



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Italy, including the islands of Sardinia and Sicily, covers 116,348 square miles (301,340 square kilometers) and is slightly smaller than Norway and slightly larger than the U.S. state of Arizona. It boasts a variety of natural landscapes: from the alpine mountains in the north to the coastal lowlands in the south. Shaped like a boot, the country is generally mountainous. The Italian Alps run along the northern border, and the Apennines form a spine down the peninsula. Sicily and Sardinia are also rocky and mountainous. The “heel” and some coastal areas are flat. The Po River Basin, to the north, holds some of Italy's richest farmland and most of its heavy industry. Southern agricultural areas are subject to droughts. The climate is temperate but varies by region. Winters are cold and rainy in the north, cool around Rome, and mild in the south. Typical of the Mediterranean climate, summers in the south can be very hot (up to 104°F, or 40°C). The rest of the country usually experiences moderate summers.

Italy surrounds two independent nations: San Marino and Vatican City (Holy See). San Marino has been independent since the fourth century AD. Vatican City was governed by France for most of the 19th century until it was occupied by Italy in 1870, becoming a sovereign entity in 1929.

History

Much of the West's civilization and culture stems from the Italian Peninsula. The area's history dates back several thousand years; one of the first civilizations to flourish was

that of the Etruscans, between the eighth and second centuries BC. The Etruscans influenced mostly central Italy and, later, the Roman Empire. Before the Romans became prominent, Greek civilization dominated the south. Rome later adopted much of the Greek culture and became a major power after 300 BC as it expanded throughout the Mediterranean region. By the fifth century AD, the western Roman Empire had fallen to a number of invasions. The peninsula was then divided into several separate political regions. In addition to local rulers, French, Spanish, and Austrian leaders governed various parts of Italy. The Italian Peninsula was the center of many artistic, cultural, and architectural revolutions, including the great Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries.

The Italian unification movement, which was known as *Risorgimento*, began in the 1800s. The first Italian parliament in Turin declared national unification in 1861 and named Victor Emmanuel II king. The inclusion of Rome in 1870 completed unification.

Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini ruled the country from 1922 to 1943 and initially aided Adolf Hitler in World War II. In 1943, the Italian government overthrew the fascists, and the country lent its support to the Allies. Italy established itself as a republic in the 1946 elections, officially abolishing the monarchy by national referendum. Political violence and terrorism marked the 1970s. Conflicts within the coalition governments led to frequent government collapses during the 1980s.

Elections in April 1992 hurt the ruling coalition but failed to bring a strong government to power. The proportional system of voting, originally designed to prevent

totalitarianism, was blamed for consistently bringing weak coalitions to power. On its 16th vote, Parliament finally chose Oscar Luigi Scalfaro as president. The country was soon rocked by dozens of political scandals, or *tangentopoli* (bribe city). Numerous top officials resigned, including the prime minister, and charges of past corruption became even more widespread. By 1994, six thousand individuals were under investigation for corruption in an enquiry called *Mani Pulite* (Clean Hands).

Political instability in Italy has continued, with more than 57 successive governments since World War II. Attempts to stabilize the country's tricky coalition politics have been largely unsuccessful. Silvio Berlusconi, who was elected in 2001, served the longest term as prime minister since Italy became a republic in 1946. He was replaced by opposition leader Romano Prodi in 2006 but was reelected in the 2008 election.

Italy continues to face ongoing problems such as illegal immigration, organized crime, corruption, high unemployment, and the economic disparity between southern Italy and the more prosperous north. It must also combat the recession caused by the global financial crisis of 2008. Prime Minister Berlusconi's ruling coalition government was able to pass economic austerity measures in 2011 but struggled to implement them. Berlusconi was forced to resign in November 2011, and Mario Monti, a former European Union commissioner, was asked to take over as prime minister until new elections could be held.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Italy's population of 61 million is declining slightly at a rate of 0.42 percent. There is increasing concern about the country's birthrate, one of the lowest in Europe, because Italy's population is expected to decline significantly in the coming decades, and the ageing population is expected to put a large strain on Italy's economy. Nearly 70 percent of Italians live in urban areas. Rome is the capital and the largest city, with more than 2.7 million people. Most of the country's inhabitants are ethnic Italians, but there are small groups of ethnic Austrians, French, and Slovenes, as well as Albanian Italians and Greek Italians. Although Italy historically has lost many citizens to emigration, the nation has experienced a large influx of immigrants in the last two decades.

