giardino. There's also a well-preserved 18th-century maze.

Open March-November, Wednesday-Sunday, 10am-6pm. Entrance £7.10. Castello di Masino, Caravino, Turin (00 39 0125 778 100; fondoambiente.it). *AH*

3. Milan Expo

The big Italian visitor draw of 2015, the Milan Expo takes up the baton of recent World's Fairs in Yeosu, South Korea (2012), Shanghai (2010) and Zaragoza (2008). This time round, the theme is "Feeding the planet, energy for life". Food-related themes will be explored in 144 national pavilions on a 490-acre site north-west of the city centre. To make sense of a huge and potentially exhausting site, consider signing up for the six-hour Expo Pavilion Tour offered by Milan Expo Tours (milanexpotours.com), which among other stops will take in Nottingham-based artist Wolfgang Buttress' British pavilion – a huge gilded steel orb representing a beehive. Kids are catered for in a Children's Park with interactive games and activities relating to agriculture and the natural world.

Entry to Milan Expo from £20; May 1-October 31, 2015 (expo2015.org). *AH*

4. Bottega del Tintoretto, Venice

Venice's 16th-century artistic genius Tintoretto was famous for his frenetic activity, and this workshop next to the house where the maestro lived and worked carries on that tradition. Print works, exhibition space, conference centre and meeting place for artists working in every imaginable medium, the Bottega also organises some of Venice's best art courses. Etching, letterpress printing on the workshop's ancient presses, sculpture, sketching and other disciplines are covered in five-day crash courses, or you can piggy-back on year-long courses, attending just for the time you choose to spend in La Serenissima.

Five-day intensive courses £305 (00 39 041 722 081; tintorettovenezia.it) including materials and lunch in the workshop. *AH*

5. Incontri in Terra di Siena

Classical music insiders consider Incontri in Terra di Siena to be among the top three summer chamber music festivals in Italy – and the setting is breathtaking. The main venue is La Foce, the estate of the Origo family, which centres on a stately home and formal garden near Chianciano Terme with sweeping views across the Val d'Orcia. Ever seen a photo of a zigzag row of cypresses? It's here. Year on year the festival attracts talents of the calibre of the Tallis Scholars and Vladimir Ashkenazy; associated dinners, wine tastings and other side events turn it into a kind of Italian Glyndebourne. The 2015 season runs from July 24-August 2; among the performers will be the Borromeo String Quartet, celebrating its 25th anniversary year with two concerts, and the award-winning flautist Carol Wincenc.

Tickets £20; £8 for under-25s (00 39 0578 63316; itslafoce.org). *AH*

6. Ferrara

Trains from Venice to Florence and Rome pass through Ferrara, but it's only the most intrepid Italophiles who alight here – a pity, given the very special things this most urbane of Italy's northern cities has to offer. Supremely elegant, the unusually wide central streets have something De Chirico-esque about them when empty. But they lend themselves, too, to the kind of street-party atmosphere that prevails when the

Internazionale journalism festival brings some 70,000 people to the city in early October or buskers flood the streets for a festa in August. The massive brick bulk of the moated Estense castle faces the delicate 12th-century façade of the cathedral; Palazzo dei Diamanti, with its striking bugnato walls, stages world-class art exhibitions; in Palazzo Schifanoia are a series of delightful frescoes depicting seasons and classical gods, created in the 15th century for Ferrara's ruling Duke Borso d'Este.

Further information: palazzodiamanti.it; artecultura.fe.it; internazionale.it; ferrarabuskers.com. *AH*

7. Insider's guide to the Vatican

There's nothing like a really good guide to transform a long trudge past statues and frescoes into a memorable and instructive experience. Eyes of Rome describes itself as a "creative club of independent tour guides"; Stefania Pistone, one of its 38 guides, adds that "we like to think of ourselves as storytellers". The company's best-selling Vatican tour "Sistine Chapel: Secrets and Mysteries" brings masterpieces like Michelangelo's frescoes, Raphael's School of Athens and Bernini's work on St Peter's Basilica and Piazza to vivid life. To give just one example: could those dancing figures in the background just above Christ's opened sepulchre in Pinturicchio's 1494 fresco of the Resurrection in the Borgia Apartments be the first known depictions of Native Americans – based on Columbus's eye-witness account? It's details like this that make all the difference.

Three-hour guided tour from £145 a head for two people, excluding entry tickets (00 39 392 928 3376; eyesofrome.com). *AH*

8. Ravenna's mosaics by night

The Unesco-listed Byzantine mosaics of Ravenna are among the wonders of Italy. They're even more dazzling when illuminated by night. During the Mosaico di Notte season (late June to early September), four of the Adriatic city's major sixth- to eighth-century monuments, including San Vitale and the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, are open for guided tours on Tuesday and Friday evenings from 9pm-11pm. Time your visit to fall between July 20 and 25, during the feast of Sant'Apollinare, the city's patron saint, and you'll see Ravenna come alive with concerts, street-food stalls, fireworks and sound-and-light shows.

Admission £8, free for children up to 10 (00 39 0544 482 663; turismo.ra.it). *AH*

9. Gardens & villas of the Italian lakes

Since time immemorial, the inhabitants of northern Italy's larger cities have used lakes Como and Maggiore as their rural escape: the first-century naturalist Pliny the Elder wrote eloquently of them. The former more mountainous and dramatic, the latter with its two spectacularly landscaped islands – Isola Bella and Isola Madre – and both with villas and gardens of the rich and famous on their shores. Martin Randall's six-night Gardens and Villas of the Italian Lakes tour throws some lesser-known gems into a classic itinerary, adding commentary from a highly knowledgeable architectural historian to bring the whole thing alive.

From £2,960 per person (020 8742 3355; martinrandall.com). *AH*

10. Umbrian archaeology

The long-established cultural specialist Andante Travels is one of the few operators to devote an entire tour to Umbria, a region whose hill-towns and many archaeological and architectural attractions are usually passed over or tacked on to longer Tuscan or pan-Italian itineraries. The company's eight-day "Archaeology in the Hill Towns" tour offers a fascinating overview of the region, covering more than 2,000 years of history with trips to

hill towns large and small (Gubbio, Spoleto and Assisi, but also Spello, Todi and Montefalco) and visits to see Roman ruins and Renaissance frescoes. Above all, every departure benefits from the company of an expert academic lecturer.

From £2,150, excluding flights (01722 713800; andantetravels.co.uk). *Tim Jepson*

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