

AN OUTLANDER SOCIETY DESTINATION COMPANION

Alpine Gems

Switzerland & Italy

April 1 - 15, 2027 | 14 nights | Zurich to Bari

The places behind the itinerary

From the Swiss Alps to the Adriatic: what makes each destination distinctive, and what to notice along the way.

Alpine Gems brings together several very different European worlds. Historic Chur introduces the mountain crossroads of Switzerland. The Bernina Express carries us into a changing landscape, followed by Italian-speaking Lugano. In Italy, country estates, maritime cities, coastal villages and extraordinary works of art lead us south to the distinctive towns of Puglia.

Prepared for guests of MGA Travel and The Outlander Society, hosted by Michael and Kelly Graham. This standalone companion is for travelers joining the Switzerland and Italy portion. Read it before departure to discover which places speak to you, then return to it as the scenery changes.

Joining in Zurich | April 1

The published program begins with the group meeting and Tour Director at Zurich Airport, followed by the transfer to Chur. Central Zurich, beside the Limmat and Lake Zurich, has a historic old town and a distinctive waterside setting, but downtown touring is not part of this published program. Any earlier arrival arrangements should be confirmed separately with MGA Travel.

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About this companion

Based on the Switzerland and Italy itinerary reviewed September 11, 2026. The precise Cinque Terre villages are not specified; all five are described for context. Tirano is the rail-to-coach connection. Background sights, foods and cultural details do not imply additional included visits. The final trip itinerary governs admissions, meals and arrangements.

SWITZERLAND & THE ALPS | APRIL 1 - 4

From Alpine crossroads to lake life

The scenery changes, but so do language, architecture and regional identity.

Chur

AN OLD CITY AT THE MEETING OF MOUNTAIN ROUTES

Chur is a compact historic city in Graubünden, with an exceptionally long settlement history. Its importance grew from its position among Alpine routes. The old town's lanes, guild houses and squares reveal a community built around movement, trade and religious authority.

The cathedral and episcopal court above the town give the streets a historical anchor. Chur is particularly enjoyable on foot because its car-free center makes small details easy to appreciate. Regional foods such as capuns and pizokel offer another introduction to a part of Switzerland with its own strong traditions.

Look a little closer: Look for the contrast between the intimate old town and the mountains surrounding it.

Further reading: [Old Town of Chur](#)

The Bernina route & Tirano

A RAILWAY THAT MAKES THE LANDSCAPE THE EXPERIENCE

The Bernina Express turns a border crossing into a major part of the trip. Viaducts, mountain scenery and the descent toward Italy reveal both the scale of the Alps and the ingenuity needed to travel through them. The railway is meaningful as engineering heritage as well as scenery.

Tirano is the Italian arrival point and the connection to the private coach. In the Valtellina valley, it has long been associated with travel through the mountain passes and with the Sanctuary of the Madonna di Tirano. No dedicated town or sanctuary tour is specified. Even as a connection, it marks a striking shift from the high Alpine world.

Look a little closer: Follow the transitions in vegetation, settlement and building styles as the train descends.

Further reading: [Bernina Express, Rhaetian Railway](#)

Lugano

SWITZERLAND WITH AN ITALIAN VOICE

Lugano lies in Italian-speaking Ticino, where lakeside promenades, piazzas and surrounding mountains create a distinctive Swiss setting. After Chur, the change in language and atmosphere is part of the attraction. Switzerland's cultural variety becomes tangible within a single day's travel.

The lake gives Lugano its spaciousness, while the old center offers a more intimate network of streets and cafés. The planned cruise provides another perspective on the hills and shoreline. A Ticinese dinner adds a regional introduction through food as well as scenery.

Look a little closer: Listen to the language around you and notice how quickly the sense of place has changed.

Further reading: [Lugano, Switzerland Tourism](#)

ITALY | APRIL 5

Country estates & a maritime republic

Two different forms of Italian prosperity, encountered in one day.

Gabiano & Castello di Gabiano

PIEDMONT THROUGH ITS LAND AND WINE

Gabiano introduces the Monferrato area of Piedmont, where vineyards, hilltop settlements and country estates make agriculture central to the view. This is a different Italy from the famous coastal towns: the appeal is in cultivated countryside and the long relationship between landownership, hospitality and wine.

Castello di Gabiano brings those elements together. The estate describes more than four centuries of winemaking, and its cellars and vineyard setting connect the historic property with a living agricultural business. The visit is centered on the estate for wine tasting and lunch, rather than a separate town tour.

