

GOLF, ITALIAN STYLE

THE RYDER CUP IS COMING TO ITALY, A COUNTRY WITH A SURPRISING NUMBER OF UNFORGETTABLE GOLF COURSES. HERE ARE THE BEST

BY LARRY OLMSTED

As the old saying goes, “All roads lead to Rome,” and for golf fans, all roads will lead to Rome’s Marco Simone Golf Club in September, where the Ryder Cup—postponed a year by the pandemic—will be contested in Italy for the first time in history. But after the big spectacle, many golfers might find themselves on roads of their own throughout Italy, as the spotlight by the international competition reveals what a surprisingly great destination it is for a golf vacation.

It’s no secret that Italy is beloved by travelers, consistently ranked the top dream destination for Americans in poll after poll. When travel resumed after lockdowns, Venice became arguably the most desirable vacation spot on Earth, and last summer much of Italy—especially perennial hotspots Tuscany, Rome, Sicily and the Amalfi Coast—saw record tourism. What remains a well-kept

There’s more to the Tuscan countryside than great wine. It’s also home to Argentario Golf Resort & Spa, where olive groves serve as hazards.





Marco Simone's castle makes a stunning backdrop for the course, Italy's finest, which will host the Ryder Cup this fall.

secret is Italy's golf scene. The key is that nearly all of the country's best courses are at world-class resorts, which are spread all around the nation on properties that will impress even non-golfing partners.

Italy is flush with tourist appeal, from rich history to a jaw-dropping coastline and stunning food. All of this pairs perfectly with golf. As a round takes about four hours it can easily be enjoyed before a long lunch, leaving most of the day free to enjoy all the wondrous things people envision when they dream of Italy, from visiting the Vatican to vineyard wine tastings to cooking classes, touring medieval villages or art museums, shopping for the latest international fashions, driving Ferraris and enjoying the incredible cuisine. Italy is the ultimate destination for a "golf plus" trip.

"You can play here in the morning and spend the afternoon in Florence," says Ottavio Coppola, director of golf at Argentario, a luxury resort in Tuscany's coastal Maremma, the home of famed Super Tuscan wines. "Italy is not a place you go to play 36 holes a day, every day. You come to Italy for the lifestyle, the food, and then you play golf. That's the big difference. Here, golf is just one component of the vacation." The eleventh hole at Argentario's PGA National Golf Course features a unique hazard, a dense stand of olive trees just short of the green. Visually dramatic, they play the same strategic role of a large bunker, except most American golfers have never seen an olive tree on a course. The resort has 4,500 of them, from which they make their own superlative extra virgin olive oil, served in all the restaurants. They also have orchards of fruit trees, hives producing honey, an extensive organic farm, and the seafood they serve comes from local fishermen—there are ocean views from half a dozen holes. That is golf in Italy.

"After Paris [the last European Ryder Cup venue] we needed another iconic city, and that's Rome," says Riccardo Tirotti, Marco Simone's director of golf. "But Marco Simone was not the candidate for hosting the Ryder Cup, Italy was, and it's the entire country that is the host. Sixty five percent of the world's cultural heritage

is in Italy, it's just incredible. It's a great place for a vacation but a lot of people don't know you can play great golf courses."

Marco Simone is only 11 miles from the historic city center of Rome, with the Colosseum, the Pantheon and so much more, but even in suburbia you can see neighboring olive groves and ancient farmhouses. The course was completely rebuilt specifically for the tournament and designed with risk/reward drama and holes meant to encourage dramatic swings in matches, such as the pond tight to the front of the green on the fifth hole. But what was not changed was the medieval castle sitting behind the green, with an imposing 11th century tower jutting upwards beyond the flagstick. The tower is 1,000 years old, and 450 years ago, Galileo stood on top of it and made astronomical measurements. You are not going to get that in Myrtle Beach.

"The Ryder Cup is very different, a unique atmosphere, most like the Masters," says Tirotti. "The fan energy is really good and it's something every golfer should experience once in his lifetime." This will not only be the first time the Cup has been contested in Italy, it will be only the third time in the 95-year-history of the tournament that it will be held in continental Europe. As millions of fans around the world tune in to watch the drama on television, they might just discover that Italy would make a fantastic golf vacation. Here is our guide on where to play golf in Italy and what to expect.

