

How To Plan Your Trip To

Italy

So You Feel

Like A Local



**Mama Margaret
& Friends**
COOKING ADVENTURES IN ITALY

www.italycookingschools.com

BY MARGARET COWAN

How To Plan Your Trip To Italy So You Feel Like A Local

“He who has been to Italy can forget all other regions. Who has been in heaven does not desire the earth. Europe compared to Italy is like a gloomy day compared to a day of sunshine.”

GOGOL ON ITALY

Little town of **San Giorgio**
in the Veneto's Valpolicella
wine country



Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Top Four Top Tips: How To Plan Your Italy Trip	4
Planning Your Trip In Italy: Where Should We Go?	6
How To Plan Your Italy Flights: Less Stress, More Enjoyment	9
Amazing Deal! 9 Euros+ Fares On Trains Between Cities Anywhere In Italy	11
How To Find Your Train In Italian Train Stations: Avoid Confusion and Stress	13
How To Avoid Paying A Fine To The Train Conductor	16
Top Eight Tips For Getting Around Easily In Big Italian Cities	17
Top Seven Tips For Getting Around In Italy's Countryside	19
How To Travel More Safely In Italy	21
Venice For Rookies: Experience Venice With Locals At Locals' Prices	23
Apps for Italy Food Lovers: Perfect Gifts	26

Florence: San Miniato
church on a hill



Introduction

Planning your trip to Italy fills you with a delightful feeling of excited anticipation especially if you're going to Italy to celebrate an important milestone with family and friends. As you read and research, you discover what an amazing variety of food, wines, people, beauty, landscapes, art, shopping and history you can find in Italy's regions.

My hope is that this e-book will help you save time and frustration so you avoid feeling overwhelmed as you plan your trip. Once in Italy, its tips will help you to enjoy a smoother, happier trip since you'll know the ropes in advance.

Buon viaggio!

Mama Margaret

The Amalfi Coast
from town of Ravello,
"where poets go to die."
(anonymous)



Top Four Top Tips: How To Plan Your Italy Trip

From Mama Margaret's Italy Travel & Food E-newsletter, August 31, 2011

Our tour clients and many travelers on the Italy travel forums at Trip Advisor and Slow Travel are asking for **help in planning their Italy trip**. On these forums, I'm seeing and giving suggestions on how to best plan your Italy itinerary so you save time and money and enjoy your vacation you dreamed of. **Here are the four top tips.**

1. **Ask yourself, "What is most important to me on this trip?"** Many people, especially for their first Italian vacation, try to squeeze all of Italy in to one or two weeks. "How should we divide our time among Venice, Florence, the Chianti country, Cinque Terre, Rome and the Amalfi Coast in our 14 days?" they ask.

Short answer—you don't, unless you want to dip only a toe in the Adriatic and the Arno for rushed, superficial experiences. Focus on your priorities. **What am I most interested in doing?**

2. **Remember travel time and checking in and out of hotels eat into your itinerary.** If you're in Italy for two weeks, and you go from Venice to Amalfi with four stops in between, you're spending a lot of time on trains or in your rental car. Plus six hotels to find, get settled in and check in and out of.

You'll save time and experience more if **choose two or three regions**. For **major cities** like Florence, especially if it's your first time in Italy, **allow three days**, not counting travel time, to explore.

How To Plan Your Trip To Italy So You Feel Like A Local

Sicily: street on Stromboli
in the Aeolian Islands



- 3. Don't over plan or over book yourself at home.** Give yourself free time to just hang out, enjoy quiet times, reflect on life and experience local life. Wander at local, non touristed markets or go to the beach and rent a big umbrella and sun cot beside Italian families.

Allow flexibility for the unexpected like discovering a marvelous art show or talking to a local person who recommends something that captivates you, that takes you on a totally different path.

- 4. Plan your route so you don't cover the same ground twice.** You see more and save time and money. A route in one line like north to south from Venice to Florence, or west to east from Turin to Venice, or in a circle like all around the coast of Sicily work well.

Planning Your Trip In Italy: Where Should We Go?

From Mama Margaret's Italy Travel & Food E-newsletter, December 28, 2011

You've decided to explore Italy for your 2012 vacation. Where to go? You face endless, tantalizing possibilities and feel like shouting, "Help!" Help is on its way...right here.

