

No one would argue that Italy is an incredible country to visit. The landscapes, the food, the culture... it's a traveller's dream come true. But you? You've been to Italy 17 times. If you see the Colosseum from a tour bus one more time you'll scream. Drink your way through one more Tuscan winery and you'll cry. So what is left for you in the *bel paese*? What hidden pleasures can you still squeeze from your ancestral homeland when your vacation comes calling? Lots, actually.

A New Vista

From Ferraris to mafia hideouts, these unique Italian getaways will excite even the most seasoned tourist

by Emily Saso

photo: I Glide Tours



photo: Libera Terra



Rocca delle Poiane agriturismo in Corleone, Sicily, was once the home of a notorious mafia boss. Now it's a tourist's retreat

Stay in the Home of "The Beast"

Most people leave Italy to have a vacation (often permanent) away from the Mafia. But today, tourists are coming to the country to experience an intimate—and much less threatening—part of the world of organized crime. Travellers looking for an unusual experience can now stay where one of Italy's most notorious mob bosses once hung his gun at the end of a long day. The former home of Salvatore "The Beast" Riina has been turned into an *agriturismo* called Rocca delle Poiane. Near the town of Corleone in Sicily, this brand-new countryside inn and restaurant offers charming landscapes, traditional home cooking and of course, a dark history.

Riina ruled the Mafia throughout the 1980s until he was captured in 1993 and charged with the murders of anti-Mafia judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino. During his life-long career he is believed to have personally killed roughly forty people and to have ordered the deaths of several hundred more. Several of Riina's former properties, as well as those of his townsman and fellow Mafia chief Bernardo Provenzano, have been seized by the Italian state and turned into schools, farms or restaurants.

When Rocca delle Poiane opens at the end of the summer, it will offer many activities and facilities including a bowling green and soccer field, as well as hiking and biking. Rocca delle Poiane is managed by the Pio La Torre Libera Terra Cooperative, a youth-focused association that manages 100 hectares of grounds confiscated from the Mafia. The three-acre site of Rocca delle Poiane has 16 beds and is close to other popular tourist attractions such as the Gorgo del Drago natural park.

Rocca delle Poiane opens in September of 2008. \$55 per night, including breakfast; \$86 per night, with breakfast and dinner; \$125 per night, breakfast, lunch and dinner included. Contact piolatorre@liberaterra.it and visit www.liberaterra.it for more information.



You can get away with a lot with a tourist visa and a Ferrari

Tour Italy in High Ferrari Style

Picture this: You're a tourist speeding along the Tuscan hills, wind in your hair, fresh air in your lungs. Children at the side of the road are cheering and waving. Women are swooning and declaring their undying love. Men are looking you up and down, seething with jealousy. Sounds impossible, right? After all, you've driven a rental through Italy before with nary a swoon in sight. But this ain't last year's March Break with the kids. And this rental ain't no Fiat Panda.

With Red Travel, a luxury travel provider, this dream can become a reality with their Ferrari tours across Italy. Each participant or couple gets their own Ferrari to use for the duration of the trip (usually three days in length with two days of driving). Ferrari 430 Spider F1s are available, as are Ferrari 599 GTB Fioranos, Ferrari 430 Scuderia F1s and Ferrari 612 Scaglietti F1s. You'll get an introduction to the car, a lead car for easy navigation and a driving instructor to advise you on car handling techniques.

Red Travel's Ferrari trips let you experience the country as a real Ferrari owner would—as a first-class traveller. Tours can be tailored to suit your every need and destination desire, from a one-day Sardinian tour to an eight-day Rome, Tuscany and Tyrrhenian Sea trip. You'll dine at the finest restaurants, shop at the most exclusive boutiques, enjoy a world-class spa in the hills of the Val d'Orcia and stay in five-star luxury hotels. And there's no need to worry about getting lost in the remote countryside, having to look for parking on a narrow cobbled street or even fitting your luggage into the small trunk. Your Ferrari personal assistant will take care of everything.

Panda shmanda.

