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SPECIAL REPORT:

BEST LOCAL TOUR GUIDES IN NORTHERN ITALY

DREAM OF ITALY®



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ENHANCE YOUR ITALY TRIP WITH A GREAT TOUR GUIDE

I have to be honest and confess that I was a late convert to the advantages of tour guides. In this age of excellent guide books and infinite online information available at the stroke of a key, booking a private guide seemed superfluous.

Thus, the first time I visited *Pompeii*—over a decade ago, now—I went armed with an exhaustive printed guide and some itineraries I had found online. It was fine; we visited the highlights of the sprawling site, dutifully read our histories and factoids while squinting

at crumbling walls, and generally retained almost none of it.



Manuela Farneti

On my second visit a few years later, the friends we were travelling with insisted on hiring a Pompeii guide who had been recommended by a colleague. Group travel is always a little give, a little take, so it seemed diplomatic to concede to their request.

Pompeii that day came alive for me. Our guide (for whom, I regret to admit, I was never able to track down contact information), an enthusi-

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Albaway Tours

How We Chose the Best Local Guides

Trying to compile a list of the best local tour guides in Italy is a daunting task. In this issue, you will find our favorites in northern Italy and in the February issue of *Dream of Italy*, we'll reveal our recommended guides in central and southern Italy.

Definition: For our listings, we chose guides who live in the regions or cities where they work and who know their material thoroughly and present it passionately. All the guides we selected offer private and/or semi-private half-day and full-day tours. We did not include guides who lead multi-day tours only.

How We Chose: We personally toured with many of these guides, asked trusted contacts for recommendations and took nominations online from readers and subscribers. It is impossible to make a list like this complete, so look for future additions at www.dreamofitaly.com and tell us about guides you love (email kathy@dreamofitaly.com), we might include them in a revised list.

Rates: Unless otherwise noted, prices quoted refer to the cost for a family or small group.

—Kathy McCabe, Editor and Rebecca Winke, Contributing Editor

Italy is the 5th most visited country.

this wider, looser umbrella category has a licensing exam less cultural and more practical in content; applicants are tested for proficiency in language and the logistics of group transport and organization. Often you'll find an *accompagnatore* and a guide who collaborate.

In addition, some guides working legally in Italy do so under the authority of a license granted by one of the EU guiding unions that recognizes their academic qualifications. This is especially true for some of the larger tour companies based in Italy that include

non-Italian natives among their guides. This loophole has eased some of the tension between guides licensed in Italy and their foreign colleagues, though the minor hitch of being denied discounted tickets at certain monuments remains.

THE FOUR GUIDE GUIDELINES

Finding the right guide is like most everything else in travel: a little planning goes a long way towards making accidental serendipity possible. Here are four steps to help you find the perfect guide for you:

To Thine Ownself Be True

You are at the first step of your planning process and now's the time for honesty. Take a step back and a long, hard look at yourself and the rest of your group. Many times traveling companions have different trip goals, dreams—and limitations.

- Jot down each person's interests and turn-offs, and see where they intersect.
- Be honest about how much physical and mental exertion everyone can take.
- Dream a little! Want to bike through vineyards, explore your artistic side with a photo tour? Italy is perfect for either. Be courageous and *carpe diem*.

Plan Ahead

Finding the right guide takes thought and time, so don't put it off till the last minute.

- The best guides are often the most sought after and can book up early, especially in high season and at popular destinations and cities.

Alessandra Mallozzi from *Discovering Umbria* says, "I often have clients contact me two years before their trip. Many people dream of visiting Umbria for years,

and fill that time with a lot of advance planning."

- Once you have a rough itinerary and an idea of your goals and limits, it's time for a little research. Start with our recommendations here in this issue and check out their websites. Send a quick feeler email asking for more information. Plus, ask your friends who have travelled to Italy.
- A rough itinerary will also help you narrow down where along your route you might benefit from hiring a guide. Many, if not most, major museums in Italy offer excellent audio guides and are well-covered in the better guidebooks, so can be easily visited independently. Booking a guide often makes more sense for sights that are less accessible to the traveller: Roman ruins, local artisans, traditional markets. You may also consider booking a guide simply to break up your itinerary a bit. If you have a couple of days of solid art and culture, you may enjoy a day off with a food or photography tour.

Be a Communicator

Communicating with your guide before you arrive may be the most important part of the entire process. Dedicate time to this step, and the

pay-off will be worth it.

- Be clear about your group's goals and limits.
- Take the time to get a feel for your guide's personality and style. Remember, you'll be spending anywhere from a half-day to many days with this person.
- Don't be shy. Remember the dreaming part above? Your guide is the person who will be able to make it happen. As *Dream of Italy* subscriber Lee Laurino tells, "I had an Italian dream. One where I would find a *nonna* (grandmother) to teach me all the Italian traditions. ...*Yle (Sambati)* told me to come to *Puglia* and she would find me a nonna.... Perhaps because I am Italian American, finding *Nonna Vata* was a unique experience that only a local, skilled adventure creator could accomplish."

