

ITALY WITH FRIENDS "BELLA ITALIA" TOUR
September 20 – October 3, 2020
(Itinerary is subject to change and variations with and/or without notice.)

Day 0 - Depart USA – Saturday, September 19, 2020

Remember you will arrive in Europe the day after you depart the USA. You will need to book your air travel so that you arrive in Venice early enough to check into your hotel and be ready to meet with the group for sightseeing at 3 PM.

Day 1 - Arrival Day - Benvenuto a Venice, La Serenissima – Sunday, September 20, 2020

Welcome to Venice, known as "La Serenissima", the most serene. Many first-time visitors are often stirred deeply by this almost fantasy world unlike anything they have ever seen before. We will enjoy a walking tour through the back streets of Venice leading to the Grand Canal near the Rialto Bridge, continuing to St. Mark's Square. Napoleon referred to this square as "the most beautiful drawing room in Europe". St. Mark's Basilica and the Doge's Palace are both located on this beautiful square. Finally, we will enjoy a welcome dinner at a restaurant along a quiet canal. (B) (D) Light

Day 2 - The Pleasure of Getting Lost in Venice – Monday, September 21, 2020

We will dive right into the historic center of what was for centuries Europe's top superpower, with a visit inside St. Mark's Basilica and its museum. We will then walk to the Rialto Bridge which has been a major landmark in Venice since 1588. Across the Rialto Bridge is the commercial district of Venice. You will find the local vegetable and fish markets here in the same place they have been for centuries.

We will then head to the Dorsoduro district crossing the old Accademia Bridge to see one of the last Gondola shops in Venice. We will enjoy lunch at a restaurant located on the Giudecca Canal. What a view! The rest of the day is free for you to visit Venice's other famous sights or get delightfully lost on this magical island. I am sure you will want to take that gondola ride sometime during your visit. Also, do not forget that Venice has some of the best and most unusual shopping in Italy. You may also wish to take a boat ride to one of the islands like Murano to see the glass blowing exhibits. (B) (L) Moderate

Day 3 - Florence, Birthplace of the Renaissance – Tuesday, September 22, 2020

This morning we are off to Florence or Firenze, the capital of Tuscany. We will jump right into the frenzy of Firenze with a walking tour of the main sights including the Duomo, Baptistery, with its famous bronze doors, followed by a walk through the medieval streets of Florence. You will pass Piazza Republica, leather markets, the sculpture studded Piazza Signoria and end at the oldest bridge in Florence, the Ponte Vecchio. Florence is known as an outdoor museum and you will have time to enjoy all the sculpture, art, and architecture that surrounds you.

Seeing Michelangelo's sculpture of his 17 Ft. marble "David" is truly a highlight of any visit to Florence. We will visit the Accademia Gallery to gaze upon one of the most famous sculptures in the world. We will then enjoy our first Tuscan dinner together. (B) (D) Moderate

Day 4 - Fun in Florence – Wednesday, September 23, 2020

Tuscany's cuisine is world famous. Today you will have the opportunity to learn how to prepare a Tuscan meal yourself, in the kitchen of Chefactory. You will begin your day strolling through one of the open-air markets in Florence focusing on the culture of Tuscan food. This includes the tasting of local and seasonal products with targeted spending on organic products which will be useful for the performance and processing of the seasonal menu of your class. Then, with the guidance of your professional chef, you will prepare several courses from starters like bruschetta, homemade pasta and sauce, a main course and finally dessert. You will then sit down to enjoy the fruits of your labor with a little vino. This experience is always a highlight for many of my travelers.

After your cooking lesson, you will have some free time. Shopping abounds in this town of designers and it is a great place to find those special souvenirs. The San Lorenzo market and it is a great place to find bargains and souvenirs. There are several leather markets, and the Ponte Vecchio is known for its many gold and silver shops. You might want to stop into my favorite chocolate shop, Rivoire, located right on Piazza Signoria. You can find delicious treats and some unusual gifts. (B) (L) Light

Day 5 - Chianti Traditions and "la citta delle belle torri" – Thursday, September 24, 2020

We will say farewell to Florence and then make a stop at the American Military Cemetery located just outside of Florence. The compelling sight of endless rows of white marble crosses recalls the heroism of the young Americans who fought so valiantly to free Italy from the grips of fascism during World War II. The 1940's may seem very long ago, but during WWII this area was terribly ravaged by the fighting. I feel it is an honor and our duty to take time to pay our respects to these brave soldiers.

No trip to Tuscany would be complete without a visit to a local castle and winery. We will visit one of the oldest in the Chianti area of Tuscany, the 11th century Castello Verrazzano. You may recognize the name Verrazzano as the captain who discovered New York harbor in 1542. The Verrazzano Narrows bridge is named after him. His family's hilltop estate and winery are just spectacular. You will enjoy a guided tour of the castle grounds and ancient ageing cellars followed by a feast of homemade Tuscan favorites accompanied by a range of delicious wines made by the Verrazzano winery. You will have the opportunity to learn the art of wine tasting in this relaxed and amusing setting.

