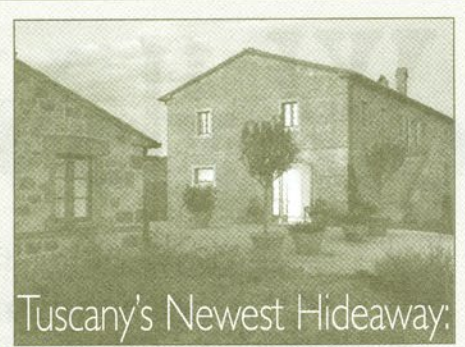




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Tuscany's Newest Hideaway:

DREAM OF ITALY®

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Hitting the Links *Italian Style*

I believe it is safe to say Italy will never be marketed as "golf's next Ireland." Case in point: out of a population of nearly 58 million, only an estimated 100,000 Italians play golf compared to two million who hunt. Still, golfing in Italy has abundant charms.

If you are paired with an Italian, he or she may point out *Leonardo da Vinci's* birthplace through a grove of olive trees (*Montecatini Golf Club*) or ancient aqueducts (*Rome Golf Course*), and you might drink your 19th hole *prosecco* in a clubhouse built inside a fortification from the Austro-Hungarian Empire (*Circolo Golf Venezia*). If you pass a holy water receptacle as you walk along a fairway, as I did at *Ugolino Golf Club* near Florence, you might pause to plead

for divine intervention with your next shot.

Many Italian courses are historic, clubhouses are architecturally significant, players dress fashionably, and the food is divine. Before a 1 p.m. tee time, my husband and I joined a dining room full of well-dressed golfers lingering over their *pinot* and *risotto*.



For me, the exploration of Italian golf started a decade ago when I became determined to break up my museum and cathedral marathons with something my husband would enjoy. It took me a few years to deliver. It wasn't easy to research golf in Italy; most guidebooks did not have "golf" in the index, and most still don't.

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La Bandita

Brand new in 2007, *La Bandita* is the Tuscan castle in the sky of owner *John Voightmann* and his wife *Ondine*. Trading in his successful music-industry career to build and run an inn in Tuscany's picture-perfect *Val D'Orcia* area, Voightmann has effectively imported his American Dream. On the top of a large hill, alongside a sheep farm and surrounded by land belonging to UNESCO (meaning the land will forever remain undeveloped), *La Bandita* presents a breathtaking panoramic view as well as the ultimate hideaway location.

The driveway to *La Bandita* is a long, winding gravel path, unmarked off the main road. It jostles and bumps as you climb and then climb some more, prompting prayer that your rental car will survive the trip. Yet as soon as you plateau and park, the sweet, cool breeze and 360-degree view of Tuscany's beloved rolling hills are like a tonic to the now-forgotten discomfort of the drive.

Voightmann greets his road-weary guests with a handshake and an offer of *Campari* and soda, instantly communicating the intended casual and relaxed mood of *La Bandita*. The inn is meant to feel like a friend's home, and though the service and amenities most likely outdo those of your acquaintances, the overall sentiment is that you are among friends and encouraged to act accordingly. Comprised of two squat stone farm-

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The British introduced golf to Italy in the 19th century.

A concierge from the *Hotel Saturnia* in Venice was so impressed with my interest he mailed me a thick book on golf in Italy. I was so excited — until I realized it was all in Italian. I have abundant interest but limited skills in the Italian language. I can get around town, shop successfully, order dinner competently, and carry on short conversations...but I could not read this book.

Although the links to golf on the Italian Government Tourist Board Web site take you to sites that are all in Italian, there are other ways to find information on courses. I'm going to venture a guess that not many of us would plan a trip around particular courses. To the contrary, we plan the trip and then find the courses that are near towns we will visit.

