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Best of Italy

Hopping between the country's most iconic cities, this two-week tour has to be the ultimate Italian rail trip. You'll experience *la dolce vita* (the sweet life) everywhere you go as you travel from the north to the south.

● MILAN ITALY ● NAPLES ITALY

🚄 TO MAXIMIZE YOUR TIME IN EACH CITY, TRAVEL ON HIGH-SPEED FRECCIAROSSA SERVICES. BOOK AHEAD FOR THE BEST FARES (P252).

🕒 12-16 DAYS 📏 1,002 KM (623 MILES)

Milan

Financial powerhouse, fashion capital, cultural colossus – and the first chapter in your Italian odyssey. Milan is often ignored in favour of the other cities on this tour, but it shouldn't be. There's art and architecture in abundance here, including two of Italy's finest sights.

The city centre itself is relatively compact, and is best explored on foot. Standing at the heart of it all is the rather remarkable Duomo, a Gothic masterpiece with twisted pinnacles and spires soaring into the sky. It's arguably the most impressive cathedral in all of Italy – architecturally, yes, but also because it's one of the few where visitors are permitted to climb the rooftop. Enjoy the

surreal experience, and those sweeping views across the city below.

From here, you'll be able to see the dome of the Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Grazie, just a 20-minute walk away from the cathedral. This church's deceptively nondescript brick exterior conceals a world-famous painting: Leonardo da Vinci's iconic *The Last Supper*. Viewings are by reservation only so book ahead to avoid disappointment.

While you're here, you'll get your first taste of the Italian art of *aperitivo*. In the early evenings, *milanesi* sit back at stylish bars, sipping elegantly crafted cocktails and savouring finger food designed to whet the appetite. Do as they do, snacking on these little treats before planning your

● Milan (Milano)

2 hrs 30 mins

● Venice (Venezia)

2 hrs 15 mins

● Florence (Firenze)

1 hr 35 mins

● Rome (Roma)

1 hr 15 mins

● Naples (Napoli)

onward journey to Venice at a nearby restaurant.

🚄 Frecciarossa trains zip east from Milano Centrale to Venezia Santa Lucia, Venice's main station, every 30–60 minutes. The last part of the journey, when the train runs across the Venetian Lagoon, is particularly scenic.

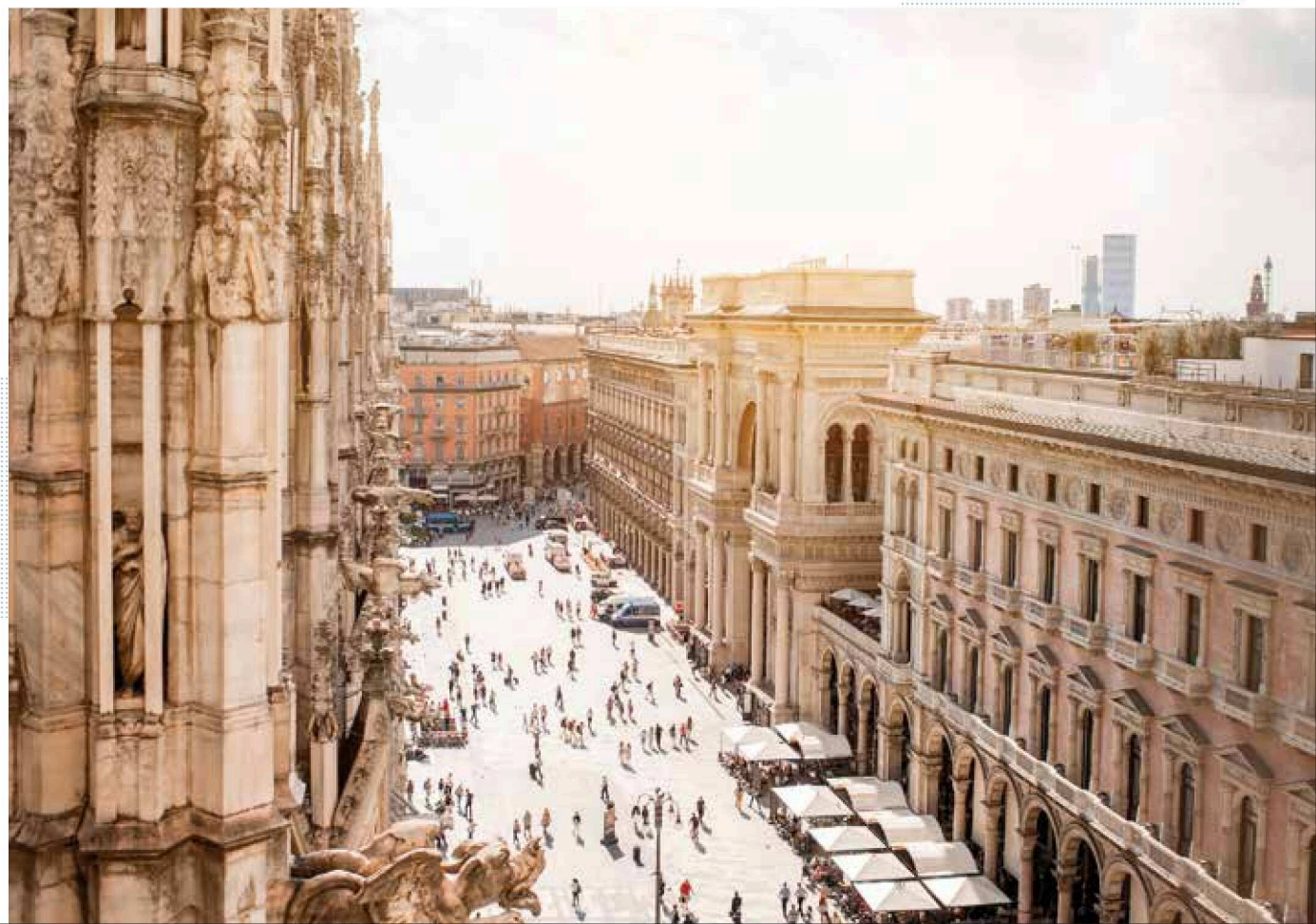
Venice

Set over 100 islands, separated by a maze of canals and linked by over 400 footbridges, Venice and its unique watery cityscape continue to capture the world's

