



SPA ITALIA

From thermal therapy to steaming underground caverns, state-of-the-art spas to nature reserve tranquillity, Italy has so much to offer the wellness traveller in search of rest and rejuvenation.

Fonteverde

Billed as a place of 'timeless grace', you'll find Fonteverde south of Sienna on the Tuscan-Umbrian border and it is certainly a very special place to stay. Originally built as a Renaissance palace for the Grand Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici, the resort overlooks the vast rolling hills of Val d'Orcia, a UNESCO World Heritage site. It's one of the most stunning locations in Italy, built over a group of natural thermal springs.

The defining feature is a collection of panoramic pools overlooking the beautiful countryside. These include the hotel's open-air thermal pool, set against green hills and golden Val d'Orcia fields. The views alone are enough to revive body and soul.

The indoor-outdoor Bioaquam pool consists of a huge thermal pool with jets and underwater seating, plus lounge areas, both inside and out, with a range of hydro massagers. Again, the views are sensational and it's quite easy to lose track of time here.

The lower level of the hotel houses the day spa pool, which is not quite as luxurious. More municipal in feel, it has a cafeteria and is open to the paying public on a day session basis. It's worth booking in for a few hours R&R if you're travelling through Tuscany on holiday – it's suitable for all ages, too. In the summer, Saturday nights see a thermal pool party under the stars, with music from 7pm until midnight (book tickets online).

Last but not least, the hotel has two special dog pools. Both are filled with thermal water and are popular with Rome's fashionistas escaping the city heat to pamper their designer doggies.

Besides the thermal pools there's also a heated outdoor swimming pool – it's very swish, with white-coated pool attendants circulating with freshly squeezed vegetable elixirs, fruit skewers and iced face cloths to dampen down



'Rome's fashionistas escape the city heat to pamper their designer doggies in the dog pool'

the heat of the day. Outside the pools, Fonteverde also boasts a good array of beauty treatments, including thermal mud wraps, clay facial brightening treatments, fruit acid body peels, seaweed lymphatic drainage massages and an especially relaxing and skin-nourishing Tranquillity Aromatic Ritual body massage.

Food is a strong feature at Fonteverde and it might not be the ideal place to lose weight, as the daily temptations to stray

into carb-laden territory are legion. The external terrace restaurant is especially renowned for its lavish local dishes. However, it is possible to book into the Equilibrium Periodic Fasting programme, with two to five days of semi-fasting and a personalised diet plan – the best option if you're looking to shed a few pounds during your stay.

REVIEWED BY LIZ EARLE

From €305 per night (B&B). fonteverdespa.com

San Luis

A few kilometres from Merano in South Tyrol (northern Italy), you will find San Luis. It's a private retreat hotel beside a stunning 5,800 square-metre lake in an unspoilt alpine park. Whether you're craving a chalet overlooking the sun-dappled lake or a treehouse deep in the forest, you can take your pick of the private lodges, each built to encourage restorative encounters with nature. I've heard the retreat is dreamy in spring, but can't imagine anything more magical than the snowy San Luis I visited.

Undisturbed relaxation is order of the day at San Luis, which is described by its founders as a 'retreat in which to listen to yourself and a setting in which to find yourself.' The central lobby is divided into two wings: one side features the bar and restaurant area as well as a small cinema and large outdoor terrace. Wander to the other side and you are immersed in a world of wellbeing, with zones dedicated to fitness and relaxation as well as a breathtaking swimming pool that extends from the two-storey barn-spa outdoors towards the lake.

In winter months, steam billows off the top of the outdoor pool and you can pop out through automatic underwater doors for an invigorating swim surrounded by the snow-capped peaks of the surrounding Dolomite



mountains. In fact, guests are spoilt for swimming and bathing experiences: the Jacuzzi in the centre of the outdoor lake is not to be missed and there are personal hot tubs and saunas alongside each chalet. The site's extensive facilities are tied together by the roaring fires that are almost never out of sight – in the lodges, restaurants and even poolside. These fires are designed to 'gather thoughts, warm the heart and speed energy and wellbeing.'

