



Bellissimi! Italy's hilltop towns

‘rumbling castles, houses hewn from caves and spiralling streets — theseavity-defying spots beauties, says
a Aimaro Ogden

‘Impossible’ is the response I get over and over again when I ask the Italians I know to choose the best hilltop towns in the country. It’s not that they won’t, they simply can’t. A nation with more than 70 mountain ranges, plus countless smaller peaks and troughs, has a lot of high points. Picking the finest examples is tough. In this selection we’ve ignored the seven hills of Rome — they’re a story unto themselves — and tried to balance the big hitters (Matera, Taormina, San Gimignano) with those you might not know: Santa Severina? Pietrapertosa? Brisighella? What they all have in common, though, is a degree of altitude — and an even greater degree of charm.

We’ve travelled from Valle d’Aosta in the north to Sicily in the south. Many of our 25 date from the Middle Ages and were founded on sites first populated by the Etruscans, who lived from 900BC in what we now call Tuscany and Umbria, as well as parts of Lazio, Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, Veneto and Campania, until they were “incorporated” into the Roman Empire. These towns and villages are often fortified and topped by castles, with defensive walls and towers, narrow streets and cobbled courtyards, grand palazzi and crumbling ruins, all of which add to that fairytale feel. Often it seems that time has stood still



Pienza in Tuscany

in these places: in Civita di Bagnoregio it looks as though the inhabitants still live in the 16th century; in La Morra families make wine the way they have for centuries; in Ragusa Ibla, after the 1693 earthquake destroyed the old city the townspeople rebuilt it in the same spot; in San Daniele they have been preserving prosciutto to the same recipe since at least 1453.

What you’ll experience in these places is a very particular sense of atmosphere, a generous welcome, knockout views and a profound respect for history and tradition. And which is my favourite? Oddly, it’s impossible to say. ▶

Matera Basilicata

One of southern Italy's strangest sights, Matera is as otherworldly as any film set. And that's where you might have seen it: in *No Time to Die*, Bond's Aston DB5 races through the narrow streets. This community of sassi — caves hollowed out of the soft rock to form a maze of windowless houses, frescoed churches and tiny shops — was cleared in the 1950s, its residents rehoused. Now creatives are breathing new life into the caves, starting up cool hotels — Sextantio Le Grotte della Civita is the best — as well as artists' workshops and Michelin-starred restaurants (try Vitantonio Lombardo).

Details B&B doubles from £179 (sextantio.it). Fly to Bari

La Morra Piedmont

The loveliest of the 11 hilltop towns that make up the Barolo region, medieval La Morra is the prime producer of the "king of wines". Local growers Giovanni Corino, Marcarini and Cascina Ballarin welcome visitors for tastings. Walk the three-mile Sentiero dei Grandi Orizzonti (the footpath of wide horizons) for the best views of the Langhe; high points include the church of San Martino, the weathered exterior of which gives little clue to the majesty within. For dinner, book the tasting menu at Ristorante Bovo and stay at Fior di Farine, home to four generations of millers.

Details B&B doubles from £81 (fiordifarine.com). Fly to Turin

Taormina Sicily

From its perch on a headland overlooking the Ionian Sea, Taormina commands some of Sicily's most startling views, but it means that in high season Corso Umberto I, the dreamy, bougainvillea-lined main street, is crammed with visitors. Escape to the Teatro Antico, the amphitheatre dating from the 3rd century BC and Greek colonial times, where you can still catch a modern gig (this summer's highlights are Simple Minds and Paolo Nutini), along with views of Mount Etna. On Via di Giovanni, grab a glass of Sicily's best lemon granita at BamBar before checking into the super-luxe Belmond Grand Hotel Timen.

Details B&B doubles from £338 (belmond.com). Fly to Catania

Pienza Tuscany

When it comes to delicious hilltop towns in Tuscany you are spoilt for choice. This particular Renaissance contender was designed in the mid-1400s by Pope Pius II as a means of reinventing his home town (previously called Corsignano) as a model for architectural beauty. The results are impressive, with a central piazza lined on three sides by handsome palaces, and the fourth by the

descend into this glutton's paradise where specialities include forgotten fruits such as the vulpina pear; the best sangiovese di romagna wine; conciato cheese, ripened in chalky caves; and pork from the local mora romagnola breed. Book a room at the family-run La Rocca with its excellent restaurant.

Details B&B doubles from £51 (albergo-larecca.it). Fly to Bologna

Fiumefreddo Bruzio Calabria

Fiumefreddo Bruzio takes very seriously its official status as one of the most beautiful villages in Italy. More than 2000ft up from the beach, the people of this inspirational hilltop community have pulled together to save their medieval home from the fate of so many isolated spots in the south. They have branded themselves a "slow village" with a canteen, ConVivio, showcasing seasonal, regional food ("You eat what is available"); Granatello, an albergo diffuso with five rooms and two apartments split between 17th-century buildings; and a retreat for those with breast cancer at the Casa di Rosa.

Details B&B doubles from £60 (borpodifiume.it). Fly to Lamezia Terme

Ostuni Puglia

This white city could easily be mistaken for one on an Ionian island. That's because when La Città Bianca was destroyed by Hannibal during the Second Punic War, it was the Greeks who rebuilt it, turning it into a Pugliese town. Today its whitewashed towers, lined with low whitewashed buildings, wind up the hill to the gothic cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta. Ostuni's olive groves stretch down to the Adriatic — make time to visit Masseria Brancati, an ancient mill, where you can taste oil from 2,000-year-old trees. Stay at La Sommità, a minimalist 16th-century palazzo with exceptional views.

Details B&B doubles from £179 (lasommita.it). Fly to Bari

San Daniele Friuli Venezia Giulia

In the battle of Parma v San Daniele hams, producers from the tiny Friulian town generally come out on top. Visit Prosciuttificio Bagatto to learn how this three-generation family business put ham on the gastronomic map. However, pretty San Daniele is home to more than just the DOP delicacy. In Sant'Antonio Abate, Pellegrino da San Daniele's intense frescoes have earned it the reputation of the "Sistine Chapel of Friuli". Also visit the Biblioteca Guarnieriana, a library that opened in 1466 and has priceless first editions, including Dante's *Inferno*. The funky



nonsense Hotel Donatella in town.

suites at Corte della Ma