

# Understand Italy

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Despite ongoing corruption, nepotism and economic stagnation, winds of change are blowing through the *bel paese* (beautiful country).

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

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

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## THE ITALIAN TABLE.....931

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

# Italy Today

This is the 'beautiful country', where even a cup of coffee is an exercise in perfection. Yet under the exquisite surface are some serious problems, in which corruption, nepotism and unstable governments have all played a part. But it isn't all doom and gloom. Italy's youngest-ever leader, Matteo Renzi, is effecting dramatic political changes, Pope Francis continues to reinvigorate the Vatican and Italians are using their ingenuity to address such issues as the cost of maintaining their illustrious heritage.

## Best Blogs

### Becoming Italian Word by Word

(<http://becomingitalianwordbyword.typepad.com>) Italian language explored.

**Parla Food** ([www.parlafood.com](http://www.parlafood.com)) By savvy food blogger Katie Parla.

**Italian Food Forever** ([www.italianfoodforever.com](http://www.italianfoodforever.com)) Umbria-based, delicious recipes.

## Best on Film

### La Grande Bellezza (Great Beauty)

Paolo Sorrentino's Fellini-esque tribute to Italy.

**La Dolce Vita** (Sweet Life) Federico Fellini capturing Italy's 1950s zeitgeist.

**The Leopard** Luchino Visconti's portrayal of the decaying Sicilian nobility.

**Ladri di biciclette** (Bicycle Thieves) A moving portrait of post-WWII Italy.

## Best in Print

**The Italians** (Luigi Barzini) Revealing portrait of the Italian character.

**The Leopard** (Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa) Masterpiece about tumultuous 19th-century Sicily.

**The Italians** (John Hooper) Italy correspondent assesses modern Italy.

**Gomorra** (Paolo Saviano) Unput-downable epic about the Neapolitan Camorra (Mafia).

## The Economy

Over the last 15 years, the Italian economy has stagnated. In Europe, Italy's public debt ranks among the highest while its economic growth is among the lowest.

Things are especially difficult for the young. Youth unemployment rose to over 44% in early 2015. The same year, it was calculated that the cost to the Italian economy of graduates fleeing the country in search of better opportunities elsewhere was around €23bn.

Nepotism and corruption don't help. In 2014 alone, three major transgressions were exposed: alleged corruption in awarding contracts for the Milan Expo; the 'Mafia Capitale' scandal, in which politicians were discovered to have liaised with criminals to steal funds from the Roman municipality; and corruption relating to the construction of the MOSE flood defence system that led to the resignation of the mayor of Venice.

## At the Helm

The downfall of former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, who was convicted of tax fraud in 2013, ushered in a new era in Italian politics. The 39-year-old Matteo Renzi, previously mayor of Florence, took over as leader of a right-left coalition in 2014, making him the third unelected prime minister since Berlusconi's fall (following Mario Monti and Enrico Letta). Renzi's cabinet is the youngest in Italian history and the first with an even gender balance.

Even before taking the role of prime minister, Renzi was known as '*il rottamatore*' (the scrapper), a name he continues to embrace as he attempts to change Italy's political landscape with a package of employment and electoral reforms. Soon after taking over from Letta, Renzi led his party to success in the European elections, but their share of the vote was just 24% in the 2015 local