

# Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



## Double the pleasure

A two centre break in Rome and Umbria offers the best of Italy's capital and countryside, writes **Rosalind Erskine**

While Paris may be seen as the ultimate city of romance, it is Italy that holds the key to many hearts. With its history, world-renowned food and wine and beautiful landscapes, Italy will always delight no matter how many times you visit.

If a trip that includes a city break and a country retreat is what you're looking for then a couple of days in Rome followed by a tour of Umbria – one of Italy's central regions – will tick those boxes.

If you want to be close to the action of the Eternal City but feel a million miles away too, then a stay at the contemporary A.ROMA hotel is a must. Just 15 minutes away from the Vatican City, the hotel's location within the rolling green hills on the outskirts of the city centre makes it the best of both worlds.

Having recently been brought

up to date by owners LDC Hotels, the A.ROMA caters for business guests – it has become well known for its conference facilities – as well as those looking for a city break. Through a dark, sliding glass door lies the minimalist lobby, complete with modern artwork and masses of marble, giving a nod to Rome's history. The design of the building itself and accents in the décor include subtle Asian touches – mixing east with west.

Consisting of 276 rooms – this is by no means a boutique affair – it is still possible to find peace and quiet within the large private gardens or by the outdoor pool, where it is easy to forget that the bustling city is nearby.

While Italy and indeed Rome are

*Views across the city from the top floor bar are unparalleled*



Iconic Rome attraction the Colosseum, main; the exterior of the Villa Monte Solare in Umbria, above

famed for their cuisine, it is of no surprise that the hotel's offering is top class – if a bit unexpected. Catering for international tastes of all sorts, the Saponi dal Mondo restaurant comprises no less than ten food stations that serve menus from all over the world. With live cooking stations and a street-food feel, this restaurant is perfect for families or solo business travellers looking for a quick bite. A fresh buffet-style dining experience allows guests to sample everything from a freshly-baked pizza and an American feast, to an array of fine Asian delicacies.

Il Giardino Bar is an altogether more formal affair, without being

stuffy. Serving lunch and dinner on a shaded terrace, the menu here has all the Italian delights from basic but delicious pasta to caprese salads, plus a range of cocktails and drinks. Healthy options are also available, as are those with Asian influences.

After dinner, guests can make their way to the speakeasy-style Sky Star Bar. Located on the top floor of the hotel, a simple ring of the bell will alert staff to open the doors to the bar, which seats only a small number of guests. Views across the city are unparalleled, and although perfectly located, the bar may be missing a trick as sundowner drinks aren't possible due to the 9pm opening.

In addition to the modern interior and well-positioned location, A.ROMA'S crowning glory is its spa – SPA.ROMA. Set over 2,500sqm, guests can indulge in facilities that include a salt water pool, Finnish sauna, cold fog showers, Turkish baths and a biosauna. Treatments range from bespoke massages and facials (which I would recommend) to more cosmetic offerings.

While a city break is all well and good, the ability to be able to truly get



away from it all is an enticing option, which is why a trip to Villa Monte Solare (also owned by LDC Hotels) makes for the perfect escape.

Once the private home of an aristocratic family, the beautiful villa is situated within the hills of Umbria and close to neighbouring Perugia. The history of the building goes as far back as 1780, and the immediate grounds are home to a charming church and Lemon House, now the spa – both of which date back to the 16th century when the villa was a convent.

It's hard to imagine a more tranquil setting, which is why it is easy to understand how Villa Monte Solare has become a luxury spa destination – and so much more. With around 80 hectares of land, covered in more than 3,000 olive trees (some of which are over 200 years old), the villa is also a destination for guests who want to explore the Umbrian countryside and all its delicacies, as well as indulge in a relaxing retreat. Activities include biking, hiking, truffle hunting, wine tasting, olive oil tasting and cooking classes (which are held in the Villa's on-site kitchen, created specially for guests).

Inside, the history and charm of the villa is evident in the original features, which range from murals to cotto floors and period furniture. Any modern additions, such as TVs and a Jacuzzi bath, have been done sympathetically and with the overall look and feel in mind.

With only 25 rooms, each with their own unique quirks (one bed has a former fireplace as its headboard, and many include hand-painted, floral wall art), it is the beautiful views of the Umbrian hills that are the piece

de résistance here. Although the space and tranquillity come a close second.

Restaurant Dolium makes the most of its home-grown produce and wines to deliver daily and seasonal dishes characteristic of the region – a true taste of Umbria. Each dish is topped off with the most flavoursome olive oil that is produced from their very own olive trees. Healthy, hearty and tasty would be the best way to describe the cuisine at Dolium.

