The 50 best holidays in Italy

From cultural tours to foodie getaways, family adventures to beach holidays, Robert Ryan has this year’s top trips

Best new hotels

1 New in Forte Village

Changes are afoot at the family favourite Forte Village on the southwest coast of Sardinia, near Pula. There is the new Hotel Bouganville, which offers bungalow accommodation, a new waterfront area with private beach bordered by a fresh crop of restaurants and a larger sports area with beach volleyball. Plus, for the grown-ups, there’s a new Michelin-starred restaurant.

Details: Seven nights is from £1,665 per adult (£1,375 under-12s sharing the parents’ room) half-board in a bungalow at Hotel Bouganville, including flights but not transfers (01204 821419, destilndogy.co.uk)

2 Stay on Lake Como

Anyone yearning for that Grand Budapest Hotel experience of a grand old dame of a hotel with a colourful history and impeccable service should try the Grand Hotel Tremezzo on Lake Como, which has recently been carefully updated (a new spa opens next door soon and many of the upper suites now have outdoor hot tubs). With its lakefront terrace and “floating pool”, it creates both grandeur and glamour (after all, Carpe stayed here).

Details: Seven nights’ B&B is from £1,385pp, including flights from Heathrow and transfers (02244 395 527, lcluburytravel.co.uk)

3 Eco hotel in the Dolomites

The Naturhotel Miraval, a new opening in the Alta Badia area of the Dolomites, is a modern 12-bedroom, 10-apartment eco-conscious complex that sits on Sasso Santa Croce Mountain. In late spring and during the summer months it is an ideal starting point for both easy and challenging hiking trails, climbing walls, mountain biking and motorcycle tours around...
the area's impressive mountain passes.

**Details**
- Half-board doubles are from £68 (00 39 09471 84 40 55, naturhotelmiravalle.com). Flights to Innsbruck or Venice with easyJet (easyjet.com) are from £50.

4 Short break in Naples

This city is up and coming, with a new non-no nonsense mayor determined to clean up, a metro system that functions as public art (including Monte S. Angelo by our own Amanda Levete and Anish Kapoor), new flights from Luton, and two new additions to the i-escape hotel portfolio — Attico Partenopeo, a B&B with a roof terrace for views over the city, and the cinema-themed boutique Hotel Partenopeo Relais.

**Details**
- Attico Partenopeo has B&B doubles from £70 per night; Partenopeo Relais is £105; both through i-escape.com. Flights cost from £380 (easyjet.com).

5 Mandarin in Milan

Milan is not exactly under-resourced when it comes to luxury hotels, but surprisingly it has never had a Mandarin Oriental — until now, that is. A conversion of three lovely 19th-century buildings on Via Monte di Pietà, this 104-room hotel is conveniently located for all important Milanese sport — shopping.

**Details**
- Doubles are from £469 (00 39 02 97318888, mandarinoriental.com). Flights cost from £54 (easyjet.com).

6 Two hotels in one in Florence

The Garni B&B is a new four-star hotel in Florence that is internally linked to an existing three-star one (the Hotel Rosso 23), thus offering a two-in-one experience, with shared common spaces and facilities and the chance to experience bars and restaurants in both hotels. The Garni is on Piazza Santa Maria Novella — handy for the station. And although Garni, himself, once stayed at this historic building — the hotel features antiques and contemporary touches (and very comfortable beds), including lots of blue — it has a denim theme.

**Details**
- B&B doubles are from £95 (00 39 055 2737300, whybelibxhrhotels.com). Flights cost from £102 (easyjet.com).

7 Rough luxe in Rome

"Rough luxe" is the hotel equivalent of very expensive ripples jeans. G-Rough, opening near Piazza Navona in Rome in March, is a deliberately scuffed 16th-century building that celebrates several generations of Italian designers, and promises a "Fellini-esque visual landscape that meshes fantasy and baroque." Whether you need the "lifestyle manager" it comes with remains to be seen.

**Details**
- Doubles are from £138 (00800 547469 37, designhotels.com). Flights cost from £90 (ba.com).

8 Palace in Genoa

Genoa remains one of the unsung cities in Italy, despite an abundance of classic art and architecture, a fantastic maze of medieval alleys known as "carrari" good Ligurian food and easy access to the local Riviera and the Cega Terme. A recently opened hotel adds to the attraction. The 12-bedroom Le Nole is on the fourth floor of the Lamba Doria Palace and celebrates its 16th to 17th-century heritage with marble floors and ornate plasterwork.

