



# 101 Essential travel tips for Italy

Katy Clarke - Untold Italy and Untold Morsels

## Buon giorno!

Whether you are visiting Italy for the first or tenth time, it's always exciting.

Before you depart, let's make sure you are ready.

Our travel tips for Italy include advice on Italian culture and etiquette as well as practical information about transport, accommodation and much more for your trip.

No doubt you will have lots of questions. If you need assistance please join our friendly Facebook group - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/italytravelplanning/> where there is sure to be someone online who can help

[Click here to join the Italy travel planning Facebook group](#)

*Disclosure: Untold Italy and Untold Morsels assist our readers with carefully chosen product and services recommendations that help make travel easier and more fun. If you click through and make a purchase on many of these items we may earn a commission. All opinions are our own – please read our [disclosure page](#) for more information.*

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## Italy is a big and diverse country

From the alps in the north to the rocky shores of Sicily and all the [magnificent cities](#) in between, there are so many different landscapes and cultures to explore in Italy.

Not so long ago, you needed to catch overnight trains to cross the country. Don't underestimate how long it will take to travel from north to south if you are straying from the major cities.

Italy only became a unified country in 1871. Prior to that, the area we know as Italy today was made up of several kingdoms who each had their own identities, culture, food and language.

These differences continue today, so much so that Italians from the north may not be able to understand southerners when they speak in their local dialect.

However, in most situations these days everyone speaks standard Italian.

## Italian language tips

While many people, particularly in tourist areas, speak and understand English it is the polite thing to do to try and learn some basic Italian phrases. People always appreciate it when you make an effort with their language.

Always greet people when you enter a shop, restaurant or attraction. Saying Buon Giorno! (good morning) to everyone you meet is an essential part of Italian culture and it is considered rude if you don't make this small effort.

## Learn a few words

These days there are many tools to help you learn how to use and pronounce words. We like [Duolingo](#) a free online tool that can help you to learn Italian at your own pace.

If you want to get up to speed quickly, this [Italian language course](#) for travelers has great reviews.

While on the road you can't beat [Google Translate](#) – it even helps you with pronunciation.

*If you are traveling with kids, Italians love it when your children call out **Buon Giorno!** and **Grazie!** Our children quickly learnt that this was a sure fire way to score a few treats – extra scoops of gelato and lollipops*

Here are the most basic phrases you should know:



## Communicating isn't just about words

Watching people speak to each other in Italy is so entertaining. Italians use their faces and hands to communicate as well as words. Decoding the signals takes some practice so here's a [fun video](#) to get you started.

I've also learnt over the years, especially being married to someone from an Italian background, that speaking loudly and in what I consider to be an angry tone does not necessarily mean the other person is angry or picking a fight.

It's just part of the communication process.

## Out of bounds topic

Thanks to books and movies, many people are fascinated with the Italian mafia and their impact on daily life. This is not a subject you should raise in Italy.

The mafia are a series of organised crime groups that operated mainly in the south and in Sicily. People in the north are not interested and find the topic distasteful. In the south, you don't know whose toes you might tread on. It's a subject best avoided.

If you are stuck for conversation topics, just talk about food. Italians love talking about what, where and with whom they are eating.

## Italian culture tips

Despite their differences, Italians have some cultural norms you should be aware of when you visit. Italy is a conservative Catholic country and loud raucous behaviour, and particularly drunkenness is not well received.

In fact, there are now laws in place to fine tourists who disrespect national monuments like the Trevi Fountain in Rome and Piazza della Signoria in Florence by going for a swim or using them as a toilet. Which is as it should be.

Italians have an essential concept in their culture known as "***bella figura***" meaning – the beautiful figure. It refers to presentation and how one is perceived.

Bella Figura drives the Italian way of dressing and their attention to grooming but it also refers to behaviour. Knowing how to behave and showing good manners is an important part of this concept.

## How to dress in Italy

Italians are snappy dressers and will always make an effort to be well groomed and look sharp. They wear fitted, pressed clothing (even jeans) and wear classic styles and neutral colors. You rarely see Italians in sports clothes on the street and I have never seen anyone wearing flip flops.