It is still not easy to research Italian golf courses on the Internet but I found a few decent sites (see sidebar). One oddity common to these sites is that a course like Ugolino, one of the best known in Italy, is listed under a different name on each site: Golf Club Ugolino, Florence Circolo Golf Ugolino (but actually listed under Tuscany courses as *Grassina*, the name of its address in a small town near Florence) and Firenze Ugolino Golf Club.

If you don't need to have every detail scheduled ahead of time, arrange to play after you arrive and settle in. If you are staying in a hotel with a concierge, it will be easy. If not, most front desk staff — even in small hotels in Italy — are very resourceful.

Once you commit to adding golf glove and shoes to your packing list, the toughest decision will be where to stay and play if you are not starting with a set itinerary. According to the Italian Golf Federation, there are about 300 courses in Italy. Travelers can golf around the northern lakes or major cities, near beaches, in the mountains or at a spa resort. The regions with the most choices are *Emilia-Romagna*, *Lombardy*, and *Piedmont* in the north; *Tuscany* and *Lazio* in central Italy; *Campania* and *Puglia* in the south.

Here are some favorite home-away-from-home places to play:

Places to Stay

Hotel Villa San Michele

Via Doccia, 4
Fiesole (Florence)
(39) 055 5678200
www.villasanmichele.com
Rates: Start at 670€ per night including breakfast.

Fattoria Mansi Bernadini

Italian Vacation Villas
Alice Tetelman and Martin Wenick
(202) 333-6247
www.villasitalia.com
Rates: Weekly rental rates for the villas, which sleep 10 to 14 people, range from \$4,850 to \$10,580.

Hotel Terme di Saturnia

Saturnia
(39) 0564 600111
www.termedisaturnia.com
Rates: Start at 200 € per person, per night, including use of facilities and breakfast. Weekly packages available.

Hotel Villa Serbelloni

Via Roma, 1
Bellagio
(39) 031 950216
www.villaserbelloni.com
Rates: A double room with breakfast starts at 375 € per night.

Hotel Cipriani

Giudecca 10
Venice
(39) 041 5207744
www.hotelcipriani.it
Rates: Start at 690 € per night including a full American buffet breakfast.

Also see *Dream of Italy's* March 2006 issue for a villa rental that comes with its own private 18-hole golf course.

Circolo del Golf dell'Ugolino



Tuscany

Surely some of the world's best "rooms with a view" are in the 15th-century *Villa San Michele* in the town of *Fiesole* high above Florence. Its façade is attributed to *Michelangelo*, and a dining room has an expansive 16th-century fresco of *The Last Supper*. Three well-regarded golf courses are within 45 minutes: *Ugolino*, *Poggia dei Medici* and *Pavoniere*.

At *Ugolino*, it was amusing to see a "No Dogs, No Spikes!" sign. Golf in Italy began in 1889 when British transplants founded the Florence Golf Club, the country's first golf association. They built *Ugolino*, perhaps Italy's best-known course, 15 miles from Florence in 1934. You don't need power here; you need finesse.

They don't slap up plain clubhouses in Italy; *Ugolino's* is protected by the Department of Fine Arts. Inside, tables are set with linens and fresh flowers. There's faith here, too, in the form of a holy water receptacle affixed to a tree along a fairway.

After Chuck and I played our round, someone on staff introduced us to a fellow Americans. Don and his wife live in Florence part of the year, and invited us for drinks that evening at their apartment overlooking the *Ponte Vecchio*. It was amazing to see the sunset from that heavenly angle.

For a different kind of sport, outlet shopping, we made our way to a great center simply called *The Mall*, within a half hour drive of *Ugolino*. We purchased some discounted *Loro Piana* cashmere and *Bottega Veneta* leather. Temptations included *Gucci* and *Armani*. No food court here: there was a stylish café.

