

# Twelve Towns

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Twelve Italian villages in twelve different regions, none of them on a tour bus route. What happened in each one, how you actually get there, and what nobody selling you a trip will tell you.

Population figures: Istat, 1 January 2026.

Driving times are estimates from road routing, not certified data.

Check opening hours and festival dates with the town before you travel.

# Read this first

Most lists of hidden Italian villages are the same eight places, and they are not hidden. This one has a rule: one town per region, none of them in the standard rotation, and every one of them chosen because something specific happened there that you can still go and look at.

A witchcraft trial whose transcripts survive. A village the state ordered evacuated, that refused to leave. A Roman town built where the sheep trails crossed. A salt mine with sculptures cut into the walls. The point is not that these places are pretty. Plenty of Italy is pretty. The point is that each one is about something.

Every entry ends with a section called *the honest part*. It is where the beds run out, where the road closes, where the festival was cancelled, where the museum keeps hours that will waste your afternoon. A guide that leaves that out is selling you something.

## ONE THING WORTH KNOWING BEFORE YOU PLAN

Eleven of these twelve towns are effectively unreachable without a car. Italy's small-town rail and bus service is not built for visitors with luggage, and the timetables published online are frequently wrong. Budget for a hire car, and budget for the drive being slower than the map says.

# 01 Triora

LIGURIA · 419 RESIDENTS

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Between 1587 and 1589 an inquisitor sent from Genoa tried thirteen women of this village for witchcraft. They were healers and herbalists, and the famine was blamed on them. The transcripts of their interrogations are still held in the State Archive in Genoa.

One bakery is left. It makes low, round loaves of about 850 grams, scored with a square on the crust, risen overnight, good for a week. Triora was the granary of the Genoese Republic and there was only ever one communal oven.

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## GETTING THERE

Nice (NCE) is the nearest international airport, about two hours by car; Genoa about two and a half. The last thirty-five kilometres are a narrow provincial road up the Argentina valley.

## WHEN

Strigora, the historical re-enactment, falls on the Sunday after 15 August. Otherwise late spring and early autumn.

## THE HONEST PART

Four hundred and nineteen people live here, so there are almost no beds. The witchcraft museum is small and part of it is being moved. Winter closes most things. You need a car.

## 02 Ostana

PIEDMONT · 78 RESIDENTS

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By the 1980s fewer than ten people still lived in Ostana, all of them old. A century earlier there had been more than a thousand. From 1985 the village rebuilt its stone houses and made the Occitan language the thing it organised itself around.

It worked. The average age is now around thirty-seven. A bakery opened in 2019. There is a doctor's post and a tiny school. The stated goal is one hundred residents.

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### GETTING THERE

Turin (TRN). The municipality gives the distance as seventy-five kilometres from Turin, roughly two hours. No train reaches the village.

### WHEN

June to September, when the road is easy and the services are open.

### THE HONEST PART

Seventy-eight residents means seventy-eight residents. Book months ahead. One bakery, no supermarket. The road up is steep and winter can require chains. There is nothing to do here except walk and talk.

## 03 Venzone

FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA · 1,941 RESIDENTS

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The earthquakes of 6 May and 11 September 1976 flattened this walled town. It was rebuilt where it stood and as it stood: every stone numbered and put back. The centre is now a national monument.

In the crypt of the chapel of San Michele are the mummies of Venzone, bodies found from 1647 onward in the tombs of the cathedral, dried out by a natural process rather than embalmed.

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### GETTING THERE

Trieste (TRS) is about a hundred kilometres, an hour and a quarter. Venzone has a working station on the Udine-Tarvisio line, about forty minutes from Udine.

### WHEN

May to June and September to October.

### THE HONEST PART

The Pumpkin Festival that made Venzone famous was cancelled in 2024 and again in 2025. Check with the town before planning around it. The crypt keeps seasonal hours, and the railway line closes for works.

## 04 **Calcata**

LAZIO · 905 RESIDENTS

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In 1935 the mayor registered Calcata among the towns to be moved under a 1908 law on settlements threatened by landslides. Anyone who relocated within ten years would get a hundred square metres free in the new site. Nobody went.

Two laws in 1939 protected the village as a historic and landscape asset. The new Calcata was finished in 1959 and the transfers began in 1966, but by then artists and architects from Rome had moved into the emptied houses. They are still there.

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### GETTING THERE

Rome Fiumicino (FCO), about seventy kilometres, a little over an hour. There is no station and the bus is slow and rare.

