DISCOVERING ITALY
Holidays in the open air and natural surroundings...

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1. The National Parks  Top
If we consider an ecological holiday in the open air we naturally think about the extraordinary heritage of the national parks, a must for those who wish to discover Italy. Breathtaking itineraries spread throughout some twenty vast national parks and an infinite choice of protected areas provide trekking for the enthusiast with a total immersion in natural environments of exceptional beauty.

1.1 THE ALPINE PARKS  Top
The first Italian national park was born among the perpetual ice and the emerald green valley of the Alps. Founded in 1922, the National Park of Gran Paradiso is a former hunting reserve that was handed over to the State in 1919 by the reigning house. The park, situated in a territory of high mountains between Piemonte and Val d’Aosta, covers an area of around 70,000 hectares, including 800 meters of the valley and 4061 meters of the Gran Paradiso mountain peaks. Woodlands of larches and firs; meadows, rocks and glaciers are the home of a great variety of wildlife: the ibex, which miraculously escape extinction and is today the symbol of the park, marmots, stoats, chamois and a great many species of birds,
including the recently reintroduced "bearded vulture" and the golden eagle. The environment also has numerous traces of the presence of man, with 300 kilometers of mule tracks, hunting lodges, the mines of Cogne, villages and mountain pastures. For those wishing to learn more about the park there are centers for visitors located in the valleys, which provide general information including the sale of books, guides, etc., and organize permanent and temporary exhibitions. In the summer months these structures also show films and organize excursions and children's activities. The main tourist center can be found at Salvo Noasca (in the valley of the river Orco) in the region of Piemonte and is open all year round (for information contact the Park Tourism Office, Noasca Visitors' Center, tel. 0124 901070); the other centers are open in the summer, at Christmas and on several Sundays throughout the year. The National Park of Stelvio extends over an area of 134,620 hectares in the heart of the Central Alps and contains valleys molded by the ice and water descending from the Ortles-Cevedale Massif. This protected area is bounded to the north by the Swiss National Park of Engadina and to the south by the Regional Park of Adamello, in Lombardia, which in turn directly borders the Ademello-Brenta Natural Park in Trentino. The idea of protecting this magnificent Alpine landscape dates back to the early 1900s and the area became a park on April 24, 1935. In 1977 the park was extended to its present-day size. Here visitors can admire every kind of Alpine formation, from rocky peaks (Ortes, 3905 m) to glaciers, from mountain pastures to valley floors (Laces, 650 m). The hydro-geological conditions of the area give the landscape its typical characteristics of ice-formed lakes and foaming mountain torrents. The variety of the territory, determined by considerable differences in height, favors the existence of various ecosystems, with numerous rare species of wildlife. The upper slopes are the habitat of the chamois, and ibex can be seen in some of the high valleys, while foxes, marmots and stoats are easily spotted. Excursions can be made to the villages and mountain pastures, which are scattered throughout the valley floors and on the mountain slopes, or to discover the charming examples of rural and sacred architecture, in complete harmony with the natural surroundings. Information on itineraries and excursions in the protected area can be found in the visitors' centers. In the northwest of Piemonte, near the Swiss border and very close to Lake Maggiore, is a fairly recently founded park (1993) with totally different characteristics. This is the National Park of Val Grande, the largest natural area in Italy and a veritable open-air museum of Alpine civilization. The abandonment of such practices as mountain grazing and deforestation has marked the return of the wilderness. The richness and variety of the vegetation, with its impenetrable woodlands and brightly colored flowers, are one of the area's main attractions. The rarest and most interesting botanic species are, without a doubt, the Alpine aquilegia and the Alpine tulip. The fauna includes chamois, deer, roe deer, badgers, martens, stone martens, hedgehogs, dormice, squirrels and foxes. Bounded by the Ossola Valley, Lake Maggiore, and the valleys of Vigezzo, Intrasca and Cannobina, the park guarantees an unforgettable visit in a genuine sanctuary of nature. Traces of man's presence in the area range from engravings in the rocks of the Prà Alp at Cicogna and Sassoleso to military fortifications built on the edges of the area during the First World War. In the province of Belluno, in Veneto, is the National Park of the Bellunese Dolomites, which was founded in 1990 to protect an area in the southern part of the Dolomites, a territory that is less famous, but with a landscape of exceptionally beauty and unspoiled nature. Situated in the high mountains, the park is characterized by an extremely rich and wild natural environment; where the towns and villages are concentrated in a narrow belt around the edge. The Feltre and Serva mountains were already famous for their exceptional flora in the 18th Century. The rare species of plant life and the impressive variety of landscapes are mainly due to the park's unusual location on the southeast edge of the mountain range in extremely remote areas, part of which remained free from the ice during the coldest stretches of the Quaternary Period (the last ended in around 10,000-12,000 years ago). The fauna of the park includes chamois (around 2000 specimens), deer (currently spreading), roe deer and mouflons, as well as foxes, badgers, stoats, weasels, stone martens, squirrels and hedgehogs. In a high mountain park such as this, there is not, of course, a great historical and artistic heritage. The most important place to visit is the Charterhouse of Vedana, which contains a monastery; here there are shepherds' huts and cheese factories, abandoned for decades, and the small village of Geno in the valley of Mis.

1.2 THE PARKS OF THE APENNINES  Top

Along the ridge of the Apennines that runs from the north to the south of Italy a network of numerous national parks has developed over the last decades, three of which are located in Abruzzo, which represents the heart of the network. The oldest of these, founded in 1923, is the National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise, which has played a fundamental role in preserving some of the most important species of large fauna in Italy, including the Marsicano brown bear, the chamois of Abruzzo and the wolf, and is today a true model of the harmonious co-
existence of environmental protection and economic growth. Visits to the park are subject to control and selection, and there are numerous facilities for tourists. The **National Park of Majella** combines natural (the area boasts an extraordinarily varied plant life with over 1800 species registered) and spiritual values. The landscape of the Majella Massif, in fact, bears witness to the strong religious feeling of its past inhabitants, with numerous sacred buildings including abbeys, hermitages and sanctuaries dug in the rock. The park has many tourist facilities and organizes frequent initiatives to encourage tourism. The third park of Abruzzo (which again involves the neighbouring regions of Lazio and the Marche) is the **National Park of Gran Sasso and the Laga Mountains**, which, covering an area of 150,000 hectares, is one of the largest in Italy. It contains three mountain ranges - the Gran Sasso of Italy, the Massif of Laga and the Gemelli Mountains, and has the highest peak of the Apennines, the Cono Grande (2912 m), and the only glacier in the Apennine range, the Calabrone, which is the southernmost glacier of Europe. For lovers of local art and traditions the historical center of Isola del Gran Sasso offers a great number of fine historical buildings. The village of Castelli, famous for its artistic ceramics, is a veritable concentration of art, history and culture. From north to south ranges a series of recently founded national parks, of which the newest is the **National Park of the Toscana-Emilia Apennines**. With three quarters of its surface in Emilia Romagna and a quarter in Toscana, the park contains in one single protected area the Regional Park of Gigante, part of the Regional Park of the Upper Valley of Parma and Cedra (Emilia Romagna), and parts of the Lunigiana and Garfagnana regions, which boast some of the highest peaks of the northern Apennine ridge. The park is characterized by dense forests and woodlands, including vast beech woods alternated with forests of silver firs and conifers. Stretching out between Emilia Romagna and Toscana is the **National Park of the Casentinese Forests, Mount Falterona and Campigna**. In the territory of Romagna the landscape is characterized by deep, narrow valleys and mountainsides that are partly rocky and partly covered with dense woodland; the slopes on the Tuscan side, meanwhile, are less rugged, and scored with the mountain torrents that flow into the River Arno. This park boasts an extremely rich flora, while its fauna includes wolves, golden eagles and various hoofed species. In the forests and in the very varied natural environments there are numerous traces of the presence of man dating back to remote times, with a number of ancient villages and two sanctuaries of special interest, Camaldoli and La Verna, dedicated to St. Benedict of Norcia and St. Francis of Assisi. Another national park strongly characterized by its ancient European Christian imprint is the **National Park of the Syllantine Mountains**, in the heart of Italy between Umbria and the Marche. Right in the center of the park is Norcia, the birthplace of St. Benedict, the father of western monasticism. In ancient times, this was believed to be a center of demons, sorcerers, fairies and the prophetess Sybil, from whom the mountains take their name. The park, which contains some of the highest peaks of the Apennine range, boasts a number of rare wildflowers, such as the edelweiss of the Apennines, as well as some magnificent wildlife species, for example the golden eagle. An original feature of the area is the accommodation that is provided for visitors. In 1995, in fact, the so-called Park Houses were set up in fifteen different boroughs to cater for tourism. With its wealth of mythological and historical references (from the nymph Leucosia to the fated Palinuro, companion of Aeneas in the flight from Troy; from the remains of the Greek settlements of Elea and Paestum to the splendid Charterhouse of Padula), the **National Park of Cilento and Diano Valley** stretches out from the Tyrrhenian coast to the foot of the Campania-Basilicata Apennines. Thanks to the beauty of its natural environments and to its historical and artistic heritage, the park has won a place on the Unesco Heritage of Humanity list. Also in the territory of Campania is the **National Park of Vesuvio**, a natural area of great importance in Europe (Vesuvio is the only active Continental volcano), in which the archaeological and historical heritage of the area is protected. In the southern Apennines, between Basilicata and Calabria, is the **National Park of Pollino**. The symbol of this territory is the Bosnian pine, a tree characterized by a dect bark of shiny plates, which grows on the higher slopes. The park contains some very interesting sites for enthusiasts of paleontology and archaeology. The two southernmost parks along the Apennine range are situated in Calabria. The **National Park of Calabria**, which contains the Sila range, is virtually uninhabited and has consequently been modeled on the large America parks, which are crossed only by special routes equipped for tourists. Most of the territory of the park belongs to the State. Lastly, in the extreme south of the region, is the **National Park of Aspromonte**, an area characterized by wild, unspools nature, high, rocky peaks, dense forests overlooking the sea, exceptional wildlife (this is the most southern area where the wolf is still found) and remains of the ancient civilization of Magna Graecia.