**Details**
- B&B doubles are from £74 (00 39 010 250067, hotellevonorba.com). Flights are from £46 (ryanair.com).

Best for culture

9 Art and food in Parma

Tick several cultural boxes with Kirker's new Art, Music and Gastronomy tour to Emilia Romagna, with departures in April and October. Based in Parma, the holiday majors on the famous local ham and cheese. It is also the birthplace of Verdi and Toccanini and there is a trip to Cerrune, home of violin making, and visits to masterpieces by the artists Coreggio and Parmigianino.

**Details**
- Six nights' B&B is from £175pp, including three dinners and three lunches, flights and transfers (0207 593 1095, kirkerhotels.com).

10 Mummies in Turin

Well known for its role in the original Italian Job film, Turin is also home to the finest collection of Egyptian artefacts outside Cairo, and a newly revamped Museo Egizio dedicated to them opens in April (see Museum and Art). Also new is the central NH Collection Torino Piazza Carignano Hotel, a super-smart contemporary conversion of a 17th-century palace, close to the Egyptian museum, Mole Antonelliana, Royal Palace, Palazzo Madama and the city's famous shopping circuses. Book to view the Shroud of Turin, on display this year from April 15 to June 24 at sanombre.org or call 03 40 01 529 5550.

**Details**
- Doubles are from £119 room-only (08070 80 17 189, nh-hotels.com). Return flights from Manchester with jet2 (jet2.com) or easyjet (easyjet.com) are from £119 return.

11 Veneto by rail

Surely Discovery has a new independent itinerary for 2015, exploring the "cultural richness" of the Veneto by train. It visits Verona (for the Giartano Giusti, a beautiful Renaissance-led garden, and, of course, that balcony; if you must), Padua (for Giusti’s great Naturalis Garden at the Scrovegni Chapel), Vicenza (for Palladio’s last work — the Teatro Olimpico) and then finally on to Venice for... everything.

**Details**
- Seven nights' B&B is from £589pp, including flights and train transfers between cities (020 8785 4722, sumil.co.uk).

12 Papal riches in Lazio

Andante Travels has an unusual new tour in May exploring the wealth and status of the papal aristocracy during the Renaissance in the shape of sumptuous Roman-inspired villas, abbeys, gardens and estates in the rolling hills of Lazio, staying near Trevi and in the splendid hill town of Civita Castellana.

**Details**
- Six nights' B&B is from £205pp, including flights, all meals, daily wine, services of an expert guide and transfers (01723 718000, antreav.co.uk).

13 Opera in the Marches

To tie in with Milan hosting Expo 15, this year’s opera festival in the lovely Le Marche hill town of Macerata (July 23-27) has an all-Italian cultural theme, with Verdi’s Rigoletto, Puccini’s La bohème and a double bill of Mascagni’s Cavalleria rusticana and Leoncavallo’s Pagliacci. Not as well known or as lurid as Veronna, it offers an equally stunning setting — the Arena Sferistero, a 19th-century gardens arena.

**Details**
- Four nights' B&B is from £115, plus two lunches, including top tickets for the three opera nights, guided sightseeing tours, flights and transfers (020 8799 8550, travelforthearts.co.uk).

14 Gardens in Lucca

Get behind normally closed doors with Cicero Travel's Lucca & The Renaissance Garden Tour in May. Not only do you spend time in the medieval walled city of Lucca in Tuscany, but you visit seven significant gardens and villas, some rarely open to the public, including Villa Bernardini, still lived in by members of the family who built it in 1625.

**Details**
- Four nights' B&B is from £150pp, plus two lunches and two dinners, flights, transfers, and entry fees (01369 81167, ciceroni.co.uk).
Guided walk in northern Italy, combined with fine food and wine. See the hilltop town of Montepulciano, Lucchi's villas, and spend a night in a winery and time in Pienza.

Details Seven nights' B&B is from £1095pp, including guided walks, tours, flights and transfers (0844 490 0901, exploric.co.uk).

20 Michelín-starred Rome
Rome's Palazzo Manfredi, a 17th-century palace in the historical centre, comes with fabulous views over the Colosseum, the Imperial Forum and the Domus Aurea from its rooftop terrace and Aroma restaurant. After just been awarded its first Michelín star, so head there for the likes of Chiavina beef tartare with rocket pesto, tomato water jelly and pecorino cheese foam and fabulous home-made pasta.

Details B&B doubles cost from £325, with dinners sharing a room paying from £725 a night (00 39 071 489 500, ristorantealpino.it). Flights to innsbruck cost from £50 (easyjet.com). Car hire is from £350 a week (020 3740 9859, holidaycars.co.uk).