### WHEN

April to June and September to October, at weekends, when the workshops are open.

### THE HONEST PART

It is an hour from Rome, so on a fine weekend it fills with Romans. Cars stay outside; you walk in. Some of the workshops lean new-age. Almost nobody stays the night.

# 05 Santo Stefano di Sessanio

ABRUZZO · 102 RESIDENTS

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The Medici tower came down in the earthquake of 6 April 2009. It was rebuilt using the original blocks and reopened on 8 October 2021, twelve years later, for a village of a hundred and two people.

Under the Medici this was a centre of the carfagna wool trade across Europe. Since the 2000s the abandoned houses have been bought and restored as a scattered hotel, without adding anything foreign to the original material. The lentils grown above 1,200 metres are a Slow Food presidium.

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## GETTING THERE

Rome Fiumicino (FCO), about a hundred and eighty kilometres, two and a quarter hours by the A24. Not realistically reachable by train: you drive the last thirty kilometres of mountain road.

## WHEN

June to September. The Campo Imperatore bloom is in June, the lentil harvest at the end of August.

## THE HONEST PART

One hundred and two residents. The accommodation is dominated by one luxury operation. At 1,229 metres winter brings snow and road closures. No pharmacy, no bank, no shop.

## 06 Sepino

MOLISE · 1,815 RESIDENTS

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Saepinum-Altilia is a complete Roman town: gate, forum, basilica, theatre. What makes it unlike any other is why it is shaped the way it is. The street plan was laid out where the Pescasseroli-Candela drove road crossed the road down from the Matese.

For centuries the transhumance flocks walked straight along the decumanus. Farmhouses are still built into and on top of the ruins.

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### GETTING THERE

Naples (NAP), about a hundred and thirty kilometres, under two hours. Molise is the least served region in Italy; without a car this is close to impossible.

### WHEN

April to June and September to October. There is no shade in July and August. Open daily 8:15 to 19:15.

### THE HONEST PART

Almost no beds in the town itself; base yourself in Campobasso or Bojano. Signage and interpretation in English are thin, so a guide is worth it. Outside the site there is little.



# 07 Roscigno

CAMPANIA • 570 RESIDENTS

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Roscigno Vecchia is an entire village left standing and empty. Under the landslide laws of 1902 and 1908 the inhabitants were ordered to a new settlement a kilometre or two away. The move took decades; the exodus came in the 1960s.

The square, the church, the fountain and the houses stayed as they were. The old rectory and town hall now hold a museum of peasant life, around five hundred objects across six rooms.

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## GETTING THERE

Naples (NAP), about a hundred and fifty kilometres, roughly two hours. No usable train; the nearest station is forty kilometres away.

## WHEN

April to June and September to October. Museum 9 to 13, and 15 to 17 at weekends.

## THE HONEST PART

Giuseppe Spagnuolo, for over twenty years the only resident and the face of the village in dozens of reports, died on 20 January 2024. What you find now is a village that is genuinely empty. Almost no accommodation.

## 08 Specchia

PUGLIA · 4,453 RESIDENTS

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Under the streets of the old centre runs a network of underground oil mills cut into the rock, in use from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. Oil was pressed below ground at a constant temperature, and the millers lived down there for months at a time during the pressing season.

Above ground: the sixteenth-century Risolo castle on the main square, and a Franciscan crypt held up by thirty-six columns.

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### GETTING THERE

Brindisi (BDS), about a hundred and ten kilometres, an hour and a half. The local railway exists but is unreliable and the station serves three towns from outside the built-up area.

### WHEN

May to June and September to October. Specchia is inland and cooler than the coast, which is why it makes sense in high summer.

### THE HONEST PART

In July and August the whole Salento is congested and expensive. The underground mills are by appointment only, not walk-in. Half a day is enough: use it as a base, not a destination.

# 09 Castelvezzano

BASILICATA · 684 RESIDENTS

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About fifty narrow steps cut straight into the sandstone climb to the highest point of a Norman-Swabian fort, where a lookout watched the Basento valley. It is not a viewing platform built for visitors. It is the original way up, and you climb it holding the rock.

The village itself is wedged inside the rock spires of the Lucanian Dolomites in a way that has no equivalent in Italy.

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## GETTING THERE

Bari (BRI), about a hundred and thirty kilometres, a little over two hours. No useful train.

## WHEN

First Sunday in May for the Quagliata festival; 19 August for San Rocco; 12 and 13 September for the Festa del Majo.

