

**GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY
ROBINSON COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
STUDY ABROAD IN ITALY**

Italy's "Oldest" Holiday
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Italy is known as a history-packed place, and stepping into the past is part and parcel of any Italian holiday. But some things are ancient than others, so for those wanting to properly explore ancient times, here's a round-Italy trip that takes in the oldest of everything.

Oldest town

Because records before Roman times are so vague, historians are very wary of saying that any one town is definitively the oldest in the country. However, a few places have very good claims, the first of which is Cortona in Tuscany. Cortona was recently made popular by Frances Mayes in her book, *Under The Tuscan Sun*, but the town's heritage can be dated back to the Etruscans, somewhere between 800 and 650BC. Virgil called Cortona the mother of Troy and the grandmother of Rome, and remnants of the Etruscan heritage can be found in the city walls. The other major contender is the Sicilian mountainside town of Erice, which features two castles – one built over the ruins of the ancient Temple of Venus – and stunning views of the bay beneath. Erice's claim to being the oldest dates to its mention in the poems of Homer, who, if he really was one person, is thought to have lived in the 8th century BC.

Oldest hotel

Whilst a lot depends on your definition of what makes something the oldest – does it have to be continually run as a hotel? Does an old building converted to a hotel count? – the Luna Hotel Baglioni (+39 041 5289840, www.baglionihotels.com) in Venice probably goes back furthest. Located in Piazza San Marco, this five star establishment has records of the Knights Templar staying there in 1118 whilst visiting the Venetian Republic. Today, the rooms are furnished with suitably grand antiques, whilst the main conference facilities are covered in magnificent frescos. It certainly tries to capture the romantic vibe of Venice, despite being even older than the city's loved-up reputation – expect chandelier-lit restaurants and fabulously intricate headboards on the beds.

Oldest National Park

The high, alpine region of Gran Paradiso, tucked in the far north west of Italy, was originally collared off by the House of Savoy as a private hunting ground. Part of the park was given over to the people in 1919, making it the first National Park in the country. The legacy was more than just the land, though, as to make hunting easier, the Savoys created hundred of tracks, criss-crossing the peaks. This has turned it into a walking haven, whilst the more adventurous can tackle the Gran Paradiso mountain, which tops 4,000m. To properly explore, you will probably need a car, although bus services from nearby Aosta aren't too bad.

Oldest museum

Unsurprisingly, the prestige of being the oldest building containing old things is fought over quite vigorously by people who should perhaps know better. Anyway, just about every place housing a dusty old relic will claim to be the oldest by inserting some kind of sub-clause, but the most convincing argument comes from the Musei Capitolini (+39 667 102 071, www.museicapitolini.org) in Rome. They go back to 1471, although they would have been admittedly a pretty poor effort back then, containing only some bronze statues donated by Pope Sixtus IV. It was 1734 before the museums opened to the public, and they are now home to a wealth of artefacts from the Roman Empire, as well as many impressive sculptures from Rome's most influential periods.

Oldest café

Dating back to 1720, Café Florian (+39 041 5202 641, www.cafe Florian.com) in Venice has seen it all. Merchants, artists, philosophers and political plotters have all dropped in over the years for a coffee and a chat, with the famous roll call of patrons including Stravinsky, Proust, Rousseau and Byron. Set amongst the splendour of Piazza San Marco, the Florian got dressed up considerably during the 20th century, and is now one of the most ornate coffee houses you'll ever see. The main dining area is surrounded by lavishly decorated mirrors, while artworks can be found dotted throughout the building. As you'd expect, the prices are not cheap, but you're drinking history as well as cappuccino.

Oldest sporting arena

While the San Siro in Milan may be the most intimidating arena of the modern day, it can't hold a torch to the Colosseum in Rome, which could fit in 87,000 spectators baying for blood during gladiatorial combat. The Colosseum is the most famous amphitheatre, but it is not the oldest, however. That honour goes to the smaller effort

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in Pompeii, which is still relatively well maintained despite being covered in lava and rock during the famous eruption of Vesuvius in 79AD. It was constructed somewhere between 70 and 80BC (depending on which sources you choose to believe), and you can still walk through the 12,000-capacity arena whilst the volcano looms above in the distance.

Oldest vineyard

A good wine is an essential part of any Italian adventure, and a few hours tasting in the countryside can beat away any urban tourist trap blues. Again, this category is very much open to interpretation, but there is a history of wine-making going back to 590AD at Feudi di San Gregorio (+39 825 986626, www.feudi.it) near Avellino in Campania. Production has certainly not continued for all that time, but staff there will happily tell you that ancient secrets have been passed down through the generations. The Tufo (white) and Taurasi (red) are apparently the ones to try should you fancy a drop.

Oldest botanical garden

The cities of Padua and Pisa are happy to slug this category out, but whichever explanation you go for, that garden is not just the oldest in Italy, but in the world. Pisa's version, in the grounds of the university, dates back to 1544, but has moved location since its inception. Padua's was founded in 1545, and is now World Heritage listed by UNESCO as being the first of its type. Originally conceived as a method for helping students learn the difference between medicinal and non-medicinal plants, it is now a tranquil spot for workers to have their lunch, tourists to soak up the sun, and plant experts to pick out examples from around the world. Padua is a short drive or train journey from Venice, and the gardens are opposite the Basilica di St Antonio.

Oldest place of worship

Italy is rightly famed for its magnificent churches, cathedrals and basilicas. From the Duomo in Florence to the Basilica di San Giovanni in Laterano in Rome, the magnificent old structures often dominate all around them. However, the oldest place of worship pre-dates the Christian era. In Paestum, a short drive down the coast from Naples, there are three Doric temples, the oldest of which dates back to around 550BC. Visitors are no longer allowed inside, but they are relatively well preserved. It's that word 'around', however, that means we can't be definite about it. The Temple of Hercules in Agrigento, Sicily was also built around that time, and is thought by many to be older.

Oldest football club

Catholicism may be Italy's official religion, but football certainly runs it close. Juventus and AC Milan may be the big names, with bulging trophy cabinets and some of the world's best players, but they're not the oldest clubs. That honour goes to Genoa, who now play in the second tier, Serie B. The linguists will note that the club is given the English spelling of the city – not Genova, the Italian version – and that's because it was English ex-pats that set it up. In fact, the club's full name is Genoa Cricket and Football Club, although you're unlikely to hear the thwack of leather on willow in the 41,917-capacity Stadio Luigi Ferraris. Not so in 1893 when the club was formed – the football was almost an afterthought. Given the side's lack of recent success, tickets are almost always available on match days.