Piedmont offers a distinctive introduction to Italian wine culture. Its landscapes and local traditions give the region an identity of its own. The most interesting questions are often simple: what grows well here, and why?

Look a little closer: Treat the surrounding vineyards as part of the historic site, rather than merely an attractive view.

Further reading: [Castello di Gabiano winery](#)

Genoa

HIDDEN GRANDEUR IN A WORKING PORT CITY

Genoa was a powerful maritime republic, and its historic fabric still shows the wealth generated by trade and finance. The city can feel like a discovery: narrow caruggi, or lanes, suddenly reveal substantial churches, courtyards or aristocratic façades. Its grandeur often appears in unexpected places.

The Palazzi dei Rolli tell an especially interesting story. These private palaces formed a formal system for accommodating distinguished state visitors, turning elite homes into instruments of public prestige. Their Renaissance and Baroque architecture helps explain Genoa's historical influence.

The active port and everyday street life keep the city from feeling like an open-air museum. Food adds another regional identity, particularly pesto and focaccia. Genoa is rewarding for a traveler who enjoys the texture of a real city as much as polished postcard views.

Look a little closer: Notice the dramatic change from a confined lane to an imposing palace frontage. That contrast is central to Genoa.

Further reading: [UNESCO: Genoa's Rolli palaces](#)

ITALY | APRIL 6

Understanding the Cinque Terre

Five related villages, each with its own personality.

The Cinque Terre are a cultural landscape as much as a collection of colorful seaside villages. Generations of residents shaped steep slopes with terraces and dry-stone walls to make cultivation possible. The scenery reflects persistent human work in difficult terrain.

The itinerary does not identify the villages to be visited or promise all five. These short portraits explain the area. Boat travel is weather-dependent.

Monterosso al Mare

THE MOST OBVIOUS SEASIDE-RESORT CHARACTER

Monterosso has the broadest beach setting of the five and a more spacious waterfront feel. Its older streets and the seafront show two sides of the place: a historic Ligurian village and a destination for enjoying the shore. It provides a useful contrast with the tightly compressed harbors farther along the coast.

Vernazza

A HARBOR THAT FEELS LIKE A VILLAGE SQUARE

Vernazza's small harbor gathers houses, boats and the waterfront church into an unusually coherent scene. Its appeal is the way civic and maritime life meet in one compact space. From the water, the buildings seem to form a protective embrace around the landing place.

Corniglia

THE VILLAGE ABOVE THE SEA

Corniglia sits high on a promontory rather than directly around a harbor. That position gives it a more elevated, landward relationship with the coast and surrounding vineyards. It is the clearest reminder that the Cinque Terre are also farming communities. Its height makes access different from the waterfront villages.

Manarola

HOUSES, ROCK AND VINEYARDS

Manarola's tall houses crowd a rocky spur above a small landing place. The vertical arrangement makes the village particularly striking, while the cultivated slopes behind it explain how settlement and farming share limited space. The interest is in that close fit between construction and geology.

Riomaggiore

A STEEP VALLEY OPENING TO THE WATER

Riomaggiore follows a narrow valley down toward its small harbor. The stacked houses and steep streets create a strong sense of vertical movement, with the sea appearing at the end of the descent. It is an especially clear example of a settlement adapting to the shape of its terrain.

Further reading: [UNESCO cultural landscape](#) · [Cinque Terre village guide](#)

ITALY | APRIL 6 - 8

Spa culture, design & a hilltop city

These stops broaden the picture of Italy beyond its famous capitals.

Montecatini Terme

THE ARCHITECTURE OF TAKING TIME

Montecatini developed around thermal springs and the European tradition of traveling to “take the waters.” Its parks, promenades and elegant spa buildings belong to a culture in which health, sociability and leisure were closely connected. The town forms part of the UNESCO-listed Great Spa Towns of Europe.

Its architecture includes the decorative world Italians call Liberty style, related to Art Nouveau. Rather than a dense medieval center, expect a town whose identity is tied to landscaped spaces and gracious public buildings. The program uses it as a base; spa treatments or access to particular thermal buildings are not implied.

Look a little closer: Notice how the scale of streets and green spaces encourages strolling.

Further reading: [Montecatini Terme](#), [Visit Tuscany](#)

Maranello

ITALIAN CRAFT EXPRESSED THROUGH SPEED

Maranello offers a very different kind of cultural stop. Ferrari’s history brings together engineering, industrial skill, racing and visual design. The museum gives a way into modern Italian identity through an object that combines technical performance with emotion.

