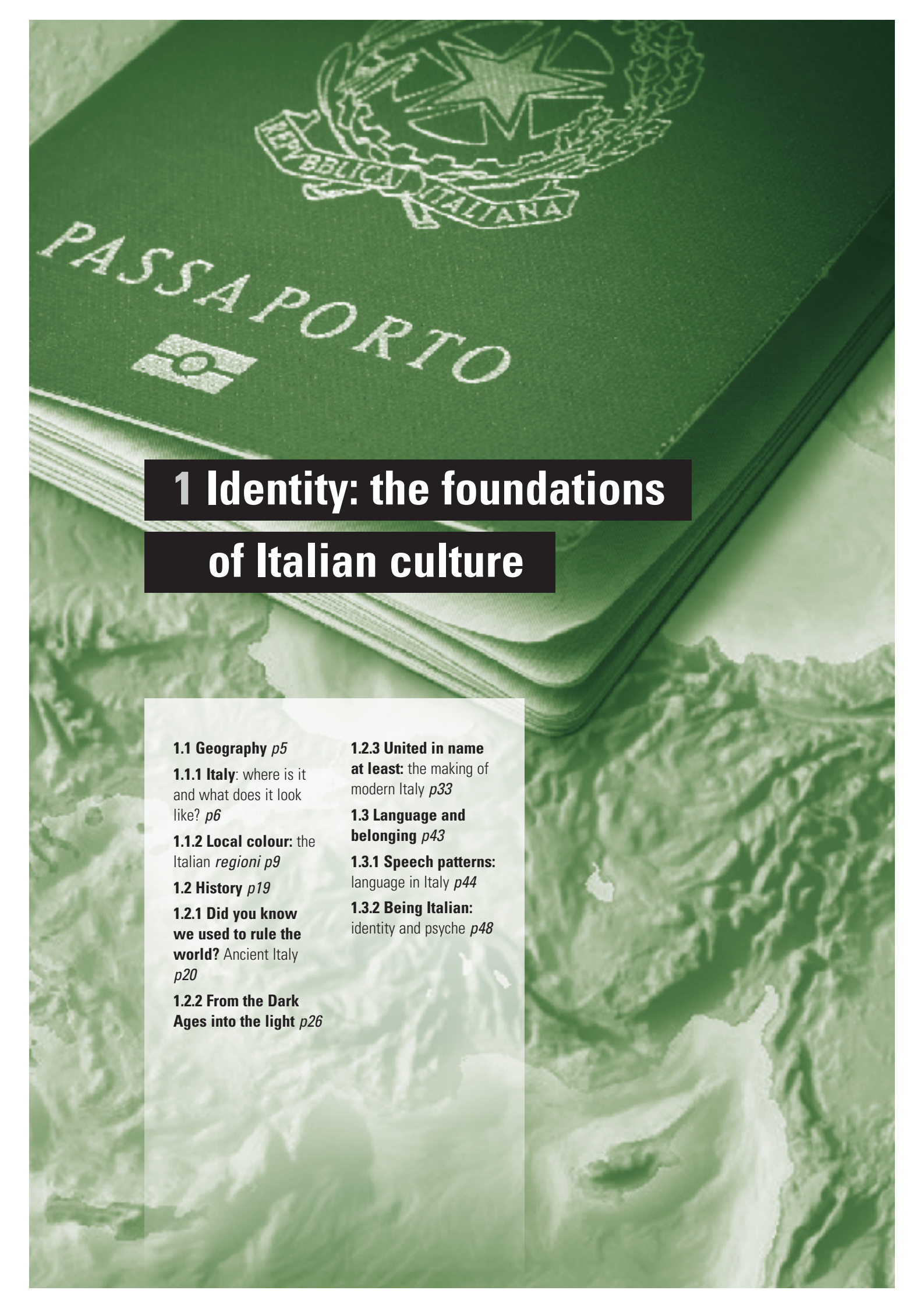




1 Identity: the foundations of Italian culture

1.1 Geography *p5*

1.1.1 Italy: where is it and what does it look like? *p6*

1.1.2 Local colour: the Italian *regioni* *p9*

1.2 History *p19*

1.2.1 Did you know we used to rule the world? Ancient Italy *p20*

1.2.2 From the Dark Ages into the light *p26*

1.2.3 United in name at least: the making of modern Italy *p33*

1.3 Language and belonging *p43*

1.3.1 Speech patterns: language in Italy *p44*

1.3.2 Being Italian: identity and psyche *p48*



1.1 Geography

The Italian landscape can be as varied and stirring as any; it has peaks, plains and more volcanoes than the rest of mainland Europe combined. However, it's the breadth and diversity of culture – the traditions and the sense of *campanilismo* – that shape the real identity of each region.

1.1.1 Italy: where is it and

what does it look like?

Grain drain

Half of Italy's beaches are disappearing, deprived of sand by natural erosion and human interference. As sea levels rise, the prognosis looks bleak. Shrinkage is already causing friction: in 2008 Lecce and Brindisi, both in Puglia (where 65 per cent of beaches are losing their sand), fell out when Lecce tried to dredge for new sand offshore from its near neighbour and longtime rival.

If the boot fits

The Italians sometimes call their prong of southern Europe *lo Stivale*, the Boot, for obvious reasons. It's an iconic physique, from the muscular Alpine thigh right down to the bony Calabrian toe that punts Sicily eternally towards Africa (Sicilian capital Palermo is closer to Tunis than Rome). Running clockwise from Trieste in the north-east, the country is bordered by the Adriatic, Ionian, Tyrrhenian and Ligurian Seas, all of them a part of the Mediterranean Sea. Land borders with France, Switzerland, Austria and Slovenia in the north are dominated by the Alps. Italy has a number of islands out in the Med, of which Sardinia (120 miles adrift from Rome in the Tyrrhenian Sea) and Sicily are by far the largest.

Lie of the land: the hills are alive

