

ITALY PIEDMONT

# Picture perfect

Jane Cornwell takes a walking tour through stately gardens in the province and finds creative expression at every turn.

Viewed from one side of the Palace Gardens, the Turin skyline is a jumble of chimney pots and ochre-tiled rooftops, the skyline accented with castellated towers and a curved duomo topped with a cross. There are wildflowers and leafy trees and a moss-strewn Roman wall under a blue sky softened with wisps of cloud. In the distance, the Alps beckon.

There's only one thing wrong with this picture – the moat is no longer there and neither are the servants, who are depicted hanging up sheets on a clothes line. It could otherwise be the view today, but we're actually looking at an oil on canvas painted in 1745, by Canaletto, titled, fittingly, *View of Turin from the Side of the Royal Garden*.

"Most visual artists have a relationship with the land," explains art historian and landscape designer Paul Blanchard, as our tour group stands in the new Sabauda Gallery in a restored wing of the Royal Palace of Turin. Outside the gallery doors, across a grassy courtyard, the old town's roofs soak up the springtime sunshine, as they've done for centuries.

All around us, hung just so over four floors, are masterpieces by Rembrandt, Van Dyck and Dutch golden age painter Abraham Mignon, whose still life floral bouquets sport butterflies, caterpillars, wilting lilies and rotting fruit. Nature's beauty is transient, the artist is saying. Appreciate it while you can.

Built in the 16th century for the House of Savoy, Italy's former (and formerly powerful) royal family, the Palace is an imposing Baroque-style edifice smack-bang in the historical centre of Turin, the capital of northern Italy's Piedmont region, which nestles between France and Switzerland.

"Art has always been closely linked to nature and landscape," says our tour guide, Blanchard, his New York twang undiminished by four decades of living in Italy. "If you are 'seeing' the landscape mentally, you are also 'painting' it."

Art turns out to be a vital component of Gardens of Piedmont, a walking tour offered by Sydney-based travel company, Hidden Italy. Which is hardly surprising: whether hanging on walls, featured in gardens or existing as a deliberately created landscape, human creative expression is everywhere you look in Turin, our starting point, and in the Langhe, one of Italy's most celebrated wine-producing areas an hour's drive away.

My travel companions are four retired and robust Australian couples, all of whom have booked the full two weeks worth of "gentle" walks through the gardens and parklands of a region that, while remarkably untouristy (think Tuscany without the crowds), harbours a veritable embarrassment of riches.

But not everyone has done the basic two-month hill training recommended by Hidden

Italy ("whatever for, if they are gentle walks?" reason Don and Rose from Sydney).

After gathering us in the foyer full of modern art at our first hotel, a former 17th-century trade school that is now the NH Collection Torino Piazza Carlina, Blanchard escorts us out to explore the museums and gardens in palaces that once belonged to the Savoy (the last prince, 45-year-old Emanuele Filiberto, won the nation's 2009 version of *Dancing with the Stars*).

We start with the Galleria Sabauda. The windows on its far side overlook excavated ruins and what's left of the Roman wall visible in Canaletto's painting.

Blanchard tells us there are Roman settlements everywhere under central Turin, whose mix of Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo architecture makes the old city feel like a theatre set when you're out at six in the morning. An easy 15-minute walk and we're beside the meandering River Po in the Botanic Gardens, founded in 1729 and one of the best locations to study Italian plants.

There are 7500 botanical drawings in the Botanic Gardens' library. Outside, wild roses ramble and species of alpine flora, the pretty and the medicinal, grow synergetically; the twitter of chaffinches and bumble bees buzzing from poppies to peonies fill the air, while ancient oak trees invite you to sink back against their roots and take refuge from the unseasonal heat.

An adjacent forest garden planted in 1830 offers a Romantic perspective of unsullied nature: an Eden of orchards, silver birches, giant pines and long grass dotted with buttercups and daisies. We sit by a pond to watch the ducks and breathe in the scent of orange blossom, before a centuries-old sundial reminds us of our need to move on.