Marco Simone Golf Club, Rome

Marco Simone has members, but has always been open to public play. It has modern, extensive facilities including large locker rooms with steam, sauna and pool, and a pleasant bar and café with indoor and outdoor seating. The course was closed, redesigned and rebuilt for the Ryder Cup, and is better than ever, both in routing and conditions. "It's a brand-new course, completely different," says Tirotti. The club had to give up its nine-hole short course to make space for broadcast facilities and merchandise

tents, and the course now has a large open area in the middle for pavilions and spectators to see the action on nearly half the holes simultaneously via mounding along fairways.

But the real fun is how the design was done with match play in mind: there are two drivable par-4s with ponds in front of the greens, one of which Rory McIlroy found while trying to mount a charge during the last Italian Open here. These are sure to come into the mix when players have to gamble, and several other greens are fronted with ponds. Historically, most Ryder Cup matches have been decided on the 16th or 17th holes, so the finish was made expressly for that. Sixteen is one of those short but watery par-4s, and seventeen is a tricky par-3 playing over 200 yards to a small, undulating green that drops off sharply. If players survive this and get to the final hole, it is a par-5 with yet another pond short of the green, challenging those going in two. "If you are up three with three to play, it's not over yet," says Tirotti. "It is now the stadium of golf in Italy."

The course reopened in April 2021. You can experience all this drama yourself, and with the exception of sinking some balls in the ponds, it is fun and playable, with no woods to battle off the tee, the kind of course where you can play poorly yet still have a blast. It is one of the most accessible and affordable Ryder Cup venues you can play, around \$220 based on the season. You can book tee times online six months in advance. Marco Simone is one of the best maintained courses in the country and will remain a fixture for golf travelers going forward.

This course has no lodging, but most visitors stay in Rome and use taxis or car service. A top choice for both a great tourist location and easy access to the new luxury Anantara Palazzo Naiadi on Piazza Repubblica.

Rosewood Castiglion del Bosco, Tuscany

This over-the-top fantasy luxury resort is heavily praised. Located in the heart of Brunello country just outside charming Montalcino, Castiglion del Bosco is a 5,000-acre estate that includes an entire 800-year-old village, anchored by ruins of the namesake castle. It was a crumbling ghost town when discovered by Massimo Ferragamo, son of famed fashion designer Salvatore Ferragamo, and chairman of Ferragamo USA. His wife Chiara, a noted designer and model, spearheaded a painstaking renovation, and dilapidated stone farmhouses have been turned into sumptuous villas with private pools and tennis courts, while "regular" suites—there are no mere rooms—occupy buildings that once played key roles in the forgotten hamlet's daily life: stables, wine storage, even the priest's residence. The result is a stunning resort with just 42 suites and 11 villas, every one unique and furnished in high style, full of top-shelf everything, from toiletries to stemware. The huge resort is self-contained, with the village, three restaurants, spa and very extensive

facilities, from bocce courts to a kids club to a full cooking school. There is also an acclaimed vineyard producing Brunello di Montalcino, olive groves a huge chef's garden that provides the fine dining eatery's kitchen, and the golf club, which until summer 2022, was the only totally private one in Italy. It is also the only Tom Weiskopf design in Europe, and he was chosen specifically because he doesn't move a lot of earth, and Ferragamo wanted the course to fit the landscape. Weiskopf had to find special ochre sand that matched surrounding vegetation, so the bunkers disappear when viewed from afar.



When the United States won the last Ryder Cup against Europe, Xander Schauffele (right) lit up a victory cigar with teammate Jordan Spieth. Will team U.S.A. celebrate with smoke in Italy this year?

