

# ITALY 2011

Whether it's new wine trails in the north, reviving villages in the south or great-value villas on the islands, this year is full of fresh reasons to love Italy, says Brian Schofield

## FOR HIPSTERS AND HEDONISTS Bologna gets its groove on

It's not always easy to tell which Italian cities are most infused with youthful buzz — because the antique architecture leaves such a strong impression of sleepy, well-preserved stasis. Take Bologna: look up and you'll see the medieval towers, the basilica domes, the miles and miles of porticoes. You'll think you're in a living museum. At ground level, however, this city of 80,000 students has a wild streak, and in recent years the shabby-chic university social scene has shaded into a more sophisticated older nightlife, making Bologna (where the food, of course, is spectacular) the dream ticket for your one blowout weekend away of 2011. The hippest hang-outs are popping up near Piazza Maggiore, particularly on the short, covered Via dei Musei. Nu Lounge (00 39-051 222532, nu-lounge.com) is

a cocktail bar with a terrace that is usually heaving after midnight; two doors down, Café le Palais ([www.cafelepalais.com](http://www.cafelepalais.com)) is as swanky as you'd expect an Italian "fashion-cafe-bar" to be. Elsewhere, ancient buildings are having nocturnal makeovers: Le Stanze, on Via Borgo San Pietro, is a chapel turned funk bar, while La Scuderia, on Piazza Verdi, is a stable turned edgy art-house boozier. Dinner, while tremendous, is less cutting-edge, so go trad at Bar Trattoria Fantoni (051 236358; mains from £7) on the more boho Via del Pratello. For accommodation, there's a thriving B&B network — B&B Benelli is top-notch (051 252138, bb-benelli.it; doubles £76). Fly to Bologna with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com), from Gatwick, Stansted or Edinburgh, or EasyJet ([easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)) or British Airways (0844 493 0787, ba.com), both from Gatwick.

## Milan gets its groove back

If you're a model or a magazine editor, all Milanese doors are open to you, but mere mortals on a weekend break often find that after the window-shopping and beautiful-people-watching, there's not that much to do. Now that's all changing — and fast. The stunning new Museo del Novecento, right on Piazza del Duomo, is a 20th-century art museum that's an explicit imitation of Tate Modern's "culture for the masses" informality ([museodelnovecento.org](http://museodelnovecento.org); free). There's a similar spirit at work in the expanding Triennale Design Museum, where the intention is to drain Italian design of its Prada polo-neck pretension (00 39-02 724341,



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trienaledesignmuseum.it; £6.80). Finally, the builders have promised that 2011 will see the opening of the mind-blowing architectural gamble that is the city's new contemporary art gallery — but this is Italy, so delay is a distinct possibility. In hotel terms, it's still all high fashion: the Armani Hotel ([armanihotels.com](http://armanihotels.com)) will open up this year, to match the fabulouso Maison Moschino (02 2900 9858, [maisonmoschino.com](http://maisonmoschino.com); doubles £191). There are flights to Milan from 20 UK airports and Dublin. Airlines include Flybe (0871 700 2000, [flybe.com](http://flybe.com)) and Alitalia (0871 424 1424, [alitalia.com](http://alitalia.com)).

#### FOR CLASSIC ROMANTICS The revived star of Sicily

If there's a theme to 2011 in Italy, it's this: Sicily, Sicily, Sicily. British travel operators are desperate to persuade us to pile into the mysterious southern island — basically because prices are lower than on the mainland. You can pick up a bargain family holiday more easily — or, in the case of the renovated masterpiece that is the Grand Hotel Timeo, enjoy some lovers' luxury for less. First opened in 1873 and with Audrey Hepburn and Liz Taylor in the guestbook, this *grande dame* overlooking the precipitous east coast at Taormina has just had its shine renewed, so that the restaurant rooms and pretentiously titled Literary Terrace will now match up to the spectacular views. The relaunching is scheduled for March — but best to wait until mid-April, because that's when the Timeo's sister property, the Villa Sant'Andrea, also reopens. The Sant'Andrea is right down by the sea, tucked up against a narrow but beautiful private beach, and whether you'd rather sleep with the cool hilltop breeze in the Timeo or to the sound of lapping waves (we'd say go high, far from the coast road), you want that beach open for day trips. As mentioned, this is luxury that stings a little bit less than in, say, Portofino: doubles start at £232 if booked direct ([grandhoteltimeo.com](http://grandhoteltimeo.com)). Original Travel (020 7978 7333, [originaltravel.co.uk](http://originaltravel.co.uk)) has four nights at the Timeo from £960pp, based on two sharing and including car hire and return flights with BA from Gatwick to Catania.

#### Movie romance

What is Francis Ford Coppola up to?

