



Italy Beyond the Obvious

DRIVING IN ITALY

*The traveler's definitive
guide to driving in Italy!
Version 1.0*



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Letter from the author, Madeline Jhawar, President – Italy Beyond the Obvious

When we create Italy itineraries for our travelers here at Italy Beyond the Obvious, we always spend a lot of time thinking about logistics, and the best way to get from A to B within Italy. Smooth logistics are an important part of a great trip!

We've found that people are often afraid or hesitant to drive in Italy, and I understand why. If you've only ever driven in North America, you'll find driving in Italy to be a very different experience, and it's not for everyone.

When I worked as a guide in Italy leading hiking and biking trips around the country, I drove a Renault van thousands of miles up and down the Italian peninsula. These days when, as Owner of Italy Beyond the Obvious, I visit for my own trips, I often rent a car.



This ebook contains the advice we give to our travel planning clients. It may seem like a lot of information about a fairly straightforward topic, but I guarantee that if you take this advice, driving in Italy will definitely be less stressful.

I hope you'll find the information useful!

Madeline

Should You Drive in Italy?

Having a car on your Italian vacation can be an expensive hassle, or it can be a means to more independence and a way to get off the beaten track. But which is it? The answer is, it depends. On whether you are visiting the countryside; on how light you are traveling; and on whether you are traveling on a budget.

Bottom Line

DO NOT ASSUME RENTING A CAR IN ITALY IS NECESSARY

You may want to skip ahead here briefly and read about Italian Driving Habits in the next chapter to decide whether you're up for driving in Italy.

Otherwise, continue reading for the three questions you need to ask yourself in order to determine whether you even need a car for your specific Italy itinerary.



To determine whether you need a car in Italy, or whether you'll be just fine getting around by train, answer these three questions.

1) Are you visiting only cities or also venturing into the countryside?

Driving in Italian cities is a *huge* pain: plan to spend time stuck in traffic, getting lost, and circling for parking. Expect frustration when trying to interpret foreign road signs, avoid limited traffic zones, and navigate winding, narrow, and one-way roads.

On the other hand, trains run frequently between all major and many smaller Italian cities, and it's easy to get around within a city by either taxi, public transportation, or in many cities, just plain walking.

If your itinerary includes only cities, you do not need a car. Renting a car in Italy is not for you. Take the train.

However, visiting the countryside can be challenging without a car. Check on whether trains go to the towns you're planning to visit by plugging your cities into www.trenitalia.it. Even if trains do go to small towns, compare transit times, using www.viamichelin.com for driving times. If getting from A to B is five hours by train because you need to change trains three times, and driving is half that, then consider renting a car.

If you're doing both cities and countryside, just rent a car for the countryside part.

2) Are you traveling on a budget?

If you need this trip to be as economical as possible, the train may cost less.

To do a cost comparison, budget not only for the car rental, but also calculate gas, tolls, and parking.

Then, compare that to the cost of the train by checking www.trenitalia.it to compare prices.

A rule of thumb for road tolls is that 300 km (190 miles) = 15 Euros. Or to calculate road tolls for your exact trip, go to www.autostrade.it.

You may well find that the train is much cheaper even for a family of four. However the train could be a greater hassle, so renting a car in Italy may be the right solution for you.

3) How light are you traveling?

There's no question about it: lugging suitcases on and off trains and to and from train stations is no fun. But if you're only visiting cities, I *still* recommend not renting a car. Just pack lighter.

If you're visiting the countryside and also have a lot of luggage, it may make sense to rent a car.

How To Drive Like an Italian

So you've decided you could use a car on your Italy itinerary. But what are you getting yourself into? Italians have a reputation for being crazy drivers, and sure, you may see some crazy drivers especially in cities. But I would argue that in general, Italians are some of the best drivers in the world. It's a matter of understanding their driving habits. In this section, read **10 Italy driving tips you need to know if you're going to be driving in Italy.**



But first, my story about an accident with an Italian policeman

The *Carabiniere* had pulled up next to my white van in his brand-new Alfa Romeo. We were at a T-intersection, both turning left, and he had squeezed himself in to my right – which is perfectly normal in Italy. But since I was in the left lane, I had the right of way for the left turn. Then, my mistake: I hesitated, trying to decide whether my 20-foot long Renault van had enough torque to propel itself into the approaching gap in traffic. I concluded it did, and released the clutch, but a second too late: the *Carabiniere* had already started to turn left in front of me. There was a scraping of metal, a slamming of brakes, and then I learned some new Italian swear words.

