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ITALIEN

DIE NEUE RENAISSANCE **ITALY**
THE NEW RENAISSANCE



ITALY READY FOR A NEW RENAISSANCE

The world's leading country in UNESCO World Heritage sites now rolls out the red carpet also on its picturesque country side. Austrian companies could profit from an economic boost.

Text: Stephan Burianek



PHOTO: DOBBS STOCK

Rome is also called the Eternal City. The Sant'Angelo Bridge was built in 134 A.D.



Polignano a Mare: Explore tourism far from hustle and bustle.

FACTS & FIGURES



PHOTOS: ADOBE STOCK, PAOLO PETRIGNANI

It is not easy to refrain from superlatives when writing about Italy, especially if you are an Austrian. For Austrians, this country on the “other” side of the Alps has always been a place of longing. The reasons for this are manifold and include the mild Mediterranean climate, the delicious cuisine, the fine wines, and the sea. We Austrians think that we know Italy extremely well from our innumerable trips, and at the same time we are aware that it is a country with a variety of local characteristics and with people of matchless temper, which provide us with exactly the right portion of an off-wall experience that travellers are generally looking for.

But Italy is, of course, much more than a sought after travel destination. Italian culture has significantly influenced the Western world. Before French became the language of diplomacy at European courts, even in France, Italian had long been the lingua franca. A fair share on the raise of the Italian language had the poet and philosopher Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), whose “Divina Comedia” (“Divine Comedy”) marks the transition from Latin to Tuscan,

ITALY

Official name: Italian Republic (Repubblica Italiana)
Administration: 20 regions, 100 provinces and 9 cities with special status
Government: Unitary parliamentary constitutional republic
Capital: Rome
President: Sergio Mattarella
Prime Minister: Mario Draghi
Area: 301,302 km²
Population: 60.5 million, plus 5 million expats (2020)
Religion: Christians: 80.53%, unaffiliated: 13.39%, Muslims: 4.9%, Buddhists: 0.25%, Hinduists: 0.25%
Languages: Italian (official language) and 34 native living spoken languages and related dialects
Currency: Euro
GDP per capita: 33,228 USD (2019)



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Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome.



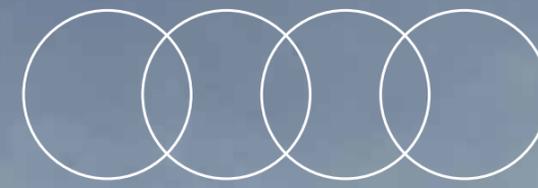
Rome again, with the Colosseum and the Roman Forum.

the latter of which provided the basis for the Italian language we know today.

On the occasion of Alighieri's 700th year of death, many Italian cities and regions honour him with exhibitions or other cultural events this year. The Dante Museum, located in a former monastery near Alighieri's tomb in Ravenna, opened recently after a renovation, and in Rome the Scuderie del Quirinale will start a grand "Inferno" show in October. Between Alighieri's natal town Florence and Ravenna the "Vie di Dante" ("Dante's routes") recently were listed among this year's special recommendations by the tourist guide Lonely Planet.

The largely rural "Vie di Dante" are an indication of a new tourism strategy by Italian authorities. In fact, for decades it seemed as if Italy's tourism sector had not much felt the need to leave the deep roots off its beaten path. The masses kept flowing in anyway. Iconic sights like the Colosseum in Rome, the Vatican Museums, the picturesque canals in Venice or the cathedrals in Tuscany, to name but a few, will always be sought-after destinations to check off the global bucket list. >>

PHOTOS: ADOBE STOCK



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Venice: Gondolas passing by Santa Maria della Salute church (below), colourful houses in Burano (below left), and one of the city's best hotels, the Bauer Palazzo (below).



But Covid-19 has changed it all, especially on the Apennine peninsula. Italy was the first European country hit by the pandemic at the end of February 2020, and due to little knowledge about the new disease at this early stage it was hit very hard. Although the government imposed far-reaching measures, the death toll added up to around 125,000 on the day of the editorial deadline, corresponding to 0.2 per cent of the population (Austria by comparison: 0.12 per cent).

By locking down almost half of all enterprises for several months in order to fight the virus, the so-called "non-essential" tourism and cultural sectors were especially affected. And like in Austria, these two sectors contribute an important share to the economy. In 2019, a booming tourism industry contributed 14.7 percent to the GDP. A year later, Italy registered a decrease in touristic foreign arrivals by 70 percent, which could be equilibrated only partly by national tourists that were "forced" to stay in Italy. However, with the vaccination strategy gaining ground, and with opening up cultural and gastronomic venues, the tourism sector is finally expecting a

recovery, still with compulsory masks outdoor.