### What not to wear

If you don't want to stand out as a tourist in Italy then you should follow the following rules:

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- don't wear sports clothes, yoga pants or sweats unless you are exercising
- flip flops are for the beach only and will not support your feet over cobblestones
- if you must wear sneakers make them stylish – like [these ones](#)
- avoid very bright colors and big logos
- very tiny shorts and skirts are not recommended

## Instead, wear this in Italy

Stick to neutrals (navy, black, white, grey) and well fitted clothes. Then accessorize for the season. Your sunglasses and a scarf will get you through most situations.

Above all, bring comfortable shoes.

More information on how to dress in Italy including a capsule wardrobe and packing list in our [Italy packing guide](#).

## Visiting churches

You are sure to be visiting at least one church on any trip to Italy. After all, they are the cultural hub of every town and village in the country.

Be respectful and make sure you cover up. That means no bare shoulders or knees. So tank tops, short skirts and shorts should not be worn. You must also remove your hat.

While in a church, try to remain silent or use a very low tone of voice if you need to speak. Refrain from eating, drinking and chewing gum inside churches.

## Afternoon walk or “La Passeggiata”



One of my favorite traditions in Italy is their afternoon walk known as La Passeggiata. Italians of all ages take a leisurely early evening walk or stroll, just to socialize and catch up on all the local news.

Between the hours of 5 and 7pm across the country, from the [smallest towns and villages](#) to the grand piazzas of Rome and Florence, locals mingle and stop for a chat with friends and family before dinner.

Join in the fun but be sure to make an effort with your presentation (***bella figura***) and take it slow, stopping for a pre dinner drink or gelato as the sun sets.

## Food and eating in Italy



You can't talk about Italian culture without talking about food. Italians love their food – talking about what they are going to eat and what they have eaten is one of their favorite pastimes.

For example, my Italian mother-in-law has an ongoing conversation with her best friend about how to make a certain type of cookie. That discussion has been ongoing for over 50 years!

Note that Italian food is really something only foreigners discuss. Italian cuisine is regional, each area has its own local traditions, cooking methods and dishes.

For example, Milan and the Lombardy region are famous for risotto while pizza was invented and is most traditional in the south. While in Venice they enjoy small bites called [cicchetti](#) that are a bit like Spanish tapas.

Read our food guides: [Rome](#), [Venice](#), [Brescia](#) and [Sicilian desserts](#)

When you are in Italy, embrace this culture, taste the local dishes and enjoy every last bite. I don't know why pasta and gelato taste better in Italy, they just do!

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## Meal times in Italy

Mealtimes in Italy are quite different to what you are probably used to.

Breakfast (collazione) is eaten between 8am and 11am and is usually very light – a coffee and perhaps a small pastry (cornetto) or some fruit.

Lunch (pranzo) is served between 12:30pm and 2pm and usually includes pasta and/or protein with salad or vegetables

Aperitivo – a light pre dinner snack eaten between 5pm and 8pm – see below

Dinner (cena) is not served until at least 8pm until 10:30pm and follows the same structure as lunch.

Most Italians will make either lunch or dinner their main meal and have a panino (sandwich), salad (insalata) or even a pizza for the other meal.

Gelato may be eaten at any time of day. In Sicily they eat it for breakfast in summer! Not all gelato is great however. Learn how to find the best gelato [here](#)

Many restaurants close on Mondays



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So you know how to order from the menu in Italy, here is the basic structure of an Italian menu

- Antipasti – light starters such as cured meats and olives
- Primo piatto – first course – pasta or rice ( risotto)
- Secondo piatto – second course – usually meat or fish
- Contorni – side dishes such as vegetables ( verdure) or salad ( insalata)
- Dolce – dessert such as cake or gelato

Do NOT feel obligated to eat a full 3 or 4 course meal. It is not necessary – unless you want to of course!

Tourist menus are likely to be quite ordinary and are best avoided.

The menu will indicate if there is a cover charge (coperto) – a standard charge of a couple of euros for your seat and bread (even if you don't eat it). It is non negotiable.

There may also be a service charge (servizio) of 10% particularly in tourist areas.

Tipping is not expected (especially when there is a service charge). You leave your change to the nearest dollar if you like.



