

TRAVEL



Italy, in the steps of St. Francis

Story and photos by KERRI WESTENBERG • For the Minnesota Star Tribune

On a brisk spring morning in Rimini, I stood in a hushed cathedral with 11 other hikers, waiting for a bishop's blessing.

Ahead lay days of strenuous trekking through Italy's mountainous Emilia-Romagna region to the Sanctuary of La Verna, a Franciscan monastery in Tuscany. Together we would climb and descend for 75 miles on paths, some rugged and steep. So far, we had walked just three flat city blocks. Given the rigors ahead, pausing for celestial aid seemed wise.

We were following in the footsteps of St. Francis of Assisi, but we weren't on a religious pilgrimage. My husband and I joined this trip, offered by the Minneapolis-based nonprofit Esperienza — which reinvigorates rural Italy through philanthropy and tourism — to visit hilltop towns where trains don't stop and tourists rarely roam. And we would take the slow approach — by foot.

We have been to Italy many times, but never like this, with each day framed by views of mountains we had crossed over, or were yet to climb. By the end, our legs were weary, and our hearts were full.

Climbing toward camaraderie

The 11-day trip included five hiking days, covering around 15 miles each, punctuated by well-timed days of rest and exploration. On the hiking days, our group of professionals and retirees, most from Minnesota, laced up boots and hoisted daypacks stuffed with lunches, water, trekking poles and rain gear (which, given blessed balmy days, stayed tucked away). Our luggage took the easier route, shuttled ahead by van. On tough days, a few hikers did, too.

We followed Alessia Ghirardi, our knowledgeable and cheerful Italian guide, through alpine fields, past olive groves with blankets of yellow flowers, and up daunting trails to remote monasteries and stunning views. Alessia introduced us to Italians, including restaurateurs who forage or grow produce and farmers tending newborn lambs with dogs that bounded down the road to greet us. Along the way, we urged one another on, shared Advil and chocolates, and formed a camaraderie built on a shared mission and many miles.



Then at each day's end, we reached hilltop villages that struck me as well earned rewards, each one a gem.

Pasta-making and poetry

In the golden-hued fortress town of San Leo, on our first rest day, we learned to make pasta from the hotel's cook, Antonella Cetrangolo, plus the hotel's owner and Alessia. All are home cooks with a knack for fettuccine.

Antonella doesn't speak English, but her gestures, encouraging looks and willingness to grab a rolling pin when needed did the trick.

Together we ate our creation in the hotel's breakfast room. Before we departed for a hilltop castle — fought over for centuries for its 360-degree views of the countryside — Antonella addressed us from the doorway of her tiny kitchen. "I am usually in the kitchen and don't often see people enjoy my cooking, let alone eat with them. This has been a beautiful day for me," she said in Italian with Alessia translating. Then she turned the corner to wipe away tears.

Such moments — intimate and heartfelt — fueled us even on the toughest hiking days. Sometimes literally.

The day before, after hours of hiking, we had stopped at a defunct monastery. Its caretaker, Angelo Righetti, greeted us and brought us through

its simple church and then to its interior courtyard. As we rested beneath porticos, Angelo surprised us with cookies and wine. The treat boosted us on the final ascent to San Leo.

In Sant'Agata Feltria, we toured the Museum of Rural Crafts, filled with antique tools of weavers, shoemakers, vintners and other artisans. Down a hill, in a square shared with a truffle shop and a butcher, we walked into the 100-seat, 17th-century Teatro Angelo Mariani. Entering the oldest wooden theater in Italy, built of chestnut wood with three tiers of box seats painted with draped curtains and flowers, was a little like walking into a wedding cake.

A quick bus ride brought us to Pennabilli. There, we enjoyed lunch and a nature walk with the town's retired doctor-turned-poet, Luigi Cappella. On the outskirts of town, he stopped at a house. The octogenarian owner emerged and, at Luigi's prodding, began to recite his poems. She read with such emotion, we needed no translation to feel the power of Luigi's verse, extolling the balm and peace of nature.

