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ITALIAN NATIONAL & REGIONAL PARKS

www.parcocollieuganei.it

Some 10 per cent of Italy is governed by state and regional laws designed to protect the environment for the enjoyment of the public today and for future generations. There are 24 National Parks and more than 120 Regional Parks where regular management of the ecosystem protects fauna and flora as well as air, land, water, minerals and historical sites.

They have been a great success, generating valuable income through tourism and the promotion of traditional arts, crafts and food. In addition there are 16 Marine Reserves and around 270 smaller Regional Reserves protecting valuable areas. The Euganean Hills Regional Park was founded in 1989. Work in the park has been registered under the European Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS), which acknowledges organisations that improve their environmental performance on a continuous basis.



Clockwise, from top left: View of Monselice, where a castle houses a fine collection of medieval weapons; A bronze statue at the spa town of Albano Terme; Sweet peas in the organic vineyard at agriturismo, Ca'Orologio; Pietro and his pet pig at Ca'Orologio; Catajo Castle by the canal at Battaglia Terme

The hills are alive...

The Euganean Hills Regional Park protects life on a range of extinct volcanoes. **Jane Gifford** explores the paths and cycle tracks that link the peaks with vineyards, castles, medieval villages and magical gardens

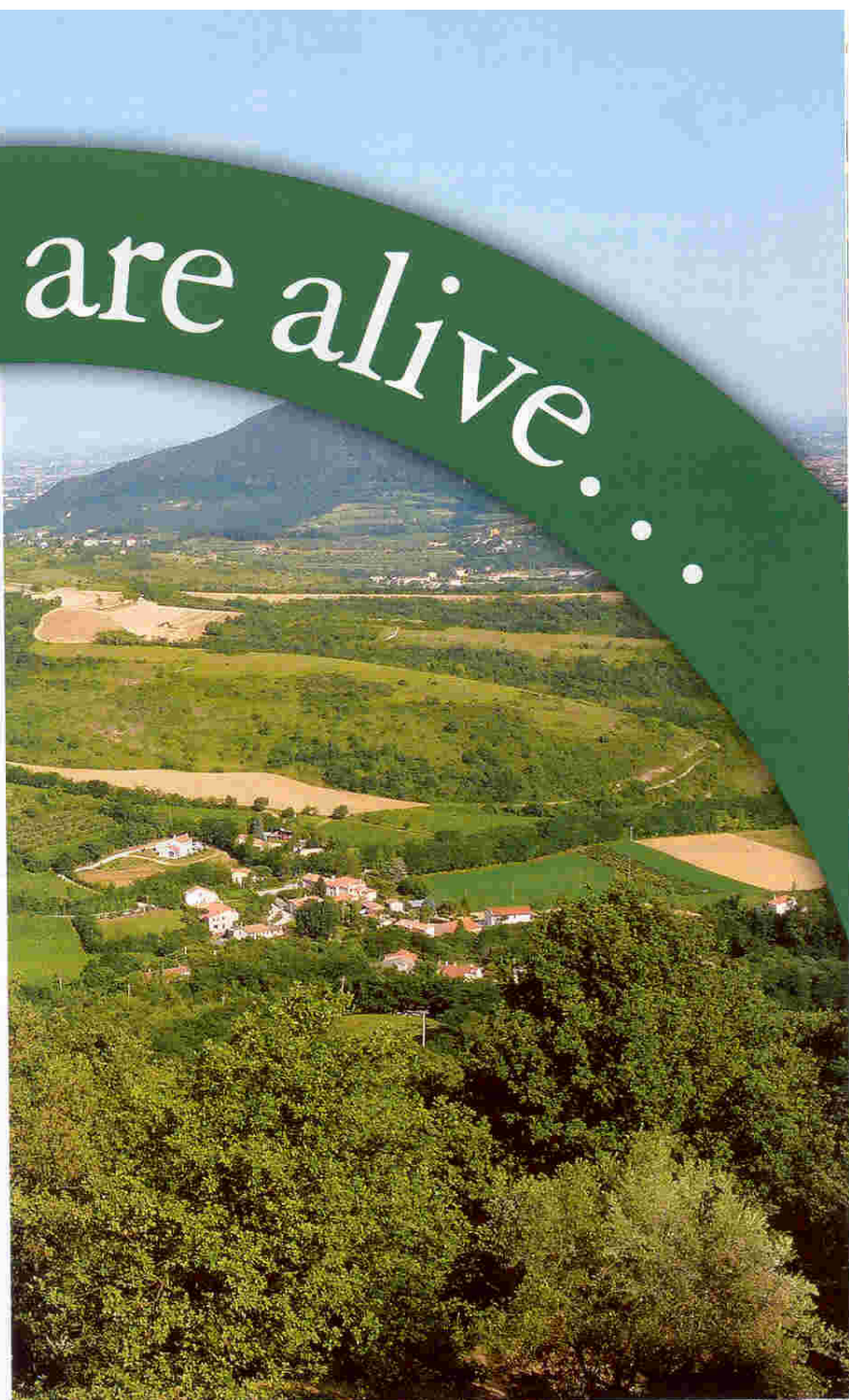
It's pretty flat on the Po Delta between the Adriatic and the Dolomites, which is why the Euganean Hills seem so tall, rising from a landscape levelled by water. Known as the Monti Azzurri, they aren't really mountains, they just seem that way. There are 81 distinct peaks closely packed into an area of less than 50,000 acres (roughly 10x20km). The highest 'mountain', Monte Venda, barely tops 600m, and some 200 paths and cycle tracks wait to be explored. Canals run between the hills to the Brenta and Bacchiglione rivers and on to the sea. A day's boating takes you to Venice, the fish market and beach at Chioggia are closer, and it's not far to Padua.

