

The Essence of Italy

Day 1 – Thu 10th May:

Genoa

Arrival into Genoa.

Our accommodation is the beautiful **Palazzo Grillo** – an important palace in the history of Genoa and the Old Town, located in the very heart of the historical centre.

Overnight: **Palazzo Grillo** where we are staying for two glorious nights.

Genoa – “The Superb” city- imposing, grandiose, but also haughty and proud is a city of strange contrasts. The birthplace of Christopher Columbus and Paganini, Italy’s biggest port is squeezed between the mountains and the sea. Here you will discover renaissance palaces, grand 19th-century boulevards and gilded baroque churches hidden amongst the narrow medieval alleys called “caruggi” by the local people. Genoa is made for exploring and getting lost in the medieval quarter with its lively food shops, bars and trattorias ...it’s all part of the experience.

Day 2 – Fri 11 May:

Historical walking tour of Genoa (B/L)

After breakfast, we meet our local guide and walk through **the historical centre**, one of the oldest and well preserved in Europe. Along the narrow alleys you will discover hidden noble palaces, churches, speciality food shops, local markets with a colourful mix of cultures.

Admire the striped marble façade of San Lorenzo Cathedral, dating back to the 12th century. You will see a very small and beautiful piazza - San Matteo - home to the powerful Doria family for 500 years. See the stunning church of San Matteo, with its 14th-century cloister and breathe the history that permeates this amazing city.

Lunch in one of the oldest “osteria” of the historical centre, where local people usually go to eat the very best and genuine Ligurian dishes: focaccia, farinata, anchovies and the famous “pansotti” (a sort of vegetable ravioli) together with a glass of local white wine “il bianchetto”.



Rest of our day is for us to discover this intriguing city.

Overnight: Palazzo Grillo, Genoa

Day 3 – Sat 12 May:

Portofino Natural Park (4.5kms) (B/L)

After breakfast, we transfer to the Portofino Natural Park. This morning we have a gentle 4 ½ km walk through the Promontory of Portofino. Our local guide will show us the beauty of the forests of maritime pines, chestnuts trees and oaks and many other treasures of this region.

We can stop in the rural house Agririfugio Molini for a coffee and then continue our walk to San Fruttuoso bay. Here time seems to stop... crystalline waters, an ancient abbey, fishermen's boats. Maybe a swim ?

Lunch in a local restaurant where we will taste the home made lasagne with pesto sauce and the catch of the day.

We head back by boat to Camogli. From Camogli we transfer to Levanto by vehicle.

***San Fruttuoso** - one of the most unique and special places in all of Liguria. It is tucked away in a tiny, pristine bay between Camogli and Portofino surrounded by lush vegetation. To add to its exclusiveness, you can only reach it by sea or on foot, hiking the nature trails of the National Park of Portofino. Its charming Abbey has an interesting and rich history ~ from being a monastery, to a pirate's den, to a humble fisherman's home and then the residence of the Princess of Doria.*



The Christ of the Abyss (Cristo degli Abissi) statue, submerged in the waters of the Protected Marine Area of Portofino, has become one of the most famous and popular diving sites in the world. The statue was placed in the waters of San Fruttuoso di Camogli on 22nd Aug 1954, at a depth of about 18 meters by the Costa family.

Overnight at **Villa Margherita, Levanto**. Our beautiful accommodation for the next three nights is owned by the wonderful Federico and his family.

Day 4 – Sun 13 May:

Pesto cooking class (B/Light lunch)

After a leisurely breakfast, we drive into Levanto's quaint historical centre for a hands on cooking experience - making authentic Pesto in the region where it comes from.

You will learn how to prepare this typical Ligurian sauce - made of aromatic basil leaves, olive oil and cheese – in the traditional way with a marble mortar.

Since 1976 in Levanto's historical centre, the "laboratory" of the pesto prepares the most ancient and well known sauce in the world. After a glass of Prosecco, accompanied with a local extra virgin olive oil on a bruschetta, you will taste the pesto sauce made with the modern method comparing it to the traditional way of creating it with a mortar.