23 Beaches in Elba
It might be a wish to get there (flight, car, ferry) but Elba, with its 96 beaches and pretty harbours, is a top Italian family destination and increasingly popular with the British. Hotel Désirée, set in 17 acres of private parkland in Spatao Bay, has been refurbished, adding family rooms that sleep up to five.

Details Seven nights at the hotel. Rates are from £925pp half-board including car hire, return ferry transfers and flights to Pisa from Gatwick (01933 738 753, cittalia.com).
27 Basilicata base
Basilicata is an up and coming area for the UK market and the Hotel Gabbiano, near Maratea, occupies one of the best spots on the coast, sitting on a little cove with all rooms having sea view and a balcony. Right on the beach, it has good food, friendly owners and a great wine list — perfect for families.

Details Seven nights’ half board costs from £435pp per adult (£334 per child under 12 sharing a room) including flights (01694 722893, long-travel.co.uk)

28 Island life in Ischia
For something different, try Ischia, a volcanic island in the Tyrrhenian Sea, famous for hot springs and revitalising mud baths, and accessible by boat from Naples. The Garden & Villas resort is a lovely family-friendly hotel consisting of nine whitewashed villas scattered throughout the extensive hillside gardens in the northeastern corner of the island, a short walk from the beach (though there are steps, so it’s not for a toddler) and with an American Bar set into a cave.

Details Seven nights’ half board is from £1,325pp (under-12s pay £137) including flights and transfers (020 7791 3938, realholiday.co.uk)

29 Coastal retreat near Livorno
Completely last year, the stylish and modern Villa Casa Lia in Pineta di Roccamare (on the coast between Livorno and Rome) is a new rental. Ideal for two families with young children or teenagers, the villa is set in a pine forest and is a short walk from a quiet beach, has a private tennis court 100m away, and bicycles to explore on. It has five bedrooms and sleeps up to ten.

Details The villa costs £4,348 (07049 812721, sarathomas@gmail.com). Flights to Pisa are from £95 (faa.com)

Best new villas
30 Budget Sicily
Wish Sicily is a new company renting villas on the island. Its portfolio includes several budget options, including Green Villa, a modern white cube of a house, close to the seaside resort of Mondello, near Palermo, which comes with a large garden with a law and children’s play area.

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area, overlooked by a terrace with an outdoor kitchen, dining and sitting area. There’s no pool but there’s always the sea. Details: Green Villa sleeps six and costs from £659 a week (0207 719 7302, wiarath.co.uk). Flights to Palermo are from £192 (easyjet.com).

31 On Tuscany’s border
New on the rental market for 2015, Casale Fonte Sant’Angelo is a beautifully restored and updated barn farmhouse that straddles the Umbrian-Tuscan border, with an immaculate lawn dotted with Puglian olive trees, framing a view of nearby Lake Trasimeno, with its lakeside restaurants and water sports. Quite honestly, though, you may find it hard to get away from the rather splendid pool and its loungers. Details: The villa sleeps 14 and costs from £4,995 per week (0192 2664315, vitagettatravel.co.uk). Fly to Perugia from £60 (ryanair.com).

32 Stay in a Tuscan quarry
It might sound a little bleak, but Casa di Calabro, a stone cottage, is set in a former stone quarry. Luckily, grottoes have reclaimed spot of the rocks and it now makes for a very private and spectacular setting. About just 15 minutes from Siena, Renovated late last year, the multi-level property has new wood and marble floors, a large kitchen, indoor and outdoor dining areas and a 6 x 12m pool. Details: A week for eight is from £2,629 (020 6444 9500, iviavittoriotuscany.com). Flights to Florence from £409 (easyjet.com).

33 Masseria in Puglia
Masseria Monopoli is a pretty fabulous white fortified farmhouse designed to keep Saracens and pirates at bay, and which makes you feel as if you could keep out the marauding hordes for months, while living in style. It has olive groves, a pool with a pool house, a kitchen and both garden, and a housekeeper as well as eight very chic bedrooms (sleeps 16). Details: One week is from £8,700 or £644 per person if fully occupied (020 7902 7652, beltravell.travel). Flights to Bari are from £100pp (ba.com).

34 By the beach in Sicily
Massimo Villas La Masseria is close to that rarity in Italy — a lovely unspoilt little beach: there are no loungers, pedalo or jet skis. The villa is surrounded by Sicily’s Venetici Nature Reserve and a footpath through it leads to Cala Mosca, a quiet, little-known beach within the reserve (and next to the archaeological site of Etna). Just make sure you don’t take a wrong turn to the nudist beach. The villa itself is single-storey, nicely equipped, with a Zen garden, covered terraces and a plunge pool. It sleeps eight. Details: Seven nights for eight are from £1,760 (0203 529 8103, massimovillas.com). Fly to Catania (80km away) from £98 (easyjet.com).