In this pleasant green oasis, rural life proceeds in pace with nature and the seasons. Something good to eat can be found in every garden, in the woods and pasture, and ingredients from the Colli Euganei are highly prized by restaurants, including herbs, mushrooms, cherries, pomegranates and apricots, lemons, figs, almonds, walnuts and hazelnuts, *caciotta* cheeses and *grano padano*, hams and olive oil. Hot springs and thermal lakes make the land yet more desirable and there are some very special wines. It's small wonder that these hills have attracted settlers for thousands of years. They were central to the ancient Veneti and take their name from a distant tribe, while the Romans built spas here and the Venetians their villas. Shelley, Byron and Bruce Chatwin also fell under the spell of the place.

LIFE IN THE HILLS

Within the Regional Park today environmental laws protect wildlife and promote traditional farming methods. Following the paths that circle each hill, you can pass from olive groves on the southern slopes to chestnut groves in shadow of the sun on the same hill. One sixth of all Italian flora – from Alpine plants to Mediterranean cacti – can be found here, including over 35 species of wild orchid. Butterflies, falcons, hoopoes and wild boar abound.

In early June the magnolias are in full bloom and flowering lime trees load the air with their wonderful scent. The grain is turning golden with the woods still fresh and leafy and sweet-peas and harebells peek from the grass. The park is best discovered on bike or by foot, and most places you will stay have bikes for loan or hire.



DISCOVER ITALIA!

WHERE TO EAT, DRINK & STAY

BROLO DI CA'OROLOGIO

Ca'Orologio, Via Ca'Orologio 7/A, Baone

☎ +39 336 376100

www.caorologio.com

www.agriturismo.net

Farm holidays in a beautifully restored 16th-century Venetian villa.

CASTELLO DI LISPIDA

Via IV Novembre 4, Monselice

☎ +39 429 780530

www.lispida.com

Rooms or apartments are available at this elegant castle in beautiful grounds.

Double room from €90

ANTICA TRATTORIA BALLOTTA

Via Carromatto 2, Torreglia

☎ +39 49 5212970

www.ballotta.it

Very atmospheric, traditional restaurant in a 17th-century coaching house.

Tourist menu €33

OSTERIA DEL PICCHIO

Via Euganea 154, Selvazzano

☎ +39 49 637197

A small, unpretentious and friendly country restaurant popular with locals, specialising in traditional cuisine.

Meal without wine about €20

CAFFÈ BORSA

Piazza Maggiore 5, Este

☎ +39 429 603529

On the main square in the old stock exchange building in the middle of Este, a great bar to sit and watch the world go by.