He's opening his sixth hotel in 2011, but he hasn't directed a movie you've heard of in the past 19 years. He purchased Palazzo Margherita, a 19th-century villa in his grandfather's remote home town, Bernalda, seven

years ago, and the transformation into a nine-suite hotel with a sumptuous restaurant is nearing completion. The most intriguing thing about this new property — details of the interiors, prices and menu being under wraps until the spring launch — is its location. Bernalda is in Basilicata, the southern Italian region that we might cautiously call the "new Puglia". That means it's baking hot, steeped in history, relatively free of tourists and properly, properly poor. The nearby town of Matera is famous for the cave dwellings in which local peasants still lived in the 1950s, and life hasn't got notably easier for many of the inhabitants of this hardscrabble but beautiful region. The nascent tourism here is surprisingly high-luxury: the Hotel Torre Fiore (00 39-0835 580239, [hoteltorrefiore.com](http://hoteltorrefiore.com); doubles from £102) is a spectacular Moorish boutique pad outside the small hilltop city of Pisticci, and you can stay in Matera's caves, at the floridly titled Sextantio Albergo Diffuso Le Grotte Della Civita (0835 332744, [legrottedellacivita.com](http://legrottedellacivita.com); doubles from £234). Palazzo Margherita will be available through Exsus (020 7337 9010, [exsus.com](http://exsus.com)). Fly into the region through Bari, served by BA (0844 493 0787, [ba.com](http://ba.com)), from Gatwick, and Ryanair (0871 246 0000, [ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)), from Stansted.

#### The lakes by rail

For quality, reliability and the sheer number of worthwhile stops, the Italian rail system has to be the most rewarding in Europe. If you like the idea of a romantic trip, with everything taken care of by a tour guide, the new Great Rail Journeys itinerary through the north of the country looks spot-on. You rattle from London to Cologne via Brussels, then point due south, crossing the Alps at the Brenner Pass, touring the Dolomites, the Lake Garda region and even Venice, before turning for home. A 10-day trip costs £1,495pp, based on two sharing, with all breakfasts and seven dinners (01904 521936, [greatrail.com](http://greatrail.com)). If you don't

fancy being in a group — which will tend to attract a more, ahem, mature crowd — Railbookers (020 3327 2430, [railbookers.com](http://railbookers.com)) has a seven-night trip with hotels and trains booked for you. You take in London, Zurich, Venice, Garda, then fly home. Prices start at £749pp, B&B, in February, or £999pp in April, based on two sharing and including trains, flights and accommodation. Even more independent-minded souls could book an Italy-only InterRail ticket — six days' travel inside one month will cost you £173pp through Rail Europe (0844 848 4064, [raileurope.co.uk](http://raileurope.co.uk)).

#### CULTURE AND LEARNING Verona in style

An opera break in Verona is a treat — the Arena di Verona amphitheatre is spectacular, and the summer programme tends towards the reliably crowd-pleasing. This year's offerings will include Aida, Nabucco (multiple encores of the Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves guaranteed) and La traviata.

The city's hotels, however, have tended towards the stuffy — which is why the arrival of the Escalus Luxury Suites will be welcomed by music buffs with a desire for design. A boutique all-suite affair in a renovated palazzo within earshot of the arena, it's cool and unfussy, with the nice touch that breakfast is always by room service. Kirker Holidays (020 7593 2283, [www.kirkerholidays.com](http://www.kirkerholidays.com)) has three nights there from £498pp, based on two sharing and including flights from London; it can arrange opera tickets, from £42. For the best pre-opera dinner in town, the loudest applause tends to be directed at Il Cenacolo, on Via Teatro Filarmonico (00 39 045 592288, [ristoranteilcenacolo.it](http://ristoranteilcenacolo.it); mains from £13), although vegetarians should look elsewhere.

#### Wine and walking

Springtime in Piedmont, the green and rolling region in the northwest of Italy, should make for particularly pleasant strolling between glasses of powerhouse Barolo and more subtle Barbaresco wine, on the new tour from the specialist operator Arblaster & Clarke (01730 263111, [winetours.co.uk](http://winetours.co.uk)). Departing on May 8, the six-night walk is suitable for moderately healthy walkers and immoderately healthy

drinkers, with at least one tasting a day and a fair amount to quaff during the six dinners. Staying in three-star hotels, it costs £1,699pp, including breakfast and dinners, a minibus for your bags and a guide, but not flights to Turin, which is served by BA (0844 493 0787, ba.com) and Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com). A&C has

another Piedmont innovation worth mentioning for 2011 — if you can rustle up seven foodie chums, a three-day private group tour of the region in autumn, tucking into wine, cheese and truffles, will cost only £525pp, plus flights to Turin. That price is well worth sending out an email about.

### Etruscan bones

You have to feel for the Etruscans. They could have been one of antiquity's great civilisations — had it not been for their noisy, all-conquering neighbours, the Romans, who stomped them into the footnotes of history. Thankfully, you can see some of their legacy this year, in archeological sites, stunning

painted tombs and museum exhibits throughout Tuscany and northern Lazio — which just happens to be a lovely area to spend a week pottering and learning — in the company of the esteemed bone-brusher Dr Judith Toms. Andante Travels (01722 713800, barebonestours.co.uk) is running two trips with Toms in 2011: one in May, for £1,850pp including flights to Rome and all meals, and a £1,085pp option in September, where you sort the flights, pay for dinner and stay in less swanky hotels. Airlines flying to Rome include BA (0844 493 0787, ba.com) and Alitalia (0871 424 1424, alitalia.com).