The next hours echoed his words. At a vista where he had installed benches (funded by Esperienza) to encourage townspeople to relish the outdoors, we watched wind ripple the grasses in the field below.

EMILIA-ROMAGNA

Top, hikers traverse a stretch between San Leo and Sant'Agata Feltria during Esperienza's 11-day "In the Steps of St. Francis" hiking trip. Above, hikers greet one another outside the church at La Verna, the final destination of the 75-mile walk.

IF YOU GO

For information about upcoming trips with Minneapolis-based nonprofit Esperienza, go to esperienza.org/tour-programs.

The next "In the Steps of St. Francis" trip is scheduled for Oct. 2-12. Spring and fall trips are also scheduled for 2026, when the Catholic Church will have special commemorations to mark the 800th anniversary of the saint's death, known as the Easter of St. Francis.

ROMAN HOLIDAYS

Rome. The Eternal City's blend of ancient monuments, decadent food and charming neighborhoods recently became easier to reach with Delta Air Lines' restored nonstop flight from Minneapolis-St. Paul. Here are four reasons to hop aboard.



Getty Images

Famous Trevi fountain in Rome.

Face-lift for the Jubilee

Rome has spiffed itself up for 2025, a Jubilee Year for the Catholic Church that could draw more than 30 million visitors before it ends Dec. 28. These holy years occur only every 25 years.

For this one, dozens of monuments were restored, including the famed Trevi Fountain that now gleams after a deep clean. Piazza Pia — linking St. Peter's Basilica, the epicenter of the pilgrimage year, and the museum of Castel Sant'Angelo — has been transformed into a pedestrian walkway along the Tiber River. Piazza dei Cinquecento, just outside Termini train station, now boasts green spaces with new gardens and trees.

Art beyond museums

Just walk around Rome and you'll encounter the surprise of artwork by masters — all without fighting crowds or paying entrance fees.

Don't want to wait in line to visit the Vatican Museum and its Sistine Chapel? Head to the Church of Sant'Ignazio di Loyola, where Andrea Pozzo's lavish fresco covers the ceiling — a baroque cousin to Michelangelo's masterpiece. A mirror in the nave floor reflects the artwork so you don't need to crane your neck.

Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculptures are scattered around the city: the Fountain of the Four Rivers in Piazza Navona; a marble elephant outside the Pantheon; the graceful "Ecstasy of St. Teresa" in Santa Maria della Vittoria; and Pope Urban VIII's tomb in Santa Maria sopra Minerva, which is also home to Michelangelo's "Christ the Redeemer" sculpture.

A Caravaggio exhibit at Rome's Palazzo Barberini wrapped up on July 6, but some of his finest paintings stayed put inside their home churches. At Santa Maria del Popolo, "The Crucifixion of St. Peter" and "The Conversion on the Way to Damascus" both reveal why his emotion-filled works ushered in the Baroque. San Luigi dei Francesi houses a triptych by the artist.

Great food, great prices

In a city where life revolves around meals, finding a great one is easy. Skip the white-tablecloth restaurants, because chefs and cooks turn simple ingredients into marvels everywhere. For lunch, grab a slice of pizza at a quick-stop shop, then pop into a gelato shop for dessert. (One is never far away; I adore Fiocco di Neve.) For a sit-down situation, try a cozy trattoria such as Trattoria Monti, Da Enzo or Ristorante Dilla.

Gateway to Italy

If your Italian holiday extends beyond Rome, a quick metro ride from the airport brings you to Termini Station. From there, fast trains fan across the country. Bologna, where I began my hiking adventure with Esperienza, is just over two hours away. Venice is within reach in four hours. Naples, the gateway to the Amalfi Coast and Pompeii, is only an hour south.

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In Amalfi, the beach is close to the town square, so it's easy to make a day exploring both.