You do not need to follow motorsport to appreciate the thinking behind the cars. Curves, proportions, materials and the driver’s position all reveal compromises between beauty and function. This is the itinerary’s strongest counterpoint to historic churches and palaces: a reminder that Italian creativity continues in workshops and factories. The planned museum visit is not a factory tour.

Look a little closer: Choose a car and consider which design choices serve speed and which create its visual personality.

Orvieto

A CATHEDRAL CITY ON VOLCANIC ROCK

Orvieto rises on a dramatic plateau of volcanic tuff above the Umbrian countryside. The natural platform explains the city’s commanding position and gives the approach much of its impact. Its roots reach back to the Etruscans, long before the medieval streets and cathedral that dominate today’s visitor experience.

The cathedral’s richly decorated façade makes a striking contrast with the surrounding town. Stone carving, mosaics and strong geometry turn the building into a public statement of faith and civic ambition. The appeal extends into the streets, where the scale returns to small shops, houses and everyday life.

Look a little closer: Appreciate the town from below before studying it at street level. Its setting is part of its history.

ITALY | APRIL 8 - 9

Rome & the Vatican

An imperial capital, a religious center and a living city occupying the same space.

Rome

HISTORY AS PART OF DAILY LIFE

Rome's distinction is the density of its layers. Ancient remains, medieval churches, Renaissance art and Baroque public spaces are woven into a city that still works, eats, argues and commutes around them. A few steps can move you between periods separated by centuries.

The Colosseum makes the Roman ability to organize mass spectacle tangible. The Forum offers a different perspective: public life, religious ritual and political authority concentrated in a shared urban center. Reading them together helps turn famous ruins into evidence of how an empire functioned.

Rome also rewards attention between the headline sights. Reused stone, fragments set into walls and the sudden opening of a piazza show how later generations adapted what they inherited. The city's interest is not simply that it is old, but that so much of the past remains involved in the present.

Look a little closer: Ask yourself what each space was designed to make people do: gather, worship, watch, move or feel impressed.

Vatican City

ART, FAITH AND THE LANGUAGE OF AUTHORITY

The Vatican is a separate sovereign state within Rome, and its significance reaches far beyond its small size. The museums, Sistine Chapel and St. Peter's form a concentrated encounter with the ways faith and patronage shaped European art.

Michelangelo's ceiling and Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel use the human figure to communicate enormous religious ideas. His Pietà in St. Peter's works at a different emotional scale, drawing attention to grief, tenderness and the handling of marble. Seeing both offers a remarkable contrast within one artist's achievement.

St. Peter's and its square make architecture part of religious experience, organizing movement and framing collective gathering. The published itinerary also lists an excavation experience beneath the basilica, adding a potentially intimate historical layer below the monumental church. Final arrangements govern the precise visits.

Look a little closer: Notice the difference between works designed for a vast public audience and those that invite a quiet, personal response.

Rome is a full sightseeing day. The depth comes from connecting the places and ideas, rather than trying to remember every date.

ITALY | APRIL 10 - 11

Two ways to experience the coast

Sorrento offers a base above the Bay of Naples; Positano brings the Amalfi Coast's vertical drama.

Sorrento

A SEASIDE TOWN WITH CRAFT AND CHARACTER

Sorrento stands above the sea on the Sorrentine Peninsula, facing the Bay of Naples. That elevated setting gives it broad views and a more level central area than the cliff-clinging image many travelers associate with the Amalfi Coast. It is a distinct destination in its own right, rather than simply a place to sleep before an excursion.

Its lanes bring together cafés, food shops, churches and local crafts. Lemon culture is especially visible, from sweets to limoncello, while inlaid woodwork reflects another longstanding tradition. In that craft, small pieces of different woods create intricate patterns and pictures, making an everyday material unexpectedly expressive.

The appeal is the balance between a lively town and a wide coastal outlook. An orientation walk helps establish its shape; unhurried time lets the smaller pleasures emerge.

Look a little closer: Look closely at an example of wood inlay, then step back and see how the separate pieces form a complete image.

Further reading: [Local inlaid-wood craft](#)

Positano & the Amalfi Coast

A TOWN BUILT IN THREE DIMENSIONS

Positano is shaped by the steep slope on which it stands. Houses, hotels and gardens descend in tiers toward the waterfront, and lanes frequently become stairways. Its familiar beauty comes from this compressed relationship between built space, mountain and sea.

The church of Santa Maria Assunta, with its tiled dome, provides a recognizable anchor amid the buildings. Boutiques and galleries add to the town's contemporary resort identity, but the underlying fascination is spatial: how people have made a town on terrain that offers so little level ground.