For those seeking a physical challenge, the South Tyrol Tourist Board (suedtirolo.info/en) is on hand to advise on



a mountain climb or even a spot of skiing. Our local guide advised a snow-shoe hike as the best way to experience the beauty of the surrounding landscape, so we set out to tackle the 2,631m mountain trail. We were on the mountain for the best part of a day and found ourselves exhausted and thigh-deep in snow on many occasions. It's well worth it for the summit views, however. A challenging and unforgettable encounter to awaken all the senses.

By the time we returned to San Luis we were eager to sample some well-earned treats at the spa. I was greeted by a firm and mildly disapproving massage therapist who whipped my body – too often hunched over a laptop – into shape. The first treatment was a soft full-body massage, warming and soothing my freezing cold legs. The therapist warned that the following day's massage would not be so pleasant, however. This physio-med massage can only be described as excruciating and, if I'm honest, I'd sooner climb another mountain. Having said that, the ordeal was justified as every ache and pain was pummelled out of me and I left feeling realigned and restored, if a little shaken.



Thankfully, the food at San Luis is less punishing. They've combined health and indulgence using only local ingredients, and many vegetables, berries and spices are sourced from the four hectares surrounding the retreat. The harvest is in the safe hands of Harald Gasser, who is dedicated to sustaining the biodiversity of the reserve.

Breakfast at San Luis is a private ritual, hand-delivered to your chalet or treehouse, allowing guests to start the day unhurried and at their own rhythm. Take your pick of homemade breads and cakes, spreads, fruit, salami, eggs, fish and freshly pressed juices. Once you're feeling peckish again, traditional pasta dishes, fresh meat and fish, plentiful salads and vegetables are available at the central restaurant, as well as an extensive local wine menu. The food is simple and delicious, and the kitchen specialises in grilled meat and fish, among other South Tyrolean specialities. If you'd prefer a cosy fireside evening in, a range of traditional dishes are available to be enjoyed in the comfort of your own chalet.

REVIEWED BY ELLIE SMITH

From €305pp per night (half board), minimum three-night stay. sanluis-hotel.com



Argentario Golf and Spa

Situated in the heart of Maremma Tuscany (from the Latin *maritima* or 'maritime land'), this area was once marshland until drained by Ferdinando I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany in the 1500s. Today, much of the Maremma is officially protected and populated by wild boar, deer and pine martins. Unlike the historic thermal spas elsewhere in Tuscany, the more recently built five-star Argentario Golf Resort and Spa on Monte Argentario stretches over a huge green space beside a protected national forest and includes its own 18-hole PGA National Golf Course, golf academy, wellness centre, two restaurants and verdant nature trails. Luxuriously contemporary in style, its softly sweeping architecture blends into the landscape dotted with hills, lagoons and olive trees. The airy reception area features a huge white spiral staircase that connects the restaurant with the outdoor terraces and bar – all with spectacular views across the golf course, neighbouring polo club and the lagoon beyond.

As its name suggests, golf is a main feature here, with a beautifully set out course, stylish clubhouse and driving range complete with junior-sized clubs for younger



players. Because of this, the gym, spa and wellness offering is more alpha-male orientated than most. There's a full-size billiards table in the reception area and Pirelli e-bikes for exploring outdoors. But don't let the macho-style gym filled with heavy-duty weight lifting equipment and the odd burly bodybuilder put you off. The simple, straightforward beauty treatments are first-rate and the single-sex sauna and steam bath areas well-designed for relaxation. The morning stretch sessions are a highlight to start the day, followed by aqua aerobics in the outdoor oval pool, fringed with strategically planted shrubs and wild herbs for privacy. The Kneipp circuit is good too (an aqua walkway that alternates hot and cold water to boost



the lymphatics and give a genuine endorphin rush) and you can dip into this at any point during the day.

Health-gain rather than weight-loss is the order of the day here and it must be said that the food is sensational. Choose between the laid-back ambience of the Club House beside the golf course or the gourmet-style fine dining of the award-winning Dama Dama restaurant (where each course is preceded by a delicious

little amuse-bouche). Breakfast wins hand-down, with buffet tables bursting with local organic yoghurts, a nuts-and-seeds bar and a fridge packed with every kind of milk imaginable.

