

# ITALIAN JOURNEYS

4400 Cold Springs Road, Winston-Salem, NC 27106

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## **NORTHWEST ITALY** (revised, October 2009) **May 10 to 21, 2010** **September 20 to October 1, 2010**

The region known as Piemonte lies in the northwest corner of Italy. Its name derives from “*ai piedi di monti*,” or “at the feet of the mountains,” though it could just as easily be called “at the edge of the lake” or “by the seashore” or “up in the alps.” For in this corner of Italy lies a wealth of beautiful landscapes, as well as the cultures, cuisines, and traditions that go with them. Piedmonte, moreover, is branded throughout by the Savoy monarchs, minor kings chosen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to reign over a newly united Italy. Their castles offer stunning proof that these royals mostly liked to hunt.

Our tour begins on the shores of Lago d’Orta, the sleepest of the Italian lakes and, in our minds, the most pleasing. From the Lake District, we make our way into the mountains of the Valle d’Aosta, a valley crowned by majestic peaks, awash with spectacular scenery, and dotted with richly decorated castles. Descending from the mountains, we encounter Torino, the home of the once powerful Savoy kings. Then on to Alba, a charming city amidst some of the finest vineyards in Italy and adjacent to a number of wonderful medieval sites including the castle of La Manta with its beautiful and beautifully preserved late-medieval frescoes.

We will spend three nights in Genoa--at a charming hotel--from where we can explore this famous port as well as the seaside village of Portofino and the remote, tenth century abbey of San Fruttuoso. We return to Milan via Vercelli, the rice capital of Italy, where we will discover how this uniquely Italian rice is grown and processed.

All told, it will be a journey to a lesser-known Italy, as well as a rich compilation of beautiful places, castles, palaces, gardens, excellent wines and elegant meals.

### **ITINERARY:**

**Day 1-** Afternoon tour of Orta San Giulio: the village and the beguiling Isola di San Giulio. Dinner at a local restaurant. (Hotel Leon d’Oro; dinner)



**Day 2-** Excursion to Lago Maggiore to visit the Borromean Islands: Isola Bella with its fairy-tale palace and terraced gardens; Isola Madre,

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noted for its botanic gardens; and Isola Pescatori, a pretty fishing village where we will stop for lunch. (Hotel Leon d'Oro; lunch)

**Day 3-** Travel up the Valle D'Aosta, with stops along the way, first at to see the castle of Issogne with a wonderfully preserved and absolutely charming 15<sup>th</sup> century fresco series with scenes of everyday village life. Aosta, the capital of this region, has Roman roots, evidenced by an Augustan-era triumphal arch and an impressive set of walls. The church of Sant'Orso is a wonderful medieval complex with frescoes and interesting sculpture. We will spend two nights at a luxurious hotel in La Salle, a village with views of Mont Blanc. (Mont Blanc Hotel Village, dinner)

**Day 4-** If the weather is fine, we will offer an optional, morning visit to Courmayeur from where you can take a cable car into the heart of the Alps. Weather notwithstanding, we have two exquisite castles on order an intact medieval castle, and the more modern Sarre Castle where Savoy aristocrats hunted for chamois and ibex. We will also leave time to enjoy our hotel's state of the art "center for wellbeing." (Mont Blanc Hotel Village, dinner)



**Day 5-** Leaving behind the mountains, we head for Torino, the capital, briefly, of Italy. We will tour the Palazzo Reale, from where the Savoy's ruled. Torino is, above all, a museum city, with the finest collection of Egyptian art in Europe, an excellent painting collection in the Galleria Sabaudia, and a museum of Ancient Art in the Savoy's Palazzo Madama. You will have time to visit sites of your choosing. (They are all in the same area.) Or you may prefer to explore the charming little streets of the nearby Roman/medieval quarter. If time allows, we will stop on the way out of town at the Castello di Rivoli, a Savoy castle that is today a stunning museum of contemporary art. (Palazzo Finati, dinner)

**Day 6-** More of the Savoy Kings: Racconigi, their favorite castle, was used for hunting wild boar. It is also, in my mind, one of the most interesting castles in Italy—and I don't say this lightly. Left entirely in tact when its tenants were exiled at the end of World War II, Racconigi is fascinating both as a window on the kings and as a compendium of aristocratic taste from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. We plan to hire carriages (!) to tour the gardens and the remotely located stables. The day promises to be full of surprises. (Palazzo Finati, lunch)