After a day exploring the beautiful countryside and quaint villages (or relaxing by one of the two pools on the jade green and wooden vintage-style sun loungers), a visit to the spa is a welcome indulgence at Villa Monte Solare. Le Muse Wellness can be found in the Villa's beautiful gardens in the former Lemon House.

The complete peace of the setting is ideal for a relaxing, bespoke massage. Here you'll find options such as a 'red wine' massage, which includes a plate of local cheese, meat and wine after, to the Mont Saint Michel Treatment, which uses mud from the Bay of Mont Saint Michel.

It is not just the location, wonderful food and activities but space and peace that can be found in spades when staying at Villa Monte Solare that truly sets it apart. ■

**Flights from Edinburgh to Rome Ciampino Airport with Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) start from £12.99. A deluxe double room in the A.ROMA hotel (www.hotel-aroma.com) starts from €450 per night. Classic rooms at Villa Monte Solare (www.villamontesolare.com/en/) start from €149 per night (average mid-season rate).**



A room at the Villa Monte Solare, top; the pool at the A.ROMA hotel, above

SHORT HAUL



# Reflected glory

Bordeaux, once a sleepy gateway to its famed vineyards, is now a vibrant destination in its own right, says Gaby Soutar

Young people used to leave Bordeaux," says our tour guide, Veronique, "Now they stay because the rent is cheaper than Paris, but it's still a vibrant place."

Indeed, if you want a French break, but have exhausted the capital, visit this elegant port city instead.

According to resident Veronique, who leads walking tours for Bordeaux Tourisme, it's changed over the last few two decades. No longer just a gateway to the wine regions, it's a destination in its own right.

She leads us down side streets to show us some ancient blocks that haven't been cleaned up.

"Does Edinburgh still have black buildings, like this?" she asks.

I suppose it does, but most of Bordeaux's 18th century boulevards are lined with honey-coloured limestone blocks. (This material, which makes the region so fertile for vines, is the same stuff that makes the Garonne, which flows through the centre of town, beige).

Cours de l'Intendance is one such pristine street, with trams silently hurtling down its centre. Veronique shows us which shops have sprung up, including a branch of upmarket chain & Other Stories.

However, independent places also survive nearby, like bookshop Librairie Mollat, La Parfumerie Bordelaise and a swanky new lifestyle store, Rainbow ("You used to only get places like this in Paris," says Veronique proudly).

We pass by the Grand Theatre, then we're onto the Place de la Bourse by the Pont de Pierre bridge, where you'll find the 11-year-old Miroir d'eau water feature. It forms a flat pool to reflect the grand buildings and, every 15 minutes, the jets puff up fog, to signal the cycle is beginning again and tourists can assemble for selfies.

We'd found the ideal vantage point for this attraction, and almost everything else, in our four-star townhouse Le Boutique Hotel.

Our room was the comfortable Suite Chateau Haut Brion (all the rooms are named after wine chateaux). Its slightly wacky focal point is a giant bath, slap-bang in the middle of the room and framed by voile drapes, pictures of stars like Audrey Hepburn and a cinema-style flood light. Ooh-la-la.

But if that was for extroverted bathers only, there were also double beds as soft as ripe Camembert and a welcome sample of one of this city's

signature treat, the canele (a sort of rum pastry). Breakfast, served by their team of cheerful young staff, is a relaxed Continental affair, with, among other things, muesli, hams, cheese, and about 20 types of confiture. Wine and dinner – tapas-style – is also served on the ground floor, and on their leafy terrace.

There's a relaxed vibe to the hotel, and we would've liked to have lingered, but the city was calling.

If you're planning a packed itinerary, the tourist office's CityPass is available in three lengths of time (€29 for 24 hours, €39 for 48 hours or €46 for 72 hours) and, as well as free admission to almost every museum and gallery, it covers public transport.

*I anticipated a worthy but dull museum experience, but La Cité du Vin is mesmerising*

Entry to the 18-month-old La Cité du Vin is also included. We took the BatCub ferry across the Garonne to see this amazing building, which was inspired by the eddies of the river and wine swirling in a glass.

I anticipated a worthy but dull museum experience, but this place is mesmerising, from the holographic actors in tiny viewing boxes, to interactive games and sensorial exhibits. Visits are rounded off with

**Clockwise from main: the Place de la Bourse reflected in the Miroir d'eau; La Cité du Vin; the Suite Chateau Haut Brion at the Le Boutique Hotel**

a glass of wine in their top floor Belvedere bar, with its panoramic views of the city.

