

Italy's best golf courses, by Costantino Rocca

North and Lakes

Alberoni: It's surprising to find golf in Venice, but the Lido has a lovely course tucked away inside the walls of an old fortress. Playing here feels like entering a secret garden and there are some strong holes – with plenty of water, naturally. Most famous is the 9th, a blind par-three known in the past for its many holes-in-one, assisted by the caddie's boot!

6,039m (6,604 yards), par 72;

Bergamo: L'Albenza is my home course and I never tire of it, because the holes are all different and you have to "work" the ball. Of the three nine-hole courses, Blue and Yellow is the classic round, used for the Italian Open in 1996. It would have been nice to win, but 20th place paid for a few evenings at my favourite restaurant in the old city, Da Mimmo.

6,068m, par 72; €55

Biella: A really tough course, and one of the very best in Italy, at the foot of the Alps between Turin and Valle d'Aosta. If you don't score well, never mind: truffles and mushrooms are on the menu in this region. Enjoy!

6,497m, par 73; €70

Franciacorta: The Wine Golf Course is not the longest, but it has the subtlety of a fine wine and I always look forward to a game here – and a sociable drink. Brut/Saten [the names of two of the three layouts] is the usual way to play 18 of the 27 holes. With L'Albereta hotel and Marchesi's restaurant nearby, this is how to enjoy golf and la dolce vita.

5,921m, par 73; €50

Menaggio: This is the oldest of the courses in the Lakes, with great views of Lake Como and the mountains, a traditional atmosphere and, for those very rare wet-weather days, a famous library of golf literature. The course may not be long but it is quite tight, so make sure you play straight. Enter one of the competitions and you might find yourself playing with George Clooney, who has a house nearby and is not a bad golfer.

5,476m, par 70;

Rome

Castelgandolfo: Olgiata, rather than this course, is where aspiring Italian professionals go to qualifying school – just as I did. It's a demanding layout, especially since they added 800m as part of Rome's bid for the 2020 Olympics. For holiday golf, I recommend Castelgandolfo, set in an extinct volcanic crater in the Frascati hills,

overlooked by the Pope's summer residence. If he wanted to take up the game, he would have a beautiful course in his back yard. The club has accommodation and a good restaurant in the clubhouse, a 17th-century palazzo.

6,205m, par 72;

Tuscany

Argentario: This new resort in the Maremma offers luxury accommodation paired with coastal golf. They say the prevailing style is minimalist chic, but there is nothing minimalist about the bill.

6,218m, par 71

South

San Domenico: This is the best of Puglia's courses – wide open and often windy, with a beautiful hotel, the Masseria San Domenico, among the olive groves nearby. People come to Puglia to enjoy the local food, notably the pesto, and escape the northern winter. It's a great choice for golfers, too, with a beautiful clubhouse. Just the place for a Rocca Golf Ambition winter clinic!

6,388m, par 72;

Sardinia

Pevero: Take a lot of balls to this spectacular Robert Trent Jones course on the fashionable Costa Smeralda. The fairway is not very wide and if you miss it, you are in the macchia. The wind always blows hard here, and the same is true across the water at Sperone (Corsica), where I also love to play.

6,150m, par 72;

Sicily

Il Picciolo: I am designing a new course near Taormina right now, but progress has been held up by a combination of bad weather and Sicilian attitude. Until that is finished, my favourite Sicilian course is the original one, on a country estate near Linguaglossa on the shoulder of Etna, with the smoking volcano always in view. There is a new resort hotel beside the course, but I prefer the "dormy house" or foresteria solution, staying in the clubhouse – good food and a friendly atmosphere.

5,881m, par 72;