### HAPPY FAMILIES

#### Puglia's poshest spot

When the marketing blurb tells you that a new property is "positioned to become the leading luxury resort in the Mediterranean", you need to grab a pinch of salt. Borgo Egnazia, however, might just live up to the hype. It's a fabulously swanky private holiday town for Europe's most spendthrift families, with whole streets of lavish but

understated accommodation, "Roman baths", tennis and cookery school, kids' club, golf course and several restaurants — it's a beast of a place. The prices for personal bookings are bewilderingly high — from £272 a night for a standard double room, or a staggering £698 a night for a family "townhouse" (00 39 0571 677259, borgoegnazia.com) — but packages are slightly more sane. Citalia (0844 415 1987, citalia.com) can do a week for two in balmy May or September for £1,045pp, half-board, including flights and transfers; in the school hols, a half-board week for two adults and two children comes in at a cool £5,139, including flights from London. They'll certainly keep out the riffraff with those rates.

### Sociable Tuscany

For a family to enjoy Tuscany these days without shattering the bank balance, they might have to accept some company: the best value is to be found in shared self-catering campuses. Fattoria Barbiarella Nuova (barbiellanuova.it), in a rare spot of Tuscan woodland not far from San Gimignano, is the perfect example, with seven apartments and one villa wrought out of a dilapidated farm complex. It allows you the sun, the views, the food and the nearby towns, but not necessarily the silence, as your kids will be rattling round with the other juniors on site, trying out all the new activities for 2011: the guided walks offered by the owners, the kids' kitchen garden and farmyard tours (£8), "bambini baking lessons" (£25) and, later in the summer, harvesting outings (£8). The apartments share two pools, although the eight-bed villa has a small private one. Apartments sleeping four cost £949 a week in the school hols; the villa is £2,143 a week. Airlines flying to Pisa include Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com) and Jet2 (0871 226 1737, jet2.com). Holiday Autos (0871 472 5229,

holidayautos.com) has a week's car hire from about £225.

### Camping for Italians

"Glamping" has pitched up in the hills of Umbria, in the lovely Monti Sibillini National Park. Camping Il Collaccio is a gregarious countryside camp site with 120 pitches and lots of sports and activities, and Venue Holidays (01233 629950, venueholidays.co.uk) offers pre-pitched tents sleeping up to six, with a double room and two further bedrooms, plus all the kit, for a tasty £601 a week in mid-July. This year, you can upgrade to safari-style lodge tents — more spacious affairs with cooking facilities and shelter from the rare mountain storms — for £769 in mid-July, sleeping five or six at a pinch. Both prices include return Dover-Calais ferry crossings for a car and passengers.

Generally, pre-pitched camping is this year's bargain family plan in mainland Italy. Canvas Holidays (0845 268 0827, canvasholidays.co.uk) can do a maxi-tent (sleeping five, or six at a squeeze) in a fun-packed site in Lazio for £802 for a July week in the school holidays, including return Dover-Calais ferry crossings for a car and passengers.

### FOR BEACH JUNKIES Villas in moderation

Italy is probably the most expensive country in southern Europe for self-catering in summer. Within that context, however, Sicily stands out — in particular, if you're after some sandy toes, the west coast of the island. A stunning and secluded designer property, sleeping four, with a private pool and a hilltop vista to the coast, would set you back much more than £974 a week in Tuscany, but in May, June and September (Sicily's best months), that's what SoloSicily (020 7193 0158, solosicily.com) is charging for Villa Sirena, near Scopello. Closer to the beach, but less secluded with simpler

decor, Villetta Solmadarig (holidaylettings.co.uk; ref 89590) tops out at £1,100 a week in ultra-high season, and sleeps five at a push. New flights from Luton to the western airport of Trapani with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com) might ease the pain still further, if you book far enough in advance (service starts in late March; we found seven-day return flights in May for about £115). It also flies from Stansted and Dublin. Europcar (0871 384 9847, europcar.co.uk) has a week's car hire from £125.

### Consider Calabria

If you're after that lovely combination of street pottering, great restaurants, stylish shopping and the tiny bit of beach action that the Amalfi coast offers, but you can't afford the Amalfi coast, then point south, deep south, to Calabria. Tropea is probably the prime place to head for: it has a long, spacious beach, an old town packed with good little eateries, and the Hotel Villa Antica, one of my favourite resting places in the whole country (00 39 0963 607176, www.villaantica.tropea.it; suites, worth the extra, cost £75 in May). Bigger and busier, with a fantastic restaurant-strewn piazza (but not much of a beach, although there's a super one about a mile away) is Pizzo, where there are lots of good self-catering options either right in town or bang on that fine beach, Marinella. A sea-view beach apartment (ownersdirect.co.uk; ref IT4269) sleeping four costs £425 a week in August, for heaven's sake, and one with access to a pool (ref IT4354) is still only £510. From April, you can fly into Lamezia with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com) or Monarch (Saturdays only; 0871 940 5040, monarch.co.uk). □