Meal and a drink about €15

SPA HOTELS

Abano and Montegrotto Terme

☎ +39 49 8666609

www.abanomontegrotto.it

GRAND HOTEL TERME

Viale Stazione 21, Montegrotto Terme

☎ 049 8911444

www.grandhotelterme.it

There are dozens of hotels in these two spa towns, all offering healing and beauty treatments. But it's expensive. Try the luxurious Grand Hotel Terme.

LA MONTECCHIA ESTATE & VILLA EMO CAPODILISTA

Via Montecchia, 16, Selvazzano Dentro

☎ +39 049 637294

www.lamontecchia.it

GOLF CLUB DELLA MONTECCHIA

☎ +39 49 8055550

The Capodilista family have been making wine at la Montecchia since the Middle Ages. Wine tasting is welcomed without appointment. Suites in the old castle are popular with honeymooning couples.

Meal without wine about €100



Breakfasts were delicious, with a fresh, moist cake baked every day...

Clockwise from top left: Jujube delicacies at Enoteca da Loris at Arquà Petrarca, hometown of the famous 14th-century poet, Petrarch; The old tower at Castello di Lispida; A tree-lined track alongside vineyards at the tranquil Castello di Lispida

➤ For a taste of life in the Euganean Hills you can't beat visiting an *agriturismo*, the working farms and vineyards open to visitors. I stayed at the restored 16th-century Venetian Villa, Ca'Orologio, as the guest of Maria Gioia Rosellini. Maria Gioia is a professional interior designer. She and her husband, Nicola Pagnan, restored Ca'Orologio over six years and joined the national network of *agriturismi* in 2003. Around the same time Maria Gioia decided to turn her hand to wine as well as olive oil. Nicola was too busy to help and she was unusual being a woman making wine alone. Her vineyards are entirely organic, with vines surrounded by wild flowers.

Maria Gioia follows the Maria Thun/Rudolf Steiner biodynamic system of growing, according to the phases of the moon. Each bottle has details of its particular planetary alignment printed on the label. It's a system that has worked well for Maria Gioia as after less than four years of wine production, she has already won the top Slow Food Award of 'Three Glasses'. "You must be proud of your achievement," I commented as we toured her vineyards. "Everyone says that," she replied frankly, "but there is always something to improve on."

My room had a view of the hills across vines and the nearby church in

Baone. The guest wing and garden was beautiful and breakfasts were delicious, with a fresh, moist cake baked every day. Outside, under an astronomical sundial, with the scent of jasmine and lavender in the evening air, and Maria Gioia's excellent wine in hand, I contemplated this perfect introduction to the area.

OF KINGS & CASTLES

The fascinating medieval town of Este was close by and the Euganean Hills were on my doorstep. At Castello di Lispida I had no idea what to expect. Crossing the canal, which circles the Regional Park, I turned in to a drive marked only by a hand-written cardboard sign, 'Lispida'. Driving down a long avenue of magnolia and cypress trees, vineyards either side, soon I was less than a mile from the busy main road, but in another world.

Sweeping under an arch, I entered the castle. Once it was a 12th-century monastery dedicated to Mary of Ispida, hence the name. The estate was claimed by the Venetian Republic in 1485 and came to the Corinaldi family in 1792, who made of it what you see today – a fairytale castle fit for a king. Certainly Victor Emmanuel III, King of Italy from 1900-1946, thought so as it became his General HQ during World War II. ➤

WHAT TO SEE

GARDEN OF VALSANZIBIO

Via Barbarigo 15, Valsanzibio di Galzignano Terme

☎ +39 49 8059224

www.valsanziobiogiardino.it

The 17th-century garden is considered one of the most important in Europe. Its owners have not succumbed to fashion over the centuries, preserving original design features and planting according to the design of Venetian aristocrat, Giovanni Francesco Barbarigo. Embraced by steep wooded hills this is an original place, with black and white swans, a rabbit island and a maze, water jokes, fountains and statues. Beneath it all is a deeply spiritual message for the visitor to discover.

ARQUÀ PETRARCA

The village in the heart of the hills has been beautifully preserved, retaining much medieval charm. Explore the steep cobbled streets and stop off in small bars and restaurants. Sample local wines and jujube delicacies at Enoteca da Loris and Azienda Agricola Burana. There is a small entrance fee to visit the medieval poet Petrarch's house. Admire the view from the balcony, which persuaded the poet to spend the last years of his life here. This 'showcase' village of the Regional Park can be busy.

