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.

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 enthusiast...

continued on page 4

How We Chose the Best Local Guides

rving 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
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.

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**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. ... Yel (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 especially fascinated by mosaics or traditional Venetian rowing or that three wineries in one day is way too much. Let your guide know.
- **Nadja 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!

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**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.umbriaonthelog.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

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**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@due Mori.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**
(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.

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**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 Jhawar 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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1€ = $1.35 at press time

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Million visitors per year.

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continued on page 8