To book a Ferrari tour from Canada with Red Travel, please contact Victours International at (416) 736-6613 or visit www.victours.ca.

Take a Baci Break

One of the best parts about vacationing in Italy is giving yourself permission to indulge in pasta, wine, gelato and, of course, chocolate. Italy is famous for making the best bonbons in the world, and if you want to taste one of the most famous, why not head straight to the source? Perugina (the makers of the oh-so-delectable Baci) has a factory and museum in San Sisto, Umbria, that is full to the brim with enough chocolate to satisfy your wildest confectionary fantasies.

Like any good fantasy, an initial tease is always a nice idea, so start things off with a tour of the museum. There you'll learn about the company's history and its present as a part of food giant Nestle. You'll also see early cocoa mills, candy packaging and the world's biggest Baci, weighing in at over 13,000 pounds.

After you've paid your dues in the museum, go and visit the factory. Once inside, you'll observe the Baci manufacturing process from within a series of glass-enclosed walkways. You can even watch workers insert Baci's famous love notes into each wrapper. The best part of the tour happens at the very end: the tasting. Dive right into the original, cinnamon, strawberry or limoncello flavours. You can thank me later.

The Museo Storico Nestle Perugina in San Sisto is open Monday through Friday. The factory may be toured by reservation only by telephone at 011-39-075-527-6796.

Paint with George Clooney

Well, maybe not *with* George Clooney per se, but you will be near him. Diana Willis' Paint in Italy courses in Bellagio, Lake Como, are designed for the budding da Vinci in all of us. Based on intensive, individual, one-on-one attention, this noted New York-based award-winning oil, pastel and watercolour painter and her colleagues adapt their painting methods to match yours and will respect your particular style and art preferences.

All accommodations are four-star and have private baths and breathtaking water views. The workshop price includes daily breakfast and dinner, lessons with visits to exciting *en plein air* painting sites, most art supplies and instructor's demonstrations. The best part? You get to make your own souvenir!

Prices start at US\$4,150 per person (double occupancy) for a ten-day stay. For more information, visit www.paintinitaly.com.

See Rome and Florence the Segway Way

Want to see the sights of Rome and Florence, but too full on pasta to walk? Discover two of Italy's most beautiful cities—without the need for pesky exercise—by way of one of the most talked-about vehicles of this century: the Segway Personal Transporter. The Segway PT is the first self-balancing electric-powered transportation device. With dimensions no larger than the average adult body and the ability to emulate human balance, the Segway PT takes up the same space as a pedestrian, and can go anywhere a person can walk.

Tour famous sites like the Colosseum, Circus Maximus, the Villa Borghese, the Uffizi, Santa Croce and Dante Alighieri's house. All tours include your own Segway, training and equipment, wireless head set and an experienced tour guide.

A couple words of caution, however. You will be the centre of attention wherever you go, so if you're shy or not inclined to steal the Colosseum's thunder, this may not be an ideal tour for you. Also, although being stuffed is a good reason to take a tour like this, you may need to ease off on the pasta for a few days before Segwaying—you must weigh less than 250 pounds to ride.

A three-hour tour of Rome with I Glide Tours costs \$120. Visit www.iglidetours.com. For information on three-hour tours of Florence with Italy Segway Tours, visit www.segwayfirenze.com.

Volunteer Your Vacation

Vacations are usually all about relaxation, adventure and pleasure. But what could be more pleasurable than helping others in need? This year, why not pack away the beach towel and make a difference in someone's life? While Italy may not seem like a standard destination for volunteer vacationers, there are several ways that you can help local citizens and the environment.

A popular tourist destination on the Adriatic Sea, Puglia is a stunning place to visit. But what many tourists miss out on is the chance to establish a meaningful connection with the people that live in the area. That's where Global Volunteers comes in. Through this organization, volunteers can travel to Italy, not to sun themselves or visit art galleries, but to teach English.