35 Heated pool in Chianti
Tuscany Now! II Trebbio has a nice touch — a pool heated by solar panels (even in the heat of an Italian summer, villa pools are often distinctly chilly). It is also a 13th-century hilltop farmhouse surrounded by the sort of countryside that first put Chianti on the UK map (it’s two miles from Castellina-in-Chianti). It has a lovely kitchen, plus a wonderful pergola for shaded outdoor dining. It sleeps up to ten. Details: Seven nights’ full board is from £3,662 (020 7664 8884, tuscanbynew.co.uk). Flights to Pisa are from £64 (ryanair.com).

36 Yoga in Tuscany
Destination Yoga has a charming family-run retreat in the heart of the Tuscany Valley in Puglia, with some accommodation in the region’s conical trulli houses. There are three vegetarian meals daily and two yoga classes plus an open-air swimming pool on site and a range of massage treatments available. Details: Seven nights’ full board is £819pp, including yoga and transfers from Bari, but not flights (020 3238 0122, destinationyoga.co.uk). Flights cost from £180 (ba.com).

37 Spa in Basilicata
The Sant’Angelo Hotel, which sits down the hillside near Maratea, on the southern coast of Italy, is a slice of old-school dolce vita from the 1950s (a favourite of Claudia Cardinale, Anita Ekberg and Ben Gazzara). Opening this month is the La Terme spa, with five treatment rooms. A total room, suite room with gold sand and en-suite spa, salt room (Himalayan and Sicilian salt), sea-water hydromassage pool, sauna and “emotional showers. There is a wide range of treatments, both conventional and holistic, including the Venus Miracle, an ancient Roman-inspired therapy, an immersion in rare, therapeutic “jewel milk” — from donkeys — and “m snelheart”. Details: Room-only prices are from £195, with a complimentary massage £60 39 0978 676910, hotel santaverone.com. A three day fly-drive to Naples is from £300pp (ba.com).

38 Meditate in Umbria
Learn how to meditate at Casa Fasalina, a stone country house set on 40 acres (16ha) in the Umbrian hills. The daily programme includes two mindfulness meditation sessions and two of Lugung — a Tibetan yoga to strengthen bodies and minds. There’s also a pool, walks through the countryside, historical visits, Spoleto and Orvieto mini tours by and three vegetarian meals a day (including wine with dinner). Details: Seven nights’ full board in September is from £689, including meditation sessions (00 33 638 027303, mindfulnessjourneys.com). Flights to Perugia cost from £62 (ryanair.com).

39 Therapies in Fasano
The stunning white Borgo Egnazia is in the south, near Fasano on the Adriatic coast, and its recently revamped wellness centre is reckoned to be one of the best spas in the country, offering psychosomatic naturopathy, Knipp hydrotherapy, aromatherapy, graphology, wellness life coaching, even shaman consultations. But for all, the usual spa suspects are here too, with treatments based on local, organic ingredients. Details: Five nights’ full board is from £379pp, including flights and transfers (0039 3470080162, kuoni.co.uk).

Best spa breaks

40 Painting in Umbria
Learn to paint the rolling hills and towns that form the backdrop to biblical Italian Renaissance paintings at Chiesa dei Carcerini in Umbria, an 8th-century church that, with its adjoining 18th-century farmhouse, is now a luxurious seven-room country house. Tutor Alan Reed will teach guests (how to capture the light and landscape of the stunning surroundings. Details: A week’s painting course in May is from £1,050pp, half-board, with daily tuition (0039 075 9441298, chiccadecamere.com). Flights cost from £120 (ryanair.com).

41 Snappers in Venice
Learn how to capture Venice in photos by following a top professional photographer around the calli and over the canal bridges, taking pictures of art and architecture. This course/adventure work your way back at the grand canal Bauer Hotel, which is organzing this new Venice Through A Lens package. Details: A three-day workshop in the spring is from £265. Room-only doubles at the Bauer Hotel are from £200 per night (00 39 041 540 7072, bauer venice.com). Flights are from £370 (easyjet.com).

