Before you go:

GETTING AROUND ON TRAINS
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I’m glad you’re here because I have so much to share about taking the train in Italy! After reading you can expect to know 90% more than most of the travelers who just land in Italy and try to figure everything out five minutes before their first train.

Now, I’m going to be upfront and tell you that what I’m about to share is a ton of information. It might make you feel like you’re drinking from a firehose, but just know that you can review this section when you’re actually rolling up your sleeves to book your tickets so everything will be fresh.

In Italy the train is how the majority of Italy travelers move around, and for good reason. The railway system in Italy is extensive, meaning you can get to almost anywhere in the country by train. You don’t even have to get off to cross on the ferry to Sicily — the train gets on too!

It’s also relatively cheap. You can get from Milan to Naples for just over 70 euro. Not bad for what is essentially a trip from one end of the country to the other.

The trains are fairly easy to use too, but you have to learn how the system works, and it can seem intimidating at first. That’s where we come in. I’m going to walk you through taking the train in Italy, step by step.

So let’s get started!
THE TRENITALIA WEBSITE IS YOUR FIRST STOP

The number one best resource for train-users in Italy is www.trenitalia.com.

**Heads-up:** Italo is a new-ish private train company with a fancier service, although they have fewer routes. Stalk their offerings [here](#).

This is the main Italian railway’s website, and is available in English as well. It’s easy to use and incredibly useful. Just type in the name of your departure city and the name of your arrival city, and the site will pull up a list of all your options, complete with information about switching trains and costs. Just remember to enter the Italian names of the cities in question, not their English counterparts. So Roma instead of Rome, Firenze instead of Florence, Venezia instead of Venice, and so on.
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Italy uses a 24 hour clock

This is where you see how many times you have to change trains before you reach your destination. In this case, three times. Click the arrow next to “Show” for the changes in detail — you’ll see the names of the stations you have to get off at and at what time, the names and numbers of the trains you’ll be traveling on for each leg, and how long each ride will take.

Write down:

a) transfer location (for example Pisa Centrale)
b) time train arrives (for example 10:56)
c) time train departs (for example 11:12)

Whether you make the next train depends on how much time you have between trains, how quickly you can get from one platform to the next, and whether the trains are on time. If you don’t make it, you’ll have to catch the next one.

Expand this section to see next option.

When possible, always choose trains with the fewest changes. It’s so much easier!

You can purchase ahead of time online, or at the station. And you can see what a good deal Italian trains are. Traveling from Montegrosso (which is near the French border) all the way to Florence can cost under 20 euro!

You should print this schedule out, or make a screenshot on your phone.
We get asked a lot whether buying train tickets online before your trip is a good idea, and we usually say not to, unless you’re a hundred percent sure you won’t be missing that train.

Let’s say, for example, that you’re flying into Pisa Airport and plan to head from there directly to Florence. Things like flight delays, issues with baggage and time needed to get through customs can all set you back longer than you may expect once you’ve landed. If you’ve bought train tickets in advance — especially the non-transferable and non-refundable ones for high-speed trains — you may find yourself stressed about catching the train on time or missing it altogether, when it would have been just as easy to just buy them on the go.

Once you’re in Italy and know that you’ll be leaving really early one morning for the next destination, for example, then heading over to the train station a day early or so to buy your tickets or buying them online is a great idea, if convenient. It still leaves you with enough flexibility to shorten or extend your stay in favorite or less-than-favorite towns or cities (something you can’t always know you’ll want to do until you’re there), while allowing you to advance-plan and keep all your ducks in a row for the sake of smoother travel and peace of mind. And the day of travel, you can just validate your ticket and waltz right on over to the platform — not wait in line and stress out if the line-ups are long, which they almost always are, as Murphy’s law goes.
A GOOD REASON TO BUY IN ADVANCE

If you 100% know that you have a train to catch — especially for a return flight — you should buy your ticket in advance.

An example of this would be: Your flight to return home leaves Milan at 5pm. You know you’ll be staying in Riomaggiore that night, and the train you should catch is in the morning (you make sure to schedule a few hours leeway in case there is a delay on the tracks). Having an advance ticket in this case is a good idea because a) you can control departure time b) it’s a critical train and you don’t want any drama, and c) this is complicated but worth mentioning — not all classes of trains can be bought at small train stations. For example, the train station in Riomaggiore (a small village in the Cinque Terre) only issues “Regionale” class tickets, so if you want to catch a faster train you need to go to another, larger station (like La Spezia). Talk about crazy and convoluted. Yes, I know, I wish Italian train travel wasn’t so nuanced, but it kinda is.

