



Driving in Italy - and Loving It

"Driving is truly a blood sport" in Italy, says Frances Mayes, author of the best seller "Under the Tuscan Sun" and its sequel, "Bella Tuscany." Both books are charming-but on this point Ms. Mayes is, in our experience, wrong. Despite Italy's reputation for wild drivers, Americans who have spent time keenly observing Italy's roads have come to learn that Italian drivers are more skilled and more alert than the average American road warrior. But driving in Italy is different, and knowing the ropes can make the trip a pleasure.

Basically, Italy has two kinds of road: the Autostrada, and all the rest.

On the Autostrada

Again we hear from Ms. Mayes, who points out that on the autostrade (the 'e' at the end is the plural), "people stay alert on all that adrenaline, I guess, whereas here [in the U.S.] you can float all over the freeway." This time she's right: driving the autostrada is not like swanning around on the Interstate. The autostrade are highways with relatively narrow lanes and plenty of curves that require attention. Speeds are high and road manners important.

Keep right at all times except to pass. It's the law, and a socially enforced practice. Before passing, check rearview and side mirrors and let overtaking cars pass you-which they will usually do very quickly-especially if their turn signal is blinking. Always signal when passing. Pull out and overtake quickly-don't crawl by-and return to the right lane quickly. When passing multiple vehicles, leave your signal on the whole time. If you linger in the left lane you'll soon (sooner than you expect) be tailgated. The autostrada speed limit is 130 km/hr-about 78 mph. While some drivers seem to give little regard to the speed limit, you, as an inexperienced visitor, should be more cautious. Besides, Italian police have recently become more vigilant as the country takes on some of the good habits brought with membership in the European Community, and speed cameras are posted at regular intervals on most routes. Signs announcing reductions required by local conditions are red-ringed white disks with black numerals; a bar through them means you can return to the normal speed limit for that road. Once off the autostrade, the speed limit is 110 km/hr on 4-lane highways, and 90 km/h on 2-lane roads.

At exits or service areas, reduce speed quickly: ramps are often short and sharply curved. Tolls are high, so have change handy for short stretches, or for longer trips you can use your credit card in the lanes marked "Carte." Avoid TELEPASS tollbooths, which require an electronic pass. Route signs are white-lettered on green. Unlike American signs, which say something like "I-95 North," Italian signs ignore compass points and instead note the next large town. They'll have arrows marked Roma and Milano, for example (directions may also be painted on the pavement). That would be no problem-but what about unfamiliar cities-Civitavecchia, say? The solution is to have checked your map beforehand. A critically important sign on all roads is the blue disc with a white arrow. It means "get into the other lane now!" because there's danger. And it does mean now. American Interstates have warning signs posted for miles, but in Italy, it is assumed that you are always alert. A rectangular sign with a dotted line up the middle and a bracket to the right means a lay-by-a place to pull over-is coming up, usually in 250 meters. That's less about 1/6th of a mile, so slow down quickly and signal if you plan to use it. Every few kilometers or so you'll see a yellow kiosk with a red-and-white SOS sign. Each contains a toll-free telephone; English-speaking operators are available. The difference between autostrade and superstrade? The latter are short-distance routes with no tolls and no SOS kiosks.



All the rest

Italian regional, provincial and local roads are usually two-lane blacktop; they are, like the autostrade, well maintained. They often go straight through small towns and curve frequently (and unexpectedly), so watch your speed, and remember that while the same general rules about speeding on the autostrade applies to superstrade. Here the speed limit established by the European Community is 110km/hr on four-lane highways, 90 km per hour on two-lane highways-slower than visitors to Italy may have been used to in the past. Again, signs announcing reductions required by local conditions are red-ringed white disks with black numerals; a bar through them means you can return to the normal speed limit for that road, the same way a bar through the name of a town means you are leaving its borders.

Rarely are there shoulders ("banchine," in Italian), and even if they appear to exist, beware of drainage channels cut to carry away rainwater in hilly country. Before pulling over, look for a spot where the underbrush is beaten back to bare earth. This indicates that peasants, farmers, housewives and even silk-suited, Lancia-driving Roman bureaucrats have safely used the spot, probably to engage in frantic hunts for porcini mushrooms in the fall or wild asparagus in the spring. Signage on these roads is helpful once you know the color code:

White-on-Blue Signs: With the exception of the "arrow" sign noted above, these indicate local, town-to-town routes, as opposed to the white-on-green signs that indicate an autostrada.

Black-on-White Signs: In town and at their entrances, they point to specific facilities: e.g., police HQ, sports stadiums and (often) hotels. A b/w sign with a bull's eye and "centro" on it points to the center of town. The "tutte le direzione" sign baffles many drivers the first time they try to leave a small town. How can one sign lead to "all directions"? Simple: it leads to a collecting point where other signs point the way to many other towns. The idea originates in the hill towns of the Middle Ages, which limited the number of gates in their walls as a defensive measure, so consider it a sort of "Exit" sign.

Yellow-on-Black Signs: Also common just outside town, these identify specific businesses: generally wholesalers, manufacturers and the like. Individual shops are rarely included except when products are made and sold on the same premises (e.g., a ceramics factory with a showroom).

Some older versions of these signs refer not to businesses but important historic sites, such as the Abbey of Sant'Antimo. Most-but not all-have been changed to white-on-brown signs.

White on Brown Signs: Outside of town, these lead to specific points of interest. Between Montalcino and Castello Banfi, for example, such signs mark the turn for the Abbey of Sant'Antimo. (Occasionally a major attraction and a town are identically named, so two signs point in different directions. When that happens, you'll probably want to follow the white-and-brown one.)

The only daunting part of Italian signage is the Cluster Effect. First the signs start to multiply, so the solution is to stack them. But then the stacks multiply, leading to a substantial reading list. The only thing to do is slow down and try to take them all in. Have faith: you'll become an expert before you know it.

This is enough to get you started. Now-where did you park the car?