

# Greetings Tuscany Travelers!

This letter will provide some insight into what to pack, what you'll experience on the tour, and little things you should know to enhance your travel to Tuscany.

There's a lot of information here over a wide range of topics. Please read it over as soon as you can.

## **Airport Check in**

Please check in for your flight at least 2 hours prior to flight time. I always recommend an early check in for a trip like this. You'll need to have your passport and confirmation/ticket number for your flight. It's a good time now to verify that your passport has 3 months validity left after your return home. If not, your passport must be renewed.

## **Remember your passport**

Make a couple of photocopies to place in your baggage and another with a friend at home. If lost or stolen, passports are much easier to replace if you have a facsimile copy. Take a picture of the signature page as a backup.

No visas are required for Italy (for US or Canadian Citizens), but your passport must have at least 6 months validity remaining from the date you depart Italy for home.

There is some speculation that the EU may place a visa requirement on US Travelers, but this is a long shot. If there are changes to the current situation, you'll get an email from me. **Check your passport expiration date today.**

## **[The Villa](#)**

I'm sure you've all checked out the villa online. Here's your list of features available during the stay. If you haven't yet, you can click the link above or just google Villa Carrera/Parker Villas/Torrita di Siena. The villa is also known locally as **Tenuta Villa Rocchi**.

<b>Wi-fi</b>	Yes, you'll be able to connect to the outside world.
<b>Pool</b>	There is a substantially sized pool on the grounds. It's solar heated, so may not be for the faint of heart. Towels are provided. The pool is a relatively new addition, so does not show on the google satellite photo.
<b>Elevator</b>	It's a three-story villa, no stairs required unless you need the workout
<b>Dining</b>	We're enjoying dinner 3 of our four nights there. Buffet breakfast every morning.
<b>Laundry</b>	Two washers and dryers are available for our use.
<b>Climate</b>	The villa has air conditioning that is similar to other accommodations in Europe. Typically, these systems will cool to a certain temperature but do not operate to the extremes that you find in the USA.
<b>Cleaning</b>	Refresh cleanings for the villa are scheduled for Monday and Thursday.
<b>Location</b>	The villa is a short walk from the village where you'll find 2 restaurants, a small grocer, pharmacy, and café.
<b>Television</b>	sì, c'è una televisione e la maggior parte dei canali ti aiuterà con le tue abilità linguistiche in italiano!
<b>Telephone</b>	I assume that most of you will bring a phone. See the section below that discusses phone plans and calling. There is a mobile phone on the premises that comes charged with an hour of call time.
<b>Rooms</b>	Each bedroom comes equipped with hair dryer and wall safe
<b>Smoking</b>	Smoking is not permitted anywhere in the villa or on the grounds.

## Maps

I've printed maps for the following towns on our tour:

Torrita di Siena, Siena, Montepulciano, Montalcino, San Gimignano, Volterra, Pienza, and Radda. I'll have a quantity of these maps available on site.

## 24-hour clock

Get used to using the 24-hour clock. Most of Europe works this way. 11:30 pm is noted as 23:30. This is especially important when catching any sort of scheduled transportation. Add 12 to PM times to come up with the correct number. Two PM becomes 14:00. Five AM is 05:00.

### **Suggested Dress**

There is no established dress code for this tour. It's entirely up to you. There are some tasting rooms and restaurants along the route that would expect something a bit dressier than flipflops and cut-offs. Collared shirts, slacks or shorts, sundresses are my suggestions. There is absolutely no reason to pack any formal wear. Be comfortable.

Morning tours may be a bit chilly, with warming as the day goes on. We may also experience some precipitation along the way. Layer up in the morning if it's chilly. Remove layers as the day progresses. Bring a lightweight raincoat and/or a collapsible umbrella with you.

The (unheated) pool will be open throughout the stay, so consider bringing your bathing togs. Towels are provided.

**Be certain to bring comfortable walking shoes. Break them in before the trip. Cobbled streets and uneven surfaces are the order of the day.**

### **Tuscany Weather in Autumn**

Historical temperatures in and around Siena have been very pleasant for the time we're touring. Highs in the mid-70s, and lows around 60.

Chances of rainfall increase as we leave September and move toward mid-October. It's not unlikely that we'll see a shower or two.

I suggest checking [Accuweather.com](http://Accuweather.com) or [Weather.com](http://Weather.com) just before you pack for the most current forecast.

We've got daylight hours to spare during our time in Tuscany with sunrise a little after 7:00 AM and sunset occurring a little before 7:00 PM.