42 Beaches in Marche
Naturetrek has a trip exploring the flower-dotted alpine meadows of the Shikra National Park in the eastern Apennines of the Marche region. Guided mounta walks take in carpets of gentians, edelweiss and clouds of butterflies, including many fritillaries and blues. There is fantastic birdlife, too — Alpine choughs, Alpine accentors, golden eagles, goosawks and snow buntings — as well as, less easily spotted, wolves and wildcats. To see the flowers and wildlife, you’ll pull up to a lawn, all from a comfortable hotel base. Details: Eight days full board in June is from £1,295pp, including flights and transfers (00 39 0462 770 051, naturetrek.co.uk).

Italy special

Travel 23
43 Golf and cars in the Veneto
Combine a few rounds of golf in the Venetian hinterland with touring in classic cars (such as a 1967 Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spider and 1966 Triumph Spitfire Mark 2), plus wine-tasting, oliv-oil tasting and Italian cookery lessons.
Details Eight nights' B&B is from £2,745pp (non-golfers pay £210pp less). The price includes three dinners and a lunch, six rounds of golf, driving vintage cars on two days, a boat cruise on Lake Garda, tastings, cookery lesson, and transport but not flights, which can be arranged by the company (03992 579 697, greatgolfadventures.net).

Best active breaks
44 Hiking in Liguria
One of Exodus's new soft adventure holidays is walking the Ligurian coast, including super-chic Portofino and a section of the Ligurian Blue Path, through vineyards and olive groves. The tour is based in the seaside town of Monella in the Gulf of Poets, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is graded moderate with 9-13km per day.
Details Seven nights' B&B is from £999, including two lunches, one dinner and one winetasting, as well as flights, transfers and guided walking (0845 287 2300, exodus.co.uk).

45 Sea kayak in Sardinia
The deserted coves, towering limestone cliffs, ancient watchtowers and sandy beaches make the southwest coast of Sardinia ideal for sea kayaking.
Responsible Travel has an eight-day, guided excursion that includes plenty of down time from paddling (four or five hours a day) for snorkelling, swimming or sunbathing.
Details Seven nights is from £665pp including most meals and a mixture of accommodated (tents or bed and breakfast) and transfers but not flights 08273 823700, responsibletravel.com. Flights cost from £95pp (easyJet.com).

46 'Tuscany on horseback
On Equine Escapes' tour, learn to ride with Spa and Wine package, you ride out from a castle on the Tuscan/Umbria border, which also has a tennis court and two swimming pools. You'll get the chance to ride to a natural hot water spa (massages available) and visit a vineyard for a wine tasting, on a non-riding day.

50 Windsurf on Garda
Lake Garda, especially the northern section with its reliable, steady winds, is a great place to sail and windsurf. The area is dotted with windsurfing centres that offer tuition/hire packages and Surf Segproma is one of the most established, having been there for 25 years.
Details Six nights' B&B is from £225pp including nine hours' tuition and seven days' board and bike hire (sailing is also available). Stay in hotels or apartments at either Torbole or Riva del Garda (00 39 0464 505963, surfsegrompa.it). Flights to Verona cost from £82 and car hire from £26 a day (Tachocs).

47 Walking Umbria's Sabine Hills
On Foot Holidays has an unusual self-guided route following Italy's iconic backroad: from medieval Spoleto to the famous Abbey of Farfa, in the Sabine Hills of Umbria, a trip designed for experienced walkers (five to seven hours on hill tracks per day). Highpoints include the vine-clad landscape to Il Lago di Per回首o and Greccio in the Sabine Hills, where St Francis is believed to have invented the Nativity scene.
Details Eight nights' B&B is from £750pp, staying in a range of hotels from abbeys to townhouses, plus four dinners and one picnic, luggage transfers, and detailed route information (01722 322625, onfootholidays.co.uk). Flights to Rome cost from £190 (ba.com).

48 Cycle Venice to Rome
Discover Adventure's new Venice to Rome group tour is probably out for the Sunday cyclist. From Venice it heads south through rustic villages, over the rolling hills of Tuscany and Umbria, along the Adriatic coast, then turns inland for long, steep climbs, before a relatively flat run to Rome. You need to take (or hire) your own bike.
Details Six days in May or September is from £699pp including most meals, flights, transfers and the services of the tour support (01922 784444, discoveradventure.com).

49 Soft pedal in Puglia
Have your luggage transported from one masseria (farmhouse) to the next, while you cycle on a self-guided tour of the quiet backroads of the Pates of Sorrento which forms the heel of Italy — and lovely coastal routes. Intitravel's easy Pedalling Through Puglia package takes in 3-6km a day on easy routes. Tandems are available on request.
Details Eight nights' B&B is from £1,065pp, with seven dinners and bike hire, but not flights or transfers (08453 67003, intitravel.co.uk). Flights to Bari from £90 (ba.com and easyJet.com). Transfers cost from £95.