

# Land of plenty

Joey Tyson enjoys wine, walking and white truffles in Italy's Piedmont region

The two dogs explode from the car like a pair of uncoiled springs, bounding down into the woods below. Igor, the hunter, slams the boot of his battered Fiat Panda shut and sets off in leisurely pursuit.

Vineyards line the surrounding hills, their neat red-and-yellow rows rising and falling with each gentle contour. But besides its rural good-looks, Piedmont's landscape is famous for the rich flavours it produces, and today we're after one of its most distinctive: the white truffle. This aromatic fungus, which can fetch thousands of pounds, grows in abundance here.

Hunters like Igor patrol the forests, diligently aided by their faithful hounds who have spent years learning the lay of the land. The prize, an unassuming bulb-like mass, is synonymous with fine dining all over the world.

Like a truffle, Piedmont is worth uncovering, particularly for foodies. Tucked away in Italy's northwest, the region takes its cuisine very seriously. It's the home of world-renowned wines barolo, barbaresco and asti; it gave birth to the Slow Food movement; and Jamie Oliver recently pitched up here to film his Italian Christmas.

Langhe and Roero, a Unesco

World Heritage Site in the province of Cuneo, and the base of my visit, offers a taste of Piedmont's finest fare as well as some of Italy's most underrated and gorgeous countryside.

Grand farmhouses and the occasional castle dot the rustic, autumnal landscape. It's a classic Italian setting in every sense.

And while the foodie element is a huge selling point, its accessibility is too. Turin, Piedmont's capital, is well connected to the UK by low-cost carriers and can be reached in about two hours.

It is also gloriously under-visited and can be offered as

an alternative to popular but overcrowded Tuscany and Lombardy.

## ▶ LANGHE: REFINED TASTES

There are seven different kinds of truffle in Piedmont, and hunting for them is a year-round activity. We spend our first morning in Langhe, an area of rolling hills, medieval castles and endless vineyards, foraging in the woods with Igor and his two dogs, Rocky and Lola (clients can do the same for €67 an hour).

After an hour traipsing through forests of poplar and oak, digging in the dry earth, the



**LEFT:**  
White truffles

**RIGHT:**  
Barolo wine

**BELOW:**  
Barolo wine region,  
Langhe



→ hounds hit the jackpot. The smell, at once oily and earthy, explodes into the air as soon as the truffle is uncovered. Cupping his hand to his nose, Igor takes a huge whiff and smiles.

Truffle-hunting has taken place here since the 1800s and is a huge part of Langhe's cultural tradition. The University of Truffle Dogs in Roddi has been training keen-nosed pooches for more than 100 years, while the National Centre for the Study of Truffles promotes and protects Piedmont's truffle heritage.

That these types of institutions exist is a testament to how much the Piedmontese revere their food. Regional menus are packed with complex, rich flavours such

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as truffle, veal, and tagliolini pasta. It's these tastes that Piedmont's fine wines have been crafted to complement.

Described by local writer Mario Soldati as 'the poetry of the land', wine production in Langhe is more akin to art than drink. And as the birthplace of two legendary

reds – barolo and barbaresco – this romantic outlook seems to return decent results.

Our next stop is the Marchesi di Barolo, where expert Lucrezia Falconieri explains the methods behind Barolo's oldest winery. Beneath the newly renovated tasting room and restaurant where we sip barolo and peiragal, cavernous cellars house enormous, traditional barrels of Slavonian oak. Here, amid volcanic stones shipped up from Sicily to regulate the humidity, the wine is aged for 36 months. A three-glass tasting menu starts at €18.

Barolo is derived from nebbiolo grapes, which thrive in Piedmont. Although it's regarded as a

difficult vine to cultivate, the rich soil and unique microclimate of Langhe has allowed the grape to flourish, producing full reds like barbaresco and barolo.

Next, we visit Produttori del Barbaresco, the region's first wine co-operative. Although it's not much more than 20 minutes' drive, barbaresco is completely different in taste.

The sandy soil of this area holds more nutrients, so the nebbiolo vines produce less tannin, making the wine softer. It's also younger. While barolo must be stored for three years before sale, barbaresco is ready after two. A full day's tasting tour can be arranged through Travel Langhe for €200 per person. →



**▶ ROERO: WILD WALKS AND WILD HONEY**

An area of unruly forest, deep gorges and peculiar, sandy-coloured cliffs, Roero feels like Langhe's wilder sibling. It's the outdoor hub of the area, set up for walkers, riders (by bike or horse) and trail runners.

