



Understand Italy

ITALY TODAY 848

Sex, scandal and waves of refugees: it's a testing time for the *bel paese* (beautiful country).

HISTORY 850

Incestuous emperors, scheming popes and a delusional dictator: Italy's story is prime-time drama.

ITALIAN ART & ARCHITECTURE 867

For centuries Italy has set the aesthetic standard, from Caravaggio's canvases to Renzo Piano's auditorium.

THE ITALIAN WAY OF LIFE 886

Fashionable, fastidious and *molto, molto* sexy – meet the people who put the *dolce in vita*.

ITALY ON PAGE & SCREEN 894

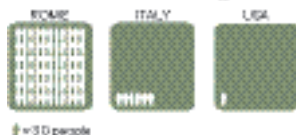
From divine comedies to divine divas, Italian creativity is the stuff of legend.

THE ITALIAN TABLE 898

In Italy, food is sacred. Loosen your belt, pop the *prosecco* (sparkling wine) and prepare for the feed of your life.



population per sq km



Italy Today

Trials & Tribulations

It might be the home of *la dolce vita*, but Italy has one hell of a *mal di testa* (headache). Unemployment rose from 6.2% in 2007 to 8.4% in 2010, while Italy's public debt remains above 115% of GDP. Unnerving memories of the social unrest that marked the 1970s came to the fore in late 2010, with nationwide rallies protesting about education reforms, and anarchist mail bombs at Rome's Swiss and Chilean embassies.

On the political front, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's string of scandals has led a growing number of Italians to question his ability to tackle the country's chronic problems. Among them is Naples' on-again, off-again rubbish crisis: in May 2011, 170 troops were deployed to help clear 2000 tonnes of litter from the city's streets, three years after Berlusconi's promise to resolve the region's waste-disposal woes.

Berlusconi may be wishing for a landfill site deep enough to bury his own woes. In early 2011 Italy's Constitutional Court overturned a law granting legal immunity to the prime minister and senior ministers. As a result, four criminal cases against the centre-right leader have been reactivated, spanning everything from alleged tax evasion to the alleged bribing of British lawyer David Mills in two corruption trials in the 1990s.

The most sensational trial, however, is 'Rubygate'. In it, Berlusconi is accused of paying for sex with Karima El Mahroug, a nightclub dancer nicknamed Ruby Rubacuori (Ruby Heartstealer), while she was still 17. The encounters reputedly took place at so-called *bunga bunga* sessions; sex parties held at several of Berlusconi's villas. The scandal has embroiled a number of public figures, including Nicole Minetti: a showgirl-turned-regional councillor for Lombardy, the Anglo-Italian is accused of procuring young women for Berlusconi's parties. Berlusconi is further

- » Population: 61 million (2011)
- » Size: 301,230 sq km
- » GDP: €1246 billion
- » GDP per capita (2010): €21,483
- » Annual inflation: 1.4%

Dos & Don'ts

- » Italians are generally chic and quick to judge on appearances. Make an effort with your presentation and never remove your shoes in public.
- » Shorts and sleeveless tops are usually forbidden in religious buildings.
- » Splitting the bill is oh-so *incivile* (uncivilised). The person who invites pays, although close friends often go Dutch.
- » When invited to a home for a meal, always take flowers, pastries or a bottle of wine.
- » Supermarkets provide disposable plastic gloves for handling fruit and vegetables: wear them.