



ABOVE, FROM LEFT The sunlit Barolo vineyards make a remarkable haven for hikers; scaling the foothills of Monviso was a memorable achievement; the colourful medieval town of Saluzzo, built on a hill overlooking a vast, cultivated plain

"I FINALLY FOUND TIME TO CONNECT WITH OTHERS, AND MYSELF"

Claire Rawlinson goes hiking and finds inspiration in the Italian hills of Piedmont.

I was dancing on the summit of a mountain, 2,300 metres high in north-west Italy, with a group of women I'd met only four days previously. 'I made it!' I cried. Two weeks earlier, I hadn't been so sure. I'd recently split up with my long-term partner, was turning 50 and needed to readjust my vision of my future. That's how I ended up on a seven-day 'hedonistic hiking' holiday here. I loved the sound of the 'slow food and fine wines', and wasn't a mountaintop just the place to inspire myself with new horizons?

The plane touched down in Turin, where the Slow Food Movement began, set up as an antidote to the rapidly growing fast food industry in Italy. On day one, we met a group of 10 men and women, ranging in age from 40 to 78. Our plan was to hike through the medieval town of Saluzzo, the fertile Po Valley and the vineyards of Barolo, as well as scale the foothills of Monviso. We were staying in Antico Podere Propano, a luxury hotel on a former farm at the edge of Saluzzo, and Corte Gondina, a boutique hotel in the village of La Morra. Before each meal, Cinzia Long, our local culinary host, would tell us all about the locally grown and sourced meal we were going to enjoy. We dined on handcrafted cheeses, tasted risottos made from local arborio rice and visited Michelin-starred restaurant Marc Lanteri Ristorante Al Castello. On the first evening, we had dinner at Staffarda Abbey, a Cistercian monastery recognised as one of the most complete medieval monastic complexes in Italy. With

the Alps providing a dramatic backdrop, it was an inspiring place to dine. I sat next to Ellen, who introduced herself as a 'New Age Buddhist from America.' 'I can tell you're used to rushing around. This trip is going to be good for you. It's OK to go slow,' she said.

Easy does it, you move too fast

Day two and our first day of hiking. We were to walk through the ancient town of Saluzzo, followed by a trek along quiet country lanes, before stopping for a picnic lunch and a visit to a 13th-century castle at Manta. I took Ellen's words on board and found myself falling in with the 'plodders' at the back, finding time to engage with other people. There were tales shared of loves lost and found – all after the age of 50 – international careers that began at 60, and charity work that inspired me to want to give something back to the world.

On day four, we were walking in the snow-capped foothills of Monviso. When we got to the top, the sense of accomplishment was amazing, and I felt a glimmer of excitement about what the future might hold.

We spent the following day walking lazily through hazelnut groves with panoramic views of the Langhe Valley. Ellen was right, it *is* OK to go slow. When you do, you connect with yourself, and with others – and even get to dance on top of a mountain.

● **Hedonistic Hiking** runs escorted gastronomic hiking tours throughout Italy. The next Jewel of Piedmont tour is in October, priced £2,895 per person, for seven nights accommodation, picnic lunches, gourmet dinners (with wine), activities, excursions and transfers (fully inclusive). hedonistichiking.com; 01858 565148