## Drinking water

Italian tap water is safe to drink. You will also find drinking fountains in the major cities. Rome, Florence and Venice all have perfectly safe, clean and free drinking water in town squares. You can take [your own bottle](#) and fill it up unless there is a sign reading '**acqua non potabile**'.

We recommend these [collapsible water bottles](#) – perfect for staying hydrated during a long day sightseeing.

At restaurants tap water is not common. You can order still (**naturale**) or sparkling (**frizzante**) water and it usually comes in a 1 litre bottle.

## Lost in translation – Italian food quirks you should know

Some foods we think of as Italian are really versions or adaptations of dishes for our tastes and palates. Here are some food items you might find confusing:

- **Insalata verde** directly translates as green salad and if you order it you will get a bowl of lettuce
- Spaghetti and meatballs is not a dish you will easily find in Italy
- Fettucine Alfredo is an Americanized version of a very simple pasta dish 'pasta in bianco' that you won't find on any menu
- Bread is not a pre dinner snack – it is there to wipe up the juices left on your plate
- Bread is not served with oil and vinegar or butter as general rule (see above)

>[Click to learn more about Italian food culture](#)

## Coffee culture

Italy has the best coffee in the world. Do not expect a giant Starbucks style latte as you won't get it. What you will get is a strong and aromatic brew. Italians drink coffee throughout the day and into the night.

### Coffee types

- Un caffè – 20 – 25ml of espresso coffee. This is what will be served if you ask for a coffee
- Cappuccino – one third espresso, one third steamed milk, one third froth – considered a breakfast drink

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- Caffé latte – hot milk mixed with a dash of coffee – breakfast drink
- Caffé americano – espresso coffee with added hot water served in a larger cup. Also known as a long black in Australia
- Caffé macchiato – espresso coffee with a drop of milk
- Caffé doppio – double espresso

## The rules on coffee

- At most coffee bars you need to pay at the till, get a ticket and then repeat your order to the server behind the bar
- Cappuccino and caffè latte are considered breakfast drinks and not consumed after 10:00am – drinking lots of milk after this time is considered to be bad for digestion
- You pay a surcharge to sit down at a cafe and consume anything (including water). This does not apply when standing at the bar

## Aperitivo



I love aperitivo! Served between 5 and 8pm, aperitivo is a tradition that began in Milan. At its most basic, aperitivo is a drink such as wine or a cocktail, such as the classic Aperol Spritz, served with bar snacks such as chips or olives. They are included in the price of your drink.

These days the concept has evolved into something more elaborate. Some bars now offer a buffet for aperitivo or higher class snacks.

## Italian wine

Wine is taken very seriously in Italy and is always accompanied by a meal or as an aperitif. As a general rule, Italians do not drink to get drunk and this practice is considered rude – see ***bella figura*** above.

Table wine or house wine is generally quite acceptable (and cheap if you are on a budget). Just ask for a glass (*bicchiere*) or bottle (*bottiglia*) of ***vino bianco*** (white wine) or ***vino rosso*** (red wine).

Sometimes house wine is served in a tumbler at more humble establishments. If you get a wine glass it will be served half full as standard practice.

If you are taking your wine drinking a little more seriously (and why not!), Italy has 15 major wine producing regions and over 1 million wine growers. You are spoiled for choice.

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Some favorite and famous Italian wines are:

- Prosecco – a light sparkling white wine from the Veneto region
- Chianti – red wine made from 80% sangiovese grapes from Tuscany
- Barolo – Italy's most expensive red wine from the Piedmont region
- Pinot grigio – a crisp white wine from Lombardy

If you want your sommelier to help you choose your wine, ask for

- Vino rosato – rosé wine
- Vino secco – dry wine
- Vino abboccato – semi-dry wine
- Vino corposo – full-bodied wine
- Vino dolce – sweet wine

Look out for **enotecas** – wine bars. They are the best places to try local wines.

## Food allergies and preferences

If you are managing food allergies and preferences you might be surprised to learn that they are easily accommodated in Italy.

Gluten intolerance in particular is a health issue for Italians, so many restaurants offer a gluten free alternative to their standard pasta dishes.