Language

Italian is the official language, although dialects differ from city to city. The Florentine and Roman dialects had a major influence on modern Italian. Most youths also speak English, the most common second language; older generations are more likely to speak French. Significant French-, German-, and Slovene-speaking minorities exist. An ethnic minority in Tyrol speaks Ladin, a Romance language native to northern Italy.

Religion

Ninety percent of Italians are Roman Catholic, although most

do not participate on a regular basis. Attendance at services is not high, and secularism is more appealing to many segments of society. At the same time, many Catholics are finding alternate ways to worship (through pilgrimages, informal gatherings, praying at shrines, and so forth). Though Italians may not always live according to Catholic principles of morality, the Catholic Church is widely respected, and it does wield significant social and political influence in Italy. Vatican City, home of the Roman Catholic pope and headquarters for the Roman Catholic Church, is located within Rome. The Italian constitution guarantees freedom of religion. About 10 percent of Italians are Protestant, Jewish, or Muslim.

General Attitudes

Because of improved economic and social conditions in southern regions and the influence of the media, differences between northern and southern Italians are diminishing. However, some regional attitudes remain, and Italians still refer to one another by their city of origin (Milanese, Roman, Florentine, etc.). Adopting practices of their German and Austrian neighbors, people in the industrialized north traditionally value punctuality, reliability, organization, and economic success. They often are less relaxed and view time as a resource not to be wasted. They take pride in having a low tolerance for criminality and public corruption. Southerners are appreciated for their warm character and friendliness. They enjoy a leisurely life and take their time doing business. Family values prevail in the south and are often more appreciated than economic success.

Regional economic differences have led to tensions within the country. Many in the more prosperous north feel they are too heavily taxed to subsidize special projects in the south. Those in the south often resent the higher incomes and better employment rates of the north. Political movements calling for more regional autonomy in a federal system have gained some momentum, particularly in the north. However, most Italians still oppose a political separation.

Italians consider social interaction very important; they try not to miss social events, such as parties and celebrations. People desire a good reputation in their social circle and seek approval from their peers. Often the ability to influence others is associated with how well one can accommodate different interests or points of view. Humor, agreeability, reliability, and success in business and social life are regarded more favorably than individual assertiveness. Italians value their health, family, serenity, and financial security.

Personal Appearance

Italians take pride in their appearance and tend to dress up for occasions as common as an evening stroll or a casual visit. Italians seldom wear worn or sloppy clothing. Although attitudes vary among the younger generation, many people base their opinions of others on how they dress. It is common to see people of all ages wearing casual shoes such as sneakers, and young people often wear jeans. Formal clothing is worn by some professionals, such as bankers or workers in government offices. For others, it is usually reserved for special occasions such as weddings or graduations. Women

commonly wear jewelry and makeup.

Italy is a major center of the European fashion industry. In many cities, clothing and shoe shops are more plentiful than bakeries. Youths throughout the country follow the latest fashion trends, often wearing expensive, brand-name clothing.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Men and women greet each other by shaking hands. When in groups, Italians avoid crossing other people's handshakes. If a person has dirty hands, he or she may offer a forearm, a finger, or a simple apology instead. When a man and a woman are introduced to each other, the man bows his head slightly and waits for the woman to extend her hand first. Close friends often greet each other by hugging or by kissing on both cheeks—or rather, by brushing cheeks as they kiss the air. Except in southern Italy, the kiss on both cheeks between men is reserved for family members. Friends and family members say *Ciao* (“Hi” or “Good-bye”) as an informal greeting. More formal terms include *Buongiorno* (Good day) and *Buonasera* (“Good afternoon” or “Good evening”). Friends of the same gender often walk arm in arm in public.