So many palazzos, so little time. We take a mini-bus to the pretty town of Rivoli, whose restored 11th-century castello sits on a hill, offering a vista of Turin and the surrounding agrarian landscape. Our party



Above: the Langhe region is known for its charming towns and scenic vineyards. Below: Canaletto's *View of Turin from the Side of the Royal Garden* – the view is little changed today. PHOTOS: GETTY

soaks in the magnificent view and, in Blanchard's words, paints it into being. The Museum of Contemporary Art lies behind the castle walls, featuring an exhibition that celebrates the use of colour by Warhol, Kandinsky and French nouveau realist Yves Klein, whose famous ultramarine blue was inspired, says Blanchard, by the hue of the sea near his home in Nice. "So each of Klein's [blue monochrome] paintings is a direct reference to his native landscape."

And if the manicured gardens of the Palace of Venaria (a former royal hunting lodge a short drive from Turin) are a work of art – visualise grottos, elevated terraces and a 250-metre fish pond – the art within the gardens is the jewel in the crown.

A series of permanent environmental installations by contemporary artist Giuseppe Penone, from bronze casts of dead trees to a shallow pool where a ghostly fingerprint appears and disappears, are laid out to emulate a 17th-century garden that court architect Amedeo di Castellamonte designed for the Venaria (it was subsequently trampled to dust by French troops).

En route to the Langhe, 40 kilometres out of Turin, we stop at Castle Racconigi, a 17th-century palace and parkland in the province of Cuneo. It's market day in Racconigi, but the bustle outside the castle gates doesn't bother the storks nesting in its huge rooftop urns, or disturb the peace in the majestic grounds, designed in the mid-19th century by German landscape architect

Xavier Kurten. Like the forest in the Botanic Gardens, the park is an example of the sensitivity to nature that prevailed during Romanticism, the era when English poets Keats and Shelley holidayed in Italy and Goethe referred to the country as "the land where the lemon trees grow".

"The French idea of imposing order on nature came to be seen as crass," Blanchard says as we stroll along a sun-dappled path to a chorus of birdsong and the ding-donging cowbells around the necks of pony-sized

## If the gardens of the Palace of Venaria are a work of art, the art within the gardens is the jewel in the crown.

Piedmontese cattle. He gestures to our surroundings: "The Romantics were all about 'infinite planting' – the size of trees, the colour of the leaves, the use of scent, light and shade hiding what is disagreeable and showing only what is beautiful."

Still, if this were a beauty contest, the Langhe, which is also in Cuneo, offers serious competition. Classified as a UNESCO world heritage site for its cultural and centuries-old wine-making traditions, the area is strewn

preferably with a friend. Then we visit a local gallery or two and walk, walk, walk. **How do you make the most of a spare afternoon in a strange city?** I love to shop for something that is a speciality of that place, such as a Borsalino hat in Italy or jade in the Orient.

## They had a macaw that sang the Italian anthem in a contralto.

Diana Watson

These tokens become all the more valuable over the years, rekindling memories of travels past. **Cure for jet lag** Ignore it. **Best overseas purchase** An antique Bouille table from Sorrento. **Best travel tale** Getting on a plane to Italy with

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24 hours' notice. We travelled at the invitation of friends and stayed with them on their sprawling farm near Rome. They live in an enormous villa, complete with secret passages beneath the house and a swimming pool. Three generations of the family live on the estate, which is decorated in the most superb Roman manner. The matriarch was the most stylish lady I have ever met. It was sensory heaven.

They had a macaw that sang the Italian national anthem in a contralto. They hunted rabbits, pigeons and wild boar for Franco the cook, who prepared opulent feasts. One day, we ate paella cooked by a Spanish princess, the next we joined the farm workers for a harvest feast under the vines.