Outside the environs of Argentario there's much to see. Although a car is useful for exploring this magical promontory, with its rugged western coastline, craggy cliffs and sandy beaches, it's not essential, as the resort's concierge team can organise transfers in a shuttle bus to local beauty spots. It's easy to venture out into the pretty fishing town of Porto Ercole with its busy marina and array of waterside cafés. El Pirata Pizzeria is a good spot for a carb-loaded quay-side lunch. The hotel also has regular 15-minute shuttles to a nearby beach club, where you can reserve a shaded *cabine* on the sand, complete with sun loungers, to enjoy a spot of seafood with a cocktail or two.

Many guests book a week's Wellbeing Retreat Detox – a package that includes a special wellness menu. It's not cheap, but off-season packages are less expensive and the website often features special offers. It's also an ideal choice if you're looking for somewhere special to go with a golfing partner, or simply seeking a beautiful spa with more to offer menfolk than most.

REVIEWED BY LIZ EARLE

From €280 per night (B&B). argentariogolfresortspa.it

'Health-gain rather than weight-loss is the order of the day here and it must be said that the food is sensational'

Masseria San Domenico

The healing properties of the Mediterranean lifestyle have long been known by those who have lived it. Before the research, the documentaries and the books, there were the people – living off the land, by the sea, enjoying Mother Nature at her best. Nowhere is this holistic 'oneness' with health, happiness and nature more apparent than in Puglia – the southern, sun-drenched heel of Italy. Its coasts are rugged, dotted with historic hilltop towns (like the postcard-perfect Polignano a Mare). Its inner landscapes are rolling and green, populated with flora, fauna and fruits (prickly pears, pomegranates, figs), and centuries-old olive groves. All this is interspersed with ancient farm dwellings, known as *masserias* – many of which are now home to boutique accommodation, rustic B&Bs and, in the case of Masseria San Domenico, five-star luxury spa hotels.

Set in a 60-acre estate of olive trees and orchards, this 15th-century fortified abode welcomes guests with both warmth and grandeur. Its handsome, white-washed walls are tall and imposing, as it was once the watch-tower of the medieval Knights of Malta. Today, after a careful restoration project, its more concerned with inviting guests in than keeping invaders out. And how inviting it is. Outside, the air is perfumed with bougainvillea and jasmine. Inside, the decor is elegant and classic, and each of the hotel's 40 bedrooms is a stylish sanctuary.

With the Adriatic just 500 metres to the south, the spirit of the sea is ever present. It's in the gentle breeze, in views from the San Domenico suites, in the saltwater lagoon pool, and most of all in the thalassotherapy





spa. Dedication to the healing properties of our planet's mineral-rich seawater and seaweed is at the heart of the spa's philosophy and treatments. Like the building it is housed in, thalassotherapy itself has a rich history. Derived from the Greek word *thalassa*, meaning 'sea', it gained popularity in the 19th century when 'going to the sea' was prescribed to cure the various ailments of the upper classes. Today, 'sea-healing' is not seen as a medical remedy, but a therapeutic one – which is how Masseria San Domenico puts to use its own seawater supply, drawn from an underground stratum.

Treatments are geared towards specific needs, with a range of programmes on offer – from the intense Sculpt and Shape to a gentler thalassotherapy. The former is for those interested in promoting natural weight-loss, and includes use of Kneipp paths and a Thermogenesis hydrobike (which I'm told is one of only two in Italy!). This, I found out, involves immersing yourself in a special pool (at 18°C), with the temperature gradually lowered to 16°C for 20 minutes. Once in there, you spend the time cycling on the spot. For someone who seeks warmth and comfort, it's anything but those things, although you do emerge feeling invigorated. Other treatments on the programme are thalgeoceane and algotherapy – a Jacuzzi-style bath with water jets and essential oils (to promote circulation), followed by a nourishing seaweed wrap designed to target excess

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water weight and reduce inflammation in the joints. This, I'm told, is a popular 'short-term' treatment with those prepping for a big event, like a wedding.

I was more interested in thalassotherapy, with its focus on relaxation. This was particularly pertinent for me when, on the second day, I was struck down by excruciating period pains. I was immediately 'prescribed' the Thalatherm – a Dead Sea mud wrap which uses a special machine that reaches a temperature of 38°C. Once I got over the feeling of being baked, I relaxed into the sensation, which did wonders for my cramping. This was followed by the most cossetting of massages, using the hotel's own olive oil. Aptly named the Olive Oil Envelopment, it also included chromotherapy, which involves using light therapy on various parts of the body to relax the muscles.