We then make our own pesto sauce with the mortar: wash and dry the basil leaves, pounding them together with salt, pine nuts and garlic, add the parmesan cheese and at the end the extra virgin olive oil. You will get a concentrated and perfumed pesto cream, which can be used on pasta or on a slice of bruschetta.



*At the end we will **enjoy our own handmade pesto sauce together with a glass of white wine and some typical local products** such as olives "taggiasche" (small black olives), bruschetta with anchovies and a typical pastry with limoncino.*

After we will have free time in Levanto to explore, relax, walk on the seaside or enjoy a light lunch.

Levanto is settled in a gulf, immersed in valley trails, a paradise for walkers which is now a protected Marine Reserve. The Cinque Terre is a few kilometers away, the famous 'five lands' walk as it is translated. Rich in art, a haven for poets, abundant seafood and lush with olive groves and vineyards. Here the philosophy of fine living animates local people and the high quality of life made Levanto enter into the prestigious Slow City Association, which promotes "slow" tourism, characterized by the rediscovery of traditions, culture and flavours.

Overnight: Villa Margherita, Levanto

Day 5 – Mon 14 May:

Walking the Cinque Terre (6.5 km) (B/LL)

After breakfast, we depart for an easy 6 ½ km walk with stunning views of the coast.

The Mesco promontory – from Levanto to Monterosso

After breakfast, we will begin our walk from Levanto along a beautiful and varied path up to the Mesco promontory which divides the bay of Levanto from Monterosso, the first village of the Cinque Terre. The hilltop, called Punta Mesco, offers an amazing view over the whole Cinque Terre coastline.

Our walk ends in Monterosso with a promenade along the beach with ample time to visit the old town centre.

In Monterosso we will enjoy a **wine tasting** from speciality winemakers of this region. We will taste a conventionally made Cinque Terre DOC white wine, a naturally and traditionally made local white wine and a Sciacchetra. Through this tasting we want to show you how in a limited area like the Cinque Terre, completely different wines and philosophies of winemaking can develop. You will learn more about the new generation of Cinque Terre wine makers and the renaissance of traditional wine making. The tasting will be accompanied by some little crostini and some cantucci with the Sciacchetra.

We return to Villa Margherita by vehicle.

Day 6 – Tues 15 May: Walking on the Via Francigena: Galleno to Fucecchio (11 km) (B)

After breakfast, we say 'che vediamo dopo' to Federico at Villa Margherita and drive to Galleno. Here we will begin walking on the Via Francigena - the ancient Pilgrimage path that begins in Canterbury and ends in Rome. This Camino is a spectacular heritage trail dating back to the Middle Ages.

In the initial section of the route we will take, we cross a lovely paved track along the ancient Via Francigena. We pass the area of Cerbaie – it is wild and deserted. Head for Ponte a Cappiano, where there is a hostel quarried from an ancient Medicean bridge. Then we cross an old wet area that has been revitalised, in the direction of the interesting city centre of Fucecchio. Here we will have time for lunch and then we will meet our driver for proceeding to San Miniato.

Our accommodation for the next two nights is at the **Hotel Miravalle, in San Miniato**. Dinner at leisure.

Hotel Miravalle - Enjoy the intact atmosphere of Italian middle ages. This hotel is set right under the Tower of Frederick in the ancient square of the castle facing the Duomo Cathedral. Delight on Italian and regional dishes in the restaurant with its panoramic dining room, from which you can admire the wonderful Tuscan hills. Or perhaps we eat out in the many options in San Miniato.

San Miniato – a land of Etruscan and Roman settlements with over 2000 years of history.

Time takes on a new meaning here. Everything has a reason; everything has a harmony. You can not run, you need to stop. To ponder. Explore quietly.

There are places that give you peace of mind and inspire an inner search such as the convent of San Francesco, built where the Patron Saint of Italy stopped. Look at the top along the streets and read the tombstones of many famous people who have made the life and history of the city. Napoleone Bonaparte was one of these.



Day 7 – Wed 16 May:

Truffle hunting (B/L)

After a leisurely breakfast we have a real treat in store. Today we will meet Massimo and his dog for an exciting truffle hunt in the woods around San Miniato.

Truffle hunting is an ancient tradition in Tuscany and requires only one rule: respect for nature. For this reason we have a small briefing before going into the woods, a sacred place for the truffle hunters.

