

## Tuscany Travel Tips

By Dick Calabro

I deal with a lot of people from all over the U.S. and for some; their upcoming trip is the first time they have traveled abroad. So, naturally, I get a variety of questions about a multitude of subjects. In this article, I thought I would try to share some of the things my wife and I have learned in our travels abroad. Hopefully, these tips will make your trip easier and more enjoyable plus eliminate some of the apprehension you may feel because you don't know what to expect.

### Things to do before you leave home.

1. Make a color copy of your driver's license and passport. These will fit on an 8 ½ x 11 sheet of paper. Open your passport to the picture page and copy that page plus the page above it that has your signature. Put your driver's license above the passport before you make the copy. Take the copy to Staples/Kinko's and get it laminated. Store separately from your passport and license. This is extremely valuable if your passport is lost or stolen.
2. If you plan on renting a car, go to AAA and get an International driver's license. You need a passport size picture (they can take it right there if you don't already have two). Cost is/was \$15.00 plus \$10.00 for pictures. You don't need this to rent a car, but do need it if you get stopped by the police. No, I'm not speaking from experience!

Remove all the credit, insurance, debit cards and driver's license from your wallet. Make a list grouping the cards into categories (licenses, insurance cards, debit/credit cards, other). For insurance cards, show type of card, insurer, Policy # and contact number. For debit/credit cards, list Bank/issuer, card #, including expiration date, and contact number. For driver's license, list number and state. Keep this list in a safe place and separate from your wallet or purse.

**IMPORTANT: 800 Numbers for U.S. companies do not work when calling from abroad. Call the company and ask for a number that works from outside the U.S.**

3. Call the customer service number on your credit card. Tell them where you'll be, but more importantly, ask what the fee is for foreign transactions. Every credit card company charges from 1-3% (maybe more now) for every charge you make while in a foreign country. This can add up quickly and generally, you don't notice it until you get your bill **after** you've returned from your trip. I actually have a separate card I use while in Europe because the fee is only 1%.
4. Buy or borrow the electricity adapter(s) and transformer applicable to the country or countries you are visiting. **Do not** try to use the outlet in the bathroom for other appliances if it says "for shavers only". I have been caught on this one!
5. Call your mobile phone company. Ask if your phone will work overseas and what the charge/minute is from each country you are visiting. For example, my mobile company is T Mobile and the phone works fine in Europe, but in Italy the charge is \$.99/minute. This can add up quick!
6. The emergency number worldwide for mobile phones is 112. Write that down or program it into your phone. For all calls from Europe, Asia, etc. you must put a (+) before the 1, area code and number when calling the U.S. or another country.
7. If you are renting a car in Italy, your best choice is a manual transmission with diesel engine. Price of fuel in Italy has been \$4.00/ gallon or higher for years, so if you plan on driving a lot, this will save you many dollars. Ask if

rental includes unlimited mileage; ask about insurance coverage's and deductible amounts for collision and comprehensive.

8. If you use washcloths, pack some to bring with you, along with a plastic bag for the wet ones when you return home. You will generally not find these in Italy or in most European countries.
9. People always worry about what clothes to pack, but be **SURE** to pack comfortable shoes. If you plan to visit the beautiful towns of Tuscany, you will be doing **a lot** of walking and comfortable shoes are an absolute necessity.

### **While in Italy**

1. Use your bank debit/ATM card to get currency from machines. No need to bring a lot of currency; if you wish to change some before you leave home, fine. Machines are located in arrival halls at airports and in towns all over Italy and I always get Euros before we leave the airport. Your card may not work in every machine; it depends on the bank, etc. If you have any doubts, call your bank before you leave home.
2. If you are renting a car in Italy, check it over very well before you leave the lot. If there are scratches, etc. get the lot attendant and note them on the form while he/she is with you and ask them to sign it.
3. In Italy, when driving on any four lane highways, you must have your headlights on.
4. If you are pumping fuel yourself, be sure to check you are using the correct grade. I have seen people pumping gasoline into a rental car requiring diesel fuel--- no, it doesn't work and if you're trying to catch an early morning flight home, you just made the day very complicated!
5. Road signs in the countryside of Italy are very good (I think they are better than in the U.S.), but the roads of Tuscany are very hilly with a lot of curves. You should designate a person to be the navigator, so the driver can focus only on that task. It is illegal to be using a cell phone while driving!
6. Parking in the small towns of Tuscany can be a challenge. First, to find a parking spot, and second, to get the car into that spot. Small cars are more common and have an advantage here, so your challenge will be greater if you have a larger car or a van. On the right front inside windshield of most rental cars, you will find a "clock". You must set this at your arrival time when you park, as most parking in small towns is for a certain period of time. The parking areas are policed strictly in Radda, and in Greve centre, you must pay for parking before you leave your car and place the receipt on the dash. Also be sure to read the signs where you park---I had a bad experience in Sorrento years ago for not paying attention to those signs!
7. A new issue to be aware of is that speed cameras are being installed on some roads. I cannot give you specific details on locations of these cameras, but be aware they exist.
8. Buy a small travel dictionary at Barnes & Noble/Borders with Italian phrases used in everyday situations (shopping, driving, road signs, restaurants, food names, etc.) and study this before you leave. Practice some of the more common phrases and try to use them when needed. Italians appreciate Americans trying to speak their language. **You should not assume everyone in Tuscany will understand and speak English as this is not the case!**
9. It is not necessary or recommended that one leaves a 15-20% tip in a restaurant. 10% is the max you should leave.

10. When planning your itineraries, remember that, in most towns, stores and restaurants close for an afternoon break. Restaurants open around 12-12:30pm and close at 2:30pm; then re-open at 7-7:30pm. Restaurants close on different days, so try to call if you can before you leave your accommodations. Stores are open from 9am to 1pm and then re-open at 3:30-4:00pm until 7-7:30pm. Some stores are closed Monday morning and most stores are closed on Sunday with the exception being Siena and San Gimignano. On Saturdays, some stores close at 1:00pm for the day.
11. In Tuscany, there are markets every day of the week (except Sunday). The Sunday exception is in Arezzo, where there is a huge Antiques market the first Sunday of every month. The markets sell food, clothing, shoes, house wares, & jewelry. When you rent from to-Tuscany, you will find a list of the days the markets are held in specific towns in your accommodation.
12. When you are returning your rental car to the airport, fill up your tank before you get to the airport. The Florence airport has gas stations very close by, but try to note where the stations are when you leave the airport after arriving as coming back in the dark to catch an early morning flight can make it more difficult. I always charge my gas so I have a receipt—just in case the rental company says I didn't fill up before I returned the car.

### **Returning home**

1. With the new security regulations on liquids, I recommend you pack any wine/olive oil in your luggage. This is particularly true if you have a connecting flight after you land in the U.S. If you forget, once you claim your luggage in the U.S., pack any liquids over 3 ounces in your checked luggage **before** you recheck it and go through security to catch your connecting flight. Remember, there are **no exceptions** to this: even for duty free purchases.