He was a little taken aback when I responded assertively, in Italian, that actually the accident was his fault, since he was not allowed to make a left turn in front of me. I handed over my insurance information while he muttered under his breath about damn French women who can't drive (my van had French plates, and I didn't see the need to clarify that I was Canadian), and moved along, with no further consequences except one: I am no longer indecisive when driving in Italy.

10 Italy Driving Tips

- ❖ **Drive with confidence.** Be decisive. I'm not saying propel yourself into traffic without making sure it's safe. Just be aware that Italian drivers assume hesitation means you are not going. They will go around you, which makes it even more difficult to eventually insert yourself into traffic. I know driving confidently is easier said than done; how many of us who have been driving for years can become confident drivers overnight? My usual recommendation to anyone who is not *already* a confident or a somewhat aggressive and safe driver is to avoid driving in Italy.
- ❖ **Remember that the left lane of the highway (autostrada) is only for passing.** If you need to pass the car in front of you, by all means, move into the left lane. Then, once you've passed, move back over to the right immediately. Never, ever pass on the right: it's dangerous because many Italian drivers don't shoulder check when changing lanes to the right. They know that any car in a lane to their right is by default moving more slowly than they are, so there's no need to look back and check for approaching cars.
- ❖ Unlike in other parts of the world, where stop signs mean drivers should come to a complete stop, **stop signs in Italy mean make sure the coast is clear before proceeding.** There may be no need to stop, or even slow down. And if you do stop when it's not necessary, you may get rear-ended. So slow down enough to make sure it's safe to go, then proceed. Note: this applies only to stop signs, not to red traffic lights – at those you must stop and wait until the light turns green.
- ❖ **Adopt the habit of folding in your side mirrors** when you park on the street, so that they're still there when you return to your car.
- ❖ **Horns are a useful mode of communication.** Practice hitting the horn lightly, because in addition to the lean-on-the-horn angry beeping you may be more familiar with, it can mean "here I come, around a blind corner", or "on your right/left" to a cyclist. If you get beeped at, don't assume the other driver is angry.



Remember that the left lane of the highway is only for passing.

10 Italy Driving Tips, cont.

- ❖ A well-known Italian saying about driving is “**You watch your front, let everyone else watch your back**”. And this is actually how they drive. Consequences: very little shoulder-checking; aggressively driving forward to fit into gaps in traffic.
- ❖ Know that **there are speed cameras everywhere**. Speed cameras in Italy track average speed, not just your speed while you’re passing a camera. If your average speed is above the speed limit by more than 5 km per hour (note, not 5 miles per hour), the cameras will snap a photo of your license plate and send the fine to your car rental company who will add a processing fee and send you a bill in the mail – up to a year later. Usually the fine will have already been deducted from your credit card.