### 1.3 THE COASTAL AND ISLAND PARKS

http://www.italiantourism.com/openairactivities.html
The network of parks and protected areas in Italy includes also the coastal areas, the seas and the islands. A modern approach to environmental protection, in which the aim is to find a balance between the activities of man and the safeguarding of the ecosystems, has in the course of time led to the preservation of a number of marine areas and their inclusion in protected parks. The southernmost of these is the National Park of the Cinque Terre in Liguria. The Cinque Terre ("five lands" or villages: Monterosso al Mare, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore) in the province of La Spezia are a real miniature paradise, with steep cliffs overlooking the sea, bays and little beaches, walls marking out terraces for the cultivation of vineyards, characteristic Medieval towns and scenic footpaths through rows of grapevines. The park, with its protected coastal and marine area, was founded to conserve and promote these varied and exceptionally beautiful natural environments that have been affected by farming, tourism and nature itself. The seaside towns are connected by a route known as the Sentiero Azzurro ("blue path"), which takes around five hours to cover by foot from one end to the other, but is well worth the effort for the beauty of this Mediterranean setting rich in herbs and plants and the breathtaking view of the mountains towering over the sea. The Via dei Santuari ("path of shrines"), meanwhile, is an ancient route that was once reserved for the pilgrimages and customs of the local farming community. Lastly, the Via dell'Amore ("path of love") offers an extremely romantic walk along a path cut into the rock overhanging the sea, which links the villages of Riomaggiore and Manarola. Visitors are enchanted by this route in all seasons for the spectacular views it offers of the charming landscape and the striking shapes and colours of the rocks. The National Park of the Tuscan Archipelago includes the seven islands off the coast of Toscana in the Tyrrhenian Sea: Elba, Capraia, Gorgona, Pianosa, Montecristo, Giglio and Giannutri. This was the first large marine park to be founded in Italy, and is the vastest protected area of the European seas. The islands of the Tuscan Archipelago are all very different, from a geological point of view. Capraia, for example, is a volcanic island, while Giglio and Elba are predominantly granitic. However, they all offer tourists enchanting landscapes and unforgettable holidays. The Mediterranean flora represents the main vegetation on the islands, which host colonies of sea birds, shearwaters and gulls, including the rare black-headed gull. Cetaceans can also be spotted. Overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea in the region of Lazio is the National Park of Circeo. This is a smaller protected area, but with very interesting characteristics. These include the oak forest today known as Selva di Circe (the "wood of Circe"), which is the only existing flatland oak wood in Italy; the calcareous promontory of Circeo; the wetlands, with their four coastal lakes; the island of Zannone, in the Pontino Archipelago, and the abundance of wildlife and lush vegetation. There are two parks crowning the northern coastline of Sardegna: the National Park of the Archipelago of La Maddalena and the National Park of Asinara. The archipelago of La Maddalena is known universally as a territory of rare beauty and exceptional naturalistic, historical and cultural wealth. The park, including both its land and sea areas, covers an area of over 20,000 hectares, with as many as 180 kilometers of coastline. It includes all the islands of the territory belonging to La Maddalena and is due to become an important part of the large international marine park of the Straits of Bonifacio, soon to be founded. The island of Asinara, inhabited since Neolithic times, is characterized by a remarkable historical, environmental and legal situation and has been able to conserve its ecosystems. In fact, due to a series of events that caused it to be dubbed with the unattractive name of Isola del Diavolo, or "Devil's Island"; it has been used as a quarantine station, a prison-of-war camp in the First World War and, until a few years ago, one of the main Italian detention centers during the period of terrorism (1970s) and in the struggle against organized crime. This isolation, which lasted for over a century, has given the island its special atmosphere of charm and mystery, and has favored the conservation of untouched and virgin areas,
which are today internationally considered a unique and priceless heritage. The last of the coastal national parks brings us to the Adriatic Sea. This is the National Park of Gargano. The promontory of Gargano is, from a biological point of view, an “island” separated from the rest of the Italian peninsula by the plain of the Tavolere delle Puglie. The park hosts an exceptional concentration of different natural habitats, ranging from the high, rocky ridges to the deep, hot valleys of the southern slope, from the ancient beech groves on the mountains (although situated at much lower heights than in other parts of Italy) to the clusters of Aleppo pines. The wildlife of the area includes the roe deer (one of the very few existing autochthonous groups found in Italy) and various species of woodpecker, whose presence emphasizes the naturalistic value of the forests, of which the Umbra Forest deserves special mention.

2. THE GREENEST TOURISM

“Agriturismo” - or farm holidays - represents a new frontier in “gentle”, ecological and sustainable tourism. In recent years an increasing amount of people opt for a farm holiday in close contact with nature, staying in country farmhouses, enjoying the authenticity of the local products as well as the friendliness and hospitality of their country hosts, and rediscovering the traditions of ancient farming cultures. Farm holidays also provide the opportunity of visiting the surrounding towns and appreciating more thoroughly their artistic and architectural heritage. A good example are the “wine trails”, a characteristic feature of many Italian regions (especially Piemonte, Lombardia, Toscana and Umbria), which lead through vineyards and farms, touching on places of remarkable historical interest along the way.

2.1 THE MEANING OF “AGRITURISMO”

In around the mid-1980s a few Italian farms decided to dedicate part of their farm complex to accommodating guests. Initially, these structures were chosen by nature-lovers as a place to spend a few quiet days, but as time went on this new type of country holiday began to gain increasing popularity, and today it is a widely appreciated practice. Generally, it is chosen as a way to re-establish a contact with nature and rediscover a taste for the fruits of the earth, and to experience the simplicity of staying in a family environment or, in any case, a setting that is less cold and neutral than that of a hotel. “Agritourism” is the expression of an original sensitivity, an activity that proposes a system of cultural, as well as business, values. It is a new approach to the rural and environmental space, capable of attracting also the younger generations. Moreover, as the farm holiday structures are situated in marginal areas or settings of high naturalistic value they also contribute to the safeguarding of the territory by promoting a type of tourism that is more responsible with regard to the environment. The farm holiday structure is, in actual fact, a fully working farm, where guests may stay overnight in friendly surroundings, far from the chaos of the large cities, and, if they wish, take part in or simply watch such activities as the harvesting of vegetables and fruit or the tending of the animals.

2.2 THE MANY FACES OF FARM HOLIDAYS

Today in Italy there are numerous organized and professional farm holiday structures offering a wide variety of activities. The more traditional types are usually farms that provide accommodation for tourists in a family environment. These are not necessarily equipped with recreation facilities but tend to concentrate on involving the guests in the daily activities of life in the countryside. A classier type of farm holiday, meanwhile, offers a more luxurious and elegant hospitality in
structures that frequently have great historical value. Many offer the opportunity of tasting their own wines and sampling specialties of Italian traditional cuisine. Increasing numbers of farms located in areas of great naturalistic value offer active holidays to tourists, with the practice of sports ranging from horse-riding to swimming in the swimming pool, as well as organizing excursions by foot and on horseback. Last but not least, the organic farms, in which the processes and the raw materials are all strictly natural, are where the triumph of nature is most fully celebrated. A number of Italian farm holiday structures are also equipped to offer hospitality to campers. In Europe there are around one million campers, with a “camper population” of over four million people. Potentially unlimited, accessible all year round and scattered throughout the whole country, the farm holiday option is an excellent opportunity for camping tourists, who find an efficient network of stopping places at their disposal.

2.3 REGION BY REGION

In the past few years the farm holiday structures have spread throughout all parts of Italy. These structures include the homesteads, or masi, of Alto Adige and Trentino, the frasche of Friuli, the farms of Piemonte and Lombardia, the tiny, picturesque villages of Medieval origin in the countryside of Umbria, the farmhouses of Toskana, Lazio and Campania, the fortified farms of Puglia and those nestled among the orange and lemon groves of Sicilia. Each region has its own characteristic version of the “agritourism” structure. In Val d’Aosta these are predominantly resting places along routes for treks on horseback or mountain bike; in Piemonte tourists have the opportunity to discover not only the great historical, artistic and environmental heritage of the region, but also its rich gourmet tradition. Local specialties include a wide variety of pasta and rice dishes, as well as farm-raised chicken, rabbit and veal, accompanied by exceptional wines, both white (Erbaluce di Calusco, Arneis del Roero etc.) and red (Barbera, Dolcetto, Nebbiolo etc.). Visitors may also spend their holidays exploring the nine "wine routes" (Langhe, Monferrato, Colli Tortonesi, Canavese, Pinerolese, Freisa di Chieri, Coste della Sesia, the Novara Hills and the Saluzzo Hills), among the vineyards and the great naturalistic and cultural attractions. A holiday "with the farmers", in total relaxation or perhaps lending a hand in the grape or olive harvest -this is what guests are offered in the farm holiday structures in

Liguria,

which are numerous and scattered throughout the region, especially in the valleys and the ancient villages of the entroterra, or hinterland. Accommodation may range from comfortable private rooms in the owner's house to flats or independent country cottages rented on a weekly basis. Visitors may also purchase the farms' own products -excellent wines, such as the fragrant Rossese di Dolceacqua of Ponente or the prized Cinqueterre Sciacchetrà of Levante; the famous olives of Taggia, home-made jams, honey, olive oil, pickled aubergines, tomatoes and vegetables, etc. The cuisine varies from place to place, with a few elements in common - olive oil, vegetables, the typical flat bread known as focaccia and the internationally renowned basil sauce pesto.