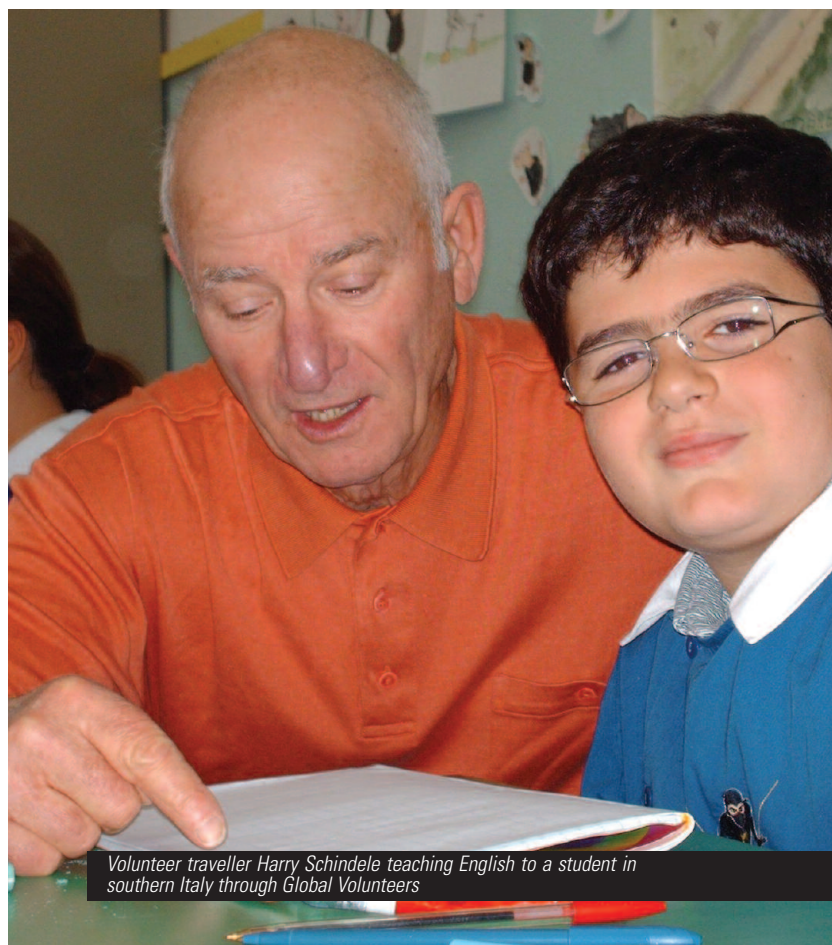
All "teachers" are hosted by the municipal schools in the towns of Monopoli and Ostuni in the Puglia region. There you will have the chance to teach English classes in local elementary schools, foster homes and even a retirement club for seniors. Volunteers need not speak Italian, although it's an added bonus if they do.

If teaching isn't your thing, why not get your hands dirty in Cinque Terre instead?

The Protect Cinque Terre program immerses travellers in the beauty of this world-famous fishing village while educating them on the stresses that tourism places on the village's sensitive landscape. The irony is that while tourism helps support the economy of the village, many activities that tourists take part in (like hiking) damage the environment by eroding the soil and cluttering the landscape with garbage.



Matera's troglodyte homes date back to the Paleolithic era



Volunteer traveller Harry Schindele teaching English to a student in southern Italy through Global Volunteers



Help preserve the beauty of Cinque Terra for generations to come with the Protect Cinque Terre program

By taking part in this program, established by the Italian Environmental Impact Assessment Center and the Municipality of Vernazza, volunteers spend three mornings working with local citizens on various projects such as rebuilding the stone walls that support terraced agriculture, cleaning trails used by thousand of tourists every month and harvesting the fruits and vegetables that are grown on the hillsides around the town.

Whether it's helping children learn a new language or helping to restore the environment, seeing Italy through the eyes of a volunteer may change how you see the rest of the world as well.

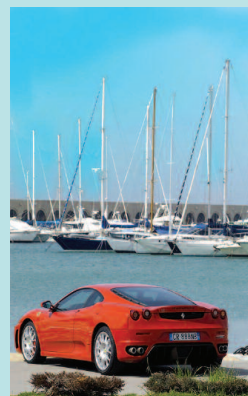
For information on teaching English in southern Italy, visit www.globalvolunteers.org. To help restore and preserve Cinque Terre's beauty, visit www.protectcinqueterre.com.

