

THE 2008 TRAVEL PLANNER

GolfStyles

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PLANET GOLF

Where Next?





THE ITALIAN JOB

THE WINING AND DINING IS KING,
BUT THE CHIPPING AND PUTTING ISN'T BAD

BY ANN COCHRAN

"F antastico," shouted our host Giovanni Giurlani, after we hit anything resembling a good shot.

Before our 1 p.m. tee time, we joined a dining room full of well-dressed golfers lingering over pinot grigio and risotto.

Determined to enjoy Italian holidays that included golf but did not revolve around it, I convinced my husband that we could break up museum and cathedral marathons with good golf, and I delivered. When I first got this brainstorm a few years ago, it wasn't easy to research, and most guidebooks still don't have golf in the index. Now, the Internet has good information, and if you are a spontaneous type, schedule tee times once you arrive in the country.

Only an estimated 80,000 Italians play golf compared to two million who hunt, so Italy will never be marketed as golf's next Ireland. Still, it has many charms. Many courses are historic, clubhouses are architecturally significant, players dress fashionably, and the food is divine. If you pass a holy water receptacle as you walk along a fairway, bless your next shot.

Before you grab your clubs, your partner

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may point out Leonardo da Vinci's birthplace through a grove of olive trees (Montecatini Golf Club); you'll see ancient aqueducts (Rome Golf Course); and your 19th hole Prosecco is poured in a clubhouse built inside a fortification from the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Circolo Golf Venezia).

After you decide to add your favorite golf shoes to your suitcase, the toughest decision is where to stay and play. According to the Italian Golf Federation, there are 342 golf courses in Italy. Travelers can golf around the northern lakes or major cities, near beaches, in the mountains and on sprawling resorts with spas. The regions with the most choices are Emilia Romagna, Lombardy and Piedmont in the north; Tuscany and Lazio in the center; Campania and Puglia in the south.

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 Michaelangelo 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.

It was amusing to see a "No dogs, no spikes!" sign at Golf Dell'Ugolino, perhaps Italy's best known course, 15 miles from Florence. Golf in Italy began in 1889 when British transplants founded the Florence Golf Club, the country's first golf association. They built Ugolino 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 painted ceramic holy water receptacle nailed to a tree along a fairway.


After our round, a staff member introduced us to 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.

Outlet shopping is a relatively new phenomenon in Italy, and one of the best centers is near Ugolino. We purchased some discounted Loro Piana cashmere and Bottega Veneta leather. Temptations included Gucci and Armani. No food court here, but there was a stylish café.

In my pre-trip notes, words to look up included low-fat milk. I quickly gave up on that notion. Italian cafés don't stock low fat, skim or 2 percent. You get whole milk and you enjoy it. Forget the low-carb concept. It would be foolish to turn away the local artisanal honey or zucchini blossoms stuffed with delicate ricotta. Heaven comes to mean different pasta each night with white bread and real butter.

We settled into a B&B near the walled city of Lucca on an estate called Fattoria Mansi Bernadini, 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 international 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 to the Cosmopolitan Golf & Country Club in Tirrenia, voted best new course in Italy 15 years ago, though I wondered how much weight an award like that could carry. The course has wide fairways and water on 11 holes.



WHEN TO GO: The season starts in spring, generally in April, and ends in October. Many courses are open year round.

WHO TO KNOW: Don't want to do it yourself? Consult the experts:

- ITC (International Travel Company), Lois Hancock, 562.595.6905
www.itcgolf-africatours.com
- Italian Vacation Villas, Alice Tetelman, Martin Wenick, 202.333.6247
www.villasitaly.com
- Italian Government Tourist Board, 212.245.5618, www.italiantourism.com

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

- Italian clubs are crazy for tournaments, which are held on weekends, so avoid weekend play if you can.
- 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 only three holes.
- Some courses ask for verification of an official handicap from a U.S. club.
- Book a tee time 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 Euro, but for the most part you can expect to pay 50 to 80 Euro per round, and 30 Euro for the cart; cart use is less prevalent there. Club rentals run from 30 Euro.



COSMOPOLITAN GOLF CLUB IN TIRRENIA

The copper-domed clubhouse, homage to Florentine architecture, is surrounded by an enormous semi-circular swimming pool.

Love of spas as well as some golf curiosity brought us to the thermal spa called Terme di Saturnia in southwestern Tuscany, an hour from Rome's Fiumicino airport. Cosmos 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.

International golf course architect Ron Fream has designed what looks to be a first-rate American-style course. After years of delays, it's scheduled to debut by year's end. Director of construction Pietro Binaghi says that in Italy you have to get approvals from many constituencies. Not only have there been the usual questions about preservation of history and landscape, but will the cows adjust? Does it look good from the air? Should the 15 villas on the course be spread out or clustered? Questions like this will soon be answered.

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, 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 1,200 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 sand-based rough force difficult recovery shots. There was an interesting rule on the scorecard: no practice shots on the tees.

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. ■