The hills and mountains that cover two thirds of Italy comprise two chains: the Alps and the Apennines. The Alps formed when the African tectonic plate slid north millions of years ago, collided with the Eurasian plate and pushed up the peaks. These shifting plates still affect Italy more than any other European country, initiating earthquakes and giving vent to three active volcanoes, Etna, Vesuvius and Stromboli. The same tectonic clash also shaped the Apennines, the peninsula's spine, curving all the way from the Ligurian Alps to the toe tip of Calabria. The northern Pianura Padana forms Italy's largest lowland plain, the Po River (Italy's longest) draining its fertile soils. The other large Italian plain is the Tavoliere delle Puglie (Chessboard of Puglia) down in the boot heel. Lakes Garda, Maggiore and Como sit in steep-sided northern valleys (when people talk about the 'Italian Lakes' they mean these), while smaller lakes to the north of Rome inhabit old volcanic craters.

What is the weather like?

The coastal lowlands of southern Italy enjoy a Mediterranean climate of hot summers and mild winters, and the warm weather stretches north up the western coast bringing uncomfortable heat in summer. Elsewhere, the norm is cooler, particularly in the north-east where the cold winds can blow in from central Europe. By consolation, east tends to be drier than west. The Po Valley experiences harsh winters and warm, humid summers, and is known for prodigious winter fogs. The Alps have their own climate of bitter winters and mild summers. When the Sirocco wind comes up from North Africa the whole country bakes. Italy's undulating topography creates some intriguing microclimates (and correspondingly fine wines). Despite Lake Garda's northerly position, for instance, the surrounding mountains provide enough shelter to grow palms and lemons. Climate change is already having a serious effect on Italy – summers in southern Italy are 0.7 degrees warmer than they were 20 years ago.

Forces of nature

Earthquake: Italy's worst quake (indeed, modern Europe's worst) and the attendant tsunami killed as many as 200,000 people when it hit Messina in 1908. The most devastating recent event came in April 2009, when a quake in Abruzzo killed nearly 300.

Flood: When the Arno River flooded Florence in 1966, it killed over a hundred people and destroyed or damaged thousands of works of art, Donatello's *Magdalene* sculpture included. The so-called 'Mud Angels' helped clean the city up.