Become a Cave Dweller

Think sleeping on your brother's pull-out is roughing it? Try sleeping in a cave. Perhaps best known for offering up scene-stealing vistas in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of The Christ*, Matera, in the southern region of Basilicata, is worth discovering in person. The town is a UNESCO World Heritage site thanks to its incredible, almost fantasy-like landscape: hundreds of homes and businesses carved directly into the rocky terrain!

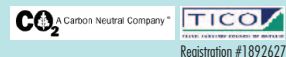
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Sights aside, the history of the town is reason enough to visit. Due to a lack of drainage or sewer systems, the Italian government rehoused the 20,000 inhabitants of the *Sassi* (rocks) in the 1950s. The residents were entitled to exchange their troglodyte homes for new houses, although some wealthier inhabitants kept both, many of which have recently been turned into hotels.

The town is a stunning maze where roofs often serve as walkways through the winding labyrinth—picture a massive stretch of condos where Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble may have time-shared. While some of the sites date all the way back to the Paleolithic era, there are many hotels popping up in the area that offer anything but Neanderthal accommodations.

The Locanda di San Martino lies in the heart of Matera's *Sassi* historical district, where the majority of the carved homes lie, and is just a short walk from the more modern city centre. All guests stay in the same cave dwellings that have been inhabited by families for thousands of years, albeit with some major updates. All rooms are equipped with private baths, air conditioning, satellite television and high speed Internet.

Wilma and Betty would have loved it.

For information on the Locanda, visit www.locandadisanimartino.it. You can also book with Victours International by calling (416) 736-6613 or by visiting them online at www.victours.ca.



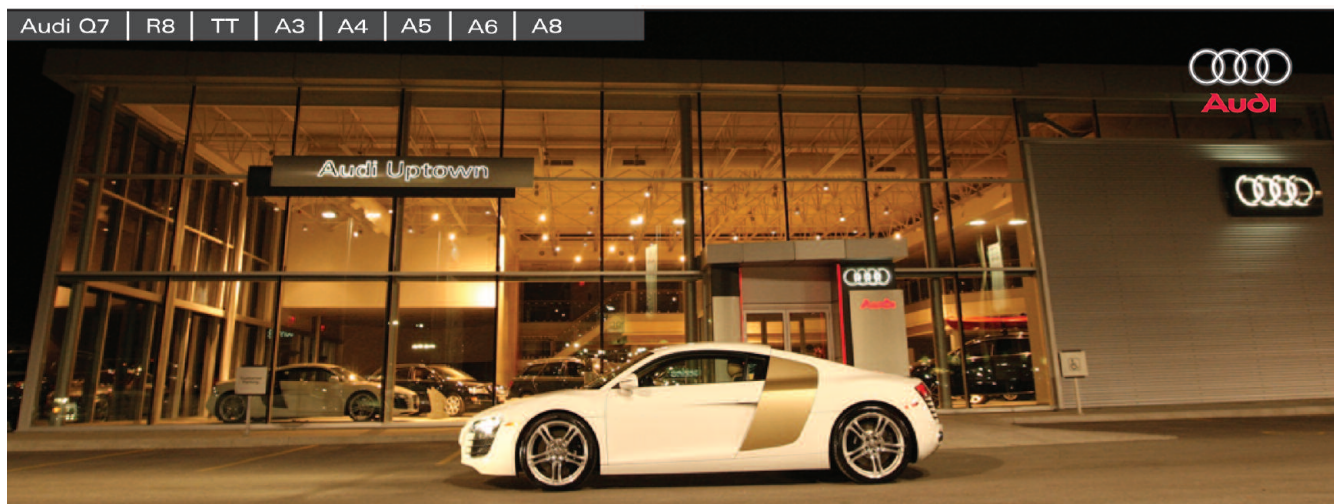
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