Lombardia

offers a wide variety of "agritourism" structures, ranging from very simple and basic farmhouses to refined country relais, from structures concentrating on educational tourism to organic-producing farms, where guests can enjoy tasty home-made "risotto", soups, stews, salami and cheeses, accompanied by excellent red, white and sparkling wines. For lovers of wine a good place to begin is in the hills of Oltrepò Pavese. In fact, from Stradella, Brani, Casteggio, Canneto, Rovescala there are numerous trails leading through the enchanting surrounding countryside with its rich wine production (red wines include Barbera, Bonarda and Cabernet Sauvignon, and white wines include Malvasia, Riesling, Moscato and Pinot Grigio). In the area of Oltrepò Itinerando ("Trailing") is an initiative established by the farm holiday structures in cooperation with various local organizations, which gives tourists the opportunity to explore places that are characterized by their great artistic and architectural heritage (castles, churches and architectural works), their rich natural resources (natural reserves and botanic gardens) and their high quality farm products and local gourmet specialities. In addition to hospitality in farm holiday structures, Itinerando organises guided tours with sampling of local products in the farms and wine-making establishments, cookery courses, etc. The "Wine and Farm Product Route of the Province of Sondrio" also passes through a charming landscape of vineyards lined up on terraces under the sun. The area of Valvignale, nestled between the foothills of the Orobi and Rhaetian mountain ranges, is one of the most important natural itineraries of
wines and local products in Lombardia. In

**Trentino-Alto Adige**

"agritourism" is by no means a new concept, but has its origins in the Medieval religious convents offering accommodation and in the refuges for pilgrims and wayfarers. Forty years ago the farm holiday structures of Trentino began to accommodate tourists in the traditional masi, typical local country homes. Today the region is a good example of well-organised "agritourism", and appreciated for its courtesy towards guests, the combination of tradition and modern facilities, a strong characterisation and an excellent quality-price ratio. Along the roads that wind through the green Euganei Hills, in

**Veneto,**
among woodlands and vineyards that line the hills, are numerous farm holiday structures where visitors can find hospitality and, if they wish, take advantage of the modern thermal centers in the area for indulging in their own wellbeing.

**Friuli-Venezia Giulia**
is another region that offers farm holidays for connoisseurs and gourmets; these structures are concentrated mainly around the lagoons and in the grape-growing hill areas, and offer quiet, refined holidays with high quality food and wine. The "agritourism" of

**Emilia Romagna**

has for the past few years represented a good alternative to the highly popular tourism of the Adriatic coast and places great emphasis on the variety of the local gastronomy. From the valley areas of Comacchio to the hills of Piacenza a number of farms offer hospitality and entice the palate with fresh pasta dishes of ancient tradition. Along the "Wine and Farm Product Route of the Imola Hills" are wine-making establishments where high-quality products can be enjoyed.

**Toscana**
is a region famous for its cities of art, its great historical heritage and celebrated characters, its landscapes, Medieval villages and farms nestled among olive groves, cypress trees and vineyards, in a unique and striking natural environment. Here "agritourism" has had the wisdom to propitiate the now consolidated integration of all these aspects, emphasized in part by the "wine route" that links cities and remote farms, long established wine shops and village wine cellars. In the areas of Maremma and Chianti in particular, there are many promotional events. One of these is the Cantine Aperte ("Open Cellars") event, lasting from May to June, during which the local producers invite the tourists to visit their cellars and sample their rare wines. The "agritourism" of Toscana is extremely varied, adapting every possible county structure to cater for guests, from plainly rustic cottages to modern houses, and for the elite villas and castles equipped with swimming pools and golf courses, and offering long rides on horseback through the hills of Chianti. In

**Umbria**
the farm holiday structure fits perfectly in the extraordinary setting of historical and artistic cities, proposing interesting itineraries on the theme of the region’s increasingly appreciated gastronomy. Every year, on the last Sunday of May, the Cantine Aperte ("Open Cellars") event is held, when a great number of farms prepare an "open day" for visitors, with excellent wines, local specialities, music and art. In the

**Marche**
"agritourism" is closely related to an economy originating from an ancient metayage tradition. Those travelling through the local countryside, therefore, may find hospitality in the old manor houses or holdings, where visitors are always welcomed with kindness and generosity. In

**Lazio**
the area that excels for its farm holiday structures is the province of Viterbo, where the farms offer high-quality and varied hospitality and tourist facilities in an environment rich in historical and archaeological remains, traditions and landscapes of great beauty. To promote both the local products and the artistic and monumental heritage of the area the "Wine Route of Upper Tuscia" was established, linking a series of farms producing wine, olive oil and other particularly prized products, as well as, naturally, a number of excellent farm holiday structures. In

**Campania**
the best "agritourism" farms are concentrated in the coastal area, in perfect continuity with the well-known tourist/seaside tradition of the region which, thanks to the magnificent views offered by the local landscapes, guarantees
unforgettable holidays. There are also many farm holiday structures throughout the region of **Abruzzo,**
which are capable of meeting a wide variety of demands. The activities offered include horse riding, guided walking
tours, excursions on rented bicycles, fishing and courses in handicrafts and cooking with farm local products. Some
structures are equipped with facilities such as tennis courts, swimming pools or archery fields, and accommodation is
often offered concurrently with the main cultural and folklore festivals. An important sector of activity is education, with
the organization of educational day trips to the farms for school groups. In **Molise,** as in **Puglia,** "agritourism" represents above all gourmet pleasures, with the farms alternating the typical fish dishes of the coast with
the meat-based dishes of the countryside. Here also there are many possibilities for trekking and horse riding excursions.
The "agritourism" structures offered by the regions of **Basilicata** and **Calabria,** although less widespread than in other parts of the country, are nevertheless also of high quality. In **Sicilia**
these structures, which in recent years have undergone a remarkable growth, have an ancient charm, as everything that
characterizes the island, from the natural environment to the archaeological heritage, from the cities to the tiniest coastal
or mountain villages. The local cuisine, with its pasta dishes, meat and fish specialties, vegetables, desserts and wines, is
true exceptional. Likewise in **Sardegna**
the farm holiday is the ideal choice for those who wish to stay away from the more commercialized tourist resorts and
seek
a close contact with nature and a glimpse into the mysterious life of the farmer, herdsman and fisherman.

3. **Under a starry sky**

The strong and exuberating sensation of the sea, the warm and reassuring embrace of the
surrounding greenery, the total silence of the mountains at night, cradled in an atmosphere filled
with peace - this is camping, a holiday under the stars, en plain air. Even when the structures are
modern and well equipped, as are hundreds of Italian campgrounds, one feels just as strongly the
adventurous spirit of "open air" tourism, constantly in search of a new landscape, a new horizon,
a new dream.

3.1 **CAMPING IN ITALY**

In the 1950s and '60s camping was practiced mainly by solitary nature-lovers with an adventurous, and sometimes
reckless spirit, who, as they moved from one place to another, created alternative, off-the-beaten-track tourist routes.
Subsequently, when families discovered that camping could be an interesting and fun idea for holidays, camping
equipment began to be sold at an increasingly widespread level, with modern and well-equipped tents and also caravans,
which were designed to cater more for the demand of comfort and travel. Today in Italy there are innumerable
campgrounds capable of meeting the needs of tourists who choose this type of holiday. As well as providing a place to
stay the night the structures, especially on the coasts, around the lakes and in the mountain valleys, offer facilities for
catering (restaurants, bars, cafeterias, etc.), recreation (discos, dance halls etc.) and sports. With its extraordinary
natural environments, its strong traditions and great historical heritage, Italy is a popular destination for many tourists.
Camping provides the possibility of moving around easily from place to place on one's chosen route, at prices that are
cheaper than those of hotels. Those wishing to go camping in the various regions of Italy may choose from among the
most efficient structures and plan a made-to-measure holiday by visiting the Website of the largest Italian campers'
association, Federcampeggio, Via Vittorio Emanuele 11, 50041 Calenzano (FI), tel. 055 882391, fax 055 8825918;
www.federcampeggio.it. The site includes addresses of all the campgrounds, as well as the possibility to buy on-line a
complete guide to Italian campgrounds, which is mailed to the purchaser's address. Very useful information may also be
obtained from the Federazione delle Associazioni Italiane dei Complessi Turistici. all'Aria Aperta ("Federation of Italian
Open Air Tourist Complex Associations") or FAITA, Via degli Scipioni 153,00192 Roma, tel. 06 32111043, fax 06
3200830; www.faita.it). Lastly, the Website www.campeggi.com, an official guide to campgrounds in Italy sponsored by FAITA and Federcampeggio, contains a list of campgrounds of all the regions of Italy. As well as camping in tents, the past few years have seen a great increase in the popularity of campers and motor homes, which today involve a large part of the population of "roving tourism". The attraction of camper tourism offers the possibility of travelling around easily from one place to another and at all times of the year, of making contact with others and exploring a great variety of environments, including natural or historical/artistic settings off the main tourist routes. Italy has a close network of service areas especially equipped for campers, often situated in small towns. Tourists wishing to travel in Italy by camper may visit the Website www.camperonline.it, which provides information on how to prepare for the journey, the various places to visit in Italy, the camper service areas and campgrounds.