During the truffle hunting Massimo will share with us much about the truffle, the magic of its traditions, its history, the legends which recall its myth, its uses in the kitchen and you will learn how to recognize and distinguish a good truffle from others of inferior quality and even artificial products.



And to complete our time here we will enjoy a very special lunch using the white truffle.

Return to San Miniato and enjoy free time. Dinner at leisure

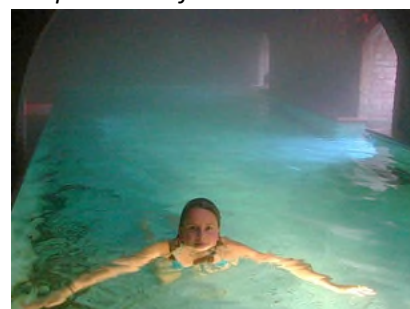
Day 8 – Thu 17 May: Via Francigena: from Case Nuove to Gambassi Terme (5.6km) (B)

After breakfast, we drive to Castelfiorentino and then from the square Case Nuove we begin our gentle 5.6 km walking day to Gambassi Terme. An extraordinary track among hill crests in Val d'Elsa.

*For a fitting end to the day you can enjoy a healthy bath in the hot springs of **Gambassi**, surrounded by a park of ancient trees.*

*The **Parco Benestare** offers visitors the chance to approach the spa waters in an original new way. On one side, immersed in the lush greenery of the park, is the spa building of Gambassi Terme, which houses the therapeutic natural mineral spring waters renowned throughout the whole of Italy for their healing benefits. Especially fabulous after our walking days! The environmental setting in which this structure stands is extraordinary thanks to the ideal climatic conditions and its historical, artistic and natural heritage. Some of the features of this terme are:*

- *the source of 'salsa' mineral water of **Pillo**, which is used by the thermal spa, which flows in the stream Rio Sanguigno at the bottom of the valley at a temperature of 15°C. The waters which flow into this stream have circulated underground for over half a century.*
- *the **Casciani** stream which flows at the bottom of the valley and is characterised by gas emissions which reach their maximum level of concentration at the hyperthermal spring "Bollori" (23°C). This stream is surrounded by deposits of metallic oxides and sulphur in a colloidal state. Next to the stream, stands a characteristic old well, from which gases are given off at irregular times, together with tepid waters.*



- *the mineral spring of **Luiano** is fed by very old waters which were renowned in the past for their medicinal properties: in the first half of the 1900s, these were in fact bottled and offered for sale.*
- *the springs of **Botro and Docce**, collected by the old aqueduct, appear at the point in which ophiolitic rock of oceanic crust with different levels of fracturing meet.*
- *the waters of the hypothermal spring '**Il Bagno**', which were used in the past by the local population as a therapy against skin diseases, flow from Pliocenic deposits (at an approximate height of 230 m above sea level) and are rich in calcium carbonate.*

We will have plenty of time to enjoy the therapeutic and emotional benefits of this healing and beautiful terme – offering many spas. An adventure for our senses !

Pick up and transfer to San Gimignano.

Our home for the next two nights is the **Boutique Hotel Antico Pozzo San Gimignano**, which lies within the walls of this beautiful turreted city.

Day 9 – Fri 18th May: Via Francigena: from Gambassi Terme to San Gimignano (13.5 km) (B)

After a leisurely breakfast we drive back to Gambassi where we begin our walk on this very beautiful and interesting route into San Gimignano. 13 ½ km is our maximum distance today where we may stop at the Sanctuary in Pancole, before walking up the characteristic area in Collemucioli and the enchanting Pieve of Cellole.



*This leg of the journey, short but rich in splendid natural scenery, will lead you to **San Gimignano**, one of the most beautiful towns along the Via Francigena: you will get a foretaste of your arrival when you see the famous towers that make its skyline unmistakable. Do not miss the view of the medieval town and its surrounding valleys from the top of the Torre Grossa, or if you don't run out of energy, venture up the steps of the Rocca di Montestaffoli, for an even more spectacular view. During the evening, take a quiet stroll to admire the illuminated town before enjoying a good glass of Vernaccia in one of the Enoteca's of the old town centre.*

Time to relax, dinner at leisure and overnight in San Gimignano.