## THE HONEST PART

In July and August the zip line between here and Pietrapertosa fills the village. Come in May or September. The access roads are narrow, parking is minimal, and the stair is not for anyone with vertigo.

# 10 Stilo

CALABRIA · 2,306 RESIDENTS

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The Cattolica di Stilo is a Byzantine chapel of the ninth or tenth century built against the rock: a square plan, three apses facing east, five brick domes, and four interior columns probably taken from the ruins of Greek Kaulon. It is considered the most intact Byzantine building in Italy.

Tommaso Campanella, who wrote *The City of the Sun*, was born here in 1568 and organised the anti-Spanish conspiracy of 1599 in this town. It cost him twenty-seven years in prison.

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## GETTING THERE

Lamezia Terme (SUF), about a hundred and ten kilometres, an hour and forty. The Monasterace-Stilo station is nine kilometres away on the Ionian line, with an Intercity stop since 2023.

## WHEN

Palio di Ribusa, the first week of August. For an empty Stilo, May or October.

## THE HONEST PART

The Cattolica keeps limited hours and can be shut out of season: telephone first. The Ionian railway is slow and infrequent. The beds are on the coast.

# 11 Petralia Soprana

SICILY · 2,807 RESIDENTS

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Beneath the town, in the Raffo district, there is a working rock-salt mine. Inside it, a space has been cut for sculptures carved out of the salt crystal itself, the home of an international salt sculpture biennial.

Above ground, the Church of the Saviour has an elliptical plan and is held to be the former mosque converted by the Normans. The Ballo della Cordella, a harvest thanksgiving danced on the threshing floor, is still performed.

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## GETTING THERE

Palermo (PMO), leaving the A19 at Irosa or Tremonzelli, roughly two hours. The town itself gives Cefalu and Termini Imerese as the nearest stations, both on the coast: the train is not an option.

## WHEN

25 to 29 June for the patronal feast; August for the Cordella and the Baronial Wedding on the evening of the 15th.

## THE HONEST PART

At 1,137 metres the Madonie winter is cold and snowy and the town empties. The salt mine is an active industrial site, not an attraction: access has to be arranged in advance. Without a car you cannot get here.

## 12 Orgosolo

SARDINIA • 3,803 RESIDENTS

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The murals begin in 1969 with the Dionysus Group, an anarchist collective led by Giancarlo Celli. The first political mural showed a map of Italy with a question mark where Sardinia should be, beside a woman in a stars-and-stripes top hat.

The year was not an accident. In 1969 the people of Orgosolo blocked the expropriation of common land for a military firing range. The walls have been a painted political archive ever since, and that is the part of this village that speaks to an American visitor.

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### GETTING THERE

Olbia (OLB), about a hundred and thirty kilometres, two hours. No train; the ARST buses from Nuoro are infrequent. A hire car is essential.

### WHEN

15 August for the Feast of the Assumption and the costumes. Otherwise May to June and September to October.

### THE HONEST PART

Orgosolo is not a pretty village. Much of it is 1960s and 1970s concrete, and the interest is political and visual rather than architectural. Coach parties stop for an hour in the middle of the day: come early or late. The bandit reputation is history, but the place is unpolished.

# What comes next

Each of these towns is a day. Putting four or five of them together into a route that works, with the drives, the nights and the meals in the right order, is a different problem, and it is the one that ruins most first trips to small Italy.

If you want the routes, the timings and the places we would actually book, that is what the newsletter is for. One letter a week, one place at a time.

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Sources. Population: Istat, 1 January 2026, via [tuttitalia.it](http://tuttitalia.it). Triora: Museo Etnografico e della Stregoneria, Ministero della Cultura. Ostana: Comune di Ostana. Venzone: Comune di Venzone; [venzoneturismo.it](http://venzoneturismo.it). Calcata: [visitcalcata.it](http://visitcalcata.it); Regione Lazio. Santo Stefano di Sessanio: Casa Italia, Presidenza del Consiglio; ANSA, 8 October 2021. Sepino: Parco archeologico di Sepino, Ministero della Cultura. Roscigno: [visitcilento.com](http://visitcilento.com). Specchia: Touring Club Italiano; Regione Puglia. Castelmezzano and Stilo: I Borghi piu belli d'Italia. Petralia Soprana: Comune di Petralia Soprana; Parco delle Madonie. Orgosolo: Comune di Orgosolo.