

1 – COLLI EUGANEI

Francesco Petrarca, a native of nearby Arquà, celebrated the Euganean Hills as a second Helicon, the mythical home of the Muses believed to be a source of poetic inspiration; for the poet, these hills served as a serene and ideal retreat for his literary pursuits during the final years of his life.

Literary references aside, we find ourselves in a hilly landscape, characterised by distinctive “dome-like” shapes resulting from recent volcanic activity, which unfolded in distinct phases producing rocks of varying chemical composition. This activity overlaid older sedimentary rocks, containing fossilised remains of ammonites, traces of the ancient Mesozoic sea that predated the formation of the hills.

A territory, due to its latitude and position, with a highly diverse flora, where species typical of both hot, arid environments and mountainous or sub-mountainous areas coexist:

in fact, the landscape ranges from pseudo-Mediterranean scrub to stands of non-native black locust, found at the base of the hills; from oak, chestnut, hornbeam and manna ash woods to arid meadows on the south-facing slopes, resulting from the abandonment of unproductive farmland and pastures that were difficult to cultivate. It is a site of interest for bird nesting, with 120 species recorded, and is also home to mammals (fox, weasel, stone marten, etc.), reptiles and amphibians such as the newt, freshwater fish and butterflies, which make use of the dry grasslands.

The Euganean Hills constitute one of Europe’s most important spa areas and an international tourist attraction; it comprises over 130 establishments and around 220 thermal pools, and has an accommodation capacity of over 13,000 beds. The hydro-mineral basin covers approximately 23 square kilometres and the properties of its thermal waters have been known since ancient times. The Little Dolomites constitute the main recharge area for the waters which, seeping deep into the permeable limestone rocks, reach depths of around 3,000 metres during their long underground journey, gradually heating up; driven by the hydraulic gradient, they emerge in the Euganean area with an average surface temperature of 75°C, high salinity due to the dissolution of the substrate, and significant radioactivity. Chemically classified, they belong to the chlorinated-sodium and saline-bromine-iodine water groups.

Traces of the ancient Venetian inhabitants are preserved in Este at the Museo Nazionale Atestino, whilst from the 2nd century BC there is evidence of the Romans, who, by beginning the construction of a road network, gave a strong impetus to settlement. The Via Annia passes through Monselice; branching off from the Via Emilia at Legnago, it led to Aquileia. During the Middle Ages, owing to the commanding position of the hills, a large number of manors, parish churches and fortifications sprang up. At the beginning of the 15th century, the territory came under the rule of the Venetian Republic, and the construction of splendid residences commissioned by the Venetian nobility began.

The cultural heritage of the area is therefore remarkable. Este, with the intact walls of the Carrarese Castle, was chosen by the Venetian nobility as the ideal retreat “to stay in a villa”. Equally well-preserved are the medieval walls of Montagnana, among the most beautiful in Europe. Monselice, at the foot of the *mons silicis* – the flint hill – supplied the trachyte used to pave St Mark’s Square in Venice; here we find the medieval castle, the Romanesque-Gothic Old Cathedral and the 16th-century Villa Nani Mocenigo, adorned with 18th-century allegorical statues of dwarves, featuring a spectacular terraced staircase.

The area’s agricultural heritage yields high-quality produce. Thanks to the favourable soil and climate conditions and the work of the winegrowers, we have the Colli Euganei, Prosecco and Delle Venezie DOCs; the “Colli Euganei Fior d’Arancio” or “Fior d’Arancio Colli Euganei” DOCG; and the Tre Venezie and Veneto IGTs. But also Veneto Euganei and Berici DOP extra virgin olive oil and honey as a Traditional Agricultural Product. Among the vegetables are “bisi”, as well as chestnuts and marroni, cherries, jujubes and small wild berries.

2 – FERRARA

Ferrara, the “first modern city in Europe”: in 1492, Ercole I d’Este commissioned the architect Biagio Rossetti to incorporate a vast area north of the existing town into the urban centre, according to a plan that was innovative for its originality and rationality at the time and which – in honour of the Duke – took the name “Addizione Erculea”. The Este family’s patronage, which had been practised since the 13th century, represents a significant example of cultural promotion in Italy, capable of combining political visibility with aesthetic pursuit; over the centuries, the court hosted artists such as Pisanello, Mantegna and Titian, and poets such as Ludovico Ariosto. In the refined Este court, the wife of Duke Alfonso II d’Este, Margherita Gonzaga – a talented singer and dancer – had personally selected an all-female ensemble in the late 16th century to form the Concerto delle Dame or “secreto” – because it was reserved for a select few guests; highly influential composers of the time, such as Claudio Monteverdi, Luzzasco Luzzaschi and Gesualdo da Venosa, wrote pieces specifically dedicated to this elite consort.