Volcano: Vesuvius' most famous outburst came in 79AD when it buried Pompeii and killed as many as 25,000 locals. A more recent eruption in 1906 claimed more than a hundred lives.

Boughing out, Tuscan style

Few sights evoke the Italian landscape, Tuscany in particular, like the tall, slim cypress tree. *Cupressus sempervirens* (if you've got dining companions to impress) probably came to Italy from the eastern Med with the Etruscans. Despite being darkly green, long-lived (they can grow for a thousand years) and sweetly pungent, the tree has strong associations with death. In *Metamorphoses*, Roman poet Ovid described the tree being born from the body of Cyparissus, the grief-stricken youth who accidentally speared Apollo's pet deer. Convinced of a connection to the underworld, the Romans would lay their dead on a bed of cypress branches and place a tree at the front of the house during periods of mourning.

Vital statistics

Area: 301,338 sq km (116,356 sq miles) (roughly the same size as Arizona).

Population: 58 million.

Length: Around 745 miles (1,200 km), depending on where you measure from.

Width: 380 miles (610km) at its widest point.

Life expectancy: 77 for men, 83 for women.

Average age: Early to mid 40s (and rising every year).

Highest mountain: Monte Bianco di Courmayeur, 4,748m (15,577 ft) (smaller, conjoined sibling of Mont Blanc).

Tallest surviving Ancient statue: Colossus of Barletta, 5.11m (16.7ft).

Where do the Italians live?

Almost three quarters of Italians now live in towns and cities, a preference for urban life that only developed in the post-war economic boom (see section 8.4 for more). The population density is relatively high (almost 200 people per sq km – the fifth most densely peopled country in the EU) although the distribution of people is unbalanced. Over a third of Italians live in the Pianura Padana, while the lands south of Rome can be quite empty. It's a north/south split connected to prosperity, to the divide between industry and agriculture and to a clash in attitudes and culture. Rome may be the biggest city by population (2.7 million), but the metropolitan areas around Milan (up to 7.4 million by some estimates) and Naples (4.4. million) embrace more inhabitants.



1.1.2 Local colour: the Italian *regioni*

The 20 regions of modern Italy may have been formally created in 1960, but each has much older origins, a pre-Unification identity usually based on subservience to a duke, king, city or pope. Each has a distinct culture, a mode of life with its dialect, customs and rivalries, to which the inhabitants subscribe and which, typically, eclipses any loyalty to the Italian nation. In fact, pride in the locale often only extends to the immediate community. They call it *campanilismo*, that connection to your birthplace, your hometown or village; the word derives from *campanile*, or bell tower, recognising a loyalty to your own corner of civilisation with the church in its midst. Five of the 20 regions (Valle d'Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Sicily and Sardinia), the *regioni autonome*, are more 'separate' than others, enjoying a degree of autonomy that brings the power to levy and spend taxes.

i. Northern Italy

Italy abuts its northern neighbours at the Alps. The mountain chain has given the country a natural frontier, and yet, in places, languages and customs still lap over from other cultures. Northern Italy is richer in industry and agriculture than the regions to the south; its resorts are slicker, its cloth better cut and the people, perhaps, more taciturn.

Valle d'Aosta.

The Romans, Hannibal and his ensemble, St Bernard and Napoleon – they've all passed through Italy's high north-eastern limits, a small region of prodigious peaks (including Monte Bianco, Monte Rosa and Cervino (also known as the Matterhorn). Today, some here speak Italian, others French or Walser German; many still use a Valdôtain patois. Under Mussolini the region was 'Italianised' with encouraged migration and language curbs, but today it's allowed a measure of autonomy. Skiing, cows, hydro electricity and metalworking pay the bills.