Gestures

Italians, especially those in the south, are known for their use of hand gestures during conversation. In fact, they often communicate with their hands instead of words. A common gesture is rubbing the thumb rapidly against the fingers to indicate “money.” Pulling down the lower eyelid with a finger is a way of acknowledging someone's cleverness. In some areas of the south, a person might indicate “no” by nodding the head upward. Moving the hand away from the nose as if to make it longer indicates that the speaker is telling a lie (a reference to the story of Pinocchio). Italian gestures are so numerous that foreigners sometimes find gesture dictionaries useful. When counting, Italians start with their thumb. Men remove their hats when entering buildings. Removing one's shoes in the presence of others is impolite. One covers the mouth when yawning or sneezing.

Visiting

Italians value long friendships and enjoy visiting one another, especially on holidays and Sundays. Busy schedules in urban areas require that most visits be planned. In villages, people are used to unannounced visits by friends and neighbors. Hosts might offer their guests coffee, cake, ice cream, or drinks. Dinner guests often bring a bottle of good wine, a box of chocolates, or flowers (traditionally in odd numbers) as a gift for the hosts.

If visiting before dinner, guests generally are expected to stay for the meal. Not staying may be considered impolite, especially in the south. Guests often wait for the hosts to sit before they are seated and to begin eating before they eat. At the end of the meal, guests wait for the host to offer second or third helpings. In the evening before dinner or on holidays,

Italians enjoy taking a walk in town.

Eating

Italians usually eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Hands are kept above the table; placing them in the lap is improper. When finished eating, a person places the utensils parallel on the plate. One does not leave the table until everyone has finished.

Although Italian families traditionally eat lunch together, this custom is becoming less common, especially in large cities. Most families at least try to get together for dinner (often around 7 or 8 p.m. in the north and 8:30 or 9:30 p.m. in the south). Italians spend more time cooking and cleaning up afterward than people in most other western European countries. When eating with guests, Italians usually do not hurry; a meal may last one to four hours. Regular family meals are much shorter. Dinner conversation often includes soccer, politics, family matters, business, and local events. Hosts appreciate compliments on the home and meal. In informal settings, guests may volunteer to help clean up. At restaurants, the bill often includes a service charge, but leaving a small tip (around 5 percent) for the server is also appropriate.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Italians enjoy strong family ties, and when being together or helping each other is possible, they honor their family obligations. The average northern family has one or two children, and most live as nuclear units. Southern families are traditionally larger, and multiple generations often live in the same house or town. Extended families throughout the country gather often and frequently live near each other. Traditionally, children grew up to work in family businesses. Many villages are still comprised of groups of families who have lived in the same area for generations. However, due to economic difficulties, younger generations are moving far away from their families to find work and educational opportunities. Even so, attachment to families remains strong. Children go home for important holidays, and parents visit children that live away from home for extended periods of time.

Young Italians seek financial independence, though high unemployment rates in the south hamper the attainment of this goal. Parents may offer financial assistance to their adult children when necessary. Many parents help their children buy a home or pay for an apartment—even if it means significant financial sacrifice. Children in general stay very dedicated to their parents. They often live at home as young adults. Some Italians find it difficult to find a job after the age of 30 because of age discrimination in the job market, and people over 30 who have not found employment are often forced to live at home. Single men or women may live with their parents into their 50s or 60s.

Traditionally, mothers—even if they work outside the home—do all the cooking for their families. Women also take on most other domestic tasks and spend a larger amount of

time cleaning and caring for others than men do; the difference between women's and men's time spent on unpaid work is much larger in Italy than in most other western European countries. However, family gender roles are influenced by age and socioeconomic class; young husbands and wives in middle- to upper-class families are more likely to share domestic responsibilities. The divorce rate is growing, and single, working mothers have become more common. Grandparents frequently help with child care.

Italy is still largely a male-dominated society. Men expect women to take care of them. Women are tiring of what they see as a chauvinistic attitude and are becoming more likely to get an education and compete in professional environments. Common positions for women include office workers, managers, and sales clerks (although these positions are usually filled by younger women). Women are also becoming more involved in politics, although this sector is still largely male dominated. Italian women encounter difficulties when balancing careers and families—only around 50 percent of mothers are employed after their children begin school.