4. On foot across Italy

A century ago one writer gave the following advice to his readers: “If you want to see the world do not go in a carriage, for carriages are too fast; go on foot”. Another wrote, "To learn one must walk”. Today it may seem out of place to talk about moving slowly in an age characterized by high speed, but these words, tinged with experience and wisdom, reveal a profound truth. True knowledge of a land, explored in all the depth of its natural and cultural aspects, is only really possible if we travel at the same pace of nature. Man tends to be too fast and, unfortunately, too superficial.

4.1 WALKING IN ITALY

Every year a greater number of people choose walking holidays in Italy. This may consist of one or two weeks of six or seven hours of walking per day through the warm and fragrant Mediterranean countryside (e.g. Sardegna, and various regions of Southern Italy) staying in family-run guest houses or small farm holiday structures, or trekking through the valleys of the Italian Alps or Apennines, sometimes with no more than a tent for shelter. This type of holiday represents a way of entering into direct contact with the nature and history of a place, and restoring the harmony and balancing rhythms of our body. A journey on foot in Italy also provides an opportunity to learn the history of the less well-known aspects of Italy, of villages and valleys, hills and mountains far from the beaten tracks, thus making contact with the life and working activities of the country folk.

4.2 THE SENTIERO ITALIA

For those at the intersections and the starting points of each stage), assistance points and emergency help on the part of the Corpo Nazionale di Soccorso Alpino e Speleologico ("National Corps for Mountain and Cave Rescue"). For information: Club Alpino Italiano, Via Petrella 19, 20124 Milano, tel. 02 2057231, fax 02 205723201; www.cai.it.se opting for a trekking holiday in Italy, the Sentiero Italia is the most suitable route. Over six thousand kilometers long, it covers the entire peninsula beginning from the south, from Sardegna and Sicilia, passing through Calabria and moving northwards up the Apennine ridge to arrive finally at Trieste in the far north of the country. There are 350 stages of the Italy Trail, linking mainly smaller towns that operate as “starting points” for paths leading into the mountains and that are themselves places of great cultural and historical value. The Sentiero Italia was inaugurated on February 12, 1995 with the trekking event known as Camminaitalia, in which a group of excursionists set off from Santa Teresa di Gallura to cross on foot Sardegna, Sicilia, the Apennines and the Alps, and arrived eight months and 6166 kilometers later in Trieste. The trail includes both easy walks and hard climbs; thanks to the numerous “stations” along the way that break
up the trail into daily stages, the Sentiero is able to offer for the most part accommodation facilities of low environmental impact. Above all, however, there are three elements in particular that characterize the Sentiero Italia throughout the country: the regularity of the signs marking the route (small red-and-white flags and information signpost)

**4.3 MOUNTAIN TRAILS**

For walking enthusiasts Italy offers a great variety of trails through natural environments of breathtaking beauty and villages rich in ancient history and tradition. The Val d'Aosta, a region situated at the foot of the eastern side of Mount Blanc, is an immense natural reserve (National Park of Gran Paradiso, Regional Park of Mount Avic) where visitors are ensured a direct and close contact with nature. Through the valley across the paths of Via Francigena, the Alte Vie 1 and 2 and the track of tours around the large Alpine massifs. The paths lead through wild areas characterized by numerous specimens of Alpine flora, including very rare species. A short distance from the peaks which are of a height exceeding 4000 meters - are the very popular target for mountain-climbers - Mount Blanc, Monte Rosa, the Matterhorn, Gran Paradiso and many others (information can be found in the official Website of the Val d'Aosta: www.regione.vda.it). In Piemonte the mountains occupy almost half of the territory and separate the region from France and Switzerland, though without isolating it. The ancient routes, which date all the way back to the days of Hannibal, represent the thread that links Piemonte with these countries that are so similar in both history and customs. The mountain ranges of Argentera, Monviso, Gran Paradiso and Monte Rosa, scattered with fortresses, abbeys and ancient villages, are also areas where mountaineering and skiing may be practiced (info: www.piemonteweb.it). Of all the protected itineraries in Liguria well represented is without doubt the Alta Via of the Ligurian Mountains, as it embraces the entire arc of the region and connects the two ends of the riviera along the Tyrrenhenian-Po watershed, from Ventimiglia to Ceparana. This is an ideal trail for those wanting to discover the Ligurian hinterland without having to approach the habitual haunts of mass tourism, and to explore the valuable treasures of Mediterranean and mountain environments that are surprisingly close together. Solitary peaks and densely-populated valleys, rocky crags and grassy expanses, impenetrable woodlands and neat vineyards - the landscapes of the mountain areas of Lombardia are lively and varied, and the trekking routes are many. From Valsassina, above the lake of Como, with the mountain peaks of Grigne, to Valchiavenna and Spluga Valley; from the valleys of Masino and Malenco, near the Bernina mountain range, to Valtellina; from Valcamonica, above the lake of Iseo, to the National Park of Stelvio, with the Ortles-Cevedale Massif (for information: www.regione.lombardia.it). It is difficult to say which are the most beautiful walks in the Dolomite Mountains of Trentino-Alto Adige. An intricate network of paths offers a great variety of itineraries catering to all types of visitors. Without a doubt, walkers will appreciate the paths of the Catinaccio (Rosengarten), the mountain that symbolizes the region and the Dolomites themselves, a true pearl set in the valleys of Tires, Ega and Fassa. Every summer, the Falzarego-Lagazuoi area hosts an increasingly large number of mountain enthusiasts. The area's extraordinary landscapes, along with a wealth of historical remains (in the First World War, for example, this was the site of several bloody battles), lend the area its great charm. The accommodation facilities are well-known for their efficiency - lifts allow tourists to reach quickly the higher places from where to begin their walks, while the refuges and refreshment points make it possible to undertake even difficult excursions without worry, offering also the possibility of overnight stays. Villages such as Castelrotto, Siusi and Fiè allo Sciliar are ideal starting points for walks in the Natural Park of Sciliar which, along with the protected area of the Siusi Alps, is a paradise for mountain lovers (for information: www.dolomiti.org). In Veneto visitors can enjoy splendid walks in the Natural Park of the Ampezzo Dolomites, from the lower valley grasslands all the way up to the rocky mountain faces and the snowfields. The park joins on the northern side the Alto Adige park of Fanes, Sennes and Braies to form a vast protected area in the heart of the Dolomites. Excursions of particular interest include those along the "vie ferrate" or "iron ways" and the paths rigged out with equipment, some of which incorporate the remains of First World War communication routes. In the mountain ranges of Lagazuoi, Tofana and Cristallo there are working lifts that take excursionists and mountaineers up to the higher trails, while on the road leading to the accesses to the Crola Rossa there is a bus service (for information: Park Offices and Management, Via del Parco 1, 32043 Cortina d'Ampezzo, tel. 0463 2206; www.dolomiti-parco.com). In Friuli-Venezia Giulia guided tours and open-air activities are organized in the

http://www.italiantourism.com/openairactivities.html
Regional Natural Park of the Friuli Dolomites, an area that extends between the eastern slope of the Piave Valley and the southern slope of the Tagliamento Valley. Walkers are advised to follow the main paths of the park, after first obtaining information from the tourist centers or the main office (tel. 0427 87333). To the south, between the high peaks of the Gran Sasso, Majella and Velino mountains and the golden coastline, the nature of Abruzzo offers a great variety of landscapes, which may be enjoyed at all times of the year. Due to excellent organization of the national and regional parks and to the great network of reserves and protected areas run by environmental associations the nature of Abruzzo is today well looked after, and with its many trekking routes and its accommodation facilities the region is well able to cater to excursionists (for information: www.regione.abruzzo.it).

4.4 ALPINE AND APENNINE REFUGES  Top

There are over 700 bivouacs and assistance points scattered throughout the Italian mountains. The refuges are structures that are conveniently located, organized and managed to offer rest, refreshment and the possibility of staying overnight, and are equipped with all necessary facilities. Some operate as small hotels; usually these are open to the public only during the summer months. Most of the refuges of the Club Alpino Italiano ("Italian Mountaineering Club") and many of the private structures have a room with a separate entrance reserved for makeshift accommodation during the winter season and when the refuge is closed. The network of mountain refuges is mainly run by the Club Alpino Italiano (CAI), an association that was founded in 1863 and today boasts over 300,000 members in around 480 branches scattered throughout all parts of Italy. These branches run the refuges, bivouacs and assistance points; information may be obtained from the main branch of the CAI, in Milan (see paragraph above on the Sentiero Italia). The assistance points, set up in existing buildings and equipped with rescue services, are situated in places where there would also be a need for a refuge, but, for a variety of reasons, would prove impossible to run. These places offer rest to trekkers and climbers and are furnished with basic, but indispensable, gear for overnight stays and, in case of need, simple cooking and heating facilities. The bivouacs are simple constructions located at fairly high altitudes and in very isolated places; they are usually used by those who need a place to shelter for the night before or after a long climb. The shelters are open and unattended; it is rarely necessary to ask for a key to enter.