Keep Communicating

Once you are actually on your trip and spending time with your guide, keep the lines of communication open.

- Most tours—especially those that last more than a few hours—end up with a bit of tweaking, based on discoveries made along the way. You may have found you are espe-

cially fascinated by mosaics or traditional Venetian rowing or that three wineries in one day is way too much. Let your guide know. *Nadia Danesin* from *Friend in Venice* says, "My first priority isn't sticking to an itinerary, but that my clients end the day feeling Venetian. If that means I have to throw out the idea I started with in the morning and do something completely different so they fall in love with my city...well, that's what I do best!"

- Remember to keep the communication going even once your trip is over. Send a quick email to your guide with your trip highlights and low points; it will be helpful for their future tour planning. And, of course, if you loved your experience pass on this information to other travellers – your guide will thank you!

—Rebecca Winke

Rebecca Winke is the contributing editor for these special issues on Italy's best local tour guides. An American who has lived in Italy since 1993, Winke is the proprietor of Brigolante, an agriturismo in a renovated family farmhouse near Assisi, Umbria. She blogs at www.brigolante.com and www.umbriaontheblog.com and is the co-author of the mobile app Umbria Slow: Food, Culture, & Travel.

ment as an international cultural and economic influence. These cerebral walks cover Venice's familiar landmarks and monuments, placing them in a much deeper and richer historical context, and take visitors into the city's hidden treasures and private homes, generally inaccessible to the general public.

Walks of Italy

(202) 684-6916

www.walksofitaly.com

Rates: from 54€ per person

This tour company offers affordable small group tours of the highlights of the city, as well as private tours. When in Venice, do as the Venetians do, and see Venice by water. The VIP Boat Excursion with Jennifer is a winner.

Giuseppina can provide special access to St. Mark's Basilica and the Doge's Palace with the Legendary Venice tour.

Also offers: similar tours in Florence and Rome

VENETO

Maria Laura Benciolini

(39) 333 1140352

marialaurabenciolini@hotmail.com

Rates: From 100€ for two hours

Specialties: Verona, Valpolicella, Lake Garda

Maria Laura introduces visitors to historic Verona, the romantic setting for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and home to "Juliet's balcony" — certainly an historical liberty, but still delightful. She is especially well-versed on local art and art history and able to create tours catering to art enthusiasts, but also enjoys organizing a more frivolous shopping expedition or wine tasting tours outside of town in the *Valpolicella* wine country.

Monica Facchini

(39) 329 4876651

mf@duemori.com

Rates: 100€ for a two-hour tour

Specialties: Vicenza, Palladian villas
Monica has a degree in contemporary art and preservation and completed an additional year of study specializing in Palladio, Venetian art and history and the culture of Vicenza. She can design tours that include both Vicenza and Palladio's countryside villas, as well as the works of other architects. Other tours include the medieval towns of *Marostica* and *Bassano del Grappa*, *Mount Grappa*, where Hemingway and *Dos Passos* lived and visits to grappa distilleries and craft workshops.



Katia Galvetto

Katia Galvetto

(39) 347 9803539

katiagalvetto@gmail.com

Rates: 120€ half day; 240€ full day

Specialties: Verona, Lake Garda
Katia specializes in the art, history, and architecture of Verona, but also enjoys taking clients to explore the beautiful and vast surrounding province, with its picturesque villages, castles, and villas, mountain-rimmed lake and excellent Valpolicella and *Soave* wine country. Her dual degree in literature and medieval archaeology and 20 years experience make her a compelling guide.

1€ = \$1.35 at press time



Vernon McClure

Vernon McClure

www.italiaoutdoors.com

Rates: full-day bike tours average 75€ per person

Aptly called "the MacGyver of active vacations" by travel specialist Madeline Jhavar from *Italy Beyond the Obvious*, *Vernon* is the perfect guide if you aim to explore the *Veneto* region or the nearby Dolomite mountain range by bike, on foot, with skis, or hanging off a sheer rock face. A sports and outdoors enthusiast, *Vernon* not only accompanies clients on their adventures, but shares tips on how to improve their form and performance while enjoying the region's breathtaking towns and countryside, with all the culture and cuisine they have to offer. His favorite itinerary is *Vicenza* and the Palladian Villas by bike.

Also offers: similar tours in the Dolomites, Friuli and Trentino

Marina Menegoi

(39) 328 9581108

www.marinamenegoi.com

Rates: from 100 to 500€ for a private tour

Specialties: Verona, Veneto vineyards, Palladian villas
Marina has been watching her clients fall in love with picturesque Verona during her tours for more than a decade. Though she is based in Verona, she also enjoys crafting bespoke itineraries to nearby Lake Garda and the Palladian Villas. As a certified sommelier, she is the perfect guide to intro-

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million visitors per year.