Something in the water

The Ligurian resort of Sestri Levante exerts quite a pull on romantic creative types. Danish author Hans Christian Andersen enjoyed a long stay in 1835, and the town now holds a children's literature competition in his name. Similarly, Richard Wagner took refuge in the town one night after being harried off the sea by a storm. Local hotels now claim, rather hopefully, that the event inspired parts of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

Duce in disguise

Mussolini was caught in Lombardy; discovered in Dongo, Lake Como, by a partisan checking German troop lorries in retreat in April 1945. The accompanying soldiers tried to pass Mussolini off as a drunken comrade, disguised with glasses, a greatcoat and Nazi helmet. The resistance fighter who spotted him, Urbano Lazzaro, subsequently became something of a celebrity as Partisan Bill, writing about his role in the demise of *Il Duce*.

Piedmont

Sit up straight; Italy's second largest region is a place of business and industry, the dynamic doer of French influence that initiated Italian Unification in the 19th century. Turin is the hub, an undemonstrative (by Italian standards) city of cars (it's home to Fiat), Baroque porticoes and breadsticks (*grissini*). Piedmont's alpine landscape softens south and east of Turin, flattening to paddy fields alongside the widening Po River.

Liguria

Liguria, with its forested, scented hills, crowns the warm Gulf of Genoa like a luxuriant head of green hair. Most are drawn here by the stretch of Riviera, a less uptight affair than its French counterpart. Genoa, the sole sizeable city, is a hard modern port with a soft medieval centre. A once powerful republic, it bore confident characters like Columbus and Garibaldi. Cliffside villages like Portofino have inspired artists and writers for centuries – just ask Guy de Maupassant, Lord Byron and Truman Capote (if you can rouse them).

Lombardy

Italy's most self-assured region envelops the Alps, the flat Pianura Padana and the country's finest lakes (Como, Maggiore and Garda are all here). Milan has fashion houses and fiscal clout (location for Italy's stock exchange, the Borsa), while the environs sprawl with industry, closing in on architecturally blessed old towns. Southerners talk of a superiority complex; the Lombards don't care. Their name derives from 'long beards', recalling Germanic occupants of old.

Trentino-Alto Adige

No really, we are Italian. It's just that we speak German, eat schnitzel and some of us want to be independent from Italy. Trentino (the more Italian half to the south)-Alto Adige (the fundamentally Austrian bit to the north, also called Süd Tirol) is a two-faced tease. Tour guides describe a harmonious meeting of cultures, but it can

feel more like a skirmish. When Mussolini compelled Südtiroleans to choose one camp or the other in the late 1930s, most chose the other, and moved north to Austria, under Nazi rule at the time. Scenically, the western end of the Dolomites distract from the identity crisis.

Friuli-Venezia Giulia

Italy and Central Europe meet in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, an autonomous, ethnically mixed north-east region of mountains, plains and coastline. It got the worst parts of the 20th century; blood-soaked in the First World War then bled dry by the Fascists, Nazis and Communists. The main city, Trieste, a large port, encapsulates the different flavours: built by Austrian Habsburg overlords in the 18th century, today it's an Italian city hemmed in by Slovenia. All parties unite in moaning about the region's freezing north-easterly wind, the Bora.

Respecting the old landlord

North-east Italy is sometimes referred to as Venetia, a region that includes much of modern day Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, bits of Lombardy and Trentino, and harks back to the territories of the once robust and 'Most Serene' Venetian Republic.



Veneto

The wealthy Veneto lands reach from the Austrian border in the Dolomites to the Adriatic coast. Venice, once the hub of a republic that dominated Mediterranean trade for centuries, merits its reputation as a breathtaking city of canals, medieval palazzos and artistic treasures. Inland, across the rice fields, vineyards and patches of industry, lie Padua, where Giotto redirected European art 700 years ago with naturalistic, reverent frescos, and Verona, with its Roman amphitheatre, so well suited for staging full-blooded opera.

"VENICE IS LIKE EATING AN ENTIRE BOX OF CHOCOLATE LIQUEURS IN ONE GO."

Truman Capote

Five cultural icons from the north

Umberto Eco

(Piedmont). Apparently 'Eco' is an acronym of *ex caelis oblatus* (a gift from the heavens), given to Umberto's grandfather, a founding, by a creative civil servant.

Dario Fo (Lombardy).

The playwright helped his father smuggle Allied soldiers through Lombardy to Switzerland during the war.