1. "What kind of travelers are we?" Choose the best regions for you.

Are you big wine lovers and want to experience your favourite wines right where they're made with the producers? If you love Amarone, choose the Veneto. For Barolo---Piedmont. For Chianti or Brunello---Tuscany. For Nero D'Avola---Sicily.

If food is your number one priority in life, ask yourself, "What kind of Italian food?" For silk-like pasta, Emilia-Romagna. For healthy vegetable dishes and seafood, the Riviera or Puglia among others.

Fun making pasta
by hand in a **Bologna** home



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If you love adventures in nature, what season to go? **In winter**, you can ski in the Dolomites north of Venice, in the mountains near Turin in Piedmont or on Mount Etna in Sicily.

In summer, you can hike on paths on the Amalfi Coast or in hills in many parts of Tuscany and Umbria. Italy's two coasts of beaches may beckon you like in Sardinia, the Riviera and Calabria.

If you adore art, what period of art and architecture? Florence focuses mostly on the Renaissance. For me, Rome shines for the antiquities and Baroque. Puglia offers imposing castles, Greek temples, quaint trulli houses, white Greek-like hill towns.

Find regions that match your passions. How? Check out the "Learn About Italy" section of our web site.

2. "What kind of travelers are we?" Slow or fast?

Do you like to settle in one place, hang out for a few days and get a good feel for life, food, wine and culture there? If you have a week, pick one region as a base, or two regions a short trip apart. If you have two weeks, choose two or three regions. You'll avoid spending too much time traveling and getting settled in too many hotels.

Florence panorama



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Some flights cost less money and time than longer train rides. For example, flying from Rome to Catania in Sicily takes one hour and costs from 98 Euros return so you could do Rome and eastern Sicily in a week.

Do you want to see as much as you can in the short time you have? Plan to stay at least two, or better three nights in each place.

Travel time between places can eat up half a day door to door. Venice to Florence is about two hours by train. But add time to get to the train in Venice from your hotel, find your train in Venice (assuming you bought tickets in advance), get from the Florence train station to your hotel and get settled, and time for the unexpected. You've lost a morning.

If you stay night #1 in Florence, tour Florence day #2, stay in Florence night #2 and leave day #3, you've spent about 1.5 days there. Hardly doing this magnificent city justice.

How To Plan Your Italy Flights: Less Stress, More Enjoyment

From Mama Margaret's Italy Travel & Food E-newsletter, January 11, 2012

Now that you've decided what region(s) in Italy to visit, it's time to plan your flights. Here are some tips to make your airplane travel smoother and more relaxing.

1. **Avoid early morning flights when you leave Italy.** Let's say you're catching a 7:00 a.m. flight in Rome. If you stay in the centre of Rome, you'll need 30 minutes to get to Fiumicino airport by taxi (an hour if you take the train) and about two hours before take-off at the airport. You'll get up at 4:00 a.m. Not a good way to end a relaxing vacation in Italy.

You could spend your last night at a Rome airport hotel in Fiumicino, a small town, and sleep about an hour later, but why do that on your last night in glorious Rome? Better to enjoy this world class city as much as you can!

2. **Fly in and out of the same airport or out of two airports?** Many Italy itineraries go from north to south or west to east in a line. Let's say you fly into Milan airport and travel down to Rome. It makes sense to fly out of Rome. You say, "The flight is cheaper if I fly in and out of the same airport. I'll fly out of Milan." Is it really cheaper?

From Rome you take a long train ride to Milan, probably changing trains along the way, hauling your luggage from one train to another. In Milan, you may arrive tired from your long journey. There you pay a taxi to take you to your hotel for a one night stay. To not risk missing your flight, you need to stay in Milan the night before you leave. These extra costs of backtracking add up and you get tired before a long flight home.

How To Plan Your Trip To Italy So You Feel Like A Local

Margaret in Turin airport with Italy tour colleague, Elio in front of the then new Fiat 500.



3. **Jet lag. When you arrive in Italy**, you'll feel jet lagged, so won't have much energy to sightsee on your first full day. If you land in Venice and plan on spending three days there, with the first day a write-off, you actually have two days. Plan accordingly.

Avoid long connection times between your European or other connecting flights and flights to Italy. If you're flying from North America or Australia and the airline tries selling you an itinerary with a five hour wait in Frankfurt for your Italy flight, say no. Your jet lag will start hitting you in Frankfurt and you may feel really tired by the time your head hits your pillow in your hotel in Italy.