Vegetarians and vegans are well catered for too. There are many amazing vegetarian dishes from a basic pasta with tomato sauce to more elaborate creations. My favorite is **melanzane parmigiana** (eggplant parmigiana)

If you are lactose intolerant or vegan, you should be able to get your daily cappuccino with soy milk. Try asking for 'un **cappuccino con latte di soia per favor**'.

Many pizzas come without cheese too. If you are in any doubt ask for your pizza **senza formaggio** (without cheese).

Look for some of the bigger gelato chains like Grom in the major cities as they offer dairy free gelato.

A special note on seafood allergies – we learnt the hard way that even if you are far from the sea, anchovies are sometimes hiding in delicious olive tapenade.

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Pork is eaten widely in Italy. Be on the lookout if you don't eat it as this meat is preferred to chicken and is widely eaten especially at lunchtimes.

### Tips on dining with kids in Italy



There really are none except that you will rarely see a kids menu. Just order a half serve from the main menu.

It's an absolute pleasure dining out as a family in Italy. Kids are so well catered for.

Restaurant staff will ensure they are fed and have a drink before you on most occasions. Meals arrive quickly and there's usually some pencils for drawing. Our kids have sometimes been given little presents too.

## Restrooms

Public restrooms can be difficult to find in Italy.

More often than not, when you do find one, you need to pay a small charge to visit the restroom in public spaces in Italy. This charge could be from 50 euro cents to €1.50. You can expect these facilities to be cleaner than standard public restrooms in your country.

While you are visiting museums use the facilities – you just never know when you are going to get another opportunity. They also usually have decent changing facilities for children and babies which is a rarity in Italy.

If there is no public facility close by then duck into the nearest cafe or restaurant and ask for 'il bagno per favore'. We always try to buy something small for their trouble.

Always carry toilet paper or tissues. Always.

If you are traveling with small children bring a foldable change mat.

## Transport and getting around in Italy

The best way to travel between the cities of Italy is by train. You can buy tickets easily at the station and online but if you prefer to book in advance using an English language site we recommend [Rail Europe](#)

**⚠ Warning - you must validate your ticket for it to be considered usable. Big fines apply for travel with unvalidated tickets**

Most city centres in Italy are very walkable but if you need to use public transport then the system is pretty standard across the country.

Buy bus or tram tickets from a nearby tabaccaio or street kiosk and train tickets at the closest station. Tickets are generally valid for a set time unless you buy a day pass and you **must validate your ticket once on board**. In Rome, for example, a single €1.50 ticket is valid for 75 minutes [2018].

If you want to use public transport on a Sunday you should buy your tickets the day before as many of the street kiosks close on Sundays.

There are often no lifts or escalators in train stations so be prepared to haul your luggage up a couple of flights of stairs

## Taxis and Uber

Taxis are generally a little expensive but they are controlled by the government and are a professional service. Look for white or yellow cars with a taxi sign on the roof.

Hailing taxis is not common. You need to find a taxi stand and wait for one to arrive or enter the first car on the stand.

If you need to call a taxi use the [Free Now](#) app

Surcharges apply at airports and major train stations like Rome Termini

Tipping is not usual although you may give a euro or two if the driver has been particularly helpful

**Uber** is available in larger cities like Rome and Milan. You can use your app just as you would at home.

## Airport transfers

If you are traveling in a group of more than 3 with large luggage we recommend booking an airport transfer. Taxis are not able to accommodate large parties.

We recommend [Suntransfers](#) or [Black Lane](#) for airport transfers in Italy and Europe for their reliable service and affordable prices.

## Driving in Italy

The Italian countryside is so beautiful and the best way to explore the small [towns and villages](#) is by car. Italian drivers have fearsome reputations though don't they?

Don't worry, driving in Italy is not as difficult as you think. We wrote a full guide with our Italy driving tips – you can read that [here](#)

Make sure to bring your International Driving Licence if you are traveling from outside Europe

We use and recommend [Rentalcars.com](#) to rent cars in Italy.

## Money in Italy

The currency in Italy is the Euro €.

Italy is a modern country with the financial services you would expect at home. You will find ATMs (called **bancomat** in Italian) that use the Visa, Mastercard, Cirrus and Maestro systems everywhere.