THE EUGANEAN WINE ROAD

www.stradadelvinocollieuganei.it

The Italian Touring Club has produced an excellent map of the Euganean Hills Regional Park with the slogan 'From hill to hill, from wine cellar to wine cellar'. It gives contact numbers and locations of wine makers, holiday farms, inns and restaurants throughout the park. The map is very detailed and invaluable for planning accommodation and finding your way around by car or bike or even on foot.

ESTE & MONSELICE

The old towns of Este and Monselice are on the southern boundary of the park. Both are unspoilt by modern development with palaces and museums, narrow shopping streets, markets and churches. Este is dominated by the towers and crenellations of a 14th-century castle and is famous for ceramics. Take in a medieval castle, the old cathedral and sumptuous Villa Nani-Moncenigo and Villa Duodo. Enjoy views from the top over the hills.

WALKING AND CYCLING

The Euganean Hills Regional Park is celebrated as the perfect place for leisurely walks or more strenuous cycle rides. Make sure you get a copy of *Paths in the Euganean Hills* from the Padua Tourist Board (www.turismopadova.it), an excellent publication providing 17 detailed maps of clearly marked paths.



In the centre of a square, seen but not entered by the public, the garden

Above: Baone Church beyond the organic vineyard at Ca'Orologio; Caffè Borsa at Este, situated in the old stock exchange building and a great spot to sit and contemplate life

➤ Lispida today belongs to the Sgaravatti family. Count Alessandro Sgaravatti, who was born in Padua in 1965, has continued the tradition of wine-making on the estate and has been responsible for the Azienda Agricola Castello di Lispida since 1986. He produced his first own vintage in 1995.

Alessandro has dispensed with modern methods of production, working instead to revive and perfect pre-industrial methods of wine-making. He follows the teachings of Masanobu Fukuoka, a Japanese scholar dedicated to the philosophy of 'Natural Farming'. Alessandro makes wine as the Romans did, in huge terra-cotta *amphora* sunk in the ground. The resulting 'Amphora' has had praise heaped upon it. There is a flower-lined canal and thermal lake to discover at Castello di Lispida too, nest-boxes in the woods, hives for the bees and a very special pool for the guests. What more could you want? Breakfast served in your suite of rooms in the castle? Well guess what? You can have that too.

Close by Battaglia Terme, Catajo Castle and especially the lovely town of Monselice are definitely worth a visit. Deeper in the hills, past the hot waters of Largo della Costa, a source of healing mud for the spa

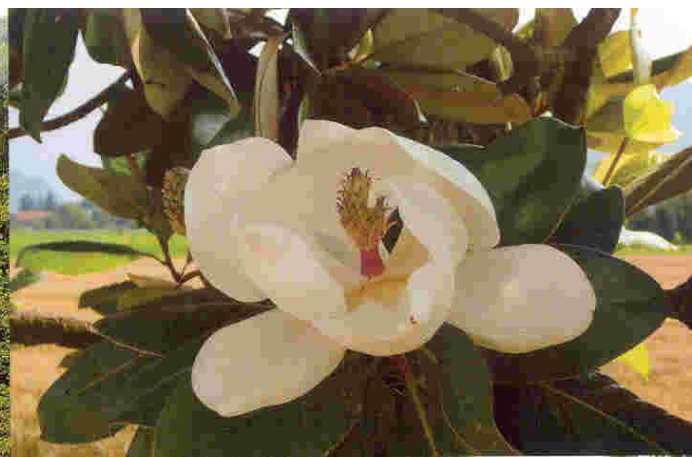
industry, steep narrow streets lead to the unspoilt medieval village of Arquà Petrarca, where 14th-century poet Francesco Petrarch spent his last years. It hasn't changed much since then. Petrarch's house is open to the public and his tomb takes pride of place in the courtyard of St Mary's.