Same thing on your flight home. Unless I have no other choice, I refuse to fly into Toronto from Italy and wait four hours there for a flight to Vancouver. The jet lag hits me in Toronto and I'm exhausted by the time I get home. I believe in being good to me whenever I can! Especially on holiday!

Amazing Deal! 9 Euros+ Fares On Trains Between Cities Anywhere In Italy

From Mama Margaret's Italy Travel & Food E-newsletter, February 22, 2012

On February 16, Trenitalia announced that under certain conditions, you can take 1st and 2nd class trains between all Italian cities for “Mini” fares of 9 Euros (about \$12) and up on all their trains except Excelsior and Excelsior E4 and Executive levels.

“What’s the catch?” Trenitalia.com says, “The MINI offer can be booked **up two days before departure** on this website, at authorised travel agencies and through our call centre, also with ticketless option, at ticket desks and self-service ticket machines at train stations.”

The Mini fares are hidden two layers down at the very useful, informative trenitalia.com. On their home page, choose your departing city, arriving city and day and time. A second page pops up with a choice of trains and prices. No Mini fares there!

Where are the Mini fares? Select your train departure time (click on “select” button on the right of the regular train fare) and click on “continue” at the bottom of the train choices list. Up pops a third screen with more fare choices including the Mini one.

The number of Mini seats is limited and varies with the day of the week, the train and the class you choose. For example, on trenitalia.com I entered Tuesday, March 6 leaving Rome at 9:15 a.m., arriving Florence at 10:46. Regular 2nd class fare is 45 Euros (about \$60) and 1st class 63 Euros (about \$85). Mini fare was 39 Euros (about \$58). What about 9 Euros?

When can I travel from Rome to Florence on March 6 for 9 Euros? I tested 10 departure times. I’d pay:

- 19 Euros (about \$25) if I went at 10:45 a.m. or 3:15 p.m.
- 29 Euros (about \$39) if I left at 6:15 a.m., 7:45 a.m. 12:15 p.m., 4:15 p.m., 8:15 p.m.
- 39 Euros (about \$58) at 8:15 a.m., 9:15 a.m. and 10:15 a.m.

How To Plan Your Trip To Italy So You Feel Like A Local

Then I gave up. The good news is I get a nice discount if I leave mid morning and pay 19 Euros, instead of 45 Euros for 2nd class or 63 Euros 1st class.

Do many 9 Euro fares actually exist? Yes. On the excellent slowtrav.com website's Italy forum, where I first saw GAC's post about mini fares, some people wrote how they bought 9 Euro tickets from Florence to Rome and from Venice to Bologna.

What if you want to change your Mini ticket? Trenitalia says, "All MINI tickets, including tickets purchased online and with ticketless option, **can be changed solely at ticket desks at train stations or at the travel agency** where the ticket was issued up to midnight of the day before departure." Changes can be made only once. You are only allowed to change the departure date or time for the same category of train or service, subject to a change fee (equal to the difference to the corresponding full base price).

Rome's Spanish Steps



How To Find Your Train In Italian Train Stations: Avoid Confusion and Stress

From Mama Margaret's Italy Travel & Food E-newsletter, July 27, 2011

On this trip in Italy in train stations, **I found myself helping many confused tourists who couldn't figure out how to find their train.** A stressful experience, especially if you're changing trains and time is tight.

Train departure information is everywhere---on TV-like screens, big black boards high above you usually in main hall area or on big yellow "Partenze—Departure" boards on station walls or on each train platform. But **you soon feel like a detective digging for clues if you don't know the ropes. Here's how.**

For example, you're in the La Spezia train station and want to leave about 3:00 p.m. (1500 on 24 hour clock) for Riomaggiore in the Cinque Terre.

You look at the Partenze-Departure screens in the main station hall area and the yellow Partenze-Departure boards and see trains for Savona at 1502 and for Sestri Levante at 1510. See photos on the next page. **Where is the train departure time for Riomaggiore buried?**

Detective hat on, you dig deeper for details. Savona and Sestri Levante are the final stops on those train runs. You look at the yellow Partenze-Departure board under each final stop (photo 1, close-up photo 2) and see all the intermediate stops. Under Savona at 1502, you see the train stops at Riomaggiore at 1510. Under Sestri Levante at 1510, the train stops at Riomaggiore at 1518. Case solved!