Housing

A large percentage of the population owns a home, and many Italian families who do not own a home dream of someday doing so. However, the high price of a new house effectively ensures that—at least in the big cities—some families stay their whole lives in a rented apartment, which they nevertheless tend to call a *casa* (house), not an *appartamento* (apartment). Most modern apartments, especially in the center and south of the country, have balconies on which occupants grow flowers and other plants. Outside major urban centers, more people tend to live in houses. Very well-off families may own large villas. These are usually brick structures covered with white- or cream-colored plaster and topped with the distinctively Mediterranean red-tiled roof. Some villas contain several units, in which various generations of the same family often live.

Dating and Marriage

As in other Western countries, Italians date either in groups or as couples. Eating together is an important component of socializing. Young single people often go to pizzerias and pubs on the weekends. Dancing and going to movies are also frequent activities. Being part of a couple is important to most young Italians, and public displays of affection are common among young people. Couples of mixed race or nationality are becoming more common but still earn the disapproval of some older Italians.

Marriage is respected. Women usually marry by age 27, while the average age for men is 30. A man will rarely marry before he has finished his education and found employment. Therefore, though engagements can happen quickly, they often last several years. Both the man and the woman wear rings while engaged. Lower- and middle-class young people often have matching silver rings; wealthier couples may buy a diamond engagement ring for the woman.

The bride and groom are not supposed to see each other the day before the wedding. The bride wears a white wedding dress, usually paid for by the groom, and a veil; the groom

wears a tuxedo or a dark suit. Marriage ceremonies most often follow Catholic traditions. The wedding takes place in the church of the bride's hometown, often in the morning, with an elaborate ceremony lasting at least an hour. Family and friends then meet the bride and groom at a restaurant or a rented venue to celebrate. Before dinner, wine is served and the best man toasts the couple. The celebration lasts into the evening and includes a meal with as many as 14 courses. A traditional multilayered cake is served to guests. The bride's mother-in-law gives her a jewel as a wedding present; pearls are never given because they are believed to bring bad luck.

Divorce is granted only after three or more years of legal separation (meaning the couple has gone to court to register their separation agreement). Nevertheless, the divorce rate is growing, and the marriage rate is slowing as more couples live together instead of marrying (especially in northern Italy).

Life Cycle

Many important life events follow Catholic customs. Most Italians baptize their children as infants. Babies were traditionally given the name of one of their grandparents, but today young couples tend to give their children a name of their own choosing. Catholic confirmation, a ceremony in which the bishop draws a cross on a child's forehead with holy oil, is a rite of passage for most children and takes place around age 10 or 11.

Legally, adulthood comes at 18, when Italians can drive and vote. Graduation from high school, moving out of one's parents' house, and marriage are also signs of adulthood for Italians. However, many students who live away from home are still financially dependent on their parents and are not usually considered adults. Military service has traditionally been considered an important sign of adulthood, but as of 2005, military service is no longer required.

In southern Italy, funerals can be highly elaborate affairs, with a reception held after the church service. In the more urban north, they are simpler. Throughout the country, the casket typically remains open in the home for 24 hours. Friends and family members come to pay their respects to the deceased. The room containing the casket is lit by wax or electric candles, and the front door remains open and the blinds closed for the entire time. A church service is held afterward. Cremation is rare. Wealthy families tend to bury their dead in family tombs, which are almost like chapels. Because land is scarce, many families pay to bury their loved ones in the ground for a period of ten years, at which time an *esumazione* is performed; the casket is taken out of the ground and is put into a tomb above the ground. Every year on 2 November, people commemorate the loss of loved ones by laying flowers on their graves. The deceased are often remembered in masses offered a month and then a year after death. It is not uncommon for a widow in the south to carry a picture of her dead husband in a locket around her neck.

Diet

Breakfast traditionally is light, consisting of a cup of coffee, a cappuccino, or warm milk (for children) and a *cornetto* (cream-filled croissant) or bread with jam or honey. With

fewer people eating the main meal at midday, heavier dinners are becoming common. The main meal, whether lunch or dinner, traditionally includes three courses: pasta, fish or meat, and vegetables. In the north, pasta or rice is part of every main meal. Pasta is dominant in the south. A simple salad (lettuce and tomatoes) or roasted vegetables are served with the second course (meat dish). The standard salad dressing contains olive oil, vinegar, salt, and pepper. *Pomodoro* (tomato sauce) and *ragù* (sauce with meat) are popular with various types of pasta; however, there are many more types of sauces, which vary by region. Veal, beef, and lamb are favorite meats. Wine commonly accompanies meals and also is used widely in cooking.