The village has another more curious asset – *la giuggiola*, the jujube. A native of China, this small fruit-like, russet-coloured olive usually grows much further south. Here they are steeped in *grappa* to make *brodo di giuggiole*. The Italian saying '*proprio andato nel brodo di giuggiole*', roughly means 'you've got a taste of the good life'. At Enoteca da Loris you can buy all things jujube. I sampled the preserved fruit and the liqueur Loris offered. Both were excellent.

SEEKING ENLIGHTENMENT

At Valsanzibio the goddess Diana announces the baroque garden from an imposing gate above a canal. The garden, attributed to Count Giovanni Francesco Barbarigo, was mostly conceived in 1669 as an offering to God for salvation from plague. It has a serious theme – the journey from ignorance to enlightenment – laid out somewhat like the Tree of Life.

In true Italian style the garden is composed mainly of trees, statues



culminates with the Ecstasy Fountain, symbol of enlightenment, otherwise known as the 'magic mushroom'

and water features. The few flowers are white or yellow. Every part of the garden has a symbolic meaning interpretable on many levels – those for the earthly, those for the spiritually advanced. When you believe you understand the first three stages, you enter the Maze of Presumption. Only when you have seen your vanity and so found your way out, can you move on to the Virtues – with a turn around Rabbit Island and a soaking from the water jokes for good measure.

Outside fabulously pink Villa Barbarigo, in the centre of a square seen but not entered by the general public, the garden culminates with the Ecstasy Fountain, symbol of enlightenment, otherwise known as the 'magic mushroom'.

From a room overlooking Enlightenment, current owner 80-year-old Count Fabio Pizzoni Ardemani graciously but sternly explained the garden. Seeing I was following closely, he laughed. "I used to climb the statues when I was young. Usually all things educational were my mother's preserve. She was so concerned she asked my father to find out why. 'Because I want the statues to talk to me,' I explained. After a life-time of study they at last do. I am not a religious man but I believe in education and strict upbringing.

A child needs to hear the word no. This way you learn." He sat back with a wistful twinkle in his eye. His son passed by outside carrying his grandchild. "Are your family also involved with the garden?" I asked. "My son is a scientist," he reflected. "He has no time for such things."

SWEET THERAPY

My last night in the Euganean Hills was spent at La Montecchia, estate of the grand family Emo Capodilista, in a medieval fortress with an austere and massive keep on top of a steep rocky hill. My rooms were sumptuous and full of antiques, fascinating books and ancestral portraits. They overlooked another hill, this one vine-covered. On its summit, hidden from general view by trees, is Villa Emo Capodilista.

Every room and balcony in this extraordinary hunting lodge is covered floor to ceiling with 16th-century frescoes, each room with a different theme showcasing special effects. Truly imaginative and wildly extravagant, it is now a magnificent folly, being impossible to live in today.

The Capodilista family has been making wine at La Montecchia since the Middle Ages. The estate's most celebrated wine is a sweet one – Fior d'Arancio Passito Colli Euganei DOC. I didn't think I liked sweet wine,

Clockwise, from above left: The famed gardens at Valsanzibio, which offer spiritual as well as more visual pleasures; The fragrance of magnolia is a welcome delight in the region; Count Alessandro Sgaravatti, owner of Castello di Lospida, discusses his 'Natural Farming' methods on his estate

but now I am a convert. It's a taste of heaven. You can call in for a free wine tasting and experience it for yourself.

The spa towns of Abano and Montegrotto Terme are not in the Regional Park, but are worth a visit, with 240 thermal baths to choose between at the many stylish hotels. Fangotherapy (thermal mud treatment) is scientifically proven to aid conditions like osteoarthritis and osteoporosis, and inhalation of water vapour helps breathing difficulties. Detox treatments make you tired, so it's best to leave your visit until the end of your trip to allow time to relax and recover while you plan your return to the enchanting Colli Euganei. ■

COMING SOON Next month we visit beautiful Lake Como, and learn how to travel through the stunning landscape by using public transport alone...

GETTING THERE

► **BY AIR, RAIL AND CAR**
Venice Marco Polo Airport is about 60km away and Terme Euganae Station is your local train station. If you're travelling by car take the motorway A13 Padova-Bologna exit Padova Sud-Terme Euganae, or Motorway A4 Venice-Milano exit Padova Ovest, Padova Est. I flew with easyJet from Bristol Airport and hired a car with easyCar from the airport.