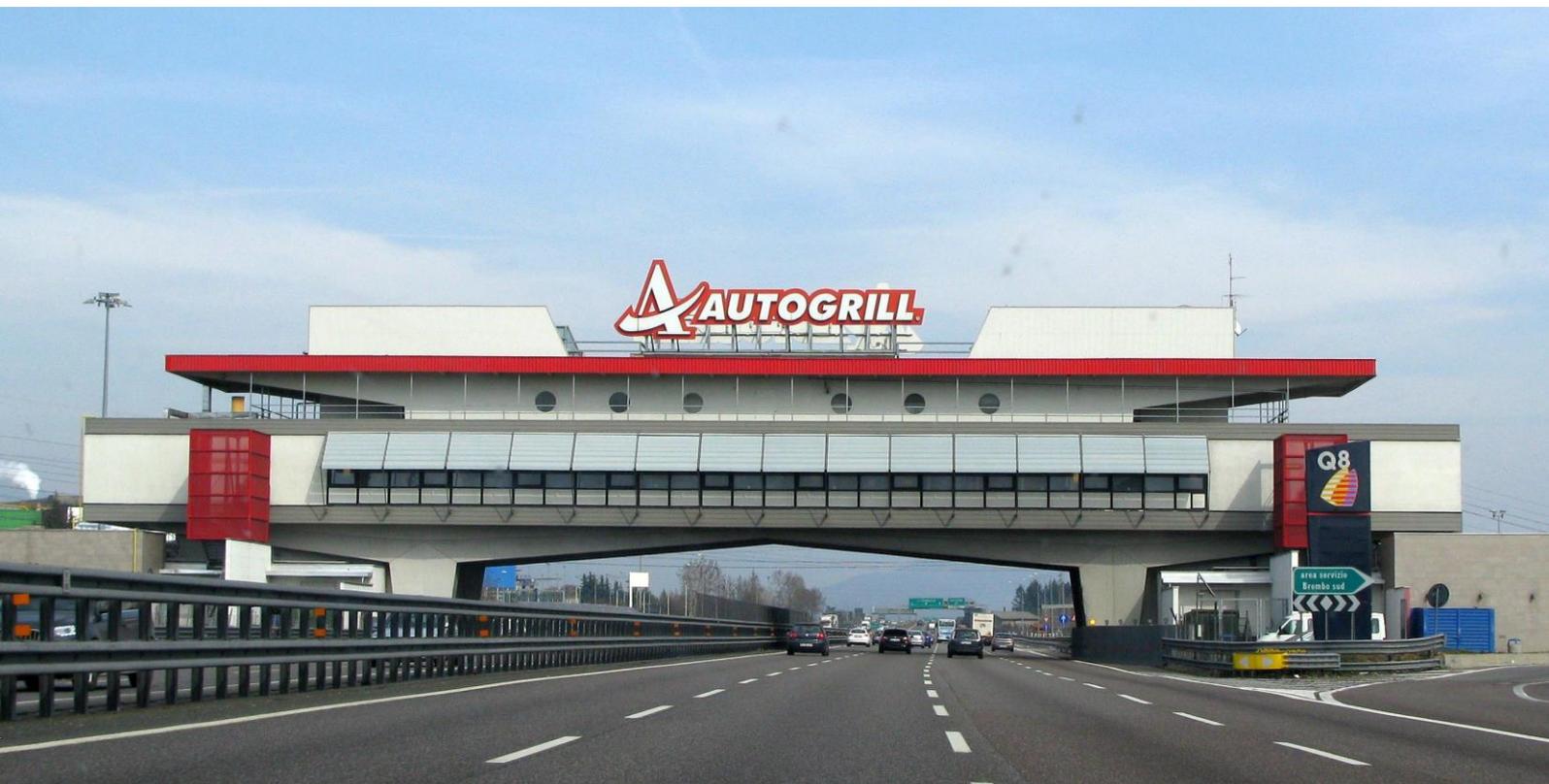


Watch out for Italians on vespas. They appear to come out of nowhere and zigzag through traffic.

- ❖ **A turn signal means “Here I go”**, not “I want to go”, or “I’m waiting to see if you let me go”. Think about the combination of #1 (be decisive) and #6 (only watch your front): when a car in front of you indicates that they are changing lanes, it doesn’t mean they are hoping you will yield, it means you should get out of the way. Similarly, when you indicate that you’re changing lanes, you should swiftly change. If you hesitate, other drivers will assume you’re not going.
- ❖ **If there’s a mirror on the road, use it**. Winding roads with little visibility and narrow streets in historic city centers often have mirrors in strategic places to help you see around corners. They are there for a reason, so get in to the habit of looking for them.
- ❖ **Keep your eye out at all times for scooters** (aka *motorinos* or Vespas): they weave in and out of traffic, will come very close to your car, and sometimes seem to come out of nowhere.

Driving on the Italian Autostrada, or Toll Roads

Let's break down driving in Italy into three categories: driving in cities, driving in the countryside, and driving on the Italian *autostrada* which are the major highways or motorways. If you're planning to drive in Italy, here's what every foreign traveler should know about these toll roads.



Autostrade are Toll Roads

You must take a ticket when you enter the *autostrada*, and pay when you exit. If you want to budget for tolls, enter your route on www.Viamichelin.com for an estimate. When you exit the *autostrada* you must pay the toll in cash. Do not go into the Telepass lane. A relatively new law says that without proof of exit location, the driver is issued a fine for what the toll would be from the entry point until the very end of the *autostrada*.



Green Signs indicate the road is an Autostrada



If you're on a road indicated with green signs, you're on an autostrada. If you're not on an autostrada but are following green signs, they will lead you to the autostrada. If you're on a road that looks pretty significant but the signs are blue, it's not an autostrada — and it's also not a toll road.