The coastal drive is part of the experience because it reveals the larger landscape of headlands, settlements and cultivated slopes. Positano's walking involves inclines and steps, so there is real value in choosing a comfortable pace and enjoying a view without needing to reach every corner. The named destination is Positano; a stop in Amalfi town is not specified.

Look a little closer: See how gardens and terraces create small horizontal spaces in an overwhelmingly vertical landscape.

ITALY | APRIL 12 - 15

Puglia: stone, faith & everyday life

A geometric castle and an Adriatic city introduce a different southern Italy.

Castel del Monte

MEDIEVAL ARCHITECTURE AS AN INTELLECTUAL STATEMENT

Built for Emperor Frederick II in the thirteenth century, Castel del Monte is immediately recognizable for its octagonal plan and eight octagonal towers. Its isolated hilltop position makes the geometry even more striking. This is a building that invites you to think as well as look.

UNESCO emphasizes its combination of influences from classical antiquity, the Islamic world and northern European Gothic architecture. That mixture reflects the wider cultural horizons of Frederick's court. The building's precise function and symbolism have inspired debate, so its "mystery" is best approached as an invitation to inquiry rather than a single solved story.

After the decorative richness of Rome and the coastal scenery of Campania, its clarity of form provides a memorable change. The landmark is near Andria; the published itinerary names the castle visit, not a separate tour of Andria.

Look a little closer: Follow the repeated octagonal shapes and consider the deliberate relationship between the building and its open setting.

Further reading: [UNESCO: Castel del Monte](#)

Bari

AN ADRIATIC CITY WITH A LIVED-IN HEART

Bari's maritime history connects it with the eastern Mediterranean as well as the Italian peninsula. Its old town, Bari Vecchia, is a dense network of lanes where religious monuments and domestic life sit close together. That everyday presence is a large part of its appeal.

The Basilica of San Nicola links the city to a saint revered across Christian traditions. The arrival of his relics in 1087 strengthened Bari's importance as a place of pilgrimage and a meeting point between East and West. Nearby streets reveal another kind of continuity through local food traditions, including hand-shaped orecchiette pasta.

The seafront offers a spacious contrast to the old town's close quarters. With several nights here and a leisure day, Bari provides an opportunity to move beyond collecting sights: revisit a street, find a favorite café and let the place become familiar.

Look a little closer: Notice the transition from the old town's lanes to the open waterfront. Both are essential to Bari's personality.

Further reading: [Bari: history and local character](#)

ITALY | APRIL 13

Two unforgettable Puglian identities

Lecce's expressive carving and Alberobello's practical ingenuity.

Lecce

WHEN LOCAL STONE BECOMES SCULPTURE

Lecce's warm, pale limestone gives the city a visual unity, while its Baroque craftsmen turned that material into richly worked façades. Flowers, figures and curling decorative forms seem to animate the surfaces. The architecture is especially satisfying when viewed slowly rather than simply photographed from a distance.

The Basilica of Santa Croce is a defining example of this local style, and the cathedral square creates a different kind of drama through the arrangement of buildings and open space. Roman remains add another historical layer beneath Lecce's better-known Baroque identity.

The city is also the cultural heart of Salento, the southern part of Puglia. The planned tastes of pasticciotto and almond coffee offer a small introduction to that regional personality. Its charm comes from the combination of architectural invention and a lively contemporary center.

Look a little closer: Pick out individual carvings, then step back to see how those details work across the whole façade.

Further reading: [Lecce, official Italy tourism](#)

Alberobello

A WHOLE TOWN THAT REVEALS A BUILDING TRADITION

Alberobello is known for trulli: whitewashed buildings with conical stone roofs. Their impact comes partly from repetition. A single trullo is curious; a district of them becomes a complete architectural landscape, with roof shapes, lanes and doorways forming an unmistakable identity.

This is a tradition of building with local limestone, using dry-stone techniques and carefully arranged roof slabs. The forms are beautiful, but they also express practical knowledge about available materials and construction. Alberobello makes that ordinary ingenuity visible on a remarkable scale.

The more commercial streets and quieter residential areas show different aspects of the town. Its UNESCO significance is best appreciated by looking beyond souvenir shops to the construction itself. After Lecce's elaborate churches, the trulli offer another answer to the same question: what can local stone become in skilled hands?

Look a little closer: Study how a roof is assembled and how its layers shed water. The appeal becomes richer when you understand the craft.

Further reading: [Alberobello and the trulli](#)

Travel is an investment.

The return is often in what you begin to notice: how a landscape shapes a town, how a building expresses an idea, and how each region preserves its own way of living.

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