All of this pampering was accompanied, true to Masseria San Domenico's ethos, by delicious, wholesome food, enjoyed in the hotel's cavernous yet cosy 18th-century dining room. Arched vaults and roaring fires were the backdrop to simple yet elegant Puglian fare. Think bruschetta and fried ricotta cheese, followed by scallop and sage risotto and grilled sea bass in an almond crust. The sort of feel-good food that nourishes. This is exactly what a spa stay at Masseria San Domenico does in general: leaves you feeling nourished, from the inside-out.

REVIEWED BY EMMA WINTERSCHLADEN

From €363 per night, masseriasandomenico.com

Bagni di Pisa

For centuries, the thermal springs of San Giuliano Terme in Tuscany have been famed for their healing properties. The Etruscans, followed by the Romans, harnessed their healing powers long before the Grand Duke of Tuscany built a summer palace on the site of these bubbling hot springs, rich in calcium and magnesium. Today, his beautiful palazzo is still filled with antique furniture and paintings, and huge vases of fresh flowers adorn its palatial, frescoed rooms. Stepping through its ornate doors is a treat. Now a thermal spa, much of the original architecture and furnishings of its 61 rooms and 20 spectacular suites remains the same: pastel frescoed ceilings, parquet floors and Carrara marble bathrooms are the norm, with the great Leaning Tower of Pisa glimpsed in the distance from some bedroom windows.

A favourite retreat for writers and poets over the years, Lord Byron and Mary Shelley were both regular visitors. Mary Shelley was inspired to write her literary



masterpiece *Frankenstein* while staying here and talking to a fellow doctor guest about electro-therapy! Aficionados can book in for the 'Mary Shelley experience' complete with a theatre-like private tour around the villa, followed by a themed candlelit dinner and music. Monsters notwithstanding, the grand first-floor Shelley Bar is a convivial spot for a reviving cocktail or two, while settling back into its plush red velvet sofas.

The motto at Bagni di Pisa is *Ab Imo Salus*, or 'health from the depths', and today's five-star hotel team approach their therapeutic treatments studiously, albeit with an air of laid-back luxury. A stay typically includes a range of water-based treatments with gourmet dining (even if on a restricted diet), in a magnificent setting. With the air of a traditional European sanatorium, it's certainly not spartan. And without exception, the staff I encountered were genuinely welcoming and warm – engagingly concerned for their guests' welfare and wellbeing.

Treatments are built upon the spa's four pillars of wellness wisdom: thermal spa therapies, exercise,





nutrition and anti-stress relaxation. Each thermal treatment stems from the hot springs that bubble up from deep underground at a temperature of 38°C. Naturally rich in sulphate, calcium and magnesium, these waters are continually fed into the hot tubs, and indoor and outdoor pools to help ease musculoskeletal aches as well as skin, gut and respiratory disorders. There are also marble-filled relaxation rooms, Turkish baths and an unusually sun-filled glass-fronted sauna. In addition, there are 15 treatment rooms and a steam room for traditional inhalations, soaks and mud treatments.

And then there is the cave. The Grand Duke's cave is carved deep into the rock to create a cavernous, personal hammam. Thermal waters flow from a small waterfall, creating a warm, humid environment ideally suited to instilling a deep sense of tranquillity and relaxation. Just 20 minutes alone in the quiet of this unique environment is extraordinarily restorative: blood pressure lowers, inflammation subsides and the respiratory system decongests. It is ideally followed by a lie down on the salt bed in a darkened room for a bit of blissed-out relaxation.

The spa has five fango therapy rooms, each with a pipe providing fermented mud, heated to 45°C to give deep relaxation and relief from muscular aches and strains. Hot wraps use enriched thermal mud, matured for six months with a special blend of natural clay mixed with the hot springs' water (considered so effective it's available on Italy's equivalent of the NHS). There's also the Mercurio bath, where you float in 18% saline solution (slightly less than the Dead Sea), allowing the body to effortlessly float without gravity pulling it down.