The membership is less than 200, mostly far-flung Americans, and the course is usually empty, but for years, resort guests could not play. But the Ferragamos sold the resort, Rosewood took on management, and by opening to guests Castiglion del Bosco suddenly became Italy's newest golf resort—and its grandest. The impeccably maintained course averages just 15 rounds a day, a truly luxurious golf experience. It is also beautiful, with rolling elevation changes and vineyard views, and as long as you don't go to the back tees, eminently playable. If you do, you will be severely tested, including the longest par-5 in Europe at 701 yards. To preserve member cache, Rosewood guests are limited to early times. The largest impediment is that after a single resort visit (up to five rounds), you need permission to return and play. This is, by far, the top choice in Tuscany, and a must on any luxury golf vacation to Italy. It's also the nation's priciest at \$300, with prices expected to rise around our time of publication.

Villa d'Este, Como

Italy's most famous resort, Villa d'Este is a home away from home for royalty and celebrities and has been for 150 years, located on a 25-acre private park full of manicured gardens with fountains,

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sculptures and Napoleonic fortifications, all in tony Bellagio on the shore of Lake Como. The 16th century Villa itself is full of museum quality art and considered one of the nation’s important buildings of its era, designed by the era’s most famous architect, Pellegrino Pellegrini. Known for its great restaurants and one-of-a-kind “floating swimming pool” on the lake, it is the kind of place loyal patrons return to every year. It has been the home of the Princess of Wales, an Italian prince and a Russian czarina among others, and a luxury hotel since 1873. It became a golf resort in 1926, when the Circolo Golf Villa d’Este was built on the hillside above the shore of smaller Lake Montorfano.



Italian golf trips truly shine after the golf is complete, and at Villa d'Este you can relax in the lap of luxury by the pool after you play.

Villa d’Este has been the nation’s top-ranked course for decades, and has hosted the Italian Open a dozen times, more than any other club. Carved through a mix of pine, chestnut and birch trees on rolling terrain overlooking the lake, it has small greens protected by elaborate bunkering. Short by modern standards at 6,300-yards, it plays long with its accuracy-demanding approach shots and an unusual par-69 routing with six par-3s, all of them fun to play. It’s easy to see the appeal even when you don’t consider that Lake Como is one of the most desirable vacation spots in a nation full of desirable vacation spots.

Argentario Golf & Wellness Resort, Tuscany

Tuscany’s less-visited Maremma region is best known to oenophiles as the birthplace of the Super Tuscan. Many celebrities choose to visit this luxe resort with its helipad, polo fields, tennis center, jogging paths, vineyards, olive groves, gardens, huge spa and the PGA National Golf Course Italy. With the Mediterranean visible from several holes, it’s the only notable coastal course in northern Italy, and even though it sits on a peninsula, it is sheltered by hills and islands and has a fantastic microclimate. Summer is peak season at the resort, but Italians come for the beach and don’t play golf, so it’s empty, and you can play here year-round. It’s part of the European PGA family, with sister resorts Gleneagles and the Belfry, and has a state-of-the-art Callaway Teaching Academy with Trackman flight monitors and full club fitting center. They have a partnership with Marco Simone (a 90-minute drive away) and many guests play both while staying here. They also send guests to half a dozen other top Tuscan courses within 30 miles, including Saturnia (see following page).

The course has several standout holes, including the olive-hazard on 11, the olive tree studded par-3 17th and all the ocean holes. There’s a fair amount of water, and the whole place has an escapist air to it. But one surprise here that sets it apart is the cuisine, exemplary even by high-Italian luxury resort standards. The local clams and squid are tiny in size but huge in flavor, regional sourcing is impeccable and every bite is a head-shaking-in-astonishment reminder of why you would go to Italy for a golf vacation. Even the simple clubhouse restaurant has world-class fare. Before the pandemic, Argentario had a lot of American guests, who are slowly trickling back, and they are well versed in catering to foreign visitors, have great staff, great service and 73 luxury rooms, plus rental villas. It’s an under-the-radar gem.



Argentario Golf Resort & Spa has a host of amenities and exemplary cuisine. The indoor pool is modern and luxurious, meant for pampering.

Verdura, Sicily

Sicily is a world unto itself, a balmy Mediterranean island that is home to Mount Etna, one of the world’s most famous volcanoes, ancient Greek temples and Roman ruins, unique regional cuisine and Verdura, Italy’s largest golf resort. It’s the work of lodging legend Sir Rocco Forte, whose eponymous hotel group includes Scotland’s Balmoral, London’s Brown’s and Florence’s Savoy, among others. But he is not the only big name associated with the resort, and while Italy has surprisingly few internationally-known golf architects beyond Weiskopf, a stray Arnold Palmer course and a Robert Trent Jones II design, all 45-holes here are the work of Kyle Phillips, the genius behind Scotland’s Kingsbarns, widely considered the greatest modern course in the British Isles.