Day 10 – Sat 19 May: Via Francigena way: from San Gimignano to Colle Val d'Elsa (12 km) (B/L)

After breakfast we walk out of San Gimignano and continue through the magnificent Tuscan Hills.

*At one point of our journey today we will come to **Molino d'Aiano**, one of the resting places along the ancient route of Sigerico. Today's destination is **Colle Val d'Elsa**, a Tuscan village which will take you back in time with its charming old town centre and narrow alleyways winding through the stone walls.*

We lunch in a typical trattoria, overlooking the beautiful panorama on Tuscan hills. Here you will taste some local cuts and cheeses and the veal meat with aromatic herbs from the garden.

Arrival and our accommodation for the next two nights at **Relais Castel Bigozzi, Monteriggioni**.



***Castel Bigozzi**, one of the oldest castles of this area, rising in the land of Strove. In the Middle Ages this castle belonged to the ancestors of the ancient noble Montanini Family. A place of antique charm, immersed in the stillness of the Tuscan countryside, where you will feel enveloped by the warmth of the hospitable environment and by the richness of a land that speaks the language of art, history, nature and traditions. A beautifully peaceful place.*

Day 11 – Sun 20 May: Via Francigena: Colle Val d’Elsa to Monteriggioni (15.5 km) (B)

A leisurely breakfast in our Castel, followed by yet another stunning walk.

*Today we will enjoy one of the most beautiful sections of the Via Francigena: a meditative route, along which you can admire the Pieve di Strove and stand in the quietness of the splendid Abbadia a Isola, where time seems to have stopped 1000 years ago. A breathtaking view awaits when you see the castle of **Monteriggioni** with its crown of towers, built on a hill with the aim of defending the ancient Republic of Siena from Florence. Within it, a small ancient world with a beautiful square and small gardens where you will be able to pause for a moment before climbing up on to the walls to admire the surrounding view.*

Overnight: Relais Castel Bigozzi, Monteriggioni

Day 12 - Mon 21 May: Via Francigena: Monteriggioni to Pian del Lago, Siena (8km) (B)

After breakfast, we walk from Monteriggioni where we will have a leisurely 8 km walk along the white roads of the Sienese countryside, passing through the old, no longer inhabited medieval village of Cerbaia arriving at Pian del Lago.

Here we will meet our driver to take us into Siena.

*Experience the same feelings as the ancient pilgrims passing through **porta Camollia**, the traditional Via Francigena entrance to the town of Siena. A plate of Pici all’Aglione in the illuminated Piazza del Campo? Some prosecco and panforte to celebrate?*

Enjoy some free time in Siena to explore the beautiful historical centre. Here you can have a typical Sienese lunch before we proceed to the Orcia Valley.

Our next 2 nights accommodation is the wonderful **Relais Il Chiostro di Pienza**.

Located right in the historic centre of Pienza, a Renaissance town designed by Bernardo Rossellino with its hanging gardens overlooking the Val d’Orcia, the Relais Il Chiostro di Pienza is an ancient 13th century convent offering charming rooms within its unique building structure.

Lots of choices for dinner within Pienza for us to choose from tonight.

Day 13 – Tues 22 May: Orcia valley (B)

After breakfast we drive to Terme San Filippo.

Bagni San Filippo is a small village of the Val D'Orcia in southern Tuscany historically known for its thermal water. A secret known by the Romans, Bagni San Filippo is located in an area of great scenic and natural beauty. The baths were renovated in 1566 for Cosimo I de Medici. They were frequented by other famous people in the family de Medici, like Lorenzo the Magnificent, who went there in 1485, and the Grand Duke Ferdinand II, who in 1635, was able to rid of a persistent headache.



For nature lovers the **Fosso Bianco** is a special place - a stream in the woods at the confluence of several hot springs in a series of pools where you can swim all year round and enjoy the special limestone formations that for their shapes have inspired the evocative names such as 'the white whale' or 'the glacier'. The first pools and limestone formations are quite close, while to see the famous waterfall and swim in the white sulphurous waters we must go a little further on a picturesque walking path in the lush bush.