Italian pizza is not the same as pizza in the United States and differs from region to region; it is generally thinner and less rich than American pizza. Classic *margherita* pizza, with mozzarella cheese and tomatoes, is the most popular. Contrary to popular belief among North Americans, spaghetti and meatballs is not a typical Italian meal. While some pasta sauces have small amounts of meat in them, Italians usually eat the main meat dish after the pasta course. Italians enjoy hundreds of cheeses, including mozzarella and parmesan.

Recreation

Leisure time is very important to Italians; hobbies, vacations, and recreation are high priorities. For recreation, Italians go to the beach, the countryside, movies, dances, or sporting events. Soccer (called *calcio*, or *football*) is by far the most popular sport, and teams wear the colors of their home city's flag. Italians often gather in homes or bars to watch soccer matches. Avid fans follow the World Cup competition, which Italy's national soccer team has won multiple times. During important soccer matches, the streets are empty. After the game, fans of the winning team dance in the streets and drive around honking their horns and yelling. Children of all ages, particularly boys, can be seen playing soccer everywhere. Bicycling, horse racing, skiing, tennis, boxing, fencing, swimming, and track-and-field are also popular. *Bocce*, a favorite game, is similar to lawn bowling.

During the day, Italians often socialize at bars, which serve both coffee and alcoholic drinks. In the evenings, people of all ages usually go out to eat gelato, go window shopping, and meander through the streets and piazzas to greet each other. Most young people meet their friends everyday for *la passeggiata* (the ritual of taking a walk in the evening), after doing homework or participating in after school activities.

Most Italians stay in Italy for vacations. The beach is a popular destination during summer holidays. Seaside resorts are packed in August. Many vacationers go snorkeling and scuba diving. The second-most popular vacation destination is the mountains, where recreational activities include hiking, swimming in lakes, and bicycling. In winter, many Italians take a "white week," during which they head to the Dolomites Mountains for skiing. For weekend getaways, Italians frequent farmhouses converted into bed-and-breakfast establishments. These are located throughout the country and offer traditional regional cuisine cooked from food grown on the establishment's land.

The Arts

Italy has been center of the arts for centuries, shaping art movements throughout Europe and the world. The Romans played a key role in the development of Western architecture, using techniques such as the arch, dome, and vault to build larger, more structurally sound buildings. The country was also the birthplace of artistic movements such as the Renaissance. Some of the greatest Western painters, architects, and sculptors were from Italy, including Giotto, Donatello, Michelangelo, Raphael, da Vinci, Titian, Bernini, Caravaggio, and Modigliani. Museums in Italian cities such as Florence, Naples, Rome, and Venice house internationally renowned art collections. Modern fashion designers such as Gucci, Cavalli, Valentino, and Versace have also become part of the list of great Italian artists. The art of *orafo*, gold-jewelry making, is famous in Italy, and Italians take pride in their crafting of leather goods.

In music, Italians invented opera, musical notation, and the piano. Opera is highly regarded, and opera houses are found in many towns. Music festivals are popular as well. Italy has also made significant contributions to world literature, including the works of the medieval poet Dante. In film, Italian actors and directors, such as Federico Fellini, have achieved international recognition. Traditional folk arts are also practiced. The *tarantella*, a lively folk dance associated with Sicily, is performed at many celebrations.

Holidays

Important religious and national holidays include New Year's Day; Epiphany (6 Jan.); Easter (including Easter Monday); Liberation Day (25 Apr.), which commemorates Italy's liberation by the Allied forces in World War II; Labor Day (1 May); the Anniversary of the Republic (2 June); the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (15 Aug.); All Saints' Day (1 Nov.); Immaculate Conception (8 Dec.); Christmas; and St. Stephen's Day (26 Dec.). Nearly every city and town honors the local patron saint with an annual celebration, and various other festivals are held throughout the year.