imagination. Overtourism is a real problem here, so time your visit carefully and think about straying from the beaten path when you can.

Visitors inevitably gravitate towards Piazza San Marco, home to the Basilica di San Marco, the Palazzo Ducale, Galleria dell'Accademia and Punta della Dogana – not to mention the city's resident pigeons. Unless you've arrived out of season, set an early morning alarm to get a head start on your fellow travellers – queues can be lengthy and pavement space sparse as the day progresses.

The Piazza del Duomo, seen from the roof terrace of Milan's cathedral



Another way to escape the daily hubbub is to hop over to one of the other islands in the Venetian Lagoon. Burano, with its vibrant painted houses, and Murano, with its famous glassworks, are both fine choices. Even more off the beaten track is San Lazzaro degli Armeni, a small island that once served as a leper colony; monks give guided tours of the complex, which includes a church, museum and library.

🚄 High-speed Frecciarossa services run from Venezia Santa Lucia to Firenze Santa Maria Novella every hour.

Florence

Cradle of the Renaissance, Florence is famous for two things: art, and more art. The Medici family made their mark here, commissioning the most prominent artists of the time (Donatello, Brunelleschi, Michelangelo, to name a few) to embellish their properties and decorate city structures. And not a lot has changed since their heyday; the city is a living museum. The striped Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore dominates the cityscape and visitors tend to begin days of sightseeing in its shadow. The Uffizi Gallery, Palazzo Pitti and the Accademia are all within striking distance, though to best appreciate the city's beauty the Piazzale Michelangelo is hard to beat. Dubbed the balcony of Florence, it's a favourite spot to watch the sun turn the city pink in the early evening.

A word of warning: to stave off the inevitable Stendhal syndrome (a psychosomatic condition brought on by so much beauty), make sure to break the day with

quick bar-side coffees, drawn-out lunches and an evening negroni (invented here, no less).

🚄 Frecciarossa trains to Roma Termini run every 15–30 minutes from Firenze Santa Maria Novella.

Rome

With 2,000 years of history to cover, it's hard to squeeze all of Rome's delights into a few days. In the densely packed historic centre, ancient Roman structures are tucked away behind Renaissance fountains, richly decorated temples hide behind graceful piazzas, and restored *palazzi* (palaces) with frescoed ceilings harbour some of the world's most impressive historical artifacts and artworks.

The must-visits: the Colosseum, Roman Forum and Pantheon (which remains the world's largest unsupported dome). The Vatican Museums should make the list, too: the Sistine Chapel, decorated with magnificent ceiling frescoes by Michelangelo, is arguably one of the most significant pieces of art in the world.

Sightseeing aside, make time to do as the Romans do: enjoy a *passeggiata* (a leisurely evening stroll), the mandatory *aperitivo* and platefuls of hearty cuisine. You won't see all that Rome has to offer, but that's the joy: you know you'll be coming back.

🚄 Frecciarossa trains travel every 30 minutes from Roma Termini to Napoli Centrale.

Naples

With its narrow, densely packed streets, noisy street life and

DETOUR

Castel Gandolfo

Home to the Pope's summer palace, Castel Gandolfo makes a great summer day trip from Rome. Reachable in 40 minutes from Termini station, the town sits on Lake Albano, which is lined with beach clubs, restaurants and watersports rental stores.

ubiquitous droning mopeds, unabashed Naples is Italy stripped back to its most authentic. It's still to shake off entirely its reputation for crime and grime but stay a while and you'll be asking why.

While there are sights aplenty, not least the Museo Archeologico, with its spectacular finds from nearby Pompeii and Herculaneum (both worthy day trips), and the Cappella Sansevero, home to

the astonishing *Veiled Christ* sculpture, plan your days around mealtimes rather than opening hours. Breakfast calls for two Neapolitan favourites: espresso and *sfogliatella* (a shell-shaped pastry filled with orange-flavoured ricotta or almond paste). Enjoy both slowly, surveying all of local life as it bustles around you. Street food vendors and bars make snack time a regular occurrence, with fried just about everything ensuring hunger never really makes an appearance. And for lunch and dinner? Naples serves the very best pizza – this is its birthplace, after all. Made with pillowy sourdough, creamy mozzarella and plump red tomatoes grown on the volcanic slopes of Vesuvius, a simple *margherita* might be the most delicious thing you've eaten on your entire tour.

EXTEND YOUR TRIP

Sicily

Sicily (p179) is a timeless land of untouched beaches, little-visited sights, fiery wine and cheap street food. Getting to the island is a once-in-a-lifetime thrill in itself: trains from Calabria are driven onto a rail-ferry, which then chugs across the Straits of Messina, before shunting carriages onto the charmingly old-fashioned Sicilian network.

The atmospheric remains of the Roman Forum, one of Rome's unmissable historic sights