Verdura sits on Sicily’s south shore, which has the island’s best beach and climate. The two coastal eighteens are intertwined and of comparably excellent quality. Each features a mix of inland holes showcasing Sicily’s lush trees, flowers, fruits (the resort has 4,500 orange trees and olive groves everywhere you look) and a series of holes right along the Mediterranean. Both courses close with tremendous finishes reminiscent of Pebble Beach, except these holes are just a few feet above the lapping waves, not on high cliffs. On slow days, you can ask to play the seaside nines of both courses to make your own epic 18. The West (7,314 yards) has more oceanfront, but the East (7,321 yards) got a full remodel in early 2022 so it’s such a toss-up you really need to stay and play both. You can tune up each day with a quick round on the 9-hole par-3 course, which winds through orange groves, for a great 27 that still leaves ample time to enjoy the rest of the Verdura charms, including a fully equipped modern golf academy, the fresh gelato stand next to the pro shop, the mile-long private beach, and arguably Italy’s best spa, a huge 36,000 square foot indoor/outdoor affair with a complex series of therapeutic baths. There are four distinct restaurants, two bars, a vast organic chef’s garden, and in addition to hotel rooms and suites, the resort has three- and four-bedroom luxury villas. You will have to leave at least once, as the nearby Valley of the Temples is one of Italy’s greatest historic sites and home to more Greek temples than anyplace in Greece. For a full immersion one-stop golf vacation, this is Italy’s most well-rounded choice.



Italy’s Puglia region is home to Borgo Egnazia, a passion project built in 2009, complete with golf. It looks ancient, but it was built to resemble a traditional white Puglian village.

similarly renovated stone farm buildings complete the compound. The hotel, which opened in 1996, combines the best of old and new, with large, opulent rooms. The property is spectacular, and in 2009, family-owned parent company San Domenico Hotels added another nearby luxury resort, Borgo Egnazia. This passion project was built from scratch to simulate an entire traditional white Puglian village, so well done it looks like it has been here for centuries. There are 183 rooms, suites and villas scattered through its castle-like buildings. The twin resorts share the beach club and golf course, and it is the stunning hotels that are the main reason to come, as the golf is merely above average.

More Courses To Consider Tuscany has many of the country’s best courses. In addition to the Rosewood and Argentario, consider Terme di Saturnia, a popular hot springs wellness and golf resort in the Maremma with luxury lodging and spa. Its quality course rolls across the valley floor, ringed by hillside olive groves and overlooked by the medieval town of Saturnia. The parkland design is thoroughly modern. Tuscany’s other top courses are closer to the heart and soul of the area, the Chianti region surrounding Florence, where the best options are Golf dell’Ugolino and Le Pavoniere. The former was originally the Florence Golf Club, founded in 1889 and relocated to its present location in 1933. Its historic clubhouse, adorned with memorabilia, is the Mediterranean’s answer to Scotland’s Prestwick. Le Pavoniere is an Arnold Palmer Signature Course on a flat site evoking a Florida layout, but with Italian charm. It features a wide variety of water and sand hazards, including an island fairway, and is just 20 miles from Florence. Neighboring Umbria is home to Antognolla Golf, a surprisingly good Robert Trent Jones Jr. design routed through a narrow valley with several lakes, artful bunkering and the requisite ancient castle overlooking the fairways. A resort hotel is under construction, but for the near future, it’s pure golf. ❖

Masseria San Domenico & Borgo Egnazia, Puglia

Puglia is the arid rocky southeasternmost region in mainland Italy, and recent years have seen a spate of luxury resorts open in this increasingly hot tourist area. The pride and joy of Puglia’s luxury hospitality has long been Masseria San Domenico. The hotel occupies one of the nation’s oldest coastal structures, a watchtower built in the 14th century by the Knights of Malta, and

TOP: FANI KURTI

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