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Frommer's Favorite Budget Providers for Independent and Escorted Travel to Italy

By Reid Bramblett
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Packages for the Independent Traveler

Before you start your search for the lowest airfare, you may want to consider booking your flight as part of a travel package. Package tours are not the same thing as escorted tours. Package tours are simply a way to buy the airfare, accommodations, and other elements of your trip (such as car rentals, airport transfers, and sometimes even activities) at the same time and often at discounted prices -- kind of like one-stop shopping. Packages are sold in bulk to tour operators -- who resell them to the public at a cost that usually undercuts standard rates.

One good source of package deals is the airlines themselves. Most major airlines offer air/land packages, including **American Airlines Vacations** (tel. 800/321-2121; www.aavacations.com), **Delta Vacations** (tel. 800/221-6666; www.deltavacations.com), **Continental Airlines Vacations** (tel. 800/301-3800; www.covacations.com), and **United Vacations** (tel. 888/854-3899; www.unitedvacations.com).

The single best-priced packager to Europe, though, is the Internet-only travel agent **Go-Today.com** (www.go-today.com), which offers excellent 4- and 6-night air/hotel packages throughout the continent, as well as airfare/car rental deals. Its up-and-coming rival **Octopus Travel** (tel. 877/330-7765; www.octopuspackages.com) sometimes undercuts Go-Today.com's rates, but look carefully at the hotels you get. Often with Octopus, the lodgings are located way on the outskirts of town. By the time you "upgrade" to a property near the historic center and take a look at the new rate, Go-Today.com turns out the real price champ.

Italiatours (tel. 800/845-3365; www.italiatourusa.com) is the tour operator branch of Alitalia airlines and offers package and escorted tours at extremely attractive prices. **TourCrafters** (tel. 800/ITALY95 or 847/816-6510; www.tourcrafters.com) offers escorted, hosted, and independent tours throughout Italy. Among the more traditional travel agencies, **Liberty Travel** (tel. 888/271-1584; www.libertytravel.com) is one of the biggest packagers in the Northeast and usually boasts a full-page ad in Sunday papers. **American Express Vacations** (tel. 800/241-1700; www.americanexpress.com) is one of the most reputable national operators. Several big **online travel agencies** -- Expedia, Travelocity, Orbitz, Site59, and Lastminute.com -- also do a brisk business in packages. If you're unsure about the pedigree of a smaller packager, check with the Better Business Bureau in the city where the company is based, or go online at www.bbb.org. If a packager won't tell you where it's based, don't fly with it.

Travel packages are also listed in the travel section of your local Sunday newspaper. Or check ads in the national travel magazines, such as *Arthur Frommer's Budget Travel*, *Travel & Leisure*, *National Geographic Traveler*, and *Condé Nast Traveler*.

Package tours can vary by leaps and bounds. Some offer a better class of hotels than others. Some offer the same hotels for lower prices. Some offer flights on scheduled airlines, while others book charters. Some limit your choice of accommodations and travel days. You are often required to make a large payment upfront. On the plus side, packages can save you money, offering group prices but allowing for independent travel. Some even let you add on a few guided excursions or escorted day trips (also at prices lower than if you booked them yourself) without booking an entirely escorted tour.

Before you invest in a package tour, get some answers. Ask about the **accommodations choices** and prices for each. Then look up the hotels' reviews in a Frommer's guide (note, however, that most hotels offered with package tours are cookie-cutter chain places very short on atmosphere, hence they might not appear within one of our guides; use the Internet to check them out and see some pictures) and check their rates for your specific dates of travel online. You'll also want to find out what **type of room** you get. If you need a certain type of room, ask for it; don't take whatever is thrown your way. Request a nonsmoking room, a quiet room, a room with a view, or whatever you fancy.

Finally, look for **hidden expenses**. Ask whether airport departure fees and taxes, for example, are included in the total cost.

Finally, if you plan to travel alone, you'll need to know if a **single supplement** will be charged and if the company can match you up with a roommate.

Escorted General-Interest Tours

Escorted tours are structured group tours, with a group leader. The price usually includes everything from airfare to hotels, meals, tours, admission costs, and local transportation.

One of the most famous Italy tour specialists, **Perillo Tours** (tel. **800/431-1515**; www.perillotours.com), offers many good itineraries. You can also get good tours from **Italiatours** (tel. **800/845-3365**; www.italiatourusa.com), the tour branch of Alitalia airlines, and **TourCrafters** (tel. **800/ITALY95** or 847/816-6510; www.tourcrafters.com).

Many people derive a certain ease and security from escorted trips. Escorted tours -- whether by bus, motor coach, train, or boat -- let travelers sit back and enjoy their trip without having to spend lots of time behind the wheel. All the little details are taken care of, you know your costs upfront, and there are few surprises. Escorted tours can take you to the maximum number of sights in the minimum amount of time with the least amount of hassle -- you don't have to sweat over the plotting and planning of a vacation schedule. Escorted tours are particularly convenient for people with limited mobility. They can also be a great way to make new friends.

On the downside, an escorted tour often requires a big deposit upfront, and lodging and dining choices are predetermined. As part of a cloud of tourists, you'll get little opportunity for serendipitous interactions with locals. The tours can be jam-packed with activities, leaving little room for individual sightseeing, whim, or adventure -- plus they also often focus only on the heavily touristed sites, so you miss out on the lesser-known gems.

Before you invest in an escorted tour, ask about the **cancellation policy**: Is a deposit required? Can they cancel the trip if they don't get enough people? Do you get a refund if they cancel? If *you* cancel? How late can you cancel if you are unable to go? When do you pay in full? **Note**: If you choose an escorted tour, think strongly about purchasing trip-cancellation insurance, especially if the tour operator asks you to pay upfront.

You'll also want to get a complete **schedule** of the trip to find out how much sightseeing is planned each day and whether enough time has been allotted for relaxing or wandering solo.

The **size** of the group is also important to know upfront. Generally, the smaller the group, the more flexible the itinerary and the less time you'll spend waiting for people to get on and off the bus. Find out the **demographics** of the group as well. What is the age range? What is the gender breakdown? Is this mostly a trip for couples or singles?

Discuss what is included in the **price**. You may have to pay for transportation to and from the airport. A box lunch may be included in an excursion, but drinks might cost extra. Tips may not be included. Find out if you will be charged if you decide to opt out of certain activities or meals. The sections on accommodations choices, hidden expenses, and single supplements discussed above under "Packages for the Independent Traveler " apply here as well.

Editor's Note: Do you have your own tips to suggest? Please, share them in our popular Message Boards covering Italy by [clicking here](#).

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Note: This information was accurate when it was published, but can change without notice. Please be sure to confirm all rates and details directly with the companies in question before planning your trip.



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