We will then head to one of Tuscany's most popular towns, San Gimignano, the "Beautiful City of Towers". We will check into the Hotel Leon Bianco, which is located right in the middle of town on the Piazza Cisterna. There will be time for a short walking tour of this magical village. We will visit the ruins of the 14th century fortress which is now a peaceful hilltop park and olive grove. There is a small tower that has great views of the San Gimignano skyline and a 360-degree view of the Tuscan countryside. You will have the evening to immerse yourself in this Medieval Manhattan. (B) (L) Strenuous

Day 6 - Magical San Gimignano – Friday, September 25, 2020

You will have the whole day to enjoy San Gimignano. You will find many things to do in San Gimignano. The hotel can even arrange some day trips for you. You may want to climb the Torre Grande, the highest tower in San Gimignano that affords expansive views over the surrounding countryside. There are several Torture Museums in town, yes, I did say torture museums, and they are supposedly very good.

Beware, there are some of the best artisan shops in Italy down every street. This has always been an important trading center. It was on the famous Via Francigena: the most traveled of the medieval roads that pilgrims traveled to Rome. From the 8th Century, it was the route through France that linked Canterbury Cathedral in England and Rome, the heart of Christianity. Today you will find locally owned shops selling ceramics, soaps, alabaster, olive wood items, jewelry, leather goods, etc. You will find a great selection of paintings and prints of the Tuscan area. Also, do not miss the award-winning gelato shop located right across from our hotel for a little taste of gelato heaven. Throngs of tourists come in and out of San Gimignano each day and it is especially nice to be able to enjoy it after the crowds have gone. (B) Light to Strenuous?

Day 7 – Grand Hill Towns – Saturday, September 26, 2020

Today we start early with a visit to Siena. This beloved Tuscan grand hill town has a medieval character that has survived to an amazing extent. Siena's heart is the shell shaped Piazza del Campo or Il Campo. This is one of Italy's most famous and most beautiful squares. The Palio, a renowned horse race takes place twice a year right here. It is hard to imagine horses racing bareback frantically around for about 90 seconds in this area.

There will be time to enjoy a tour of some of Siena's most important sights. First stop will be the massive Duomo, one of the most ornate in Italy. The inside of the Duomo is as ornate as the outside with its famous marble floors and sculpture by Michelangelo, Pisano and Bernini. The Piccolomini Library has some stunning frescos that depict the life of Pope Pius II. The frescos are just as vibrant as the day they were finished over 550 years ago. There will be some free time for lunch or shopping.

Next, we will make our way into the nearby region of Umbria. Umbria's grand hill town, Orvieto, sits majestically atop an outcrop of volcanic tufa stone with thousands of caves underneath the city, dug out during Etruscan, Medieval and Renaissance times. Orvieto was once an important Etruscan city. Today it is famous for one of Italy's most beautiful Gothic cathedrals, and a delicious white wine, Orvieto Classico. After time to settle in, we will enjoy dinner together. (B) (D) Strenuous

Day 8 – Orvieto and the Sorrentine Peninsula – Sunday, September 27, 2020

This morning there will be time to enjoy this grand hill town. We will visit the Duomo, 300 years in construction, with its San Brizio Chapel covered in frescos by Luca Signorelli. Then we will tour the fascinating Orvieto Underground to see thousands of years of archaeological history.

Then we will hit the Autostrada and head South for a visit to one of the most beautiful areas in Italy. The Divine Coast south of Naples is truly memorable. Here mountains erupt from the Mediterranean and pastel-hued villages cling to their sides. This area is filled with dazzling antiquities like Pompeii and breathtaking natural wonders. We will spend 3 days in this picturesque region.

Our overnight base will be the town of Sorrento, known as the city of orange and lemon groves, which you will see everywhere. The perfume of the citrus trees is a reminder to sample the local liqueur, Limoncello. You will find panoramic sea views all around you. We will explore Sorrento and its narrow Roman-grid streets, then sit down and enjoy a delicious dinner. Yes, we will toast our adventures thus far with some chilled Limoncello. Salute! (B) (D) Moderate

Day 9 - Picturesque Villages and Amazing Mediterranean Views – Monday, September 28, 2020

Today will be a full day of discovery on a drive along the famous Amalfi Coast, the most amazing of all the Mediterranean shores. It has also been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. You will visit the vertical town of Positano, where colorful houses cling to a hillside overlooking the sea. Continue to Amalfi, once a mighty maritime republic. Enjoy a walk through the town and a visit to the Duomo di Sant' Andrea which glitters when the sun strikes the gold mosaics on its pediment. This evening we will dine together at the hotel's fine restaurant after we toast to our beautiful setting with those amazing views. (B) (D) Light

Day 10 - La Dolce Far Niente (The Sweetness of Doing Nothing) – Tuesday, September 29, 2020

You will have time today to enjoy more of this heavenly location just as you like. You can spend more time in Sorrento. You could take a train or bus to other areas along the coast. You could hop a ferry to the magical Isle of Capri. Hire a private boat for fun in the Mediterranean. It is your day to spend as you like, even enjoying the "sweetness of doing nothing." (B)

Day 11 – Ancient Pompeii and the Eternal City of Rome – Wednesday, September 30, 2020

When Mount Vesuvius erupted in AD 79, the lively port city of Pompeii was perfectly preserved by the volcano's ashes. Pompeii has amazed visitors since its discovery in the 18th century. Exquisite mosaics and wall paintings among the ruins of theaters, shops, homes and temples offer total immersion into the ancient Roman world. We will visit the site with a local guide and enjoy a tour throughout the excavations.