Credit cards are widely accepted in hotels, restaurants, shops and autostrada tollbooths. Where you might come unstuck is relying on American Express and Diners Club which are not widely accepted

It's always wise to carry a small amount of cash for small cafes, pizzerias and restaurants (trattorias), some transport and taxis

Always take out travel insurance before you travel. We use [World Nomads insurance](#) because it is quick to buy or extend a policy, flexible depending on your travels and the customer service is great.

[Read: why you need travel insurance for Italy](#)

## Tipping in Italy

Tipping in Italy is not expected. This applies to all situations.

A service charge (servizio) may be added to your restaurant bill (in addition to the coperto cover charge). In this case tipping is absolutely not required.

If there is no service charge you could leave a few euros or add 10% for a smart restaurant. Many people leave small change when ordering a coffee at a bar

Tipping is not required for taxis or services at most hotels although is commonplace at luxury 5\* hotels

## Security

We have always felt extremely safe traveling in Italy. Police known as carabinieri are highly visible and have an extra strong presence at the main attractions and in city centres.

The general emergency number in Italy is 112. You can also call these numbers for: Police - 113 ; Fire - 115; or Medical assistance 118

The usual rules apply however. Avoid being alone in dark places at night time, particularly if you are a solo female traveler.

## Tourist scams

In general, if someone is trying to give you something for free, it really isn't and they want cash in return. As in any country with large numbers of tourists there are enterprising individuals at all of the major sights ready to make a quick buck.

My favorites are – people dressed up in Roman soldier costume ready to pose for your vacation snaps (there is a fee – we fell for this one), guys with small gifts for your children – animal carvings, bracelets etc (there is a fee), ladies with little bouquets of flowers they would just love to give you (there is a fee).



Always buy tickets and tours from licensed vendors. If you are stuck in a line at one of the major attractions it is tempting to try and jump the queue when you are offered skip the line tickets, bear in mind they may not be genuine.

Instead, be organized and book your tickets in advance. We use [GetYourGuide](#) to book tickets, tours and attractions in advance throughout Italy and Europe – you can read our full review [here](#).

## Accommodation

One of the most delightful things about traveling in Italy is you can stay in historic buildings and old palazzos.

What could be more romantic than waking up staring at a beautiful fresco and opening shuttered windows out onto a piazza?

Take note, rooms with views are more romantic, rooms without views are cheaper.

## Hotels, apartments, villas.. and more!

There is a broad range of accommodation in Italy. From upscale and boutique hotels to city apartments and bed and breakfasts and country villas.

We mainly use [Booking.com](#) to find and book accommodation in Italy as you can search through almost all accommodation options to find the one that best suits your needs.

One type of accommodation you may not be familiar with are **agriturismi** – a great option if you want to explore the Italian countryside.

At its most basic, an **agriturismo** is a farm stay – local farmers rent out their rooms for additional income and your room rate usually includes a (delicious) home cooked meal.



You can also find luxury farm stays that are more like mini resorts with a pool, restaurant and gardens. We have used this option several times now and recommend them to everyone we know.

Check [this site](#) for agriturismi around Italy. We find the site a bit clunky for booking purposes however and you can usually find the same properties on [Booking.com](#)

## Practical things to check

Make sure you check for the following things when booking accommodation in Italy:

- Do you need an elevator? Many hotels and apartments, do not have lifts so you may need to negotiate several flights of stairs to get to your room
- Do you feel the heat? Air conditioning is not as standard as you might hope in a country that experiences very hot temperatures in summer
- Read reviews to understand room sizes as these can be quite small in Italy
- Need a hearty breakfast? Breakfast is usually a very light meal in Italy so look for hotels that offer an American style breakfast

## The fine print

Many Italian cities charge a city tax of 1 to 5 Euros per person, per night. Often, this charge is payable in cash so make sure to read the terms and conditions before booking. Some hotels may include this in their daily rate, others won't.

Check the booking engine you are using for the fine print on payment. Many apartments require cash payment in Euros in arrival.

You will be asked to show your passport when you check in - this is standard practice in line with Italian law

## Internet access

Wifi and wireless mobile is widely available in Italy at reasonable speeds. Public free wifi is usually slower and less reliable however.

If you traveling from outside Europe (where charges are limited by European law) and are going to be in Italy for a couple of weeks, you may want to consider buying a local SIM card so you can avoid paying data roaming charges.