On Christmas Eve, children receive and open their presents. Italian families eat a traditional fish dinner and go to church for Midnight Mass. Christmas Day is celebrated with a large meal, and families spend time together playing games, watching TV, and going for walks. *Panettone*, a sweet bread, is one of the most famous traditional Christmas foods. Christmas markets, outdoor markets set up in Italian piazzas on Christmas Day and closing on Epiphany, are full of kiosks selling sweets and small toys. New Year's Eve is celebrated with parties, concerts, and going out to restaurants.

The celebration of Epiphany is largely a children's holiday in Italy; it commemorates the end of the Christmas holidays. According to Italian legend, *La Befana* was sweeping her house when the Three Wise Men stopped to invite her to come to Bethlehem with them. *La Befana* said no but later tried to catch up to the Wise Men and got lost. Every year, the old crone rides her broomstick through Italy as she continues to search for the *Bambino* (the infant Jesus). Children write letters to *La Befana* to ask her for specific presents, and she slides down the chimney on Epiphany Eve (5 Jan.) to fill their stockings with gifts. Children are told that they will receive

candy if they behave well and pebbles, charcoal, or ashes if they do not. On Epiphany, parents often take their children to piazzas to buy candy and small gifts from the Christmas markets, where they watch jugglers and magicians perform.

Carnevale is an important, though unofficial, holiday held at the beginning of Lent. Children typically dress up in costumes and participate in village parades with their parents. Candy and small gift kiosks are set up in piazzas. Italy's most famous *Carnevale* celebrations take place in Venice, where the streets fill with masked revelers.

On Easter Sunday, many families eat chocolate for breakfast and attend a local Easter mass. The largest mass is given by the Pope in St. Peter's Basilica, in Vatican City. Families also have a large meal together, usually including lamb and artichokes. They also eat traditional cakes, such as a *colomba* (dove-shaped) cake, which is similar to *panettone* but is only eaten at Easter. *La Pasquetta* (Little Easter), also known as Easter Monday, is celebrated the day after Easter. Traditionally, families and friends celebrate this holiday by picnicking together in the countryside and eating Easter leftovers. People often take the entire Easter weekend off to stay in the countryside.

The Assumption of the Virgin Mary, or *Ferragosto*, is celebrated in August, and celebrations include some traditions dating back to the ancient Romans. Throughout Italy, families and friends come together on 15 August to share a big meal. Many Italians travel to the sea or the mountains during this holiday, and towns and villages plan festivities. For example, the village of Positano, on the Amalfi coast, sets off fireworks over the Mediterranean Sea, and the city of Siena holds the *Palio*, a horse race that dates back to medieval times.

SOCIETY

Government

The Italian Republic is divided into 20 regions, which are further divided into provinces. A constitutional referendum in October 2001 gave increased autonomy to these 20 regions on such issues as education, the environment, and taxation. Italy's president (currently Giorgio Napolitano) is chosen by an electoral college and acts as chief of state. The prime minister (currently Mario Monti) is head of government. The prime minister is usually the head of a majority party or a majority coalition of parties but can also be chosen from other parties. In all cases, a proposed prime minister must be appointed by the president but approved by a parliamentary vote of confidence. Prime ministers can be removed from office at any time if Parliament passes a vote of no confidence.

Italy's upper legislative chamber is the 315-seat Senate. Eleven senators are appointed for life by the president, and the others are elected to five-year terms. The 630 members of Italy's Chamber of Deputies also hold office for five years, unless Parliament is dissolved early for new elections. Citizens may vote in senatorial elections at age 25. The voting age for all other elections is 18.

Because numerous parties often hold seats in Parliament, it is difficult for one party to gain a majority. Coalitions are

usually necessary but often fall apart during disputes, power struggles, or scandals; most governments last less than two years. Parties that combine to form coalitions usually are grouped as rightists, centrists, or leftists, although some coalitions have combined opposing forces.