Pier Paolo Pasolini

(Emilia-Romagna). The inveterate lefty was born in Bologna to a father who distinguished himself by saving Mussolini's life.

Niccolò Paganini

(Liguria). Took up the mandolin, aged five, in Genoa under his father's tuition, and conquered the violin two years later.

Italo Svevo (Friuli-Venezia Giulia). When the writer was born in Trieste, it was still in Austro-Hungarian hands.

Emilia-Romagna

Straddling northern Italy, the old, frequently foggy provinces of Emilia and Romagna used to form bits of the Papal States, which may explain a 20th century leaning away from the Church to the left (Communists held power here in the 1970s and 80s). Under-appreciated Bologna, the big city, has delicate arcades and some of the finest food in Italy. Modena has a leaning tower (up yours Pisa) and its balsamic vinegar, while Parma enjoys its *prosciutto* and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. All three cities are on the Via Aemilia, a Roman road named for consul Marcus Aemilius Lepidus in 187BC.

ii. Central Italy

Central Italy is the prime guardian of Italy's cultural heritage (whatever northerners might tell you). In Florence and Rome it has the finest Renaissance cities in Europe, each with its trove of art and architecture. And with its hills, cypress trees and medieval villages, the landscape is more powerfully 'Italian' than anywhere else on the peninsula.

Tuscany

Tuscany's legion foreign (and Italian) fans will attest to its beauty, to the rolling vineyards, hilltop towns and marbled cathedrals. Artists, architects and writers made this the





Campanilismo on horseback

Siena's famous Palio, the biannual breakneck horserace around the city's broad Piazza del Campo, is among the most celebrated expressions of Italian *campanilismo*, of civic pride. It's all about supporting the horse from your own *contrade* (city ward), of which there are 17 (at one time there were over 50). In Siena the riders began on buffalo, later moved to donkeys and finally settled on horseback in 1656. Today only ten horses run, with the *contradas* represented on a rotating basis. The 'palio' originally referred to the piece of silk cloth given as a prize to the race winner. The Palio d'Asti, a similar, even older race dating to the 13th century, rides round a town in Piedmont each September.

centre of the Renaissance world: Dante and Boccaccio ensured the national tongue had Tuscan roots; and Michelangelo, da Vinci, Brunelleschi, Botticelli et al did the decorating. When the crowds in Florence, Pisa, Siena and San Gimignano get too much, seek out Apennine tranquillity or untroubled medieval villages.

Umbria

Or 'Tuscany in waiting' if the hype is believed. Umbria has the Renaissance art, the architecture and the medieval hilltop towns, but, as yet, not the hubbub of its neighbour. A certain humility, born perhaps of aged piety (it was another Papal State), has settled over the green landscape: St Francis (Assisi, his home patch, is the region's prime tourist town), St Benedict and St Valentine were all Umbrian. All this and mountains, the River Tiber and the largest lake south of Garda, Lago Trasimeno.

Marche

With Adriatic to one side and Apennines on the other, Marche feels sequestered. All the ingredients of central Italy are here – sleepy hilltop towns, snow-capped mountains (the Monti Sibillini range), monasteries, Etruscan remains, Renaissance cities (Urbino, Raphael's hometown is the finest; Ascoli Piceno, the quietest) – but there is little of the potential for mania, perhaps a reflection of the region's former role collecting taxes for the pope.

"NEVER, IN ITS
BLOODIEST PRIME,
CAN THE SIGHT
OF THE GIGANTIC
COLISEUM, FULL
AND RUNNING
OVER WITH THE
LUSTIEST LIFE,
HAVE MOVED ONE
HEART, AS IT MUST
MOVE ALL WHO
LOOK UPON IT
NOW, A RUIN."

Charles Dickens

Abruzzo's got talent

Abruzzo's brooding, empty feel has much to do with the landscape, but the fact that locals migrated in droves in the 20th century didn't help. Many went to America. In particular, the 'musical' gene pool upped and left: Madonna, Dean Martin, Perry Como and Henry Mancini all had Abruzzan parents.

