

Tips for Travellers – Public Transport

Public transport is both fun and inexpensive in Italy. It is certainly one way to mix with the locals and to learn where the locals go. Much less sterile than going on organised tours the whole time!

Italy has an extensive train network and it is possible to travel from one end to the other on the train – even across the Strait of Messina to Sicilia. The major inter-city carrier is Trenitalia, although in some places (e.g. between Milan and Lake Como) there are local networks as well. Timetables and bookings can be made via the internet on the site: <http://www.trenitalia.com/>. There is a tab to view this site in English. Remember though that the station names are in Italian. There is a broad range of types of trains and generally the faster the train, the higher the cost. Most trains have both first and second class carriages. I have not found a lot of difference between these two classes so I generally travel 2nd class. Some of the Inter-Regional trains show on the website but cannot be booked until you reach Italy. If you do book from this website, then you can elect to pick up the tickets from their automatic ticket machines when you arrive at the station. They email you a receipt and when you go to the station, you enter your surname in to the machine with the reference number that they have emailed you and it prints your tickets. I have done this several times and it works well. Alternatively, you can have the ticket sent to you via SMS if you have an Italian SIM card. Usually, the earlier you book the cheaper the ticket is.

When you travel on the train in Italy then you need to validate (timbrare) your ticket before commencing your journey. The older machines for doing this are yellow but these are in the process of being replaced by new green ones. They are at the entrance to the station and at the end of each of the platforms. There are usually additional machines along the platforms, but if they are not functional, it is often a long way to walk back, so I recommend validating tickets at the first machine that you see. There are hefty fines if the ticket inspector finds that you have not validated your ticket. Each ticket is printed with your carriage number and seat number. My experience has been that Italians are not good at sitting in their correct seats, so rehearse how you are going to ask in Italian for people to check their tickets and for them to leave your seats if they are sitting in your seats! The gypsies often try and extort money from train travellers, so be on guard. Do not leave your possessions unattended or allow strangers to try to help you on to the train or to assist you with your luggage.

Larger cities like Rome and Milan have their own urban networks called the “Metropolitane”. Tickets must be purchased at the newsagents or Tabacchi at the stations. Each of the Metropolitane has an on line website setting out their destinations and the types of tickets that are available. Similarly, for the bus lines, it is necessary to buy tickets at newsagents or Tabacchi and they have on line sites of their routes.

For those cities that are difficult to get to by rail, there are bus companies such as “Sena” that have inter-city services. On a couple of occasions I have been asked for my passport when boarding as the tickets had been booked on line, so have it handy.

If you are staying at a hotel, carry a business card from the hotel with you, so that if you get lost, you clearly have the correct address and phone number of where you need to return to. Enjoy your travels!