Pay attention to the speed limit when driving on the Italian autostrada



There seems to be a misconception that speed limits in Italy are high or that you can drive as fast as you want. Not so and be careful. Speed is monitored by cameras on the highways and tickets are issued automatically and sent to drivers (or car rental agencies) in the mail. Car rental agencies will add their own processing fee to any ticket you receive as a driver.

The further left you are, the faster you should go.



If you want to go slower or are not actively passing anyone, move to the right. If you're hanging out in the left lane and not passing anybody, Italian drivers will often aggressively zoom right up behind you. It's their way of telling you to move over. The blue signs with white numerals are minimum speeds for that lane. Maximum speed limit signs are red-framed circles, with black numerals on white background. Observance of these minimum speeds is extremely important.

Don't miss the Autogrill rest stops



The Autogrill rest station is not an old boring highway rest stop. It has wonderful sandwiches, great coffee, freshly squeezed orange juice, and even cool little souvenirs. Oh, and you can fill the car with gas and use the restroom as well. When I drive on the *autostrada* I always look forward to my Autogrill stops!

Getting Fuel



Filling the car with petrol if you're driving on the *autostrada* is pretty simple. The pumps are self-service ("fai da te") and easy to use. Note that if you're using a credit card, Italy has moved to a PIN number credit card system, so if your credit card doesn't have a PIN, have a debit card ready just in case. I have been able to use my credit card at some petrol stations while others asked for a PIN and in that case I pulled out my debit card.

Look how easy it is: instructions with clear images show you how to use the gas pump. At this station, which is halfway between Milan and Venice, there's even an English translation!



Brush up on your Italian Road Signs



Make sure to read the chapter on Italian road signs so you know how to recognize a speed limit sign, a right of way sign and others, before you start driving in Italy. They may look different than what you're used to, and these days if you get a fine, it may be snapped from a camera, mailed to your car rental agency, and forwarded to you with a processing fee. Most road signs are just symbols or are in Italian like the sign in the photo, which tells drivers that in case of fog, the speed limit is 40 kilometers per hour.



Don't expect signs to be written in English.

And Finally, What Everyone Wants to Know:



Will I see a Ferrari?



You may see a Ferrari in Italy, but you probably have a better chance of spotting one in Silicon Valley or in Manhattan. I snapped the Ferrari in the photo above on the Italian autostrada but you may notice that it has Romanian plates!

Renting a Car in Italy

Advice and Tips

If you've gotten this far, you've probably decided that it's worth renting a car in Italy and that you'll be just fine driving. If so, it's time to book your Italian rental car. And of course, we have advice.

- ❖ **Book your rental car at least 8 weeks before departure.** Prices fluctuate based on available inventory, and we've found that the 8 week mark is a great time to book. There is still plenty of inventory, and prices have not started to go up yet. If you book way in advance (for example 6 months pre-departure), check back every 4-6 weeks to see if you can get a better rate.
- ❖ **We recommend booking with [AutoEurope](#).** AutoEurope (not to be confused with Auto Europa which is a terrible supplier) is not a car rental company. It's like the hotels.com for car rental so they represent many suppliers. They have excellent customer service, great inventory, and competitive prices. If you find a cheaper price elsewhere, they'll match it.
- ❖ Although automatic transmissions exist in Italy, and are actually gaining popularity, **the vast majority of cars on Italian roads have a manual transmission, also known as a stick shift.** If you can drive a stick shift, there will be more car rental options available to you, and it will cost you about 10% less compared to renting an automatic transmission. That said, Italy is not the place to learn how to drive a stick shift!
- ❖ **While you need an International Driver's License by law**, the car rental company will not need to see it, nor will you be able to rent a car with only an IDL. So have one on you in case you get pulled over while driving in Italy, but bring your valid driver's license from home in order to rent the car.



If you have the option, it's worth paying a bit more to get insurance with zero deductible.

Renting a Car in Italy, cont.