A cautious hope is reflected by the fact that among Italians the new government currently enjoys a high approval rate. This is remarkable for a country in which frustrated Prime Ministers regularly walk up the Quirinal Hill in Rome in order to hand over letters of resignation to the President. The actual government was sworn in in February and is led by the former president of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, who managed to appoint experts to key positions.

Even though the reduced number of Covid cases now to a large extent allow tourists to enter the country under certain circumstances without being locked up for several days in quarantine, and although the curfew was abandoned, distance orders still exist.

With this background, it seems logical that rural destinations now find themselves in the spotlight. Also, they perfectly match the increasing demand for green and slow tourism. With 25 national parks and several regional nature sanctuaries, Italy has a lot to offer in this regard. From the Alps in the North to the Etna volcano in the South, Italy provides innumera-



Florence is not only the birth town of the Italian language, it is also one of the world's most photogenic ones: Ponte Vecchio and the Cathedral Santa Maria del Fiore (left and below).

ble hiking and biking trails that often lead along historic sites, like the pilgrimage route of the Saint Francis' Way. Foodies, on the other hand, love the large variety of gourmet and wine routes, like the one along the Etruscan coast in Tuscany, or the Prosecco Road over the rolling hills of Venetia. Besides such recommended paths there is much more to discover in the back country. All over Italy, visitors find so-called "Borghi" – stone villages that aroused in medieval times, typically on the hills and around a fortress. These charming settlements attract with an authentic atmosphere that is created by authentic cuisine and handicrafts in small, steep and cobbled streets. They turned out to be ideal places for quality tourism, and many Borghi nowadays offer guest rooms in former mills, monasteries or even castles. For some abandoned Borghi, tourism brought salvation, as several renovated settlements now are used as "scattered accommodations" ("alberghi diffusi"), some of which are very high-end.

Even the arts go rural, as Italy's Capital of Culture 2022 will for the first time be a small island: Located

PHOTOS: ADOBE STOCK



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Tuscany: The 900-year old Ponte della Maddalena near Lucca (right), the picturesque Colli Senesi ("Siena Hills", below).



in the Gulf of Naples, Procida is mainly known for its picturesque fishing villages and orchards full of giant lemons with thick peels ("limone di pane") out of which the insulars produce the delicious Limoncello liqueur. Next year, with more than 44 projects involving 240 artists, Procida will realise its poetic vision entitled "Culture doesn't isolate".

By then, the Capital of Culture title is being held by the historic city of Parma for a second year, prolonging its status due to the pandemic and making its motto "Culture beats the time" true, by having planned several events and having reopened numerous exhibitions. One of them can be admired in the Labirinto della Masone in Fontanellato, a small town with an impressive fortress near Parma. This park was created a couple of years ago by the publisher Franco Maria Ricci, who planted 200,000 bamboo trees around a museum that contains his art collection. They form a labyrinth that until the end of September will host the multimedia show "Storia di un segno" ("History of a Sign") that communicates thoughts by the philosophers and authors Umberto Eco and Jorge Luis Borges.

Parmigiano Reggiano is the Italian king of cheeses and the Dolomites near Cortina d'Ampezzo.



But Italy seems ready for a new renaissance not only in touristic terms. Prime Minister Draghi, who strives towards an alliance with France in view of the expected power vacuum the retirement of Angela Merkel as Germany's Prime Minister in autumn might create, has presented a gigantic economic stimulus plan of around 250 billion Euro. It is the largest one in Europe, most of which shall flow in from the European Union Recovery Fund that was born out of the pandemic. Draghi's plan aims to boost the competitive capacity by transforming the nation's infrastructure regarding, for example, digitalisation or fast train connections.

Austrian companies will have the chance to profit from the projected national resurgence, as the ties between Austria and Italy are already pretty tight: In 2020, Austria imported goods from Italy for 9.1 billion, and services for 1.9 billion, and exported goods for 8.8 billion Euro, and services for 2.4 billion – these numbers make Italy the second important trading partner for Austria after Germany. The Northern Italian regions come up for 80 percent of the total trade volume, and it makes sense to highlight especially >>

PHOTOS: ADOBE STOCK, LINDA YUKAJ, DIEGO GASPARI BANDION

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Who who does not know the
Leaning Tower of Pisa?



Italy commemorates Dante Alighieri's 700th year of death (top); the Tomb of Dante in Ravenna (middle). The famous Vespa scooter is celebrating its 75th birthday this year.

the trade volume of 2.8 million Euro with the Lombardy region, which is explicitly more than the volumes Austria is reaching with Russia or Spain.