Acqua Passante is a small water source downstream of the village known for its rich mineral and healing composition. Locals travel from far and wide to come here and receive its

healing benefits.

On our way back, I suggest we stop in Bagno Vignoni with its thermal pool, just in the middle of the main square and the small and intimate San Quirico d'Orcia. Here we can enjoy a glass of local red wine "Montepulciano" in the Enoteca Al Pozzo.

Dinner at leisure and overnight at **Relais Il Chiostro di Pienza**.

Day 14 – Wed 23 May: Orcia valley - Walking into Assisi from Spello (15kms) (B/D)

After a leisurely breakfast we depart for Spello – about a 1 ½ hour drive.

From Spello we begin our final part of our walking the Via Francigena – into Assisi following Saint Francis's footsteps.

The journey is an easy 15 kms and scenically it the best that Umbria has to offer ~ the historical and architectural wonders of two of the most beautiful medieval towns in the region, the Franciscan spirituality of the hermitages, the pristine nature, the landscape and the traditions.

We will reach **Eremo delle Carceri**, the Franciscan village-monastery which through forests of oak and natural caves, is one of the loveliest parts of this region. Walking into the beautiful town of Assisi we complete our journey at the Cathedral where St Francis rests. The energy here will take your breath away.

Time to celebrate your journey....now complete.

Our accommodation for our last two nights is the magnificent **Castel of Petrata in Assisi**.

Castello Petrata – this restored castle hotel is shrouded by the Umbrian hills silence, colours and scents. This peaceful oasis is a 4 star hotel located within a 20 acre park where we can immerse ourselves in both the culture and art present. The hotel arises from an ancient XIV century fortress restored back to its old splendour due to its sensitive restoration.



Tonight we celebrate our journey together in the wonderful restaurant within the Castel.

Day 15 – Thur 24 May:

Assisi (B)

After breakfast we have a complete day of leisure. Perhaps enjoy the Castello's grounds or venture into Assisi, or beyond.

Dinner at leisure and overnight at Castello Petrata.

Day 16 – Fri 25 May:

Assisi (B)

After breakfast our journey is complete. You could stay on in Assisi, venture to other parts of Italy or Europe..... or perhaps journey home? Buon viaggio !!



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Italy Price and Inclusions 10 – 25 May 2018

Euro €5990 per person twin share rooms throughout Euro €880 single supplement

What is included:

- 15 nights in boutique style accommodation with private ensuite bathrooms
 - 2 nights in Genoa, Historical Palace Hotel Palazzo Grillo 4*
 - 3 nights in Levanto, Villa Margherita
 - 2 nights in San Miniato, Hotel Miravalle 4*
 - 2 nights in San Gimignano, Boutique Hotel Antico Pozzo 3*
 - 2 nights in Monteriggioni, Relais Castel Bigozzi 4*
 - 2 nights in Val d'Orcia, Relais Il Chostro di Pienza 4*
 - 2 nights in Assisi, Castello Petrata 4*
- All breakfasts
- Lunch in Genoa in a typical trattoria
- Lunch in San Fruttuoso during the Portofino walk
- Wine tasting in Cinque Terre
- Pesto cooking class in Levanto
- Truffle hunting and white truffle lunch in San Miniato
- Dinner in Castello Petrata
- Other meals as per the itinerary
- Walking tour in Genoa historical centre
- Walking guide in San Fruttuoso and Cinque Terre
- Boat tickets San Fruttuoso to Camogli
- Transfer by private vehicle: Genoa-Portofino Natural Park-Levanto. And Monterosso to Levanto.
- All luggage transfers
- Private vehicle with our driver guide from Day 6 to Day 14
- All prices above are in Euro and are converted to your local currency at the current exchange rate at the time of payment.
- Guided by Julie Baker from Genoa to Assisi

What is not included:

- International airfare to Italy. Milan is the closest international airport to Genoa
- Transport to Genoa. Train is best.
- Transport from Assisi at the end of our journey
- Travel Insurance
- Meals not stated in the itinerary
- Items of a personal nature
- Tips to local guide (optional)

Join us for this extraordinary journey through the spiritual heart & the gastronomic essence of Liguria, Tuscany and Umbria! Buon viaggio Julie



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