4.5 BIRDWATCHING  Top

Birdwatching is an activity that can be practiced by anyone and in the most varied natural environments. In the mountain regions, the national parks of Gran Paradiso and Stelvio are the home of many species of birds. With a little luck it is even possible to spot the very rare bearded vulture, which has recently returned to the Alps thanks to an international re-introduction programme that culminated with the first nesting in Italy after around 70 years of absence from the country. The coastal areas are also suitable for birdwatching, especially for those spending their holidays in Sardegna, Sicilia or one of the many islands. In August, in fact, all the islands of the Mediterranean host perching birds and shore birds preparing to migrate to African regions for the Winter. The lagoons and marshes of Sardegna (Cabras, Santa Gilla and Molentargius) and Sicilia (Vendicari and the swamplands of Longarini) are resting places for various types of sandpipers, avocets and flamingoes. The island of San Pietro, in Sardegna, hosts one of the largest colonies of the species known as Eleonora’s falcon in the entire Mediterranean region. The migration of birds of prey is an extraordinary sight. The best periods are spring, in the months of April and May, and late summer from August to September. The main route of Spring migration leads through the Straits of Messina, although sightings are also possible in Liguria, especially at Arenzano, near Genoa; in the Marche, on Mount San Bartolo near Pesaro and on the promontory of Conero; in Lazio, at Circeo; in Puglia, on the cape of Otranto; and from all the small islands of the Tyrrenian Sea. In autumn the birds of prey are also concentrated in other places, such as on the hills of Treviso, in Veneto, and in the western valleys of Piemonte. To enjoy the experience of birdwatching all that is needed is a set of inconspicuous clothing, good binoculars, a pocket handbook for identifying the species and a good deal of patience as you begin to “hunt out” your “prey”. There are various organizations that promote birdwatching in Italy, as well as guide

http://www.italiantourism.com/opnairactivities.html
services for accompanying tourists in the national parks and regional reserves. The most active of these include the Italian Society for the Protection of Birds, which runs around 60 oases dedicated specifically to birdwatching and equipped with structures and facilities such as huts, trackways and guides (for information: LIPU, Via Trento 49, 43100 Parma, tel. 0521 273043, fax 0521 273419; www.lipu.it).

4.6 IN THE CITIES OF ART

Italy is a veritable open-air museum, with a cultural and artistic heritage such as no other country in the world can boast. Visiting the cities of art on foot means taking an original journey through time. In the historical centers of northern and central Italy stand impressive Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals, erected after the year 1000, while in the southern regions the ancient religious architecture is frequently an interesting interpretation of Byzantine, Arabic and Norman elements. All cities contain works by great Renaissance artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Masaccio, Botticelli, Piero della Francesca, Mantegna, Donatello, Raffaello, Antonello da Messina, Bramante, Correggio, Tintoretto and Giorgione. The Renaissance period, with its creative spirit, left its mark predominantly on the cities of Florence, Rome, Venice, Milan, Naples and other smaller towns in many Italian regions. The splendor of Baroque architecture can be seen throughout the country, especially in the South -in the grandeur of the buildings and the richly decorated churches of Naples in Campania, and of Catania, Agrigento, Ragusa and Noto in Sicilia. The great archaeological wealth of the country, meanwhile, includes the unique and fascinating Valley of the Temples in Agrigento, one of the most magnificent testimonies of the ancient Greek civilization in Sicilia, or the mysteries of Pompei and Herculaneum in Campania, or of the Etruscan civilization around Tuscia, in Lazio. Moreover, there are around 3000 museums scattered throughout the country housing numerous archaeological and artistic finds, representing a historical and cultural heritage of enormous value.

5. Italy on horseback

Horseriding tourism in Italy is becoming increasingly popular as an alternative way to travel around in the open air and in the natural environment. Horse riding is generally practiced in company with others, for the sake of sharing together the beauty of the green Italian routes and overcoming more easily the difficulties that riding can involve. In many regions there are riding centers for tourists, which offer riders the possibility of spending their holidays either with their own horses or with those belonging to the center.
5.1 HORSE RIDING HOLIDAYS  TOP

Mountains, woodlands and beautiful coastal and hill landscapes - there can be no better setting for a horseriding excursion, or for riding lessons for adults and children alike (the horseriding centers have ponies and horses especially trained for carrying children). The Federazione Italiana Turismo Equestre ("Italian Horseriding Tourism Federation"), an associate of the Italian National Olympic Committee (one of the main promoters of horseriding tourism), has defined a close network of itineraries throughout the whole country, in co-operation especially with the organizations in charge of the parks, the WWF and the forest wardens. There is an amazing number of trails, from those that follow the ancient Roman consular roads or the rough tracks made by wanderers or pilgrims of bygone days (such as Via Francigena, which led from the regions of France and descended through Italy in the direction of Rome) to routes associated with gourmet specialities (the Tour of Chianti or that of Prosecco), trails of particular naturalistic value (the trail upstream along the Tiber riverbank or around Sicilia) or the historical itinerary to discover the castles of Friuli. In Maremma, in the south of Toscana, there is a network of itineraries extending for a total of around 500 kilometers, with varying degrees of difficulty and broken up into stages by resting stations equipped for horseriding tourists. Riders may also choose from among a series of excursions, led by environmental guides, which aim to discover the true essence of the Tuscan countryside, from the hills to the sea. The Alta Via of the Ligurian Mountains is particularly suited to excursions on horseback, as it boasts a wide variety of routes with more frequent stops during the day. The farm holiday structures and riding centers scattered throughout the hinterland provide the operating bases essential for long rides in complete freedom and safety. Frequently, horseriding tourism is proposed as a recreation activity by the more well-organised and well-equipped farm holiday structures, where it is possible not only to hire the horse, but also receiving training from riding instructors and obtaining informations from friendly guides.

6. Cycling holidays  TOP

In the cultural, almost philosophical, evolution that is changing our concept of holidays, transforming them from simple amusement and relaxation to an involving rediscovery of essential values, the bicycle has become the absolute protagonist. Italy boasts a great wealth of itineraries and small towns to be discovered and developed - a veritable paradise for cycling tourists. In recent years there have been an increasing number of initiatives throughout the country to introduce new cycling routes in contact with nature and traditions, and to discover the extraordinary artistic heritage of villages and cities alike.

6.1 PLANNING THE TRIP  TOP

Before setting off on a cycling holiday it is important to make preparations. The most essential tool (apart from a bicycle!) is a good map, in order to reach your chosen destination as easily as possible. For trips in Italy the planning of the route must take into account the characteristics of the territory: the landscapes (choose itineraries which will take you through an interesting natural setting), the historical, artistic and architectural value of the area (include historical towns and cities of art in your route), the folklore and gourmet traditions (leave room on your itinerary to allow yourself be "tempted" by detours along the "wine routes" to discover the numerous other local products. As well as the map, useful indications are provided along the cycling routes way by signposts and, of course, directions given by the local
people. Nevertheless, cyclists should remember that bicycles are not allowed to travel on motorways and clearways (similar to motorways but without tolls). Cyclists are obliged to respect the same traffic regulations as motorists. Bicycles must be fitted with a front white or yellow electric light and a rear red light and reflector, as well as reflectors on the pedals and the sides of the wheels. The basic road safety code must be observed: keep to the right, pay extra attention at crossroads and on corners and take care on uneven or wet road surfaces.

6.2 THE BICYCLE BY PLANE, TRAIN AND SHIP

After procuring the proper equipment and planning the trip, the next step is to find out about the means of transportation available for travelling to Italy with a bicycle. For those arriving from afar it is often essential to travel by airplane. Most airline companies accept the transport of bicycles; some provide free of charge or sell special boxes in which to pack the bicycle, while others require that it is partially dismantled and placed in special bags. It is advisable to find out from the airline companies or consult their Websites before purchasing tickets. More widely popular is the bicycle + train combination. In Italy on many local and regional trains, on some inter-regional trains bearing a special symbol, on all the so-called “green” trains and, during weekends and holidays, on many others also, bicycles may be carried on the same train as the owner, in the wagon marked with the blue bicycle logo. On “green” trains and those that do not require a special wagon the bicycle may be stood where there is space, being careful not to disturb the other passengers. For transportation by train a supplement is asked (payable at the ticket office): this may be 4 or 5 euro, according to the type of train used. The supplement ticket must be punched before mounting the train and is valid for 24 hours. The official train timetable (which may be purchased from any newspaper kiosk in Italy and is also found on the Website www.trenitalia.com) gives all the necessary information regarding the transportation of bicycles by train. On all trains, however, bicycles may be carried if they are considered part of the owner’s luggage, i.e. enclosed in a bag. Transportation by ship, meanwhile (e.g. when travelling to Sardegna or Sicilia), is also fairly simple. Bicycles may be brought on board either mounted or dismantled, placed in a large bag and carried on as luggage. Some ferry companies offer bicycle transportation free of charge, while others charge a fee ranging from 10 to 15 euro.