Other than its regular domestic political disputes might suggest, Italy is a stable industry power and an ever-promising business and investment market. Everyone knows that Italy is a well known supplier of food and beverage, fashion goods, and automotive products. Lesser known might be the fact that it is also home to powerful energy companies and financial institutions. Recently, the European Union gave green light to a fusion of the banking groups Intesa Sanpaolo and UBI, which will form Italy's largest financial institution and at the same time will be the seventh largest in the Euro zone.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the service sector in general – including also e.g. tourism, transport, and logistics – contributes 73.9 percent to the GDP. 19.6 percent are filled by the manufacturing industry, the building sector accounts for 4.3 percent, and agriculture for 2.2 percent. As a strongly exporting country, Italy traditionally achieves a respectable trade surplus, which amounted 53 billion Euro in 2019, representing more or less a quarter of the GDP.

When it comes to the manufacturing industry, fashion follows metalworking at the second place with a total turnover of 56.1 billion Euro in 2018. More than eighty thousand companies work in Italy's fa-

shion industry, more than half of them in the apparel sector. Fashion "Made in Italy" in general has a high-profile image, even though it was pressurised by a raising influence of Chinese textile networks that import cheap material from China and, following Italian designs, sew clothes and shoes on the spot, hence "make" them "in Italy". Nevertheless, the Italian fashion and creative industries have become very innovative in recent years in order to stand out against this and other forms of so-called "fast fashion". The raising awareness of ecology and sustainability has given a good reason for the Association of Italian Textile Manufacturers (ACIMIT) to start the project "Sustainable Technologies" that seeks to develop new, ecologically sustainable production techniques that help to create unprecedented variants of organic, recyclable or even vegan goods. Of increasing importance is also the "wearable technology", like smartwatches or textiles with inserted sensors.

Hence, the Advantage Austria centre in Milan sees good chances for Austrian companies in the fields of smart textiles and green fashion, and certain chances for companies that offer outdoor clothing for a good value of money, which include farmhouse style clothing and hunting gear that is mainly demanded by Italians in the Northern regions. For Austrian companies which let their collections produce in Italy, the local leather manufacturers and tanneries can be interesting business partners because of their generally good know-how and competence. Besides that, a high potential for cooperations between Austrian and Italian companies currently lie in the preparations for the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Milan and Cortina in 2026. Austrian companies, for example, are appreciated for their know-how in hard and software especially in the leisure industry sector. Not surprisingly, sustainability is one of the key factors in the concept of these games, another field to which Austrian companies will be able to contribute their expertise.

In a recent leisure industry report, the Advantage Austria centre in Milan indicated a hidden potential in hotel projects. Due to the crisis caused by the pandemic, more than 70 projects with a total investment value of more than two billion Euro are currently on hold. Many investors now are receiving financial aids in order to redefine their concepts – this might be good to know for tourism experts in Austria, who could be of help. ●

PHOTOS: ADOBE STOCK, MARCO PAROLLO (2)



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Die Macht der Unabhängigkeit.



Bella Italia in fascinating numbers



PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK

According to legend, the Carnival of Venice (Carnevale di Venezia in Italian) took place for the first time in the year 1162. Due to the pandemic, it had to be called off in 2020 and 2021.

Italians are expected to eat

42.4 kilograms of noodles

in 2021 per capita

With **55**, Italy is the world's leading country in UNESCO World Heritage Sites

No other country on this planet is producing more than

54,783,476 hectolitres

wine, as Italy did in 2019

In **1958** the first Western opera - "La Dafne" by Jacopo Peri and Jacopo Corsi - was performed in the Palazzo Corsi-Tornabuoni in Florence

Italy won the football World Cup **4 times**

The average Italian is **42.2** years old

With **979** cell phones per 1.000 inhabitants, Italy is ranked 9th in the world



H.E. Sergio Barbanti

“The work has changed completely.”

The Ambassador of the Italian Republic talks about the excellent relations with Austria and how the pandemic might change diplomacy in the future.

Interview: Stephan Burianek

CD: You have been the Ambassador of Italy to Vienna since 2017. What were the main affairs in the first years of your mandate?

BARBANTI: One of the highlights, of course, was the Austrian Presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2019 with a number of Italian ministers coming to Austria for EU meetings. In the same year, we had the state visit of President Mattarella. Also, there was the fabulous exhibition „Caravaggio & Bernini“ at the Kunsthistorisches Museum.

Both Italy and Austria are well known for their musical legacy. Did you visit concerts or opera performances here before the pandemic?

I have always enjoyed classical music and opera performances, and it is a special privilege to be the Italian Ambassador to what probably is the world capital of music. But at the same time, it is also a bit intimidating, as the average knowledge of music and opera of the Austrians is really high.

