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Italy by rail

Your dream adventure is more accessible than you think –
Sarah Blinco explores a calmer way to travel

Vicente waited patiently for us on the dock. Although we'd never met our Airbnb host, we knew it was him across the water, cutting a handsome figure in a cool Italian suit and sunnies. He was the one scanning the incoming ferry for two strangers – us – as we bobbed into the pier underneath the Rialto Bridge. He waved as my partner and I disembarked and explained in an accent of mixed Italian and Spanish that we should follow him through the sea of people.

Diligently we went along, winding through the alluring alleyways of Venice. Little bakeries and gelato stores beckoned a visit later. Sun-kissed market stalls emerged in ancient squares. The race was on to memorise landmarks within this

maze, so we could find our way without Vicente's guidance.

We stopped in front of a heavy wooden door, and before making our way upstairs to what proved to be a fabulous and perfectly situated studio apartment, Vicente pointed one way and then the other, sharing tips on where to eat, drink and 'be' like a Venetian.

Venice, the famously picturesque city of canals was the last stop on my 'birthday tour'. I'm celebrating a milestone this year and a week in Italy was my special request.

A friend inspired me by suggesting that we travel through Italy on the train. It's relatively inexpensive (see thetrainline.com) and stress-free compared with driving or flying. Many of Italy's

major cities are connected by rail. Our Italian affair began at Milano Centrale Station. This fashion capital has been dazzling visitors for years with its design-led initiatives and stunning structures.

An afternoon treat is Aperitivo, the best Italian tradition you've never heard of. From 6pm at bars around Milan, pay a set price for a drink (such as a cocktail for eight euros), and indulge in an inclusive buffet of delicious pasta, cheese, salads, and potato dishes. Find a place with fun music and atmosphere, like along the canal at Navigli, and settle in for the night.

A self-guided day-return train trip from Milan to Varenna is a great way to see Lake Como. A stark contrast from the bustling city, picture a mystical body of water reflecting the snowy Alps, colourful buildings scaling mountainsides, punctuated with old steeples and linked by narrow cobblestone streets. Varenna's charming enough, but from here Bellagio, the jewel in Como's crown, is a short ferry ride away.

'Fair Verona', where we lay our next scene, is about two hours' train trip from Milan.



What can I say about Verona, other than just go, go now!

This medieval wonder is built along the pretty Adige River and is renowned for being the setting of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. A 14th Century residence with a little balcony overlooking a courtyard is said to be Juliet's House. It was made world-famous in the 2010 film *Letters to Juliet*, and is worth a visit, for sure.

Verona Arena dominates the city centre – a huge 1st Century amphitheatre resembling Rome's Colosseum, it hosts concerts in summer, and was our meeting

spot for an evening walking tour with Wonderful Verona. Across three hours our host, Jessica, introduced us to Verona's popular and secret sights, while pouring healthy glasses of local wines in choice locations. This localised experience together with our stylish 'dream loft' Airbnb, made it hard to leave.

But then, there is Venice. Just an hour's scenic trip from Verona to Santa Lucia train station. Admittedly the first time I stopped by Venice on a tour in August 2011, I felt exhausted and hot. I didn't see it for all its

grandeur. This time, I felt it – the attraction – throughout Piazza San Marco, across the city's red rooftops and along the magnificent Grand Canal. Shout yourself a piece of glamorous Venetian glass beaded jewellery as a memento; a reminder that Italy is always worth the trip.

Find the full Italian experience and Sarah Blinco online at travellivelearn.com, [youtube.com/travellivelearn](https://www.youtube.com/travellivelearn) and Instagram @sarahblinco

