

Discovering Italy: Umbria, Puglia and Piedmont

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These under-the-radar towns in Italy have fewer tourists and sites that are must-sees. Here's some advice before you visit.

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What are some other under-the-radar places that agents and tour operators are touting?

Jill Taylor, an **Italy** specialist with **Jetset World Travel** in **Chicago**, is sending clients to **Umbria**, which she likens to **Tuscany** "before it got so busy. Umbria is close to everything, but feels so much more remote and authentic. There are fewer **American** tourists and more Italians traveling here, so it gives you a sense of being more genuine. It is a lot of fun to try new wines that aren't as well known, as well as some of the pastas and specialties. The countryside is

gorgeous and easy to traverse and the people are so generous and kind," she says. Umbria is adjacent to Tuscany and its capital, Perugia, is about a two-hour drive from Rome.

Puglia, the region that forms the heel of Italy's boot, is "wonderful," says **Joyce Falcone**, founder of specialty tour operator **The Italian Concierge**. "The infrastructure is good, the roads are flat, and there are lovely places to stay. You have many masserie, or fortified farmhouses, that have been converted into hotels. The food is amazing and you have the advantages of being on the coast."

Beth Rubin, manager of custom travel planning and sales for **Select Italy**, also likes Puglia, noting that it "is definitely more popular than in the past. Accommodations have started to catch up with the rest of the country. It's not overwhelmed like Tuscany. They have great food, young but really good wines, and the best olive oil in the country," she says. Puglia's capital, Bari, is about a four-and-a-half hour drive from Rome, but your clients can break up the journey with an overnight en route in Naples.

For clients staying longer in **Naples**, "Pompeii [recently] opened a new section. It will be all the rage for clients," says Falcone. "I always recommend [the nearby] Herculaneum instead. It's better preserved, smaller, easier to get into and less crowded." But some clients will still insist on Pompeii because they "want bragging rights," she says.

For foodies, Turin (or Torino), a 45-minute train ride west of **Milan**, is the hub for Terra Madre Salone del Gusto, September 22 to 26. Hosted by Slow Food USA, the biennial exhibit, open to the public, attracts food producers, experts and chefs from around the world and "is always terrific," says Falcone. Turin is the capital of Piedmont, a region highly touted by Rubin for, among its other assets, another signature culinary event. "Late October to early November happens to be white truffle season. You have events such as the Alba Truffle Fair, and opportunities to go on truffle hunts at that time," she says. Though the fall definitely has its charms — especially for oenophiles who will want to visit the many wine villages there — Rubin recommends Piedmont year round.

RIDE A Bike, HAVE a Bite

We don't know if you could call this a trend, but three tour companies have wheeled out programs that combine bicycling with culinary experiences. Perillo's **ItalyVacations.com** has a new 10-day "Self-Guided Food & Wine Biking Tour of Puglia," which takes guests along 220 miles of Salento coastline, visiting Byzantine shrines, Baroque cathedrals, national parks and celebrated wineries along the way. Available September to November, the tour starts at \$2,325 per person double, land only, including daily breakfast and five dinners (with drinks); four tastings of wine, cheese and local products; GPS navigator with tracks included, a book with cultural info and tips about the route, roundtrip private transfer from Bari airport to Lecce and 24-hour assistance.

In October, **DuVine Cycling + Adventure Co.**'s "Piedmont Truffle Bike Tour" lets guests join a local truffle hunter and his dog on a hunt, learn how to cook Piemontese delicacies with a Michelin-starred chef, and pedal into Alba's annual truffle festival. Oenophiles will also have a chance to taste Barolo, Barbera and Barbaresco wines. The five-night tour is priced at \$5,395 per person double. The company's five-night autumn "Tuscany Harvest Tour," priced at \$4,795, will explore ancient Etruscan villages during the annual harvest of olives, porcini, truffles and chestnuts.

One of the goals of **Backroads'** "Tuscany Active Culinary Tour: Chianti's History,

Hills & Hearty Flavors” is to have guests return from their trip with the know-how to create a Tuscan dinner back home. Cyclists will follow the hilly course of L'Eroica, Tuscany's internationally recognized vintage bike race, visit ancient cellars and taste (and learn the nuances of) Tuscan wines, from Chianti Classico to Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. The five-night tour ranges from \$3,998 to \$4,198 per person double.



About the Author

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