Economy

Italy's economy is based on agriculture in the south and industry in the north. Small- and medium-sized businesses in the north are a strong driving force in the economy. Agriculture employs less than 10 percent of the labor force, but agricultural products are important and allow Italy to be nearly self-sufficient in food production. Italy is one of the world's largest wine producers and a major producer of cheese. Other important crops include wheat, potatoes, corn, rice, fruits, and olive oil. Italy is a major steel and iron producer; industry accounts for almost one-third of the gross domestic product (GDP). The service sector, which includes tourism, comprises about two-thirds of Italy's GDP. The country's major trading partners include other European Union (EU) nations such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. Italy was granted membership in the European Monetary Union in May 1999, but continued fiscal discipline is needed to reduce Italy's public debt and fiscal deficit and lower unemployment, particularly in the south.

Most people enjoy a standard of living consistent with Italy's position as one of the world's seven major industrialized countries. However, the economy started to stagnate in 2002, when the euro replaced the *lira* as Italy's currency. Many felt the resulting price hikes hurt the economy. In 2008, Italy's economy fell into recession as a result of the global financial crisis. Though the economy began to grow again in 2010, Italy struggles to limit its government spending, and its public debt remains above 115 percent of the GDP.

Transportation and Communications

Buses and trains, the principal means of public transportation, are usually punctual but have become increasingly expensive since the introduction of the euro and are not always adequate to meet the needs of commuters. Subways operate in Rome, Milan, Naples, and Turin. Most households have at least one car. A domestic air system operates between major cities. People and goods are also transported on the seas surrounding Italy.

The communications system is modern and extensive but not always well maintained. Mail delivery is also unreliable at times. Cellular phones are common; there are more cellular phones in Italy than telephone landlines. Numerous radio and television stations broadcast on a regional basis, and Italians have access to many daily newspapers. Most newspapers are privately owned and are often connected to a political party. Broadcasters have also traditionally been subject to political influences. The internet is commonly used by both businesses and individuals. There are over 30 million internet users in Italy.

Education

School attendance is free and compulsory for students

between the ages of six and sixteen. Italians are proud of their country's school system, and the majority of students go to public schools. Private schools are mostly Catholic-run. The public school system is comprised of primary school (five years), middle school (three years), and high school (three to five years). At the completion of middle school and high school, students must pass exams in order to advance to the next level.

Students can choose which type of high school they would like to attend. *Licei*, or high schools, last five years and prepare students for higher education; there are five types of *licei*: classical, scientific, human sciences, linguistic, and artistic. Students can also choose to go to a technical institute, which lasts five years and prepares students for a vocation and for university studies. Students who wish to enter the work force directly after high school may attend a professional institute for three to five years.

Classes are held Monday through Saturday in most regions. Education is a serious matter, and most young people spend a great deal of time doing homework. Students study Italian grammar, as well as learning English, German, or French. Classes focus on memorization. Cheating is not unusual. The final exam for high school is oral, and students must memorize and remember a large amount of information in order to pass. This exam structure is also used for final course examinations in universities. Graduation from high school takes place around age 19. Only about half of Italian adults (age 25 to 64) have the equivalent of a high school diploma, which is a lower percentage than in most western European countries.

Italy has more than 50 universities and institutes of higher learning. The cost of higher education is cheaper than in countries like the United States. *La Sapienza*, in Rome, is the largest university in Europe. The University of Bologna was founded in the 12th century and is the oldest continually operating university in the world.

Health

Healthcare services are coordinated through government agencies. Individuals can choose their family physician; the government pays for most services. Private care is also available, but the patient must pay for it. Smoking is common but has decreased somewhat since a 2005 law banned smoking in enclosed public spaces such as restaurants. Many Italians refuse to wear seat belts when driving, although a 1998 law made it mandatory.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Italy, 3000 Whitehaven Street NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 612-4400; web site www.ambwashingtondc.esteri.it. Italian Tourist Board, phone (212) 245-5618; web site www.italia.it.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	61,016,804 (rank=23)
Area, sq. mi.	116,348 (rank=72)
Area, sq. km.	301,340

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	24 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	15 of 155 countries
Adult literacy rate	99% (male); 98% (female)
Infant mortality rate	3 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	79 (male); 85 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2011 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

ProQuest
 789 East Eisenhower Parkway
 Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106 USA
 Toll Free: 1.800.521.3042
 Fax: 1.800.864.0019
 www.culturegrams.com

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