Advice and Tips

- ❖ Make sure you rent a car that is big enough to completely fit all of your luggage inside the luggage compartment. **Car break-ins are very common in Italy**, but thieves are opportunistic. If your parked car *appears* to be completely empty -- even if the trunk is full of your stuff -- they will not make the effort to break in. Note that this also means you should not leave your GPS on your dash even if you're running into the bathroom for five minutes.
- ❖ **If you are renting a car in Italy between November 15th and April 15th**, even if you're not going anywhere near the mountains, be aware that you may be required to carry chains with you. There are a few places where chains are not required (for example Sicily), so ask at the time of booking. Chains can be rented from the car rental company, and double check that installation instructions are included when you pick up the car. The car rental company doesn't enforce this law, but local police sometimes do random checks and anyone not carrying chains can be fined.



All children shorter than 4'11" - regardless of age or weight - must be in a car seat.

- ❖ **One-way drop off fees are mostly a thing of the past**, so don't assume you need to pick up and drop off your car at the same location. Sometimes there is an extra fee for an airport location though.
- ❖ Unlike their wall sockets, Italian cars' **cigarette lighter plugs are compatible with ours in North America**. So bring your phone car charger or your own GPS (loaded with Italian maps, of course) and know that you'll be able to plug it in to your Italian car to charge.
- ❖ **Due to the smaller size of Italian roads and parking spots**, it's always better to rent two smaller cars than one bigger one.
- ❖ Regardless of age or weight, **Italian law says that all children under 150 cm, or 4'11" must be in a car seat or booster seat.**

Road Signs in Italy

If your Italy itinerary includes driving in Italy, you'll need to familiarize yourself with some key Italian road signs. Just like the language and the food, road signs in Italy will be foreign to you, but this is not the kind of thing you want to figure out on the fly.

Spend the time to understand Italian road signs before you leave, and you'll find driving in Italy much less stressful when you arrive at an intersection such as the one in the photo below and have just a few seconds to figure out which way you need to go.



Strategy

**PAY ATTENTION TO THE
COLOR OF THE SIGN**

Strategy: Know Your Road Sign Colors

Your strategy should be to always know what color road sign you're looking for. You'll inevitably arrive at an intersection posted with many signs and have a second or so to decide which way to turn. If you know you're *only* looking for a green sign, you'll see it much more quickly.



I have followed countryside road signs for miles before arriving at the destination. Just because there's a sign doesn't mean that the destination is close by. But you will get there eventually.

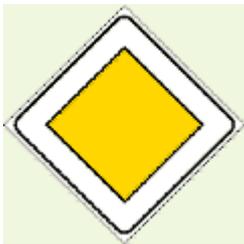
- ❖ **Blue signs indicate main roads that are not *autostrada* (highways).** If you don't want to take the *autostrada* to your destination but don't want to be driving on dirt roads either, follow the blue roads. They have lower speed limits but are usually more scenic than the green roads. And they're free.
- ❖ **Green signs indicate the *autostrada*, which is a toll road.** Note: the *autostrada* may not actually be very close to the sign, but if you continue to follow the green signs, you will eventually hit it. If you're going to be driving on the *autostrada*, read our recommendations in the previous chapter.
- ❖ Brown, yellow, and white signs are also used. **Restaurants are yellow or white. Churches, places of architectural interest, scenic drives, and tourist destinations (sometimes the tourist office) are usually brown. Everything else is white.**



Six Types of Italian Road Signs you Should Know

There are of course hundreds of types of road signs in Italy just like there are in North America. Some of them I think you can figure out, but I picked these six to highlight because I think they are important, and are also not easy to figure out if you've never seen them before.

Right of Way / End of Right of Way Sign



This sign looks like a yellow diamond surrounded with a white border and a black outline, and means you are on a road with the right of way. Cars turning in from the left or right must yield to you. When you see the black line through the same sign, you no longer have the right of way and you must yield to other traffic coming in from the right or left.

Divieto Fermata, or No Stopping



These signs are circular, with a blue center and a red outline, with a red bar or two crossing the circle. The first sign means no stopping, and the second one means no parking/tow zone (so really, no stopping either).

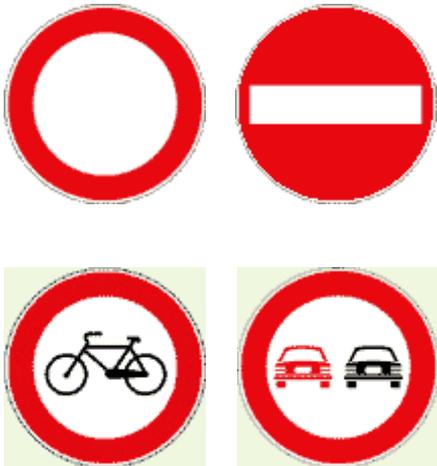
City Center



Follow the bullseye sign if you're looking for the center of the city. Very useful when driving to a city with more than one exit off the autostrada, and also helps locate the historic center within the city limits.