6.3 CYCLING ROUTES

Some of the most pleasant itineraries for cycling tourists are certainly those along the “wine routes”, which are promoted by the Federazione Italiana Amici della Bicicletta (“Italian Friends of the Bicycle Association”), or FIAB, and the Movimento Turismo del Vino (“Wine Tourism Movement”). For information: www.fiab-onlus.it ; www.movimentoturismovino.it ). Especially in occasion of the Cantine Aperte (“Open Cellar”) events in May and during the Autumn grape harvest bicycle trips are organized along special routes, mainly on secondary roads with little traffic and, where possible, on protected cycling paths. The aim is to bring tourists and visitors by bicycle to wine-making farms throughout the country, to learn about and sample the wines and typical local products, visit the wine-making plants and enjoy the promotional cultural events. The pilot project was launched in Puglia, although similar initiatives are being set up throughout the country. Another project launched for the same purpose, involving the cycling tourism associations, the Italian WWF and the Parks Federation, has led to the creation of cycling routes within the main Italian national parks, from Stelvio to Abruzzo (info: www.fiab-onlus.it; www.wwf.it; www.parks.it). On a more general scale, the great European network of cycling routes, known as Eurovelo, includes a well-established network of cycle tracks in Italy. There are three itineraries (a stretch of the Mediterranean Route, from Cadice to Athens; the ancient Via Francigena track, from London to Rome, and a part of the Middle Europe Route, from Cape North to Malta) that cross Italy with evocative cycle tracks covering the whole peninsula (for information: www.eurovelo.org). Last but not least are the so-called “greenways” - hundreds of kilometers of trails along the banks of rivers, canals and disused railways, as well as ancient historical tracks and mountain paths. These routes bring cycling tourists in contact with the most varied surroundings, in full respect of the environment and its integrity.

6.4 ACCOMODATION ALTERNATIVES

http://www.italiantourism.com/openairactivities.html
Those who practice cycling tourism generally tend to choose different types of accommodation to that offered by hotels. The most popular choice is camping - it is not difficult, in fact, especially when travelling in groups, to carry a tent and stop for the night in campgrounds or specially-equipped areas reserved for such occasions. In Italy there are hundreds of camping facilities spread throughout all regions of the country. Information may be obtained from good guidebooks, from Internet (especially useful is the Website www.campeggi.com), or from the following associations: Federcampeggio, Via Vittorio Emanuele 11, 50041 Calenzano (FI), tel. 055 882391, fax 055 882591 FAITA, Via degli Scipioni 153, 00192 Roma, tel. 06 32111043, fax 06 3200830; www.faita.it. For those who prefer to sleep with a roof over their heads the Youth Hostel organisation offers accommodation at very low prices. Most of these are part of the Associazione Italiana Alberghi per la Gioventù or AIG ("Italian Youth Hostel Association") and require a special membership card, which costs 15 euro (there is no age limit for membership). Booking may be done through the Website www.ostellionline.org. The network of farm holiday structures, which covers the whole country, provides an ideal accommodation solution for cycling tourists and offers the chance to sample typical Italian wines and specialities of the local gourmet traditions. The structures are members of organizations: Turismo Verde (www.turismoverde.it), Agriturist (www.agriturist.it) and Terranostra (www.terranostra.it), which are supervised by national farmers' associations. Bed & Breakfast accommodation costs slightly more than youth hostels but also offers a generally higher quality service; this type of hospitality is becoming increasingly widespread in Italy. A number of hotel networks (especially in the region of Emilia Romagna) offer special low-price deals for cycling tourists. In addition, a few years ago the FiAB founded a cycling enthusiasts' association, named Ospitabici, whose aim is to offer hospitality to fellow cyclists, especially those coming from abroad, during their journey. Ospitabici is part of a European-wide organisation that provides accommodation services and facilities for members of associations related to the ECF, or European Cyclists' Federation. The list contains some fifty addresses in Italy, all of which guarantee friendliness and competence (www.fiab-onlus.it/ospitabici.htm). Lastly, Sen/as, an international nonprofit association with approximately 1500 members in Italy and thousands throughout the world, offers free hospitality to cyclists (www.servas.it).

7. Waterways

7.1 SAILING

Whether it is the advertisements that make us all feel like virtual sailors or the recollections of great international races like America's Cup, the fact remains that sailing, once a sport reserved for devotees of the sea, has today become an extremely popular sport. It is an activity that appeals to all tastes, from the more adventurous to the more refined and leisurely; the number of tourists opting for a sailing holiday, in fact, is continually increasing. The sailing population ranges in age from twenty-five to sixty and is extremely varied, including families with small children, groups of friends, and even solitary sailors. Those who embark alone may choose the “cabin charter” formula, which consists of a rented cabin and the possibility of making friends with the other guests. The price, which naturally varies according to the route, includes a crew consisting of a skipper, a seaman and a hostess. There are basically three alternatives for renting the boat. The “bareboat” formula is the ideal solution for those who have a good sailing background and are able to put together their own crew, as it provides only the boat. The “boat with skipper” formula is suitable for those with little or no sailing experience, as the skipper is an expert sailor with a perfect knowledge of the sailing area and the chosen craft. The “fleet” option consists in the renting of the boat for a pre-arranged route. This is recommended for those facing their first experience as skipper, as it provides the possibility of sailing in freedom, but at the same time with the reassurance of knowing that other boats are near at hand. On one of the boats of the fleet, in fact, there is a crew of professional sailors, which guides the maneuvers and is always ready to intervene in case of emergency. Each of the boats, therefore, is free to sail independently, at a short distance from the others, and in the evening joins up with the rest of the fleet. Lastly, those who are not satisfied with merely spending a holiday on a boat, but wish to learn the techniques of sailing, may enrol in one of the many specialized sailing schools (the Website www.velanet.it gives a complete list of sailing schools in Italy). The various opportunities for sailing holidays are
managed in all the coastal regions of Italy by Italian sailing clubs, sports societies and innumerable travel agencies (Federazione Italiana Vela, "Italian Sailing Federation", Piazza Borgo Pila 40,16129 Genova, tel. 010 544541, fax 010 592864; www.federvela.it). Those wishing to organize a sailing holiday in Italian seas can find useful information in the Coastguard Website (www.guardiacostiera.it).

7.2 ON RIVERS AND LAKES

For centuries, rivers and canals have been important tools of communication, veritable “water highways” for the transportation of people or goods. Today the pursuit of new initiatives for promoting tourism has led to the re-launching of river navigation as an alternative holiday idea. The number of river tourism enthusiasts who choose to spend a day or more sailing along Italian rivers, in fact, is today over 500,000. According to the most recent statistics Italy has 2,237 kilometers of waterways. These are mostly concentrated in Lombardia, where 50% of the navigable rivers of the entire country are located, representing a thousand kilometers of rivers, lakes and canals, with 50 tourist river ports. To sail down one of the main navigable rivers of Italy means discovering a heritage of great historical, artistic, environmental and economic value. The river offering the best opportunities is the Po, the longest river in the country, which originates on the mountain of Monviso, in Piemonte, and crosses the entire northern part of Italy from west to, where it flows into the Adriatic Sea. There are at least three large ferries on this river that offer regular cruises from Venice to Cremona: the motor ship Venezia (accommodating 102 passengers in 52 well-furnished cabins), belonging to a Swiss shipping company (www.venicecruises.com; www.rmt.ch), the Michelangelo and the Casanova (deilmann-kreuzfahrten.de). Every year many people choose to spend their holidays on this river. Besides Venice, the other destinations proposed are Ferrara, Cremona and Mantua (with bus trips to Parma, Verona and Padua). In various travel agencies it is possible to rent houseboats, which are genuine floating houses, and which can be sailed without the need for a sailing license. There is also a growing interest on the part of tourists for day cruises on the River Po between Mantua and the lagoon of Veneto. The Po is also navigable in the stretch that crosses the plain of Piemonte; in Turin there are two boats, named Valentino and Valentina, which offer a one-hour cruise up the river from the historical center of the city to Moncalieri. In Lombardia, another traditional waterway is enjoying a comeback. This is the Navigli, the ancient network of canals that were used predominantly for transporting goods. A few years ago a service was set up for tourists on the Naviglio Grande ("Large Canal"), offering cruises on the Viscontea, a boat with solar panels that glides silently (thanks to an electric engine) over the waters of the canal. Veneto also offers a number of internal waterway cruises. There are currently six stretches accessible for tourists - from the canal of Padua to the mouth of the canal of Battaglia Terme. Cruises are available from Brenta by modern motorship (60,000 passengers per year) and on the River Piave by waterbus, which covers the last stretch of the river from Noventa to the outlet. In Lazio cruises are run on the River Tiber, from Rome (Castel Giubileo) to Ostia Antica, with boats that are becoming an interesting tourist attraction for the hundreds of thousands of visitors to the city. Lake navigation, meanwhile, is an ancient and well-rooted tradition in Italy. In 1826-27, in fact, the years when the steam engine became popular, the first main shipping lines were established on the three largest lakes of northern Italy (the lakes Maggiore, Como and Garda). Today the company that runs the service (which was recently extended to include also the lake of Iseo) has a fleet of 89 vessels, including ferries, motorships and hydrofoils, with a total capacity of approximately 30,000 passengers, as well as four shipyards equipped with structures and modern technological plants for the construction and maintenance of the boats. According to statistics, around eight million passengers and 650,000 vehicles are transported every year. Besides the shipping line service, however, there are a number of real cruises (including night-time cruises) offered on the lakes (for information: Navigazione Laghi, Via Ariosto 21, 20145 Milan, tel. 02 4676101, fax 02 46761059; navigazionelaghi.it).