You can buy advance train tickets either from your travel agent at home (they issue train tickets for an ever-so-slightly inflated rate but the peace of mind is well worth it) or directly online on your own.
If you’re looking for savings, purchasing in advance online can be cheaper, but as I mentioned make sure you do this only for trains you know for sure you’re going to be taking, as these tickets are usually non-refundable or have heavy restrictions on changes to things like date and time that can be made.

You’ll see that ticket prices change according to whether they are Base, Economy, Super Economy etc... Basically what this means is that the cheaper the ticket, the more restrictions there are on changing it. Super Economy, for example, is cheaper than Economy and Base. That’s because when you buy a Super Economy, changes or refunds are not allowed, whereas you can change the date and time of the slightly more expensive Economy ticket, and the most expensive Base tickets allow you to get a refund as well if your plans end up changing. All of this is explained in detail on the site when you click on the category in question.
BE PREPARED

BE PRO

If you are not staying right in the city your flight flies into, a great little piece of advice is to have a print-out of your train options ready when you land in Italy.

So say you’re flying into Genoa at 9:30 am on Monday but are staying in the Cinque Terre. You can pretty much expect customs and luggage to take at least 45 minutes, and the Volabus shuttle bus into the city to take 40 minutes. So the earliest you would be needing a train from Piazza Principe station would be around 11am. Go to the Trenitalia website, type Genova Piazza Principe as your departure station and Monterosso (or whichever Cinque Terre town you’re staying in) as your destination, and set the time you’re looking for on your arrival date as 11am. All of your options from 11am onwards will come up — print this. Once you get to the train station, you can refer to your list for the next available train, purchase tickets and head off. Much easier than having to figure things out on the ground when you get there!
VALIDATE YOUR TICKET

Now, some trains in Italy require that you validate your ticket before you get on.

Many of us don’t realize we’re supposed to do this our first time in Italy. We assume that we’ve bought our ticket and that there’s nothing left to be done. But some of Italy’s train tickets are not dated or attached to a specific train. A Regionale ticket, for example, can be used for any Regionale train traveling within the same distance on any day of the week, any month of the year. Technically speaking, if you don’t validate it (which is essentially date stamping it), you could use it again and again, thus defrauding Trenitalia. Once it’s been validated, it must be used within a certain amount of time, and therefore cannot be reused. If they catch you with an unvalidated ticket on board the train, you will be expected to pay a 50 euro fine on the spot. So be sure to validate. You’ll see the validation machines mounted throughout the station and on the platforms.

Like I mentioned, not all train tickets need to be validated — in fact, only Regionale and Regionale Veloce train tickets do. Any train that has a reserved seat and carriage (like Intercity or the Frecce trains) don’t need validation, but it’s often difficult for first-time travelers to Italy to figure out which is which, so we recommend just doing it every time. Better safe than sorry!
CATCHING A TRAIN — THE BEGINNER’S GUIDE

Now I want to walk you through the whole train process, step by step.

If you’ve looked online and have made a print-out or screenshot on your phone of your train options, you’ll arrive at the train station knowing which trains you have to choose from. If you haven’t bought your ticket online in advance, you can buy it either from the biglietteria (or ticket office — in smaller villages they only take cash). Alternatively, use an automated machine (which takes cards or cash). Once you have it in hand, validate it.

Next step — finding the right platform.

If you’ve bought your ticket at the biglietteria, you can ask the agent there which platform you need to go to, but it’s also smart to know how to check this for yourself. The first thing you want to do is track down one of the monitors mounted throughout the station. You’ll be looking for the Partenze section of the screen, which means Departures. Check your print-out for the time your train is leaving as well as the train number, and look for that train on the screen. Platform in Italian is binario, so that’s what you’ll be looking for on the screen. Now all you have to do is head to your binario and wait.
DON’T DO THIS

A major word to the wise: If you arrive at the platform with several minutes to spare, be careful about boarding the first train you see there.

Lots of trains use the same platform, and while some will be sitting there for 15 minutes before pulling out at the scheduled departure time, others arrive just minutes before. If your train leaves at 3:00, and you hop onto the train sitting at the platform at 2:45, you could find yourself pulling out of the station at 2:50, heading to a city you had no intention of visiting! A good rule of thumb is to ask someone already on the train or also boarding whether it’s going where you want it to go. I myself still do this today, just to be sure.
Now let’s talk about switching trains. It’s always easier to travel direct, of course, so scan trenitalia.com for a route that doesn’t require you to switch trains.