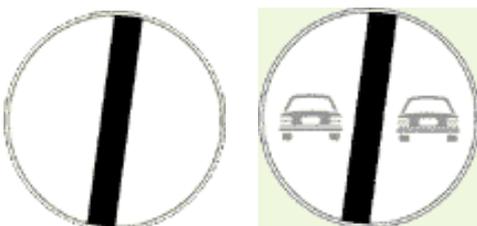
Six Types of Italian Road Signs you Should Know, continued

No entry, no bicycles, no passing, wrong way



The red circle with a white center is an important sign in Italy and we are not usually familiar with it in North America. Our equivalent sign has a diagonal red bar crossing it (think about a no smoking sign). The top sign on the left is the basic version and means no entry with a car. Often there are times of day posted underneath, which means no entry just during those times, such as in the Limited Traffic Zones of a city, or ZTL, which is discussed in another chapter of this ebook. The sign next to it is no entry / wrong way, and I've included examples of no passing and no bicycles, but anything inside a red circle means not allowed.

Okay, You're Allowed Now



The white circle with one black bar, means "it's okay to drive on this road now". The second sign, with a car on each side of the black bar, means "end of no passing zone", or "you can pass now"..

Traffic Circle / Roundabout



If you already know how to navigate a roundabout or traffic circle, then don't worry. Italian roundabouts are the same. But if you are not familiar with them, learn entry and exit rules before you accidentally have to navigate multiple lanes of traffic, all driving in a circle, on the fly. Traffic circles in Italy are very common. A great way to get an introduction into the way traffic circles work is by watching videos.

Limited Traffic Zones in Historic City Centers

Anyone who is planning to drive in Italy needs to be aware of Limited Traffic Zones, or *Zona Traffico Limitato* in Italian, abbreviated to ZTL. Many historical centers of Italian cities have set up these limited traffic zones in order to reduce congestion and pollution, and there are significant fines for driving into one of these zones unauthorized.



Italian ZTL tickets are automatically generated and sent to drivers who cross into the designated Limited Traffic Zone (ZTL) in a city, and who are unauthorized to do so.

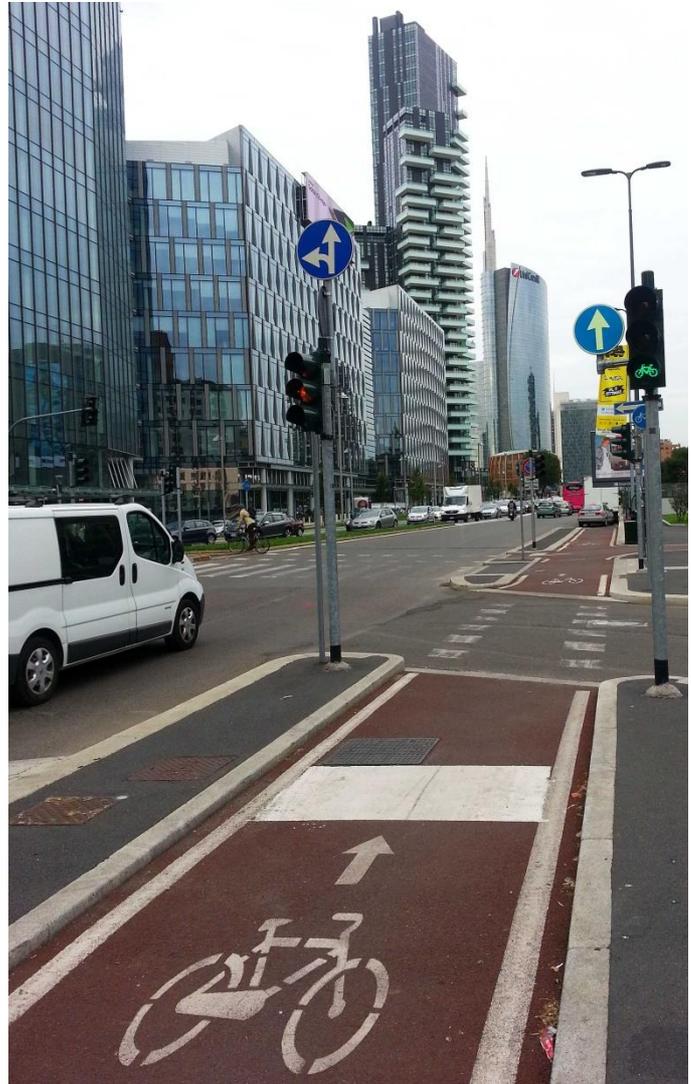
- ❖ In 2008 in Florence – a city of 365,000 residents – almost 900,000 tickets were issued for traffic violations. **More than half of those traffic violations were for driving unauthorized in an area of restricted access.**
- ❖ **The boundaries of the ZTL are clearly marked**, except that you need to know what you're looking for. The photo is an example of a ZTL boundary sign.
- ❖ The red circle means no cars allowed. The numbers underneath are the times of day, using the 24-hour clock. So this sign means no cars allowed between 8 am and 8 pm. The fine print says that cars with a pass can enter. As a traveler without a pass, you could enter this zone before 8 am or after 8 pm