How To Plan Your Trip To Italy So You Feel Like A Local

15.00	
15.01 TI 11280	S-STEFANO DI MAGRA 15.19
	La Spezia Migliarina 15.05 - Vezzano Ligure 15.11
15.02 TI 11294	SAVONA 15.59
	Bornuggione 15.10 - Montrasio 15.18 - Lavento 15.23 - Frassura 15.29 - Moneglia 15.36 - Sestri Levante 15.43 - Lavagna 15.49 - Chiavari 15.53 - Rapallo 16.01 - S.Margherita Ligure 16.05 - Camogli-S.Fruttuoso 16.11 - Recco 16.15 - Genova Nervi 16.24 - Genova Quarta 16.28 - Genova Quarto 16.32 - Genova Sturla 16.36 - Genova Brignole 16.42 - Genova Piazza Principe 16.58 - Genova Sampierdarena 17.06 - Genova Cornigliano 17.10 - Genova Sestri F. 17.13 - Genova Pegli 17.17 - Genova Pra 17.21 - Genova Vado 17.25 - Anzani 17.22 - Capotreno 17.27 - Varazze 17.44 - Cella 17.48 - Albisola 17.52
15.10* TI 24514	SESTRI LEVANTE 16.16
	Bornuggione 15.18 - Montrasio 15.21 - Camiglia 15.25 - Vernazza 15.29 - Montrasio 15.34 - Lavento 15.39 - Bonassola 15.44 - Frassura 15.48 - Dalia Marina 15.53 - Moneglia 16.00 - Riva Trigosa 16.08
15.10* TI 24562	SESTRI LEVANTE 16.16
	Bornuggione 15.18 - Montrasio 15.21 - Camiglia 15.25 - Vernazza 15.29 - Montrasio 15.34 - Lavento 15.39 - Bonassola 15.44 - Frassura 15.48 - Dalia Marina 15.53 - Moneglia 16.00 - Riva Trigosa 16.08
15.12* TI 11859	PISA CENTRALE 16.24
	La Spezia Migliarina 15.16 - Sarzana 15.27 - Carrara-Avenza 15.34 - Massa Carrara 15.40 - Forte dei Marmi 15.47 - Pietrasanta 15.51 - Viareggio 15.59 - Torre del Lago 16.05 - Pisa S.Rossone 16.15
15.27* TI 11916	PONTERMOLE 16.14
	La Spezia Migliarina 15.32 - Vezzano Ligure 15.38 - S.Stefano di Magra 15.43 - Aulla Lunigiana 15.50 - Vilfranco-Reggione 15.59 - Fivizzano 16.05
15.27* TI 24466	MONTEROSSO 15.55
	Bornuggione 15.34 - Montrasio 15.37 - Camiglia 15.42 -



What platform is your train on? On the yellow boards and screens “Bin” means “binario—platform”. Under Savona at 1502, you go to platform 2. Under Sestri Levante at 1510, you go to platform 5. I like to double check the ever updated screens in case they’ve changed the platform number. They announce these changes in Italian and English but you may not pick them up. You’ll also see a screen like this one below on the train platform so you can confirm you’re on the right one.

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Platform at La Spezia
train station with screen
for Savona (misspelled)
1502 (3:02 p.m.) train



If you get off one train to change to another train, say at La Spezia to go to Riomaggiore, check the yellow Partenze-Departure board on the platform you arrive on to see what platform your next train is on. Often I get off at say, platform 4 and find my next train is on platform 5, a few steps away on the same platform! No need to navigate stairs and underground passage ways to get to my next train.

How To Avoid Paying A Fine To The Train Conductor

This trip I found myself telling and showing several tourists how to validate (time stamp) their train tickets in the yellow validating machines in the main areas of train stations (not on most train platforms). Most didn't know you have to validate tickets or face fines. On one train I saw an Australian woman having to pay a light 10 Euro fine to the polite, but insistent train conductor because she hadn't validated her ticket.

Simply insert your train ticket into the validating machine so it stamps the date and departure town on your ticket to avoid donating money to Ferrovie dello Stato.

Left: Yellow validating machine

Right: Validated train ticket with date and place stamp



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