Lazio

Italy often pokes fun at Lazio, at its relative poverty, slow development and lack of identity. The region has to contend with Rome in its midst, overshadowing the parched farmland, hills and volcanic lakes that form the landscape. But the Latin story began here, as the outlying region proves with Etruscan necropolises and well-preserved Roman remains, notably at Hadrian's Tivoli villa and Ostia Antica, Rome's ancient port. For foreigners, rural Lazio has the lure of being largely untroubled by other visitors. Not so Rome of course. But Rome is worthy of its crowds. The city's prime talent is to make you feel part of a living process, part of the cultural evolution that deposited the Romans' Pantheon, Michelangelo's Renaissance ceiling and Bernini's Baroque fountains, rather than a visitor at the world's biggest museum.

Abruzzo

This is central Italy at its most feral; a wild region of mountains (the Apennines reach their height in the Gran Sasso massif) and silent valleys that still shelter bears, chamois and wolves. Ski and beach resorts bring a share of visitors, but most come for the large national parks. A tradition of folklore and mysticism (and a reputation for witchcraft) add to the Middle Earth ambience. L'Aquila is the earthquake prone capital, but the medieval hill villages around (some abandoned), all but bypassed by the 20th century, are more interesting.

Molise

In 1963 Molise parted company with Abruzzo (or the Abruzzi as Molise and three provinces in Abruzzo are collectively known) and went solo. Scenically it's in the untamed Abruzzo mould, albeit with lower hills, but culturally it's distinct: many here descend from medieval Balkan settlers. It has its Roman remains, notably at Saepinum, a little visited walled town, but also boasts Europe's oldest human settlement at Isernia (700,000 years old). Such delights haven't stopped the region's population dwindling: fewer people live here now than 150 years ago.

Five cultural icons from the centre

Alberto Moravia (Lazio). The author from Rome began writing during a five-year childhood stint confined to bed with TB of the bone.

Monica Bellucci (Umbria). The multilingual model and actress was born in Città di Castello, once home to Pliny the Younger.

Gabriele d'Annunzio (Abruzzo). Son to the mayor in Pescara, young Gabriele was already publishing poetry at the age of 16.

Gioachino Rossini (Marche). Spent his childhood years in theatres, where his father scraped a living playing the trumpet.

Sandro Botticelli (Tuscany). Like his fellow Florentine master, Donatello, the young Botticelli was apparently apprenticed to a goldsmith.

iii. Southern Italy

Southern Italy, the *Mezzogiorno* as it's frequently labelled, is still regularly written off. Too often, the tales of unemployment, poverty, corruption and neglect are true; almost everything south of Rome, the islands of Sicily and Sardinia included, has suffered centuries of hardship. But this ignores the south's charm, its inherent lust for life (insouciance was always a luxury too far down here), unparalleled cuisine, multi-ethnic culture and largely unspoilt scenery, all of which, finally, is starting to get the attention it deserves.

Campania

Campania gathers around Naples and its sweeping bay. The city is dense and lively; its art treasures, Renaissance buildings, fine food and atmosphere of disobedience creating a real cultural buzz. Nearby lies Mount Vesuvius, and Pompeii and Herculaneum, the Roman towns it buried. The Campi Flegrei (Fiery Fields), a steamy patch of craters west of Naples, include Lago d'Averno, pinpointed by Virgil as the entrance to Hades. South of Naples, the Amalfi Coast is renowned for dramatic towns and large, knobbly lemons. Venture inland and Campania becomes quieter, poorer and rockier.

The oldest and the smallest: nations within a nation

San Marino. A tiny throwback to Italy's pre-Unification days, the republic shouts loud about being 'Europe's oldest state' (apparently established by Marinus, a stonemason, 1,700 years ago). It's a collection of small settlements on top of a big rock sandwiched between Emilia-Romagna and Marche.

Vatican. The smallest independent state in the world (now, that *is* something to shout about), ensconced in Rome, is the HQ of the Roman Catholic Church. The Vatican wrestles to reconcile its dazzling cultural heritage with the demands of modern life: not so long ago archaeologists stumbled across a Roman necropolis while excavating an underground car park. Among the remains, they found terracotta tubes once used by mourning families to feed honey to the dead.