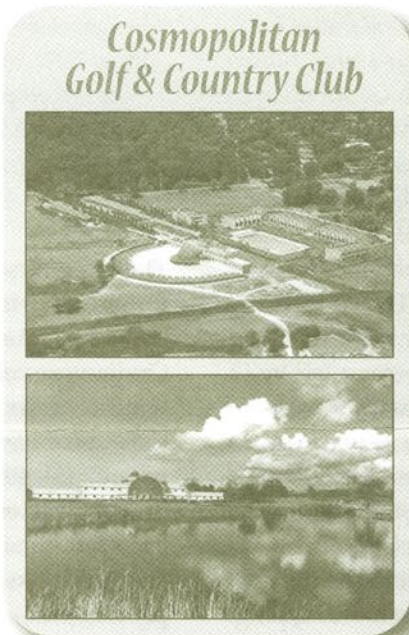
"There's no looking at a building he

of a holy water receptacle affixed to a tree along a fairway.

Our next Tuscan home was near the walled city of *Lucca*. Alice Tetelman of Italian Vacation Villas recommended the estate, *Fattoria Mansi Bernadini*. It is known for its wine and extra virgin olive oil — and five beautiful rental villas. I loved walking up the old, uneven steps in the 17th-century building, running my hands along the sloping walls. Despite my affection for wooden beams and other rustic touches, I was glad the bathroom was new and the bed linens crisp.

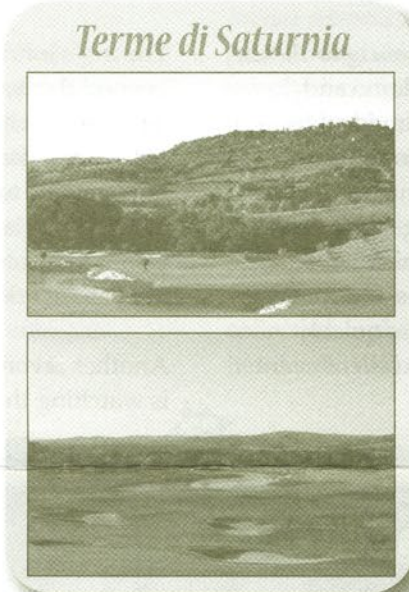
On a long stone table outdoors, a huge breakfast spread welcomed multi-national guests every morning. We sat among skinny cedars and pots full of fat geranium blossoms. A quilt of fields spread out below. From there we were invited by *Giovanni Giurlani*, a business associate of Alice Tetelman (and one more reason to use an agency to make arrangements), to the **Cosmopolitan Golf & Country Club** in *Tirrenia*, which was voted best new course in Italy when it debuted 15 years ago. The links course has wide fairways and water on 11 holes. The copper-domed club-

house, an homage to Florentine architecture, is surrounded by an enormous semi-circular swimming pool.



Cosmopolitan Golf & Country Club

Love of spas as well as golf curiosity brought us to the thermal spa called **Terme di Saturnia** (see *Dream of Italy's* September/October 2002 and February 2007 issues) in southwestern Tuscany, an hour from Rome. Cosmopolitans are shaken and served at the striking, modern bar, and art auctions are a typical evening diversion for well-heeled Europeans who tend to keep their white terry robes on all day.



Terme di Saturnia

International golf course architect Ron Fream designed a first-rate American-style course. After years of delays, it finally opened last year. Construction director *Pietro Binaghi* explained that in Italy you have to get approvals from many constituencies. Not only had there been the usual questions about preservation of history and landscape, but there were other concerns: Would the cows adjust? Will it look good from the



Menaggio & Cadenabbia Golf Club

air? Should the 15 villas on the course be spread out or clustered?

Lake Como

From our base at the elegant *Hotel Villa Serbelloni* in *Bellagio*, a flower-filled town often called the most beautiful in Europe, we took a water taxi almost directly across the lake to **Menaggio & Cadenabbia Golf Club**. A rich British tourist built this club, and its tight,

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Italian Golf Notes

The Italian golf season starts in spring, generally in April, and ends in October. Some courses are open year round but not all.



Many courses are closed Monday, except when a holiday falls on a Monday.