For more sky-high vistas, visit Tour Pey-Berland (free admission with the CityPass) which is part of the Cathédrale Saint-André and near many of the city's museums, like Musée des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux and Musée d'Aquitaine.

It's a tight squeeze up 231 steps, with Les Dawson-esque gargoyles along the highest steeple, where I had an attack of the collywobblers.

Back down onto firm terroir, and we still had so much more to do – the Capucin and Chartron markets, the CAPC contemporary gallery, not to mention a sampling of their edible specialities, which include entrecôte, eel, and duck confit.

Before all that, I found that a glass of Bordeaux's eponymous vin back in Le Boutique was the best medicine for any post-vertigo symptoms. ■

**Le Boutique Hotel, 3 Rue Lafaurie Monbadon, Bordeaux (www.hotel-bordeauxcentre.com/eng/). A double Elegance Room starts from €189. For more on the city, tours and for a CityPass, see www.bordeaux-tourisme.com. La Cité du Vin, 134 Quai de Bacalan, Bordeaux (www.laciteduvin.com/en)**



48 HOURS IN

## London

**Friday, midday**  
Check into the Jumeirah Lowndes (doubles from £227, www.jumeirah.com), a luxurious retreat in Belgravia.

**12:30pm**  
Head over to Covent Garden and Balthazar (www.balthazarlondon.com), as authentic a Parisian brasserie as you will find in London, with superb steaks and wines.

**2pm**  
The new Postal Museum (www.postalmuseum.org) opened last year, offering an insight into mail delivery through the ages and the unique experience of travelling deep below London's streets on an old mail transporter train.

**7pm**  
Savvy diners will notice the cuisine on offer at the recently relocated Leong's Legend (tel: 020-7287 028) is Taiwanese rather than Chinese, but it's as good as anything else you will find in Chinatown, with nods to Korean cuisine too.

**Saturday, 10am**  
Snare a Thames Clippers (www.thamesclippers.com) Roamer pass and head to the Battersea Power Station Pier. Take in this rapidly changing quarter before heading further upriver.

**10:30am**  
Get off at the ferry pier next to another of London's reborn former power stations on Bankside, which now houses the Tate Modern (www.tate.org.uk). The Turbine Hall is arguably the capital's most striking exhibition space.

BARGAIN BREAKS

**Catch a deal at the Trout**  
The four star Trout Hotel in Cumbria is holding a Secret Sleep Sale where guests can book any room from just £5 per person if they dine in the hotel, during the remaining weekends in January (19-21 and 26-28). Order three courses from their fixed price dinner menu (£24.95) in the hotel's AA Rosette Derwent Restaurant and pay for breakfast (£15) the next morning in order to qualify for this offer. Available on a first come first served basis.

**Call 01900 823591 or see www.trouthotel.co.uk**

**Jet off to Bali**  
Netflights.com is offering a seven-



**Midday**  
Enjoy lunch laden with fresh seasonal ingredients at the Tate Modern's restaurant – the views are as engaging as the art.

**2:30pm**  
Hop back on a Thames Clippers ferry and zoom downriver as far as Greenwich, cutting a swathe through the heart of London. Enjoy a drink in the café checking out everything you missed on the way down.

**7pm**  
The Lowndes Bar & Kitchen is worth staying in for. Savour king scallops spiced with chorizo to start before a perfectly cooked ribeye steak.

**Sunday, 9am**  
Stroll along the city's famous South Bank. The Sea Life London Aquarium (www.visitsealife.com) offers cute penguins, a massive pool of rays and sharks, plus exhibits on ongoing attempts to save the world's oceans. ■

**The Caledonian Sleeper travels to London from Edinburgh or Glasgow (www.sleeper.scot) overnight with a choice of beds or reclining seats.**

**Robin McKelvie**

night holiday to Bali, Indonesia, staying at the five star Grand Hyatt Bali on a B&B basis. Prices start from £1,069pp (saving up to £375 per couple) including flights from Glasgow. Book by 31 January for selected dates in June 2018.

**See www.netflights.com**

**Going Dutch**  
Take a short break with Travel Republic to Amsterdam, with prices from £294pp for a three-night trip that includes accommodation at the four-star Lloyd Hotel and return flights from Edinburgh on 6 February. **Call 020 8974 7200 or see www.travelrepublic.co.uk**