Five Reasons it's Easy to Get a ZTL Fine

(next page: how to avoid one)

- ❖ **You'll see other cars crossing the ZTL boundary and may assume you can proceed. Not so.** You may see plenty of Italian drivers crossing into the ZTL zone, but they're locals and they have passes. You do not, and you'll get a fine.
- ❖ **All cities do not have the same rules,** so learning the rules for Pisa may not be useful for Florence or Milan. In some cities, non-residents cannot enter the ZTL, period. In other cities, any car can enter, but only with a pass. In Milan, anyone can buy a pass. It's worth looking into ahead of time.
- ❖ **Zones are monitored by cameras, so tickets are issued immediately and automatically,** as soon as (and each time) the car crosses the ZTL boundary. There is no chance to explain to an actual person, "but officer, I didn't understand....". The ticket is sent to the address registered with the car, or for a car rental company, the ticket will be forwarded to the home address associated with the credit card – with an additional processing fee.



- ❖ **GPS systems do not know about ZTL zones, and will just suggest the shortest route,** which may indeed include driving straight into a ZTL.
- ❖ **Once you've started approaching the ZTL area, it can be impossible to turn around.** By the time you see the sign, you may not be able to avoid getting a fine. Due to traffic or narrow or one-way streets, you may need to enter the ZTL in order to leave it.

How To Avoid Getting a ZTL Fine: 4 tips

As with any traffic fine, avoiding these types of fines is mostly common sense.

- ❖ **Reading this information already helps**, since you know of the existence of these areas and you'll not only know that you should look out for them, but you'll recognize the sign and understand the 24-hour clock (where 18 is actually 6 pm, etc). Many foreign tourists are not aware of these zones and car rental companies do not have time to review this with you when you pick up your car.
- ❖ **Don't drive in the historical center of Italian cities, if at all possible.** Take the train. Or park your car outside the ZTL and use the bus, the subway, the tram, or a taxi when going into the center.
- ❖ If you know you'll need to drive in the historic center of a city, plan ahead. **Get a map of the ZTL zones**, print it out and bring it with you. The end of this chapter has links to maps of some ZTL zones of Italian cities.
- ❖ If you are renting a car and returning it to a city location, or if you have booked a hotel inside a ZTL area, **ask the hotel or car rental place about the boundaries of the ZTL**, and whether you can buy a pass or whether they can give you one. Regardless of what they tell you, be aware that *you* are still the one responsible for any fines incurred.



ZTL fines are not a scam, nor are they aimed at tourists.

Italy ZTL Resources: Maps and Information

Below are a few great resources to help you plan, if you'll have a rental car in any of the cities below. Note that there are *many* cities and towns across Italy with ZTL zones, it is not limited to the places listed here.

Rome: ZTL Map

<http://www.accessibilitacentristorici.it/ztl/lazio/roma.html>

Note that the boundaries are different in the evenings.

Florence: ZTL Map

http://www.bella-toscana.com/traffic/firenze_ztl_map_next.jpg

Virtually the entire city center is covered in ZTL.

Siena: ZTL Map

<http://www.accessibilitacentristorici.it/ztl/toscana/siena.html>

Siena is a place lots of people get ZTL fines, so be careful about the boundaries.