We played billiards with an Afghan prince, went to a magnificent party and obliged when we were asked to cook a pavlova with six dozen eggs. **✉**

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From left, above: the gardens of Piedmont are a sight to behold in spring and summer; an artwork inside the Palace of Venaria; the Venaria's manicured gardens are works of art themselves.

with ancient towns, woodlands, hazelnut groves and a patchwork of vineyards. We traipse through these after stopping for lunch in Alba, the lovely, unofficial capital of Le Langhe, before checking into the luxury guesthouse at the Luigi Einaudi wine estate above the town of Dogliani.

The first president of the Italian Republic, Einaudi appreciated a spot of luxury as well as the fruits of the soil. Today, his granddaughter's family make barolo, barberesco and dolcetto wines, which we sip on a terrace overlooking the lawn, rose gardens and the swimming pool, along with hectares of sun-splashed grapes and the undulating green and gold Langhe hills.

Our walks continue along sign-posted trails (splodges of red paint on wooden stakes, easy to spot once you know) and each has a welcome destination – a hillside cafe offering hazelnut cake and a pinch-me view, a vineyard with a cool, high-ceilinged cellar where an oenologist explains the wine-making process. Vineyards abound – organic, bio-diverse, family-run.

At Casa Matilda, former financier Fabio, a genial 30-something in a T-shirt featuring Da Vinci's Vitruvian man, brings us strawberries warmed by sunshine and glasses of *dolcetto di Dogliani* with canapes, including homemade bread and preserves.

As we trek through vineyards with little shade, the heat raises the level of exertion from gentle to taxing. A prickle of tension interrupts our harmonious relationship with nature; Rose leaves Don to it and takes the mini-bus to the next destination with Carol from the Riverina, whose husband Jonathan has powered ahead, walking poles flashing. Come evening at the Einaudi estate, balance is restored; a dining room with original 19th-century furnishings is ours and ours alone.

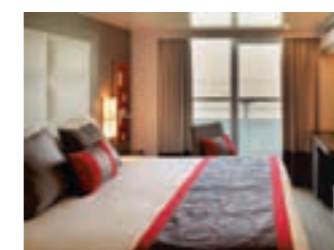
So, indeed, is the chef. Elisa Lallouardi is a dark-eyed sylph who looks like Mona Lisa and cooks like an angel. Here, to the clink of wine glasses and explanations in charmingly accented English, we partake of beef carpaccio with truffle shavings, homemade ravioli and veal marinated in wine then braised in herbs and vegetables. For dolce, a traditional *bûche alla Piemontese* – a chocolate and hazelnut pudding with a dash of liqueur, consumed in an appreciative silence.

"Now that," someone says eventually, "really was a work of art." **✉**

Jane Cornwell travelled as a guest of Hidden Italy.

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## TRAVELLER

Diana Watson artist

**First, business or economy?** On my most recent holiday to Europe, I flew in Emirates' business class. The journey was a total pleasure, from the moment the driver collected me from my front door to the in-flight service and landing.

**Most frequented destination** Italy is part of my heritage and has always been the inspiration for my painting. In Italy, Rome is my favourite destination. I love everything about this magical city, from the Vatican to all the wonderful design that crops up in this artistic mecca.

**Favourite airport** Sydney – it means I am going somewhere wonderful or coming home.

**If I ran my own airline I would...** Have smaller, faster aircraft, smaller airports and no delays.

**Where would you go with a million air miles?** I would travel on a whim wherever and whenever I wanted, with my loved ones in tow, and paint my way around the world.

**Worst place you've been lost** On a country road in the north of Italy in the middle of the night, in the most awful fog imaginable.

**Best trip ever** It was a special birthday trip to Rome with our three adult daughters. One of the highlights was visiting the Gagosian Gallery, with its incredible oval room.

**Most memorable overseas dining** Hotel Brufani in Perugia. My husband and I still talk about the tagliatelle con funghi, with cream truffles and porcini. It is in a wonderful setting overlooking Assisi. It opened in 1884, and has retained the elegance of a bygone era.

**In the suitcase** All black, starting with a black jacket, and preferably only one pair of shoes. Who knows what I will just have to buy.

**First thing you do in a new city** After checking into my hotel, I'll typically head out for a meal,