If there isn’t one, or if it doesn’t work with your schedule, then the site provides you with all the information you need to change trains. It shows you what time your train rolls into the station where you need to get off, and what time your next train rolls out, as well as its train number. You’ll have to jump off the first train, track down one of those Arrivals and Departures monitors again, find your next train’s binario, and head there to re-board. Platforms can change and they will announce this over the loudspeakers, but if something feels funky — like you get to a platform and it’s empty — don’t be afraid to ask someone.
BACK TO THE BASICS

Now what happens when you simply show up at the train station without a computer print-out and without having consulted the Trenitalia website? Don’t worry.

The internet is not a prerequisite for using the trains in Italy, it just makes things easier. If you haven’t checked what train to get on online, here’s what you do. Located throughout the station are big white paper timetables, with either Arrivi (Arrivals) or Partenze (Departures) written across the top in blue or green. You want Partenze.

The Partenze timetable shows all of the trains departing from that particular station every day. Each is indicated by the time it leaves the station and the name of its final destination. Underneath this information is a list in smaller print of each of the stations it stops at along the way, and the time it stops there. Check the actual time, look for the earliest next train on the timetable, and scan the towns and cities it stops at to see if yours is there. If not, move on to the next one and so on until you’ve found what you’re looking for. Make note of the time and train number, and then scan the station for one of those monitors that shows the arriving and departing trains.
Find your train number and time on there, and look to see which platform or binario you have to go to to board it. (The binario will be indicated on the paper timetable as well, but like I said, sometimes it changes, so it’s always best to confirm it on the TV monitors.) Sounds complicated, I know, but it’s not that hard once you get the hang of it. The good news: There are tons of trains! So even if you miss the next train, there will likely be another one along soon and you’ll get to where you want to go. The major exception is if you have a firm time you need to arrive by (like to catch a flight) — give yourself massive leeway to allow for your own learning curve and for train delays. Viva Italia!

Now, if you can’t find your train time and number on the monitor, it means that that particular train is not running that day. The paper timetable lists all of the trains that run all year long, even though some of these are only active during the high season or on holidays. If you can’t find the train you’re looking for on the monitor, you’ll have to go back to the paper timetable to look for the next possible option.

Of course the other option when you’ve shown up at the train station and don’t know which train to take is to line up at the ticket office and ask the agent for a ticket for the next train to XYC, as well as the platform you need to go to. This is an easy solution and fine too, but it’s always good to be able to take matters into your own hands (in this case with the paper timetable) if you need to, especially if you’re in a hurry. The line-ups at the biglietteria can be killer, and those agents less than polite sometimes!
Alright, let’s talk a little bit about the kinds of trains you can take in Italy. Having fun yet?

Italy’s high-speed trains are called Frecciarossa or Frecciargento, which translates to Red Arrow and Silver Arrow in English. These generally connect main Italian cities, reach speeds of up to 300 km/h, and make very few or no stops along the way. You can get from Milan to Rome on one of these now — a trip that traditionally took about five hours — in less than three. Trenitalia publishes discounts on these fares online, so if you’re looking to save, keep your eyes open for them. Be aware though, that the discounted tickets are usually non-refundable or have heavy restrictions on changes.
Regionale or Regionale Veloce trains don’t run on the main train lines (the Florence-Pisa-Cinque Terre lines are almost all Regionale, for example), have a lot of stops and tend to be on the much slower side compared to the higher-speed options. These trains don’t have assigned seats or carriages, and tickets are not marked for any particular date and time, which is why they require validation. There is also no advantage to buying these tickets online in advance, as they are always priced the same.

Frecciabianca and Intercity trains are the middle ground between the high-speed trains and the regional options. They have more stops than the Frecciarossa and Frecciargento, but fewer than the regional, and they are usually priced somewhere in between as well. Like the high-speed trains, these trains have assigned seating.

Finally, we get asked a lot about whether it’s worth it to buy a rail pass in Italy. The answer is, it isn’t. Because reservations need to be made on most trains in this country, you can’t just hop onto a train and flash your pass easy peasy. You still need to make an advance reservation and pay 10 euro to do it too.

I know it seems like a lot of information to absorb. But believe me, once you’ve taken the train a couple of times, it’ll become old hat to you.

I hope this has helped to make that learning curve a little less steep so you can enjoy your trip to Italy without having to worry about figuring out the train situation from scratch!

I think the trains in Italy are pretty cool; you have so much freedom, so many options and honestly, the value is impressive.

Happy happy train hopping from me to you,

Bianca