### **Dining on our tour**

We're dining at the villa some of the time. At other times, we'll be dining out. Generally, restaurants require that I preselect an entrée or two for the group. I will need to know about allergies, sensitivities, and dislikes in that order. If you are vegan, vegetarian, pescatarian, or carnivorous, I need to know.

The staff at the villa and restaurants will be made aware of these issues. The servers will be searching for the diners that have special dietary needs. Help them (and me) out by identifying yourself when we gather to dine.

### **Italiano?**

Italian is one of the more fun European languages to test. It becomes easier with each glass of Chianti. Our guide, of course, speaks English and we're traveling to some heavily touristed parts of the country where most of our encounters will be in English. Still, since we're encountering native-speaking Italians during the week, it never hurts to dip your toes into the culture a bit by trying the local tongue.

I've included a 1-page cheat sheet words and phrases that you'd expect to use on the tour. You may also want to consider a printed translation guide available at book stores or online. Google Translate, Microsoft Translator are but two free apps that you can download to your mobile device. Both have the unique feature of translating photographed text. This come in handy if you want to avoid some internal organ as an entrée.

### **Electrical plugs and adaptors**

You will need an adaptor and convertor for most US manufactured electrical devices that you take. The convertor changes the voltage, and adaptor allows you to plug it in. US Voltage is 110-120, and Europe runs on 220-240 volts. Battery chargers, curling irons, hair dryers are among these items. You can buy adapter/convertor kits at most drug stores. They come with many adaptors. There is a wide range of plug types. You only need your Type F plug as shown in the diagram. You can also use a C or E type plug, which are similar to the F.



Your computer and/or smart phone, if you bring one, should have already come equipped with a transformer/convertor in the cord. Check the voltage requirements on the transformer portion of the power cord. If it comes with a transformer in the cord, you will just need a plug adapter, not a current convertor. Adaptors/convertors are available at travel stores, Target, Amazon, etc.

### **Telephones**

Call your provider to see what they recommend for phone coverage overseas. Each year it seems that US carriers become more competitive with coverage plans for Europe.

If your current phone isn't equipped to work in Europe, one of the most affordable options is to buy a simple phone over there with pre-purchased minutes. There are many local phone stores in Europe that will sell inexpensive phones with preloaded minutes if you need to have the means to call home. An inexpensive smartphone preloaded with 300 minutes will probably cost you less than \$100.

### **Currency**

The Euro has been the official currency in Italy since 1999. When I managed this tour in 2019, it took \$1.17 USD to buy 1 Euro. Right now, the dollar has effectively reached par with the Euro. Recent government decisions may have an inverse effect on the dollar value. Time will tell.

Bear in mind that these are the rates at which banks buy from other banks. The Dollar moves up and down a few pegs in a week's time, but has been mostly stable the past few years. The last month has shown a lot of movement in a positive direction.

### **Spending overseas**

The ATM or Bancomat is the best way to obtain cash in Italy. They are easy to find along the route. Plan on a trip to the ATM every other day to withdraw Euro. You get the best exchange rate and won't have to worry about whether a vendor will accept a credit card.

Credit cards give you a fairly good exchange rate and most card offer consumer protection on your purchase. You also have a record of your purchase. Some bank cards charge 1-2% for purchases made in foreign currency, which offsets the beneficial rate somewhat. Chase Bank and a few others offer cards that do not charge the foreign exchange fee. Check with your bank to see about foreign currency fees. Make sure you keep your receipts.

I have found that Visa cards seem to have the widest acceptance, followed by Mastercard. It is sometimes difficult to get a vendor to accept American Express, perhaps because of their fee structure. Most smaller shops will not want to accept your card. They get hit with fees that make cash a much more attractive alternative for them.

Chip and pin cards have become the standard for most European card processing. This works just like the ATM system in that you enter a 4-digit PIN to complete your transaction. This is the system that Europe has been converting to and that the US has been somewhat slow to adopt. The USA has opted for the "chip and sign" program which most vendors across Europe are familiar with. I've found that the chip and sign cards most widely offered by banks in the USA have been perfectly adequate in my overseas travels.

The only place that a non-pin card poses a problem is with automated machines such as highway toll plazas or rail ticket machines. These are virtually impossible to use without a pin.

Bringing US Currency and hoping to exchange notes is a mistake. Banks keep shorter hours. Some don't offer foreign exchange, and many others won't like the condition of the notes you want to change. It certainly couldn't hurt to bring some US Dollars (new bills, \$50 or \$100 denomination) to use as a back up in case your card gets compromised or your banks security department locks it down.

