

A moveable FEAST

Italy's Piedmont region marries delicious views and gourmet food in perfect union, so walk up an appetite and tuck in.

WORDS & PHOTOS: RACHEL BROOMHEAD

THROUGH THE GRAPEVINES

Walk through vineyards to the town of Barolo, famed for its full-bodied red wine.



▲ MOUNTAIN HIGHS

Guides lead you along alpine paths, through valleys and to the best foodie hotspots.



HE ITALIANS DON'T believe in lumping everything onto one plate. Instead, a meal is a ceremonial parade of delicate dishes, where each flavour is to be savoured and enjoyed, before moving onto the next. The landscape of Piedmont has to be treated in much the same way.

For a place which champions the art of taking things slowly, the views here change with alarming speed. Tucked away in the left hip of Italy, Piedmont forms the joint between the Alps of France and Switzerland and the rolling vineyards of the Langhe hills south of Turin. Only an hour and a half by car separates the two landscapes, but the gulf in scenery is vast. Even the taste of the grapes varies from one valley to the next. This is a region which demands attention to every detail, to the unique ingredients of each path and each meal.

Jackie Parsons is one of the few tour operators to have spotted the benefits of combining Piedmont's world-famous cuisine with its not-so-famous footpaths. "Walking and eating are the two best ways to get to know the land," she says. "Plus, the walking makes you feel less guilty about having a six-course lunch afterwards." Together with husband Mick, she has run over twenty Hedonistic Hiking tours to Piedmont, and knows how to marry the Italian passion for fine and slow dining with a walker's appreciation of natural beauty.

In the west of the region near the French border, the Cottian Alps are an irresistible starting point. But on a cloudless October day, with the valleys a distant gold and the sun warm, the footpaths are empty. Piedmont is yet to make it onto the well-trodden tourist trail, and those who do come tend to follow their noses straight to the vineyards of Langhe.

What they're missing is a jagged skyline of snow-flecked granite set against blue sky. At the head of the plunging Po Valley, one peak in particular commands attention. Monte Viso, the highest mountain in the range and the most distinguished with its twin saw-toothed crown, is known as the Stone King among locals. Once thought to be the highest mountain in the Alps, it is in fact a good kilometre shorter than Mont Blanc at



3841m, but holds itself like its equal.

Quintino Sella, the first Italian to climb Monte Viso in 1863, went on to found Italy's Alpine Club in the same year. But it's not necessary to scale summits to appreciate the beauty of the Italian alps. 1500m below the summits on Monte Viso's east side, a well-marked trail weaves among boulders, rusting upland grass and larch trees the colour of hot amber.

The air is clear and sharp, and tiny Lago Fiorenza – set in a steep-sided hollow early on the path – is still as glass, reflecting the peaks.

Further up, Lago Chiaretto sparkles in its cradle under the roman nose-shaped slope of Monte Viso's little brother, Viso Mozzo. The surface of the lake shifts with frosted grey-green ice, and the trail climbs above it into patches of snow. In the mild

autumn air, the snow spreads thinly over the path and settles in hollows like spilt milk. But ahead, the towering east face of Monte Viso bears the fresh scar of an avalanche. This landscape is raw and unpredictable – Piedmont's wild frontier.

Down in the valley, the local refugio serves a lunch which puts every other mountain hut in Europe to shame: salami and roasted chestnuts, soft Tomino cheese, porcini mushrooms, polenta

▲ TWIN PEAKS

The mirrored summits of Monte Viso were once thought to be highest in the Alps, and they still form an impressive backdrop.

▲ DIGGING FOR GOLD

Marco Varaldo and his truffle hound Roky admire their find, a treasured white truffle.

and traditional homemade sausages from the nearby town of Bra. It's the perfect mountain meal – hearty and warmly satisfying.

Bra is also the home of Carlo Petrini, the founder of the Slow Food movement. Reacting against the global 'fast food virus', he created the organisation in 1986 to protect regional food and the culture and traditions associated with it. "He once walked with local farmers as they moved their cattle up the mountain to their summer pastures," Jackie says. "He believes in knowing where food comes from; these traditions and the link with the land are what make the flavours of local cuisine unique."

For local chefs and food producers, understanding regional flavours means understanding the landscape. To savour walking the soft lines of the Langhe hills after the drama of the Cottian alps, it helps to listen to the local connoisseurs. In the town of Cherasco just south of Bra, chocolatier Mauro Riccardi insists he will only use hazelnuts from the high hilltop groves.

"The refugio serves a lunch which puts other mountain huts to shame: salami, roast chestnuts, Tomino cheese, polenta..."



PHOTO: SHARON TOOMAN/HEDONISTIC HIKING

"In the valley, they taste like cardboard," he says. "Those ones can go to Nutella."

In the neighbouring town of La Morra, Nicola Oberto of Trediberri wines shares his passion for the unique soils of his vineyard at tasting sessions. "A wine from this valley can be easy-going and opulent while one from the other valley can be tense and strong like Arnold Schwarzenegger," he says.

Barolo, the rich and full-bodied red wine which the Langhe hills are famous for, is particularly sensitive to changes in weather and soil. "That's what makes Barolo so great," Nicola says. "It's what links the land to man. This wine sets you on the path to wine-making, because you can come here one summer and have a completely different wine the next when the rains are different."

From La Morra, the path to Barolo locates the wine high up in a landscape of ash, sycamore, birch, ►

▲ LIQUID LANDSCAPE

The red wine from the Langhe hills is distinguished by the unique soils in the region, which differ from one vineyard to another.