The medical team is led by Dr Nicola Fortunati, who uses saliva tests to pick up mineral imbalances. From this, the spa's Longevity nutritional programme is personally prescribed, focusing on Mediterranean diet favourites of fresh, seasonal vegetables, pulses, pastas and extra virgin olive oil. Chef Umberto Toscana devises deliciously light, tasty dishes. Wholefoods, yoghurt-based dressings, seeds, spices and fresh herbs combine with extra virgin olive oil,

local burrata and ricotta cheeses. Eating regimes designed for weight loss, to reduce inflammation or restore vitality are order of the day.

Exercise is gentle; there's a basic gym, excellent aqua aerobics, early morning hikes and hilltop exercises each day with Elena, the softly-spoken exercise instructor who's been coaxing guests into fitness here for the last 27 years. The ideal is to stay a week to settle into Bagni di Pisa's calming rhythms. If you prefer to keep busy, there's lots to explore nearby, including the cultural highlights of Pisa and Lucca, as well as the surrounding medieval hilltop villages amid picture-postcard Tuscan countryside. There's also a rich cultural programme of music and food festivals throughout the year – it's worth checking out what's on online when planning a trip. Even after my short stay, leaving here feels like saying goodbye to an old friend.

REVIEWED BY LIZ EARLE

From €211 per night (B&B), bagnidipisa.com

Grotta Giusti

Billed as a marvel of nature, this 19th-century Tuscan villa was once the holiday home of the poet Giuseppe Giusti. Situated in Monsummano Terme, within the cultural triangle of Florence, Pisa and Lucca, this historic spa resort has been meticulously refurbished with inlaid wooden floors, marble bathrooms and elegant soft furnishings. Accommodation is in the beautiful mansion-style hotel or its modern wing, with comfortable rooms and well-appointed bathrooms overlooking expansive parkland. But the real treasure here hides far beneath the buildings





– the most extraordinary cavernous grotto, filled with spectacular, steaming stalactite chambers, thermal spring and a deep, warm underground lake.

A masterpiece of stone and water, Grotta Giusti is the largest thermal cave in Europe, stretching over 200 metres to form a wonder of the natural world. Divided into three distinct sections called Heaven, Purgatory and Hell (Italy is still very much a Catholic country!), the cave offers visitors different experiences based on temperatures, which range between 28–34°C, each area marked by varying amounts of natural steam. The cave's interiors are filled with stalactite and stalagmite formations, scores of labyrinthine tunnels and a spacious subterranean cavern where you can just sit surrounded by steam and marvel at the magnificent ancient geology all around. The bottom of the cave is known as The Limbo, where the temperature remains a constant 36°C, regardless of the weather outside, and has a pool of sparkling water to soak in. Throughout the year, the spa holds various wellness events in the caverns, from hot yoga workshops to Tibetan singing bowl sessions and guided meditation.

The wellness spa built over the caves is the place to head for massages and beauty treatments, and the main outdoor swimming pool features 40 hydro-massaging stations for a relaxing aquatic pummelling.

With mineral-enriched water flowing in directly from the hot springs, this thermally-filled pool remains at a constant 34°C. For those inclined, all-weather tennis courts and golf are nearby at the 18-hole La Vecchia Pievaccia golf course. The resident fitness trainer also takes guided walks each morning along the nature trails surrounding the resort, featuring mineral cliffs complete with 15 'stretching stations' for guided exercises along the way.

As with so many of the leading Italian spas, the fabulously tempting gourmet food of La Veranda restaurant can make a weight-loss regime a tad tricky. If staying for more than a few days, you might like to sign up to chef Guido Liotti's innovative low-calorie, lighter cuisine. For those unconcerned by detox, top the day off with

a cocktail lesson from Francesco Iglio, award-winning bartender and impressive winner of the Italian Barman's Association championships. His signature cocktail is called RedGiovà (consisting of gin, Martini Fiero, bitters, Kamikaze liqueur and Averna don Salvatore) if you fancy giving it a try. As we always say here at *Liz Earle Wellbeing*, it's important to live life in balance – and Grotta Giusti offers a *grande* dose of that.

REVIEWED BY LIZ EARLE

From €229 per night (B&B), grottagiustispa.com

'Grotta Giusti is the largest thermal cave in Europe, stretching over 200m to form one of the wonders of the natural world'