Italian clubs are crazy for tournaments. From February through November, many have two to three tournaments a week. This is how they make money and Italian golfers love to play in tournaments because of the prizes that the sponsors give. Tournament sponsors vary from BMW and Sony to local Rotary and Lion's Clubs.

In Italy, a country that disdains rules, most courses are the standard 18 holes and some have 27, but you might find others that are 11 or even just three holes.

Some private courses ask for verification of an official handicap from a U.S. golf club.

Book a tee-off in advance, even the day before, just like at home.



At resort courses and some of the more upscale private clubs, a round can be 100€, but for the most part you can expect to pay 50 to 80€ per 18-hole round, and 30€ for the cart rental; cart use is much less prevalent here. Club rental runs from 30€

1 € = \$1.57 at press time

re after seeing Italy.” — Fanny Burney

Hitting the Links *continued from page 5*

steep course, in 1907 and made Lake Como his home. Menaggio's golf library is one of the best in the world, with more than 1200 volumes, many of historical significance.

Also in the area are the heavily-bunkered **Le Robinie Golf Club**, the only Jack Nicklaus course in Italy; **La Pinetina Golf Club** in a park-like setting carved out of forest; and the site of many Italian Opens, **Golf Club Monticello** with three types of play on two courses.

Venice

People are almost always surprised when we say we played golf in Venice. Who knew?

Circolo Golf Venezia is on the *Lido*, the largest island in the lagoon. The flat, peaceful, countryside course was built about 75 years ago. There is much to recommend about an Italian golf experience, but don't expect the greens and fairways to be maintained to American standards. I overheard

someone say that playing golf in Italy is like playing on good public courses in the U.S., but with better food and ambience.



At this Venetian club, the course was built on sand, with wide fairways that have interesting slopes and undulations. Abundant maritime pines, other seaside vegetation, and the ubiquitous sand-

based rough force difficult recovery shots.

Circolo Golf Venezia's restaurant was excellent, as we'd come to expect. After a seafood lunch with crusty bread, a half-hour boat ride took us back to the *Cipriani*, a hotel that is all fantasy, with 20-foot-high ceilings, and the kind of views that frustrate sleep. Morning or night, it was mesmerizing.

In Italy, no matter what you are doing, it's important to stand still and take in the view.

— Ann Cochran

Circolo Golf Venezia



Golf Club Monticello



Golf Travel Planners

Don't want to do it yourself?
Consult experts who have years
of experience:

ITC (International Travel Company)

Lois Hancock
(562) 595-6905
www.itcgolf-africatours.com

Sophisticated Italy

Carol and David Ross
(39) 02 48196675
www.sophisticateditaly.com

Le Robinie Golf Club



Golf Courses

Circolo del Golf dell'Ugolino

Via Chiantigiana, 3
Grassina — Firenze
(39) 055 2301009
www.golfugolino.it

Cosmopolitan Golf & Country Club

Viale Pisorno, 60
Tirrenia — Pisa
(39) 050 33633
www.cosmopolitangolf.it

Terme di Saturnia Spa & Golf Resort

Saturnia (Grosseto)
(39) 0564 600111
www.termedisaturnia.it

Menaggio & Cadenabbia Golf Club

Via Golf, 12
Grandola Ed Uniti
Como
(39) 0344 32103
www.golfclubmenaggio.it

Le Robinie Golf Club

Via per Busto, 9
Solbiate Olona
(39) 0331 329260
www.lerobinie.com

La Pinetina Golf Club

Via Al Golf, 4
Appiano Gentile, Como
(39) 031 933202
www.golfpinetina.it

Golf Club Monticello

Via Volta, 63
Cassina Rizzardi
(39) 031 928055

Circolo Golf Venezia

Alberoni, Lido di Venezia
(39) 041 731333
www.circologolfvenezia.it

Also check the following Web sites
for more information:

www.golfcoursesguide.org
www.golftoday.co.uk
www.golfeurope.com



There are almost a dozen courses close to Rome.