Monta, a mountain-top village, operates as the base of the Ecomuseum of the Rocche of Roero, where most excursions and activities can be arranged.

Nearly 200 miles of hiking trails cut through its rugged landscape, each with a theme designed to uncover a different aspect of the area's history and heritage. There are trails centred on everything from wine (what else?) to medieval folklore. Many trails, which are clearly marked in red, start from Monta.

For clients who don't trust their own navigational skills, the clever IziTravel app, developed by the Ecomuseum, allows hikers to access GPS versions of the routes, all of which come complete with audio instruction.

One such route, the Roero Honey Road, tells the story of another great Piedmont flavour, and on our final day in the region we visit Caudamiele, a local honey factory.

Head beekeeper, Claudio Cauda, greets us outside the factory. His



family-run business is one of the biggest operations in the region. With 80 hives, spread out from the Cottian Alps to the Ligurian coast, Caudamiele produces a staggering 100 tonnes of honey every year.

Claudio explains that a honey's flavour depends on the type of plant



**An area of unruly forest, deep gorges and peculiar, sandy-coloured cliffs, Roero feels like Langhe's wilder sibling**

the pollen is derived from. Castagno, a bitter, smoky honey, for example, is made from bees that have visited a chestnut plant. As he talks, a lone bee buzzes a halo around his head.

After a short tour, we follow him through the factory to his office, where three pots of honey in varying golden hues are waiting, and we relish the chance to sample the goods. A tasting tour of the factory costs €20 per person.

Roero also has its own, albeit younger, wine heritage. The soil is rich in limestone and quartz and lends itself to fruity whites and sparkling wines. Roero Arneis is one of the signature tipples and clients can try it at the Malabaila di Canale winery, a large, converted farmhouse in the Castelletto Hills.



**Citalia** has a nine-day cycling tour of the area for £2,135, which takes in the vineyard countryside of Barolo, Bra and Alba. The tour is self-guided and includes stays in historic villa hotels including a Relais & Châteaux property. All buffet breakfasts and gastronomic evening meals included. [citalia.com](http://citalia.com)

**Inntravel** does a seven-night walking tour of Piedmont's hills and vineyards for £995 excluding flights. The self-guided tour includes breakfast each day, dinner on four nights, plus three picnics, and stays in Cortemilia, Cravanzana, Castiglione, and Monteforte D'Alba. [inntravel.co.uk](http://inntravel.co.uk)




**LEFT:** Malabaila Castle, Castelletto Hills

**ABOVE:** Piazza Duomo, Alba

**▶ ALBA: ANCIENT HISTORY**

No visit to Langhe and Roero should skip its capital Alba, a provincial town of bustling cobbled streets, medieval towers and wonderful churches.

Many of Italy's great towns boast a rich history, but none show it off like Alba: in an unusual twist, some of the town's most fascinating sights lie below street level. Underground Alba takes clients on a unique walking tour of ancient ruins, Roman vaults, sewage systems and forums - depending on the tour, you could be beneath a working bank, a police station, or a school. The tours are led by a local archaeologist (€10 for an adult, free for under-10s).

Back on the surface, Alba's heavy-weight foodie credentials would be enough to impress Gordon Ramsay. With two Michelin-starred restaurants - Piazza Duomo and Larossa - and October's annual truffle festival, Alba offers Piedmontese cuisine at its most opulent. If clients want to stretch to it, that is! 

**What to do in Turin**

**Sip an aperitivo:** Home of Martini Rosso and Cinzano, Turin takes its drinks seriously and from 6pm-9pm, clients can sample a true Torino institution: the aperitivo. Drinks range from €5 to €10 and include the price of a buffet. For tradition, visit Caffè Torino on Piazza San Carlo for its signature negroni cocktail, or for something more modern, La Drogheria on Piazza Vittorio Veneto makes classic cocktails with a twist.

**Mooch around museums:** Turin is home to more than 40 museums, but if you have time for just one or two, make it the National Museum of Cinema or the Egypt Museum. The former is inside the Mole Antonelliana, a grand tower and symbol of the city, and celebrates Italian and global cinema. The latter was established in 1824 and houses more than 5,000 ancient Egyptian artefacts.

**See the sunset:** Turin has a beautiful, classic cityscape, devoid of garish skyscrapers. Backed by the distant Graian Alps, the iconic dome of the Mole Antonelliana (pictured) stands out among

terracotta-tiled roofs and church towers. To see the city recede in a splendid Piedmont dusk, clients should make the short walk up to the Church of Santa Maria at Monte dei Cappuccini at sunset.



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