Italy is Austria's second important trading partner after Germany - how would you define the relations between these two countries?

The relations are excellent at all levels – institutional, governmental and political. This has also to do with the excellent relations between our peoples: Italians love Austrians, and Austrians love Italians. Italy is the main foreign destination for Austrian tourists, hence it is very popular in Austria. By the same token, Austria is immensely popular in Italy for many reasons, for its cultural profile and for its winter sports facilities.

What are the similarities of both countries in diplomatic terms?

On certain issues our position is entirely overlapping – let's take for example the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans or our efforts in fighting anti-Semitism.

The first sectors that come into one's mind when thinking of the Italian economy are fashion, wine, food and sport cars.

True, but you must not forget about the presence of important Italian groups in Austria in the banking, insurance and energy sectors. There are also many interesting joint-ventures between Austrian and Italian companies. One important project is the Brenner Base Tunnel between Innsbruck and Fortezza, which will be the world's longest railway tunnel connecting Austria and Italy, under the Alps. Certainly noteworthy, then, is the choice of Italy as a destination for major investments by leading Austrian companies engaged in innovative sectors such as alternative energy and fintech.

The Apennine Peninsula is characterised by an economic gap between the industrial North and the rather rural South. Are there actual plans to reduce this gap?

The „Next Generation EU“ programme provides for Italy to spend 191.5 billion Euro by 2026. Strengthening territorial cohesion in Europe and promoting digital and ecological transition are among its objectives. This means restarting the process of convergence between the South and the Centre-North. The Next Generation EU resources are in addition to other European programmes and cohesion funds, which make a further 96 billion Euro available for the South over the next few years. Italy will have the opportunity to increase spending on physical and digital infrastructure and sustainable energy sources.

80% of the bilateral business exchange between Austria and Italy takes place with the northern Italian regions (about a third with Lombardy) - in which fields do you see a potential to raise this proportion in favour of the South of Italy?

More than 95,000 manufacturing companies operate in Southern Italy. Five manu-

H.E. SERGIO BARBANTI

started his diplomatic career after graduating as a Master in Law at the University of Rome. After working in Zimbabwe, Washington, Madrid, Montenegro and Rome, he became the Ambassador to Vienna in July 2017.

The Ambassador (right) welcomed CD's author Stephan Burianek in the beautiful Palais Metternich, the seat of the Italian Embassy in the third district of Vienna.





facturing sectors – automotive, aerospace, fashion clothing, agri-food and pharmaceuticals – account for 50 percent of all manufacturing in the South, generate 15 billion Euro in added value, 23 billion Euro in exports and employ 269,000 people. The large-scale nation-branding campaign that will be launched by our government globally in the coming months, will raise awareness also in Austria of the excellence produced by southern companies.

Since February, there is a new Italian government under the leadership of Mario Draghi. What can be expected from this government?

The new government has two priorities, one of which is health. It has already stepped up the vaccination campaign, and at the same time, it started a careful policy of relaxing the anti-Covid measures, in order to allow the economy to grow again. The other priority is to exploit at its full potential the resources which were made available through Next Generation EU and to accompany those financial resources with a consistent and considerable reform programme. The government headed by Prime Minister Mario Draghi, is extremely active in all those fields.

It has been now more than a year since the outbreak of the Covid pandemic. How did this affect your work here in Vienna?

The work has changed completely, as we were deprived of the possibility to meet people in person, which is an important dimension of our work. It was a full year in which we had to concentrate mainly on solving problems, mostly via video calls. However, in such hard times it was a privilege to be useful both to Italy and Austria.

Problems such as....?

Such as commuters, so that they can travel to both sides. Or such as the transit, so that trucks can cross the borders. We had to repatriate thousands of tourists that were in Austria last spring during the first wave of the pandemic.

“We’ll have to work out the importance of what you could call a health diplomacy between countries.”



PHOTO: RALPH MANFREDI

Will the pandemic have an influence on diplomacy in the future?

I think the awareness of the importance of diplomacy concerning health, was clear before, but now there is an even clearer evidence that the globalisation with its high level of mobility can – besides all its beneficial aspects – also cause health problems. We’ll have to work out the importance of what you could call a health diplomacy between countries. In general, it is better to co-operate than to isolate, no one is entirely self-sufficient. On a personal level, we all missed the company of other people, and at the same time we knew that exactly this was the danger. This also happened on a state level. In order to deal with such a big problem, you could not just isolate but needed cooperation; at the same time you had to close the borders. So, we learnt something we already knew, but we neglected. Like the Pope said: “Worse than a crisis, is to waste the opportunity of a crisis.” ●

PHOTO: RALPH MANFREDI



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