▲ FARMING TRADITION

The hills in the Piedmont region have been farmed for centuries and the production of Barolo wine dates back to the 1850s.

◀ SEASON'S BEST

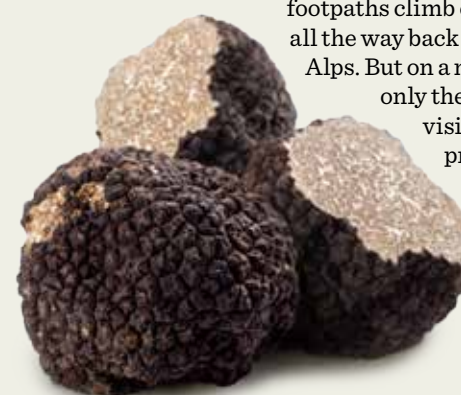
The best time to visit Piedmont is in autumn when the Langhe hills are wrapped in rainbow colours and ethereal mists.

PHOTO: © ROSTISLAV GLINSKY/ALAMY

▼ PRIZED PRODUCE

The cost of truffles makes eating them an extravagant affair. The smell hits you first – a pungent earthiness with a hint of garlic.

PHOTO: © VALENTYN VOLKOV/ALAMY*



lime and chestnut. “Langhe comes from the French for tongue,” Jackie says. “The idea is that the hills resemble tongues stretching out above the valleys.” If that’s true, these hill-tongues are laced with autumn flavour. The vineyards blaze trails of red, orange and violet across steep-sided ridges, stitching the hills with bold embroidered lines. Barolo itself is knitted into the picture like a fairytale, a hidden cluster of stone archways, spiral staircases and turreted manors.

Walk down in the darkness of the valleys, and you’ll find a man and his hound stalking the land. Together, Marco Varaldo and Roky hunt for Piedmont’s most prized culinary treasure: the white truffle. “It likes oaks and poplars the best,” Marco says. “The truffle takes its flavour from the roots of the tree it grows on, so an expert will be able to tell what tree it’s grown under just by its taste.”

Truffling patches are handed down informally from one generation to the next. Marco used to bunk off school to go truffling with the local aged hunter, and now he has free use of his patch. Starting in October, the white truffle season only lasts for two to three months, and the barks of truffle hounds are a familiar sound on autumn strolls in Piedmont. The majority of truffle hunting takes place under cover of darkness – a cloak and dagger operation which seems unnecessarily dramatic until you comprehend the value of the fungi: white truffles sell for €4000 to €5000 per kg.

The longer spent walking in the Langhe hills, the more the scenery grows in complexity. Eight miles south of La Morra, a trail weaves through fiery vines of Nebbiolo, Barbera and Dolcetto grapes and enters the time-frozen town of Monforte d’Alba. Terracotta tiles crowd together in a mountain of rooftops, all gazing up to the town’s ancient bell tower, with its views over the vineyards.

Idling back towards La Morra, the lanes and footpaths climb even higher, and it’s possible to see all the way back to Monte Viso and the Cottian Alps. But on a misty autumnal afternoon, it’s only the neighbouring hilltops which are visible – isolated, castle-crowned protrusions presiding over their own mini kingdom of vines, hazelnut groves and truffle woods. It’s best, after all, not to look too far in Piedmont. There is so much under your feet. **CW**

Plan your trip

☀ WHEN TO GO

The temperate months of spring and autumn are best for hiking. For spectacular colour and white truffle season, go in October.

🚗 GETTING THERE

British Airways (www.britishairways.com) fly direct from London Gatwick to Turin; Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) from London Stansted. Return flights from around £100.

🚌 GETTING ABOUT

Trains run between the major hubs of Turin, Saluzzo and Alba (www.trenitalia.com), but you’ll need a hire car to explore the Cottian Alps and remoter areas of the Langhe hills. Locauto offer a five-seat car, from £150 a week (www.locauto.it).

🏠 WHERE WE STAYED

In Saluzzo, close to the Cottian Alps, *Country Walking* stayed in **Antico Podere Propano** (www.anticopoderepropano.com), a converted farmhouse with rustic charm and well-equipped rooms. Doubles from €90/pn. In La Morra in the Barolo region, the exquisite rooms at **Rocche Costamagna Art Suites** (www.rocche-costamagna.it) boast balconies with views over 100 villages, while the wine cellar offers another sort of distraction. Doubles from €140/pn.

🍴 WHERE TO EAT

Alberto Melano’s cuisine was so loved by the people of Saluzzo that he moved premises in pursuit of a quieter life. Unfortunately for him, his new restaurant, **Corona di Ferro** (www.corona-diferro.it) is just as popular. Once you’ve tried his coddle egg with black truffle or risotto with Castelmagno cheese, you’ll understand. In La Morra, visit the extraordinary **Ristorante Bovio** (www.ristorantebovio.it). Dishes like raviolini ‘del plin’ with three roast meats can be savored with their own Barolo wine, but the highlight might be the semifreddo with nougat and salsa gianduia.

📍 GUIDED OPTIONS

Country Walking travelled on the **Jewels of Piedmont** tour by **Hedonistic Hiking** (www.hedonistichiking.com, 01858 565148), which includes seven nights accommodation, all meals and wine at several award-winning restaurants, tasting sessions, two experienced guides and all transport except flights, and costs €2695/pp.

