

# Italy: Off the Beaten Path



Torey Edgcomb, a luxury travel advisor affiliated with Casto Travel in San Francisco, explores *la dolce vita*.

Italy's popularity will never diminish. Our challenge as advisors is how to stay engaged and create fresh itineraries for both repeat clients or first-time visitors. Just back from a Waterstone trip to Italy, I saw the country with fresh eyes and uncovered experiences for both types of client.

## Rome

In Rome, I had the pleasure of staying at the iconic **Hassler Roma**, located at the top of the Spanish Steps. Recent renovations have kept the hotel updated, with beautifully appointed spacious and light-filled rooms. For dinner, try the contemporary Italian cuisine at **The**

**First Roma Arte's** Aquaroom restaurant, where the food is as spectacular as the views over the Eternal City.

A new tour for repeat visitors, courtesy of Waterstone and Access Italy, is "Rome Through the Centuries." Visit the Basilica of San Clemente and witness how Roman life has evolved through the centuries of ruins separated into distinct levels beneath the church.

## Norcia, Umbria

From Rome to Umbria, your clients will love the "supercar" Range Rovers provided by 100 All'Ora. Be sure to ask about vintage vehicles and touring experiences as well. Stop en route at the Marmore Falls, the largest manmade waterfalls in the world, dating from the time of Christ. Tip: Throw on a poncho and visit the crashing and misting falls with multiple rainbow sightings for photo ops.

The medieval town of Norcia has a rich gastronomical heritage, beautifully preserved at the stunning **Palazzo Seneca**, a 24-room boutique Relais & Chateaux hotel set in a restored 16th-century palace. Owners, brothers and managers Vincenzo and Federico Bianconi take great pride in their unique culture, providing warm hospitality and lovely small touches for all their guests.

While there are signs the town is still recovering from the 2016 earthquake, I highly recommend visiting and supporting the destination known for its food, culture and natural beauty. Highlights in Norcia include observing Vespers with the Monks of St. Benedict, a cooking class in the Bianconi family home, and a truffle-hunting excursion and picnic finishing with a tasting dinner at the hotel's Michelin star restaurant, Vespasia.

**TOREY EDGCOMB** (above left) learns to make chocolate at The Perugia Chocolate Factory.

**HOTEL HASSLER ROMA's** Presidential Suite San Pietro (left) has original antique Roman artifacts on display.







A COOK-OFF COMPETITION (here) with the WTB Hotels team was one of the highlights for the writer during her stay in Florence.

COOKING AFICIONADOS can hone their skills in classes like the one seen on right in Umbria.



## Perugia, Umbria

Traveling northwest toward Perugia, stop for a winery tasting experience at Arnaldo Caprai (family-owned operation and pioneers of Sagrantino wine), but be sure to book it through **Sina Brufani** whose special relationship provides unique touches to the visit. Also visit **Borgo Antichi Orti Assisi**, a beautifully renovated 1400s monastery now serving as an inn and farm-to-table restaurant in the town of Assisi, which is the birthplace of Italy's patron saint, St. Francis.

Perugia is renowned for its Umbria Jazz Festival in July and its fall Eurochocolate festival, and Sina Brufani should absolutely be your client's choice of accommodation. General Manager Stefano Chiesa is the epitome of hospitality that shines throughout the hotel; not to mention its stunning views over the city's rooftops and surrounding countryside. Note: The spa in the basement has a swimming pool featuring a transparent floor to view the medieval vaults beneath.

No visitor should leave without taking the "underground tour," a fascinating insight to a city built in the 1500s Renaissance period. The fortress "Rocca Paolina" is also a must, where one can discover the hidden cultural treasures of this unique city. For families or small groups, a perfect way to end the day is

by preparing your own Baci chocolate at The Perugina Chocolate Factory.

## Florence

The Mall Luxury Outlets, just southeast of Florence, offer a unique shopping experience and ideal lunch stop. Tip: Look out for their My Luxury Wallet benefits that advisors can pass onto their clients. In Florence, we visited and stayed at **Sina Villa Medici** and the **WTB Hotel Collection (Hotel Santa Maria Novella, Hotel L'Orologio & Garibaldi Blu)**. A highlight was an "Artisans and Bottegas" walking tour courtesy of Access Italy, exploring centuries of traditions and apprentice skills of Florence's artisan culture. A memorable Cook-Off competition with the WTB Hotels team concluded our stay with a fabulous homemade meal.

## Forte dei Marmi

Just an hour from Florence, Forte dei Marmi is well worth a visit on the western coast of Italy and **Hotel Byron** with its bright, contemporary, redesigned rooms and Michelin-star restaurant, Magnolia, makes for an ideal base. Be sure to visit nearby Lucca — a beautiful and charming city even on a rainy day. Tip: For adventurous clients, book a thrilling 4x4 tour of the ancient Marble Quarries at

Carrara — an unexpected highlight but not for the faint-hearted.

## Puglia

A quick flight from Rome to Brindisi, and Puglia beckons. Just an hour from the airport is **Il Melograno**, which is considered the first *masseria*-turned-hotel with over 400 years of history. Located just outside Monopoli, this property is not far from its sister hotel, the seafront **La Peschiera**. Either hotel is an ideal base to explore the region. Tip: Both hotels can arrange a wide choice of local tours through their own DMC services, but as Puglia becomes more popular, visit the towns in the early morning before the day-trippers arrive.

I recommend a walking tour of Monopoli (ask for Mario as your guide), a typical Apulian town with fascinating history, picturesque streets and harbor. Nearby Polignano a Mare is a beautiful seaside village with limestone cliffs that host cliff-diving competitions. After a morning's sightseeing, finish the day with spa treatments under the century-old olive trees at Il Melograno or take a cooking class preparing focaccia and orecchiette, the signature pasta of the region.

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