7.3 TOURISM AND ADVENTURE

One way of enjoying the rivers and torrents of Italy that combines tourism, sport and adventure is to practice some of the specialized sports that cater to the demands of tourist structures while frequently consisting in a real adventure. The
most popular sport of this "alternative tourism" is kayaking - an ideal and ecological way to discover torrents, rivers, lakes and coastlines in direct contact with nature. After learning the necessary basic techniques the kayak offers a wide choice of safe activities, including long-distance races, riverside camping and kayaking on the lakes. Due to the great adaptability of the kayak campgrounds, holiday villages and tour operators throughout Italy propose initiatives and organize courses and excursions. Information can be obtained from the Federazione Italiana Canoa Turistica ("Italian Touristic Canoeing Federation"), which includes all the associations operating in the sector (Via Francesca 17, 25037 Pontoglio, BS; www.canoa.org). For those who prefer more extreme sports, meanwhile, an activity that is perhaps more to their taste is rafting. A sport that is practiced mainly in Alpine areas, rafting consists in descending rapidly-flowing torrents with rubber dinghies holding from around 4 to 12 people, which are virtually unsinkable as they are made of separate compartments. The essential equipment (life jacket, wetsuit in neoprene, safety helmet and paddle) may also be hired. The Associazione Italiana Rafting ("Italian Rafting Association", Neyran 85/E, 11020 Brissogne, AO; www.airaf.it) includes all the sports societies and the 25 rafting organizations in Italy that offer facilities for practicing this activity. In many tourist towns in the Alps there are clubs and societies that organize courses of canyoning and hydrospeed. Canyoning (or river trekking) consists in following the descent of a torrent on foot, crossing fords, rapids and pools, swimming in springs that meander down between rocky gorges, etc. - frequently with the aid of ropes and mountain-climbing equipment (www.canyoning.it). Hydrospeed, which is still fairly unknown among the general public, is a more reckless sport. Protected by a water bobsleigh and a thermal wetsuit and wearing flippers, hydrospeed enthusiasts allow themselves to be carried by the current while performing daring manoeuvres as they go. On the Dora Baltea, in the Val d'Aosta, expert guides accompany tourists on this sporting adventure (www.progettoestremo.com).

7.4 FISHING HOLIDAYS  Top
In recent years in Italy new ways of interpreting tourist hospitality have been developed. One of the most original of these is called "pescaturismo", or "fishing tourism", and is dedicated to the discovery of the seas and the most beautiful coasts. The aim, in fact, is to involve tourists in the activities associated with world professional fishing, while offering the opportunity to admire spectacular landscapes and learn about the history and traditions of the seafaring population. This is a world rich in culture, with a lifestyle characterized by a fascinating blend of flavors and smells, legends and nature. There are already many co-operatives of fishermen that cater to this type of tourist hospitality. The most active, which offer extremely interesting holidays, are part of the Consorzio PEI Turismo con i Pescatori ("PEI Tourism with the Fishermen Union", Via Nazionale 243, 00184 Roma, tel. 06 46204701, fax 06 46204723-24; www.legapesca.it). Italy also has a very close network of lakes for fishing as a sport. These are organized and managed by associations belonging to the Federazione Italiana Pesca Sportiva ("Italian Fishing Federation", Viale Tiziano 70,00196 Roma, tel. 06 36858290, fax 06 36858630; www.fipsas.it), which is also in charge of granting permission and licenses.

8. Flying in Italy  Top
To think about the inborn dream of flying, the dream of Icarus, in this ultra-technological age where just a few hours’ flight on board a jet can bring us across from one continent to another, may seem somewhat rhetoric and naive. And yet the desire to fly remains one of the deepest dreams in the heart of man. To glide silently through the air, to see things from a completely different perspective and in a totally different way - this is the adventure of free flying, a fantastic way to discover the Italian landscape.

8.1 AIRBORNE SPORTS  Top
A flying holiday in Italy is a holiday that can become an unforgettable adventure. The most well known method of gliding
is by hang-glider. Used generally in mountains and hills overlooking the sea, but also in mountain valleys, the hang-glider makes it possible to fly without the aid of an engine. To set it flying it is attached to a small plane, which takes off from a slope facing in the right direction and having the right exposure to the wind. When the craft is released it must use the air currents rising from the sun-warmed earth and the air movement caused by the wind against the mountain or hillside to try to remain airborne for as long as possible before gliding down to land in a set point (information may be obtained from the Union Roma national hang-gliding school: www.parapendio-deltaplano.it). The paraglider is an evolution of the parachute, with the difference that, instead of jumping from a plane, the flier takes off, usually from a gentle slope, once the "sail" is sufficiently swollen with air. For this sport special parachutes are used, whose shape makes it possible to maneuver and guide the craft. The sails weigh 5-7 kg, have a surface of 20-30 square meters and are controlled and directed by means of two brakes. In spite of its simplicity and manageability the paraglider offers great performance, remaining airborne for several hours and covering very long distances. Some of the most popular areas where paragliding can be practiced, with the support of professional instructors, include: Canazei (Trentino), Monte Cucco (Umbria), Monte Grappa (Veneto) and Laveno (Lombardia): www.parapendio.com. Whatever environment one chooses for the holidays, whether seaside, countryside or mountains, it is not difficult to find specialized schools that are recognized by the Federazione Italiana Volo Libero ("Italian Free Flying Federation", Via Salbertrand 50, 10146 Torino, tel. 011 744991, fax 011 752846; www.fivl.it), which can realize the dream of flying in a fun yet safe way. Youngsters aged at least 16 and with the permission of their parents and adults in a good state of health may obtain a certificate of free flying (required by Italian law), enabling them to fly with the hang-glider or paraglide. The quickest way to try out the sport is by flying with a pilot qualified to fly the two-man version. It is also possible to fly with two other more traditional means - the glider and the parachute. Although a normal holiday is not long enough to learn these particular sports, which require fairly long training courses and special licences, they may be practiced by those already in possession of the necessary license through one of the specialized structures operating in the country (www.scuoladiparacadutismo.it). Beginners, meanwhile, are allowed to practice jumps of flights together with an instructor. There are many gliding clubs in Italy, which are associated with the Federazione Italiana Volo a Vela ("Italian Gliding Federation", Viale Porta Vercellina 2, 20123 Milano, tel. 02 48003325; www.fiw.it); many of these also include parachuting schools. One of the latest flying trends is, in actual fact, the rediscovery of an ancient invention - the hot-air balloon. This is a wonderful way to admire the Italian landscapes, sailing over treetops, rivers and lakes, floating gently in the air without polluting and in complete safety. The shape, size and color of the balloons may vary, but the supporting structure and the functioning systems are always the same. The balloon is made up of a basket for passengers, one or two burners and a covering that is filled with hot air. The wicker basket holds up to six people and is strong, flexible and compact. Inside the basic instruments are an altimeter, a thermometer, a variometer, which indicates the speed of ascent and descent, and a radio. The balloon itself is made of nylon or polyester, treated to resist heat and the sun’s rays. It cannot be controlled like an ordinary aircraft, but is completely at the mercy of the wind and the air currents; the passengers know where they leave the earth, but not where they will touch down again. For this reason passengers are always followed by a vehicle that is in constant contact by radio and picks up the passengers and equipment after landing. Few people, due to the high costs, can afford to buy a hot-air balloon, but anyone can go for a ride. In many regions of Italy (the Val d'Aosta, Lombardia, Piemonte, Veneto and Umbria) there are centers where balloon rides accompanied by expert fliers are offered at reasonable costs (www.scuoladiparacadutismo.it).

9. In the depths of the earth

Caves are a unique environment, luminous and magical. They represent a world that is little-known - a world of sandy beaches, dunes, waterfalls, fast-flowing rivers, lakes of crystal-clear water and magnificent calcareous formations, which in Italy presents a whole range of truly marvelous opportunities for the nature-loving tourist. The complexity and richness and Italy's geological history have created an infinite variety of underground caves and caverns. Apart from
the innumerable itineraries reserved for more experienced speleologists, in Italy several very large caves are open to the public, which are famous throughout the world for their beauty.

9.1 BOSSEA  Top
The cave of Bossea is situated in the karst area of Artesinara-Mondolè, in Piemonte. The processes of formation and modelling are still fully active today, and the action of the running and dripping water has created a natural environment of exceptional beauty. The deeper part of the grotto contains a series of huge halls characterized by steep and rugged rocks, thundering waterfalls and crystal-clear pools. The upper part, meanwhile, is made up of a deep and picturesque canyon, through which flow the waters of the torrent, and a complex of tunnels decorated by exquisite concretions. For those wishing to explore the cave the Scientific Station, in co-operation with the Associazione Culturale EKYÈ of Fontane ("EKYE Cultural Association"), has created an itinerary of great naturalistic (and also cultural) value, which crosses the entire area from the refuge of Balma (1883 m) to the cave of Bossea (836 m). How to arrive: from the Turin-Savona motorway turn off at Mondovi and follow the indications for Villanova Mondovi, turning left towards Frabosa Soprana and continuing in the direction of Fontane. After a short distance on the right the cave reception building will become visible.

