

Language and culture guide

Italian

Language experts agree that language learning is most effective when language and culture are linked. *The Polyglots* apps aim to spark children's interest in language and culture through play. This guide provides some general information about Italy, and Italian culture and language, that may be of interest to you and may extend children's learning.

About Italy

Italy, known as 'the boot' for its shape, is mainly surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea.

It has borders with France, Switzerland, Austria, Slovenia, San Marino and Vatican City. About 59 million people live in Italy (in comparison, about 28 million people live in Australia).

Early childhood education in Italy

Nursery schools (scuola materna) in Italy cater for children from 3 to 6 years old. The preschool program is under the authority of the Ministry of Education. It is not compulsory but 95 per cent of Italian children attend early childhood education.¹ The emphasis at the nursery schools is on learning through play. The Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education originated in Italy.

Language

Italian, also known as Standard Italian or 'italiano standard', is the official language of Italy, Vatican City, the Republic of San Marino and parts of Switzerland. As well as being one of the official languages of the European Union, it is a major community language in Australia. Italian is also widely used in countries such as Luxembourg, the United States, Canada, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina, and in parts of Africa.

Italian uses the same Roman alphabet as English. The Italian alphabet has 21 letters and uses the remaining 5 letters (j, k, w, x, y) of the English alphabet to spell foreign words, such as 'weekend' or 'jeans'. Accents are sometimes used on vowels.

Italian has a strong spelling-to-sound correspondence and is sometimes called a phonetic language. There are only seven vowel sounds (English has over 20).

Grammatically, Italian is a gendered language: certain word classes (nouns, adjectives, articles, pronouns) have gender. This means they are either masculine or feminine, for example, 'una banana' (feminine) or 'un fico' (masculine).

For correct pronunciation, listen carefully to the words as they are spoken in the app or in the sound library in the app toolkit on the ELLA website.

Culture

Italy has a rich culture with a strong tradition in the arts, architecture, music and food.

A large number of people are Roman Catholic but many other religions are also practised in Italy.

Politeness and customs

- In Italy, people say good day ('buongiorno') or good evening ('buonasera') when they meet. Friends use the more casual 'ciao' (hello/goodbye).
- People shake hands if they don't know you very well, while friends and family kiss each other on both cheeks.

Culture in *The Polyglots* apps

As children play with the apps, they can discover fun and intriguing Italian cultural references, such as tiramisu, Pinocchio and Venetian masks. You can learn more about the cultural references in the app toolkit.



¹ 'Education at a glance 2024', OECD, 2024, https://oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/09/education-at-a-glance-2024-country-notes_532eb29d/italy_1f8f65a5/c46299a8-en.pdf

Interesting topics

Animals	• Deer and wild boar (relatives of domestic pigs) live in the forests. • Ibexes (a type of wild goat) and brown bears can be found in the mountains. • Millions of migrating birds stop over on the Mediterranean coastline, including thousands of pink flamingos. • In 2024, more than 63 per cent of Italians owned pets, with more than half of these owning at least one dog.
Arts	Italy is rich in the arts, including visual arts, opera, theatre, music, architecture and literature. • Famous Renaissance artists include Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. • Opera and ballet originated in Italy. • The Commedia dell'arte style of theatre began in Italy in the mid-16th century and is still performed today. • Italian author Carlo Collodi published <i>The Adventures of Pinocchio</i> in 1883.
Food	Food has a special role in Italian culture. Traditionally, meals were leisurely and had many courses, but today long meals are more for special occasions. Even so, sharing a meal with family every day is very important. Many Italian people still shop daily for food, usually from local markets and small shops. There are many different regional cuisines in Italy rather than an overall Italian cuisine. • Wine and cheese are two of Italy's most famous products. There are hundreds of varieties of cheese and every region in Italy has its own specialties. • Well-known Italian dishes include lasagne, pizza, pasta and risotto. • There are many delicious Italian pastries, cakes and desserts, such as crostata, cannoli, tiramisu, panna cotta, panforte, cassata and gelato.
Sports	• The national sport of Italy is soccer (calcio). Basketball, volleyball and cycling are other popular sports. • The Giro d'Italia (Tour of Italy) is a major long-distance cycling race held every May. • Skiing (sci) is very popular in the Italian Alps and in the Apennine Mountains in winter. • Beach tennis (tennis da spiaggia) with paddle racquets was invented by Italians. • Bocce – bowling a large ball to come closest to a smaller one – is a popular sport and game. It is related to lawn bowls and the French game of boules or pétanque.



Interesting topics

Games

Traditional games include:

- campana: similar to hopscotch; it has been played in Italy since Roman times
- guardie e ladri (police and robbers): a chasing game with two teams – one police and one robbers
- lupo mangia frutta (fruit-eating wolf): a chasing game where the children are fruit and one child is the wolf
- strega comanda color (witch controls colour): one child is the witch and calls out a colour. The other children must run and touch something of that colour before the witch tags them.

Places

Italy is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world.

- Rome, the capital city of Italy, is known for its historic buildings and monuments, museums, parks and elegant shops. Rome was the capital of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire.
- There are many parks and gardens where people stroll and meet. A lot of people live in apartments, especially in cities, so they are used to accessing public places, promenading in the streets and catching public transport.
- The Amalfi Coast is known for its mild climate and beautiful coastline.
- Pompeii is an ancient Roman city that was buried by the eruption of Mt Vesuvius volcano in 79 CE.
- Venice is famous for its canals and its historic buildings, such as the Doge's Palace and St Mark's Basilica.
- Florence is renowned for its Renaissance art and architecture.
- Vatican City is a walled enclave within Rome and contains some of Italy's major tourist attractions, including St Peter's Basilica and Square, and the Sistine Chapel.

Famous landmarks

Some of Italy's most visited sites are:

- the Colosseum: the largest amphitheatre of its kind built by the Roman Empire
- the Pantheon: built as a Roman temple with a remarkable concrete dome
- the Roman Forum: contains the ruins of important ancient Roman government buildings
- the Leaning Tower of Pisa: the tower began to sink soon after building started in the 1100s.



Interesting topics

Seasons

Italy is in the northern hemisphere. Its climate varies greatly from north to south. The north has very cold winters and hot, humid summers. Central Italy has milder winters, and in the south and on the islands winters are very mild. Summer temperatures don't vary so much between north and south.

Traditions

This is just a small selection of Italy's many rich traditions:

- Christmas is celebrated over several weeks. Most Italians open their presents on Christmas Day but there is an old tradition of waiting until Epiphany on 6 January. It's traditional for children to get a stocking full of sweets if they've been good or one full of 'coal' (made of black sugar) if they've been bad.
- Easter is in spring in Italy and many traditions symbolise new life and renewal, such as giving decorated eggs (real or chocolate) and placing spring flowers on the table. Carnevale (carnival) celebrations are held before Lent, the start of the Easter period for many Christians.
- At Italian weddings it is traditional for the guests to be given confetti. These are sugar-coated almonds, not small pieces of coloured paper.

Note: This document contains content that has been gathered through independent research and consultation with subject matter experts. The figures and information included in this document should be reviewed for accuracy over time.



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