Local SIM cards are easily purchased throughout Italy. Note – You will need an unlocked cell phone to do this and you will need to show proof of identity eg your passport, to buy one

If you use a lot of data for things like social media and maps you may want to consider a personal wifi device. We talk about all the options available in Italy in [this article](#).

## Shopping

Stores are generally open from 09:00am to 13:00pm and from 16:00pm to 20:00pm. There is a break in the early afternoon for **riposo** (a traditional mid afternoon break)

Many stores close on Sundays and Monday morning although this is less common

The main supermarket chains in Italy are Carrefour and Conan – you can find small branches open 24x7 in the big cities.

When selecting fresh produce at supermarkets – use the plastic gloves provided, then weigh your goods and collect the printed sticker with the price from the scale before proceeding to the checkout.



At markets, the vendors will select the produce for you – do NOT handle the goods

Most pharmacies are open from 8:30 to 12:30 in the morning and from 15:30 to 19:30 in the afternoon. You may find some pharmacies that open at night, holidays and Sundays, but this is the exception not the rule

American Express and Diners Club are often not accepted in Italian shops

Bring your own shopping bag or expect to pay a 5 to 15 cent fee per bag – plastic bags were banned in Italy in 2011

## Attractions and museums

Many museums and churches traditionally shut on Mondays so it is wise to check in advance whether they will be open during your visit.

Italy's main attractions are incredibly popular and it is not uncommon to wait in lines for up to 3 hours to buy a ticket. For this reason we recommend booking skip the line entrance tickets in advance.

You will also need to pass through strict security checks. Do not bring large bags or backpacks with you.

Here is a list of the main attractions and where to buy tickets using online booking engine [Get Your Guide](#) which we find much easier to use than trying to navigate the Italian museum sites.

### Rome

- Colosseum (includes Roman Forum and Palatine Hill) – book tickets [here](#) or a guided tour [here](#)
- Vatican museums – book tickets [here](#) or a guided tour [here](#)

[Click here for our guide to recommended tours in Rome](#)

### Florence

- Uffizi Gallery timed priority entrance – book tickets [here](#) or a guided tour [here](#)
- Accademia Gallery for Michelangelo's David – book tickets [here](#)

### Milan

- Milan cathedral and rooftop tickets – click [here](#)
- Da Vinci's Last Supper tickets – click [here](#) (must book at least 2 months in advance)

### Venice

- St Mark's Basilica – book tickets [here](#) or a guided tour [here](#)
- Doge's Palace – book tickets [here](#) or a guided tour [here](#)

## Best souvenirs from Italy

In my opinion, the best souvenirs from Italy are food products. I only found out quite recently how easy it is to bring food stuffs back within the EU and to the United States and Canada. Sorry Australians, our quarantine laws make this almost impossible!

Stores across the country are used to vacuum sealing cheeses and meat products so they stay fresh for a long time. You can also buy pasta, herb mixes and other delicacies like truffle salt to bring with you.

Glassware from Murano, carnevale masks from Venice and paper goods and leather from Florence are popular too. Italian craftsmanship is highly regarded due to the skills they have developed over many centuries. Do check the products are made locally though and not cheap imports.



I loved the vibrant ceramics from the Amalfi Coast and Sicily. In that region you can also buy extremely well made leather sandals.

But having said all that, my favorite souvenir from Italy is a cliché tea towel with pictures of different pasta varieties on a map of the boot. You can get those anywhere, and they are light!

I hope you enjoyed reading our travel tips for Italy. If you have any other questions the best place to get answers is our [Facebook group](#)

## About the author - Katy Clarke



The creator, writer and photographer behind [Untold Italy](#) and [Untold Morsels](#), Katy has been traveling and tasting the world since she was a teenager. Now the proud mum of twins, she hopes they grow up to share her passions of great food, wine and travel.

She started Untold Morsels to help others plan their trips to Europe and around the world.

Favourite destination:

[Italy](#) (of course!)

### Want more tips for your trip to Italy?

Our friendly Facebook group of experienced travelers to Italy are here to help. Whether you have specific questions about destinations in Italy, getting around and what to eat, the group is there to help.

[Join group](#)