**Day 7-** A day of medieval sites: first, the town of Saluzzo is a gem. With its road ways of perfectly preserved palaces winding up to the castle, one feels here an aura of the past. Our visit will include the Casa Cavassa, a beautiful medieval palace that now serves at the city's museum. The nearby 12<sup>th</sup> century Cistercian

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Abbey of Staffardia provides a vivid window onto monastic life with its beautifully preserved cloister and church. We finish the day with a real treat: the Castle of



La Manta with--forgive my continued use of hyperbole—one of the most gorgeous frescoes I have ever seen. Trust me on this. (Palazzo Finati, dinner)

**Day 8-** Depart Alba for Genoa, where we will be staying for the next three nights in the heart of the historic center, just off the delightfully medieval Piazza San Lorenzo. Genoa, once one of the great ports of Europe, regained much of its stature when preparing for the 1992 anniversary of the discovery of America. Today, its medieval center is thriving, with elegant shops and excellent restaurants. The waterfront, likewise, has been transformed, with help from their resident architect, Renzo Piano.

In the afternoon we will have a walk through the historic center and visit the Maritime Museum for a graphic introduction to this city's colorful history. (Locanda di Palazzo Cicala, lunch)

**Days 9 and 10-** Our itinerary hinges on weather conditions, but we plan to spend one day exploring Genoa: the medieval center, with churches and palaces, as well as the 16<sup>th</sup> century Via Garibaldi, which is certainly one of the most elegant city streets in Europe.



Our other day in Genoa we will visit the fishing village of Camogli from where you will have the option of hiking or taking a boat to the medieval monastery of San Fruttuoso and then on to the swank resort town of Portofino. Return by boat to Genoa. For those interested, Genoa boasts the largest aquarium in Europe.

We will provide one meal during each of our days in Genoa.

**Day 11-** Depart Genoa for Vercelli, where we will visit the historic city center. An important stop on the pilgrim route from England to Rome—as was Aosta--Vercelli has an interesting cathedral along with a medieval hospital for patching up trail-weary pilgrims. Vercelli is also at the heart of Italy's rice paddies. We plan to visit a risaio to learn how this very special rice is grown and processed. And guess what's for lunch! We finish the day at our hotel near Milan's Malpensa airport. (Villa Malpensa; lunch)

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**Day 12-** The tour concludes with breakfast.

**Food-** It is no coincidence that the Slow Food movement is based in Piemonte. This is a land where great care is attached to the production and consumption of food and wine. It is only here, locals will tell you with justifiable pride, that one finds veal sausage. And eats it raw. Wines are legendary and between the cheese of the Valle D'Aosta, the rice of Vercelli, the seafood of Genoa, and the *ottimo* meats of the Piemonte, rest assured that meals will be memorable.



The trip provides breakfast each day along with one and sometimes two meals, depending on our itinerary.

**Lodging-** We have an interesting assortment of hotels, starting on the banks of Lago D'Orta with the modest but comfortable Hotel Leon D'Oro. Rooms have been recently renovated and most have views of the lake. We also like the fact that the hotel is in the heart of the village with good restaurants and interesting shops a stroll away.

Our hotel in the Valle D'Aosta is luxury: pure, simple, and utterly tasteful, with an excellent restaurant and the most lavish "wellness center" I have ever seen. A Disneyland of hot pools, steamy caves, and treatment rooms. In Alba, we have booked all the rooms of a small palace hotel: elegant, understated, and in the center of a town you will enjoy exploring.

Our hotel In Genoa is in a historic palace, so the rooms are very large. And fun, since architects chose to impose upon this historic site a whimsically contemporary aesthetic. Again, we have booked the entire hotel.

For our final night, we have opted for convenience, and are staying at a villa hotel near the Malpensa airport.

**Costs-** The cost of the tour, double occupancy is \$5750.

Single occupancy supplement: \$870.

This includes 11 nights in hotels, all breakfasts, meals as outlined above, admission fees, guide fees, tips, and transportation by bus, boat, and train. Not included are air and airport transportation, hotel extras, discretionary purchases, and the optional cable car ride from Courmayeur. Reservations require a deposit of \$500. The group will include no more than 18 participants.

For further details:

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