Trulli strange

The roofs of the whitewashed, windowless stone *trulli* of Puglia are often daubed with symbols. Some are ancient, paying homage to Jupiter, Saturn or Mercury; others are Christian or Jewish.

Puglia

Italy's hot heel stretches 400km (250 miles), from the Tavoliere plain (a former sea bed) of the north, a sea of corn in summer, to the Salento peninsula in the south, its reddy-brown dust broken by olive groves and vineyards arranged in family plots. A centuries-long cycle of invasion deposited Germanic castles, Romanesque cathedrals and Spanish Baroque frippery (at its best in Lecce). Pointy *trulli* houses and whitewashed hill towns on the Salento peninsula recall Greek connections.

Basilicata

Inaccessible and rocky, Basilicata has been held in check by grinding poverty for centuries. Finally, the shackles are loosening. The hilltop town of Matera, with its *sassi* (dugout caves), has gone from malarial slum to UNESCO World Heritage site in 30 years, while Maratea, on the Tyrrhenian coast, now draws tourists. Basilicata's isolation was such that 'agitators' were exiled here under the Fascists. One such figure, Carlo Levi, famously described the region's daily struggle for survival in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (1945).

Calabria

Like Basilicata, Calabria is *Mezzogiorno* proper, a world away from slick Turin or Milan. Poverty has been virtually endemic since Magna Graecia declined under the Romans. Elements of the Greek heritage survive, although earthquakes have reshaped the once great classical cities (often in dull concrete), regional capital Reggio di Calabria included. Calabria is mountainous (there's even a ski resort in the toe tip Aspromonte highlands), bordered on three sides by long, unspoilt beaches. The slow pace of progress is hampered by the pervasive Calabrian Mafia, the internationally powerful 'Ndrangheta.

Sicily

Strange to think that Italian unity launched from Sicily (with Garibaldi's Red Shirts (see section 1.2.3 for more)), a region so close to Africa. A succession of foreign overlords – Greek, Arab, Norman, Spanish, Bourbon – left their mark on the ethnic mix, the food and the language. Palermo, the capital, is intense, a city that's monetarily poor but culturally rich. The Mafia still has an impact on life, although few will mention it (the culture of *omertà* also runs deep). Etna, the volcanic giant, is the high point of mountains that stretch across the sparsely populated interior.

Sardinia

Like Sicily, Sardinia has a multicultural past featuring a similar cast of invaders and traders. Carthage, Rome, Pisa, Genoa, Madrid: all set up camp here and left elements of their culture behind, although the most distinctive buildings, the basalt-built fortresses of the native Nuraghic culture, predate them all. Modern Sardinia mixes glossy, expensive resorts with fine empty beaches and an interior of restful, wooded hills. The Sardinians have a reputation as a hardworking, dogged (somewhat un-Italian) bunch.

Five cultural icons from the south

Salvatore Quasimodo (Sicily). The Modica-born poet moved to Messina, aged eight, where the aftermath of a devastating earthquake informed his early verse.

Sophia Loren (Campania). Sired by cats (not really, mum was a piano teacher) in Pozzuoli, near Naples, the young Loren was hit by shrapnel when the local munitions factory was bombed in the war.

Gianni Versace (Calabria). Reggio di Calabria's famous fashion designer began helping out his mother, a dressmaker, at an early age.

Rudolph Valentino (Puglia). Born to a vet who died of malaria soon after, the actor Valentino himself died young, from peritonitis contracted after surgery on a perforated ulcer.

Pier Angeli (Sardinia). The starlet from Cagliari dated James Dean and Kirk Douglas in the 50s, and was lined up for a part in *The Godfather* when she overdosed on barbiturates in 1971.

Draw me ten Hail Marys

When restorers began chipping whitewash off the walls of a university building in Palermo, Sicily, in 2006, they found graffiti left by prisoners awaiting interrogation by the Spanish Inquisition in the early 17th century. A life-size St Andrew and a crying Mary Magdalene were among the drawings, sketched by inmates either in a bid to prove their Christian credentials or under duress from their captors.