Pisa: ZTL Map

<https://secure.comune.pisa.it/tzi/info.jsp>

Click on the zones to see details.

Milan: "Congestion Charge" area

https://www.comune.milano.it/wps/portal/ist/en/area_c

Milan has taken a different approach. You can enter the historic city center if you pay a congestion charge, in advance.



Navigation and Maps

Because of the high incidence of car break-ins in Italy, built-in GPS devices are not common in Italian rental cars. This means you need to think about how you're going to navigate while in Italy. You have a few options, and pros and cons of each are described in this chapter. The only thing we *don't* recommend is to arrive in Italy with no plan at all for navigating. The free maps they give you at the rental car offices are useless.



Tip

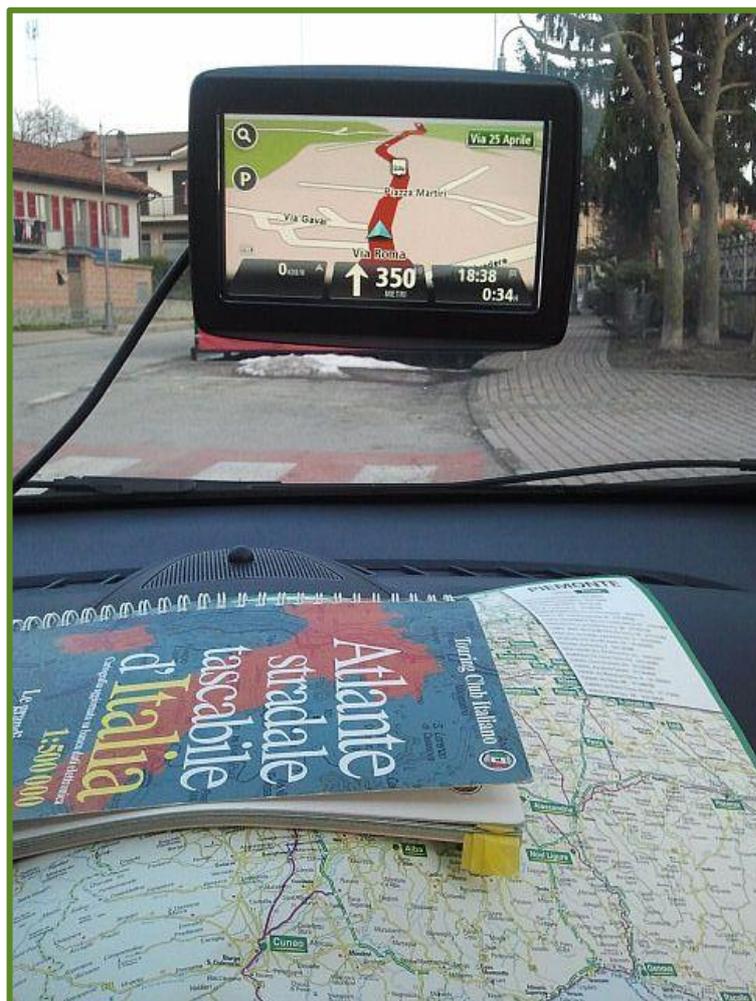
**DON'T BLINDLY FOLLOW
YOUR GPS**

Navigation and Maps: Tips & Tools

Remember that you're in a foreign country where people may not speak English if you stop to ask for directions. Also, because it's Italy, you need to allow some leeway anytime you are traveling from A to B. The further south you are, the more leeway you need.

❖ **Rent or bring a GPS.** If you bring your own GPS, just make sure you have it loaded with Italian maps. You can rent a GPS device from the local car rental company or you can rent one from [AutoEurope](#) and bring it with you in your suitcase. This option allows you to pre-program your destinations, which we highly recommend.

❖ **Buy professional paper maps.** We highly recommend having paper maps with you in your rental car to cross-check the route your GPS or smartphone is suggesting. Buy them online ahead of time (check our list of recommended Italy maps in [our resources section here](#)).



Because you're in Italy, you need to allow leeway when getting from A to B. The further south you are, the more leeway you should allow.

[Contact us](#) for Italy Travel Planning Services.
We'd love to help!



Where to find us:

Website for travel planning services and advice:
www.ItalyBeyondtheObvious.com