9.2 TOIRANO  Top
A few kilometers from the Ligurian coast is one of the most beautiful caves of karst origin in Italy, a true calcareous gem set in the heart of the Ligurian mountains. An entrance adorned with ancient stalagmites and stalactites leads to the most well-known caves of Basura, Colombo and Santa Lucia Inferiore. The first, which is also known as the Strega, or "Witch" grotto, is reached from the western slope of the large valley of Vero, at a height of 194 meters above sea level. This cave has only partially been explored and offers evocative underground views of calcareous columns and small lakes. The cave of Basura is connected to that of Santa Lucia Inferiore by a 120-meter-long tunnel, which was opened in 1967. It is famous for having preserved over the ages the bones and footprints of prehistoric animals, and also evidence of the passage of man, such as charcoal, remains of torches and the prints of hands and feet on the clay-covered walls of the so-called Hall of Mysteries. These finds are believed to have been left by the prehistoric community that inhabited the grottos, and probably refer to initiation rites, since most of the prints are of children. All the prints, nevertheless, date back to around 14,300 years ago. The caves of Toirano are "active", as the water that continually flows through them causes perpetual transformation. A constant temperature of 16 °C guarantees the conservation of the environment. How to arrive: along the A10 Savona-Ventimiglia motorway, leaving at Pietra Ligure; take the clearway 1 Aurelia to Loano and then follow the road up towards Toirano; from here follow the indications for the caves. Visiting hours: daily from 9.00 to 12.00 a.m. and from 2.00 to 5.00 p.m. Information: tel. 0182 98062.

9.3 BORGIO VEREZZI  Top
With their moon-like landscapes tinged with colour the caves of Borgio Verezzi, in Liguria, are every bit as evocative as those of Toirano. It is the colours, in fact, that distinguish them from the latter -the reds and yellows created by the ferrous minerals mixed with the rainwater that filters through the earth and the rocks. A special feature of these caves are the so-called "spaghetti" stalactites, named for their thread-like formations, which are able to vibrate with the sound waves; others have a drapery appearance, like those of Manto di San Martino. Especially worth looking out for are the pools of filtered rainwater and other formations such as the Waterfall, the Bust of Pope John, the Lantern, the Camel, the Samurai and the Pagoda. The caves, which extend for a distance of five kilometers, are inhabited by very unusual species, which are perfectly adapted to life in total darkness. These include troglobes, tiny transparent creatures without eyes or wings, which are able to live only in underground environments. The route open to the public, which was created
in 1970, is around 800 meters in length. How to arrive: along the A10 motorway as far as Finale Ligure, and then following the clearway 1 Aurelia towards Ventimiglia; after around three kilometers the road arrives at Borgio Verezzi. From here take the clearway 490 in the direction of Melogno; the road to the grottos is near the turn for Gorra. By train: on the Genoa-Ventimiglia line as far as Finale Ligure, from where there is a bus service to Borgio Verezzi (Finale Ligure-Andora line). Visiting hours: October to April, from 9.00 to 11.35 a.m. and from 2.35 to 5.35 p.m.; May to September, from 9.00 to 12.00 a.m. and from 3.00 to 6.00 p.m.; the visit lasts a little more than an hour.

Information: www.comune.borgio-verezzi.sv.it

9.4 ANTRO DELLA CORCHIA  Top
This cave was discovered in 1841 by a geologist from Levigliani named Giuseppe Simi. In 1983 a group of speleologists demonstrated that this enormous underground structure reaches a total depth of 1210 m. The cave is currently the deepest in Italy and the tenth deepest in the world. The entrance of the Antro is situated at a distance of over two kilometers from the Tuscan village of Levigliani, which extends over an orographic terrace, at a height of 600 m beneath the towering rock walls on the south side of Mount Corchia (1678 m) in the Apuane mountains. The opening through which visitors enter the grotto was made from an old mine. The most characteristic forms of the Antro, especially in the part open to the public, are concretions hanging from the ceiling, such as cylindrical or conic stalactites; others were formed by the dripping of water onto the cave floor, like the stalagmites and spray concretions. There are also magnificent columns formed by the fusion of stalactites and stalagmites, as well as the underwater concretions known as "cave pearls". How to arrive: along the A12 Sestri Levante-Livorno, turning off at Versilia and following the indications for Seravezza (around 5 kilometers). From here continue in the direction of Castelnuovo Garfagnana as far as Levigliani (around 12 kilometers after Seravezza). From Garfagnana follow directions for Castelnuovo, and from here carry on towards Arni-Versilia.

Visiting hours: see the Website. Information: www.antrococchia.it

9.5 GROTTA DEL VENTO ("WIND CAVE")  Top
Situated in the center of the Natural Park of the Apuane Mountains, the Wind Cave is divided into three parts with clearly differentiated morphological characteristics. The initial stretch is basically flat with a great quantity of calcareous concretions; the second, which begins with a deep abyss and continues in a gentle downward slope, is partly crossed by an underground river, and the third part is characterized by the presence of large vertical potholes. The grotto takes its name from the strong current of air that passes through it between two openings situated at different heights. Well-made paths allow visitors to admire comfortably all the floodlit marvels of the underground world, from stalactites and stalagmites to multicoloured flows, from alabaster draperies to pools encrusted with crystals, from underground streams to the strange shapes moulded by erosion. Visitors are accompanied through the cave by expert speleologist guides, and may choose from three different routes. The first (one hour) is on fairly flat ground and is lined almost everywhere with splendid calcareous concretions; the second (two hours), includes the first and adds the spectacular sight of huge underground halls crossed by a small river, and the third (three hours) consists of a complete visit of the whole cave.
How to arrive; from Milan the best way is by the A1 motorway and turn off onto the A15 near Parma; leave the motorway at Aulla and follow the directions. From Turin take the A21 motorway and turn off near Alessandria onto the A26 towards Voltri; take the A10 in the direction of Genoa and then the A12 as far as Massa. From here take the road to Colle San Carlo and follow the indications. From Florence take the A11 motorway to Altopascio, and from here take the roads to Porcarri, Marlia and Ponte a Moriano, then follow the indications. Visiting hours: open daily all year round (except Christmas): for visiting hours consult the Website. Information: tel. 0583 722024, fax 0583 722053; www.grottadelvento.com.

9.6 FRASASSI

The caves of Frasassi are an impressive subterranean labyrinth that stretches out for 13 kilometers, of which only one is open to the public. The entrance to this fantastic underground world hidden beneath Mount Vallemontagnana, in the region of the Marche, is through a tunnel extending for over 200 meters, created in 1971. From the initial hall the route leads to the most evocative points - Niagara Falls, the Abyss of Ancona, the Giants, the Hall of 2000, the Obelisk, the Hall of the Birthday Candles, the Hall of Infinity, the Organ and the Hall of the Bear. The Abyss of Ancona, which is one of the largest hollows in Europe and probably in the whole world, measures 200 meters in height, 180 m in length and 120 m in width - a space, in fact, large enough to contain the Duomo of Milan. Enormous blocks of stone form the background of this spectacular cave, in which the attention of visitors is immediately caught by the sight of a group of 20-meter-high stalagmites dominating one side of the hall and fittingly known as the Giants. The path passes alongside these majestic concretions and then moves on to the impressive Niagara Falls and the Dead Tree, a stalagmite with a branching effect on the upper part caused by changes in the direction of the dripping. Following on, visitors are met with another breathtaking scenario. This is the Crystallized Lake, a mirror of light blue water with a bed of calcite crystals which, emerging, have formed a series of little islands. From here, steps lead up to an upper level from where it is possible to glimpse on the top of the Abyss of Ancona a ray of light. This is a well-known point to speleologists, as it represents the first ever entrance to the cave by the explorer who originally discovered the fabulous subterranean world of Frasassi in 1971. How to arrive: along the A14 motorway, turning off at Ancona Nord and taking the Ancona-Rome clearway. Frasassi is situated around 50 km further on, in the direction of Rome. By train: on the Ancona-Rome line as far as the station of Genga, from where a shuttle bus takes passengers to the caves. Visiting hours: from March to July and from September to October, daily from 9.30 to 11.00 a.m., from 12.30 to 3.00 p.m. and from 4.30 to 6.00 p.m.; in August from 8.00 a.m. to 6.30 p.m. with visits every 10 minutes. Information: tel. 0732 90090, 0732 90780, 0732 972000; www.cadnet.marche.it.

9.7 CASTELLANA

In Puglia, in the province of Bari, beneath the plateau of the Murge mountains, is the large grotto complex of Castellana, which was discovered in 1938, and subsequently explored and made accessible to the public with guided tours and a working system of lifts. The caves of Castellana mark the course of an ancient underground river, and are characterised by a series of tunnels that open unexpectedly onto spectacular caverns and halls displaying a fine collection of magnificent and multiform stalactite and stalagmite concretions. Visits are conducted by guides along two different routes - the first, of around one kilometer and taking roughly an hour, leads as far as the Cavern of the Precipice, while the other is a complete tour as far as the White Cave, extending for a total of around three kilometers and taking roughly two hours. Access to the caves is by a simple flight of steps, while the ascent inside is made possible by a couple of fast and safe lifts. Near the caves is the "Franco Anelli" Spelaeological Museum, dedicated to the explorer who first discovered the underground complex. Here visitors have the opportunity to learn more about the origins of the caves, the environmental characteristics that caused their formation, the life form that has developed inside them extending into their most remote recesses, and the use that man has made of the caves over the ages. How to arrive: from Bari along main road no.16 towards Conversano; from Taranto along the A14 motorway, leaving at Gioia del Colle and heading towards Putignano. By
train: from Bari on the Ferrovie del Sud-Est as far as Castellana Grotte.
Visiting hours: open all year round, with frequency of visits differing according to season (from March 15th to October 15th, from December 26th to January 6th). Opening hours are from 8.30 a.m. to 7.00 p.m.; closing time is between 6.30 and 7.30 p.m. From the end of July to the end of August night-time visits are also possible.
Information: tel. 080 4998211, fax 080 4998219; www.grottedicastellana.it