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Sicilian marzipan sweets (p325)

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Venice

A city of marble built on a lagoon

A maze of skinny streets and waterways, Venice (p163) dances between reality and sheer fantasy. This is a city of ethereal winter fogs, fairy-tale domes and Gothic arches fit for an opera set. But look beyond its sparkling mosaics and brooding Tintoretto to discover another Venice; a city peppered with hidden gardens, sleepy *campi* (squares) and timeless *bacari* (small bars) filled with the fizz of prosecco and Venetians' sing-song local dialect. Top: Carnevale (p22); Bottom: Grand Canal (p166)

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Florence

An exquisite city packed with art

An extraordinary treasure chest of priceless world-class art, the Tuscan capital (p93) is where the Renaissance kicked off and giants like Brunelleschi, Michelangelo and Botticelli rewrote the rules of creative expression. The result is a city laden with artistic treasures, blockbuster museums and jewel-box churches, with atmospheric medieval streets and lanes teeming with wine bars, trattorias and chic boutiques. Facade of Duomo (p102)



Naples

Italy's boisterous southern metropolis

Nowhere else in Italy are people as conscious of their role in the theatre of everyday life as in Naples (p231). And in no other city does daily life radiate such drama and intensity. Naples' ancient streets are a stage, cast with boisterous matriarchs, bellowing baristi and tongue-knotted lovers. To savour the flavour, dive into one of the city's markets – loud, lavish operas of fruit vendors, wriggling seafood and the aroma of just-baked *sfogliatelle* (ricotta pastries).





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Cinque Terre

Five dramatically picturesque fishing villages

For the sinful inhabitants of the five sherbet-coloured villages of Cinque Terre (p151) – Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore – penance involved a hike up the vertiginous cliff side to the sanctuary to appeal for forgiveness. Scale the same trails today through terraced vineyards, and as the heavenly views unfurl, it's hard to think of a more benign punishment. For those seeking less exertion, hop from one village to the next on the train.

Far left: Vernazza (p158); Left: Manarola (p160)