

Walk these paths into Italy's past

Explore these ancient pilgrimage routes to feel the country's vibrant history and culture beneath your feet. By **Abra Dunsby**

Steeped in history as much as in landscape, tradition and mythology, these ancient Italian walking routes will connect you with countless others who have traversed them over the centuries. Italy has long been crossed on foot – by merchants, soldiers, pilgrims and saints. Today, a long-distance walk along one of its storied routes allows you to slowly uncover layers of history and connect with those who travelled before you, while enjoying spectacular

landscapes, meeting new people and refuelling on delicious traditional dishes along the way. The Antichi Cammini d'Italia (Ancient Walking Routes of Italy) brings together five of the most historic paths: the Via Francigena, the Saint Francis Way, the Saint Benedict Way, the Romea Strata and the Via Romea Germanica. From Alpine passes to the timeless cities of Lazio and Rome, these journeys reveal Italy's history, landscapes and culture on foot.

A stop on the pilgrim's way
The imposing Basilica of Santa Margherita, right, one of the highlights of the Via Francigena walk



The Saint Francis Way

A contemplative journey through Umbria and Lazio

Length: The Northern Way is approximately 190km; the Southern Way is approximately 300km

Time: Up to 10 days for the Northern way, around two weeks for the Southern Way

Follow in the footsteps of Francis of Assisi, Italy's patron saint, on a network of routes linking places central to his life. The Northern Way runs from La Verna to Assisi, while the Southern Way covers 13 stages from Rome to Assisi, crossing Lazio through the Sabine countryside and the Rieti Holy Valley.

Leaving Assisi, the path threads through terraced olive groves and honey-hued villages, heading southwards to Spoleto, surrounded by vineyards and home to a striking 12th-century cathedral. In the Nera Valley rivers, waterfalls and meadows create a sense of seclusion and connection to nature. One meaningful stretch is the Rieti Holy Valley, home to four Franciscan sanctuaries: Greccio, where Francis created the first nativity scene in 1223, Fonte Colombo, La Foresta and Poggio Bustone. Some walkers begin further north at the Sanctuary of La Verna, where Francis received the stigmata in 1224. The Lazio experience is defined by the Southern Way: a quieter, deeply spiritual route through the Rieti Holy Valley and onwards towards Rome.



Ways to go
Make the pilgrimage to Santuario della Madonna delle Cese in Lazio, left; Farfa Abbey in the province of Rieti, above

The Saint Benedict Way

A moderate, meditative walk through the remote Apennines

Length: Approximately 300km in 16 stages between Umbria and Lazio

Time: Two weeks

Wend your way through Italy's green heart on this lesser-trodden route across Umbria and Lazio, tracing places linked to Saint Benedict of Nursia, founder of Western monasticism and patron of Europe. The route begins in Norcia, a medieval town surrounded by the peaks, gorges and karst caves of Monti Sibillini National Park. From here it traverses mountain terrain before reaching Subiaco, perched above the Aniene Valley and considered one of Italy's most beautiful villages. Here,



Beauty spots
The magnificent Sanctuary of Sacro Speco, set against the cliffside of Mount Taleo near Subiaco, left; Montecassino Abbey, the birthplace of the Benedictine Order, below

Saint Benedict lived as a hermit and later founded cliffside monasteries, some of which still stand. Nearby Santa Scolastica hosted Italy's first printing press in 1465. The journey ends at Montecassino Abbey, founded in 529 AD and rebuilt after the Second World War. It's a marvel of mosaics, frescoes and marble, and its terraces offer views of the Liri Valley and the Apennines – a fitting conclusion to a route that encourages quiet reflection in nature. This is a walk you can extend to Rome.



The Romea Strata

A demanding trans-European walk that offers an alternative route to Rome

Length: Approximately 1,000km in 47 stages along the main Italian route

Time: Up to two months from Tarvisio to Rome

The Romea Strata is the newest of these routes to be certified as a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe, receiving the recognition in June 2025. It retraces the ancient roads that brought pilgrims from central-eastern and Baltic Europe to Rome: more than 4,700km across seven countries, with 245 stages and passing over fifty Unesco World Heritage sites. The main Italian section runs for around 1,000km in 47 stages, touching

places such as Lazio Bolsena, Montefiascone, Viterbo and San Martino al Cimino before reaching Rome. Since 2024 its final stretch no longer rejoins the Via Francigena, thanks to meticulous remapping by a network of volunteers, giving the route a distinct identity and a new approach to the Eternal City.



Heavenly sight The imposing Castello Monaldeschi della Cervara fortress, above

79 stages on his return. His diary, now preserved in the British Library, shaped one of medieval Europe's great pilgrimage corridors. The Italian route runs for about 1,000km in 45 stages, but its final approach through Lazio gives the journey some of its most memorable scenes. Entering the Tuscia of Viterbo, walkers pass Lake Bolsena, Montefiascone and Viterbo, with its medieval San Pellegrino quarter, before continuing to Sutri, La Storta and the last miles into Rome – and reaching St Peter's Basilica on foot provides an incredibly powerful finale to the journey.



The Via Romea Germanica

Combine art cities and Unesco sites with Italy's agricultural heartlands on this moderate walk

Length: Approximately 1,050km (Italian section)

Time: Around 46 days

Based on the journey described by Abbot Albert of Stade in the Annales Stadenses of 1236, the Via Romea Germanica was recognised as a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe in 2020. The Italian leg kicks off at the majestic Brenner Pass, descending from the Alps into South Tyrol's fairytale towns framed by the Dolomites. The route threads together a series of historic cities, including Padua, Unesco-listed Ferrara and Ravenna, famed for its stunning Byzantine mosaics and the Tomb of Dante. Between these cultural centres,

walkers weave through vineyards; fragrant, hay bale-filled orchards and quiet farming villages, following rivers and treading paths across the landscapes of Veneto, Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany. In Lazio the route approaches Rome through Civita di Bagnoregio, Bolsena, Montefiascone, Viterbo, Sutri, the Veio Regional Park and La Storta before arriving at St Peter's. It's a route that combines cultural richness with rural tranquility, showcasing Italy's artistic and agricultural heritage in all its glory.



Mystical The striking walled town of Sermentum in Lazio, above; the Etruscan Necropolis of Sutri, top

WALK THIS WAY: TOP TIPS

- The routes include Roman roads, gravel tracks, mountain paths and cobblestones, so train on uneven terrain before you go. Supportive, broken-in trail shoes or light hiking boots with good grip are essential.
- Choose early spring or late autumn to walk or, in summer, start early and take a long midday break.
- Pack light – 6-8kg is ideal. Bring a light rain jacket, spare socks, a water bottle and blister-care essentials.
- Most routes are well waymarked, but download GPX tracks to your phone for added reassurance.
- Accommodation ranges from simple pilgrim hostels to small-scale stays and monastery lodgings. Booking ahead is advisable.
- Pilgrims should carry a *credenziale* (pilgrim passport), available via official route websites.



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Immersive The Appian Way, one of Rome's oldest walkways, above; San Salvatore church in Bolsena, right