You should be able to order some Euros from your bank if you want to arrive there with some (though really not necessary). There is usually a fee and you

have to allow time for your bank to secure the currency. It's easiest just to hit the ATM at the airport or the nearest one to your destination. At each ATM Stop, get enough cash to last you for a couple days. Please note that airport and rail station ATM machines charge a higher fee. The last note related to ATMs is to use one that's associated with a bank. The "stand-alone" machines can charge more.

Traveler's checks are a thing of the past. They are a distant third to Cash (ATM), followed by credit card.

It used to be that your bank wanted to you advise them regarding overseas destinations and dates. Their loss management departments now find it easier to simply shut down your account at the first sign of irregularity than to manage individual travelers. Chase Bank won't even take the information online or over the phone. Be aware that your credit card may be suspended with overseas use. If generally takes a call to your bank to rectify the problem. You should be sure to get the toll-free international number for your bank in the event of an over-reaching security algorithm at your bank.

You should still make an attempt to contact your bank with your schedule and dates. Some banks allow you to make these notifications online. Otherwise get in touch with the customer service section of your bank.

**Another Note:** I have a wallet that is **RFID protected**. Some credit and debit cards can be read remotely using a portable reader. Add a level of protection by purchasing RFID sleeves for your cards. You can also find RFID wallets online.

### **Packing your bags**

There are a few excellent websites dedicated to the art of packing for a trip. I have reproduced some of that information here, but you may want to visit some of these sites yourself. The links are [www.oratory.com/travel](http://www.oratory.com/travel), and <https://happytowander.com/suitcase-packing-tips/>. Please do what you can to reduce the size of your bag and remember that laundry is available at the villa.

Make sure you have a bag with wheels. Don't take too much. Leave some room for the wine you'll be taking home.

### **Laundry**

There are two washing machines and at least one dryer available to use, free of charge, at the villa.

### **Security/Safety**

There is very little violent crime toward tourists in Italy. There is, however, a great deal of pickpocketing and scams in which tourists are a prime target.

Be particularly aware of your belongings and surroundings in crowded places. Markets, churches, restaurants are places where a lack of attention can lead to a snag in your holiday fun.

Take a photo of your passport with your phone. It's also a good idea to photocopy the data page and zip it into a suitcase pocket. Leave a copy with a friend or relative that is able to fax or email that copy should you need it. It's much easier to replace a lost or stolen passport if you have a facsimile to present.

Rick Steves and people that have used them, swear by a money belt. I've always found them to be somewhat uncomfortable, but you may want to give it a try. Please! No wallets in back pockets! Purses and backpacks should always be zipped closed and held in front of you in crowded situations. See the section on RFID protection under Banking.

Buddy up! If you're going out, don't go alone. There is safety in numbers.

### **Suggested Gratuities**

You do not typically tip at restaurants in Italy. There is typically an added service fee on the bill of 1-3 euros.

Taxis are generally offered an extra 1-2 euro in the city. If you get help with your bags and you have an exceptional driver, then 5% is a nice addition.

Hotel porters-generally 1 € per bag.

Our guides are compensated for their time, but work hard for a little extra gratuity at the end of the week. If you enjoyed the service provided by our resident guide and driver, show your appreciation. Guidelines are €3-€5 per person, per day for the guides, and €2-€3 per person, per day for the driver. I'll pass an envelope close to the end of the tour for contributions.

### **Transportation from Florence to the villa**

I'm still working out the specific timetable as to pick up times in Florence. All shuttle transportation will begin at the Florence Airport. Traveling into town with a vehicle of any size is time consuming and requires fees the coach company is not interested in paying.

If you're arriving in Florence on the first day of your villa week, your flight will be met. If you are coming to Florence early, you'll meet your ride at the airport at a time to be determined. If you are coming from Venice after the cruise, you'll be met at the rail station (train tickets will be provided from Venice to Florence). The villa is about 90 minutes away from the airport by car.

You'll have an updated schedule of arrival and departure times the week before the tour.

### **Departure from Florence**

See above

### **Local transportation**

We'll have the use of a motor coach during the tour. For people looking for transportation before and after the villa week, here are a few suggestions.

Florence is now Uber and Lyft-friendly, a good change from when I was last there in 2019. Taxis are available in every major town. The Italian rail system is typically over crowded and doesn't compare well to northern European systems, but it still gets you where you need to go. I prefer [www.trainline.eu](http://www.trainline.eu) as a great resource for schedules, fares, and tickets.

### **Traveler Name list**

I don't usually send guest name lists in advance of travel. When I send your villa transportation details to you on or about September 13<sup>th</sup>, I will also include a list of first names of your fellow guests in the villa.

More details to come...

Cheers!

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