Then it will be time to hit the Autostrada one last time for our drive to the Rome, the capital of Italy. After time to settle into our hotel, we will enjoy an easy walking tour of Rome's historical district. We will visit the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, Piazza Navona, and the Trevi Fountain along the way. We will enjoy dinner together this evening in one of my favorite trattorias. You must try the "Cacio e Pepe", a homemade pasta dish with Pecorino Romano cheese and black pepper. Delizioso!! (B) (D) Strenuous

Day 12 - The Wonders of Ancient Rome – Thursday, October 1, 2020

Today will be a full day of sightseeing starting with a walking tour of Ancient Rome's most important sights. The Pantheon is the only building in Rome to have been continually in use since its construction in 120AD. There will be time to learn of the origins of Rome as we visit the Campidoglio which sits on the Capitoline Hill.

The Colosseum is one of the most impressive sights in the entire city of Rome. We will visit inside and learn about 'Bread and Circuses' and the Gladiatorial games. We will then walk among the ruins of the Roman Forum, the political and religious center of ancient Rome. We will enjoy lunch together in a restaurant overlooking the Colosseum. Afterwards, you will have some free time to continue your ancient history lesson with a visit to Palatine Hill or other spots in Rome. (B) (L) Very Strenuous

Day 13 - The Treasures of Vatican City– Friday, October 2, 2020

Today we will visit Campo de Fiore with its lively market. Then we will cross the Tiber river on the Ponte Sant' Angelo with its beautiful statues of Angels by Bernini. This bridge leads to the Castel Sant'Angelo, built as a tomb for the Emperor Hadrian.

From here we will enter Vatican City, a tiny independent country. We will take some time for lunch together at a little outdoor cafe. We will then spend a big part of our day visiting the Vatican Museum with its famous Sistine Chapel followed by a visit inside St. Peter's Basilica, the largest and grandest church in Christendom. After some free time, we will meet for our farewell dinner. (B) (L) (D) Strenuous

Day 14 - Arrivederci Italia! – Saturday, October 3, 2020

Sadly, it is time to say "arrivederci". Parting will be such sweet sorrow, but I know you will take along wonderful memories of time spent discovering "Bella Italia" with new friends. (B)

(Included meals are designated each day with (B) for breakfast, (L) for lunch, and (D) for dinner.)

THE FOLLOWING IS INCLUDED IN YOUR ITALY WITH FRIENDS TOUR:

- 13 nights' accommodation in 3-4 star, centrally located hotels with private bath or shower.
- 25 meals included: 13 breakfasts (B), 5 lunches (L), 7 dinners (D).
- All ground transportation in Italy during tour.
- Guided sightseeing and entrance fees to select sights, wineries and museums as described in itinerary.
- Local VAT taxes and government fees, gas, highway tolls and parking fees.
- Pre-tour visit with helpful travel information.
- Plenty of memories to last a lifetime.
- Surprises along the way.

NOT INCLUDED IN TOUR:

- Does not include airfare.
- Does not include transportation to and/or from the airport in Venice or Rome.
- Does not include remaining meals, alcoholic or non-alcoholic drinks at included meals.
- Does not include local City Tax at each hotel. Can range from 1 Euro – 6 Euro.
- Does not include personal expenses such as internet use, laundry, mini-bar, or extra transportation in tour towns.
- Does not include travel insurance.

2020 LAND ONLY TOUR PRICES:

Tour begins in Venice and ends in Rome; tour is for 14 days and 13 nights.

The total cost per person is **\$3999** with double occupancy. (Includes taxes, fees, and Euro exchange rate adjustment.) Single occupancy supplement is **\$850**.

A **\$500** deposit will hold your place on the tour. Tours are limited in size. (This tour is limited to 8 guests.) Payment is accepted by check or credit card through PayPal. (5% fee if using PayPal) Your deposit is credited against the total tour cost. Final payment is required no later than **60** days prior to departure.

PHYSICAL DEMANDS:

Prepare for a physically demanding tour. Age is not a concern so long as you are physically fit, a very good walker at an energetic pace, and able to stand for extended periods of time and climb lots of hills and stairs. All the above could be done in all sorts of weather and temperatures. You are required to load and unload your bags into the van, and to carry your bag to your room. This sometimes could be a short distance from the hotel. Most days our sightseeing will cover anywhere from 2-8 miles of walking, sometimes over uneven surfaces. Plan to get in shape before you head to Italy.