Inextricably linked to the duchy is the city’s rich cultural heritage, which makes it a prime destination for cultural tourism; even the most hurried visitor cannot overlook the Cathedral of San Giorgio, Via delle Volte, the Castello Estense, the Palazzo dei Diamanti, and the Certosa Monumentale. A stroll around the city walls, lined with the greenery of the embankments and ramparts, stretching for some nine kilometres, offers one of the most complete circuits in Italy, a significant testament to military architecture between the 15th and 17th centuries. But Ferrara also features in 20th-century culture: it was the birthplace of the director Antonioni, to whom the city dedicates an exhibition space, and is celebrated in Giorgio Bassani’s novel *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, which



inspired De Sica's 1970 film of the same name. The events depicted in the film, centring on a wealthy Jewish family from Ferrara, indirectly bear witness to the deep-rooted and long-standing presence of the Jewish community in the city. Traces of this past can be glimpsed on a tour of the former ghetto, which still houses the synagogue today, and along Via Mazzini, home to the community's commercial and social activities. The National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah also offers visitors a tour dedicated to Jewish history in Italy.

On the last Sunday in May, the city holds one of the oldest Palios in Piazza Ariostea – in fact, four distinct races: the green race for the "putte", the red race for the "putti", the white race for the donkeys and the yellow race for the horses, contested between the four districts within the city walls and the four villages situated outside them. The event is accompanied by flag-waving and musical competitions, in which representatives of the eight districts compete in seven distinct disciplines.

In the field of traditional crafts, some Ferrara artisans have revived the Renaissance technique of graffito ceramics, a fascinating engraving practice using primitive colours; some workshops specialise in the construction and restoration of musical instruments, linked to the ancient musical traditions cultivated at the Este court; finally, worth mentioning is the working of leather and hide.

The region offers local specialities such as Voghiera garlic, Po Delta IGP rice and the "violina" pumpkin; the pumpkin flowers are used to make tasty fritters, whilst the boiled flesh is used as a filling for cappellacci (*caplaz* in the Ferrara dialect, *a reference to the typical straw hats worn by local farmers*). The local cuisine also boasts the Ferrara-style pasticcio – a shortcrust pastry filled with short pasta, white ragù, béchamel sauce, mushrooms and grated truffle – as well as cappelletti and the typical twisted bread (the Ferrara-style "coppia"). Among the desserts are zuppa inglese, *brazadela* (so called because it was carried in the innkeepers' arms) and *tenerina*. Special mention goes to the *salama da sugo* PGI, a sausage of ancient origin, stuffed with a mixture of minced pork treated with red wine, salt, black pepper, nutmeg, cloves and cinnamon; after maturing for at least 6 months, it is cooked while suspended in water over a gentle simmer.

Until the 12th century, Ferrara was lapped by the main branch of the River Po, which then shifted further north following the Ficarolo flood of 1152; the river's dynamics and its floods are indirectly evidenced in the historic centre by the monumental *padimetro*, which indicates the river's historical flood levels as measured at the nearby Pontelagoscuro hydrometer.



3 – MODENA

The ancient Mutina of the Romans, described by Cicero as a colony “*splendidissima et floridissima*”, lies along the Via Emilia, the straight route stretching between Rimini and Piacenza along the line of the ancient springs at the foot of the Apennines. It was founded in 183 BC as a Roman colony with the transfer of two thousand citizens from Rome, later becoming an important strategic and commercial centre for the entire region, favoured precisely by the Via Emilia.

Anyone who studied art history at school will surely remember the Romanesque Cathedral, a masterful work by Lanfranco assisted by the sculptor Viligelmo, begun in 1099. In 1997, Modena Cathedral, the Civic Tower and Piazza Grande were declared UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Then there are the attractions linked to the Este dynasty, with the Gallerie Estensi and the Ducal Palace, along with the Garden, a vast green space that once belonged to the dukes and later became public, divided into an “Italian-style” section and an “English-style” park. A portion of this area was designated as a Botanical Garden in 1758 by Francesco III d’Este.

The strong commercial character of Piazza Grande is indirectly represented on the side of the cathedral’s apse by the visible grooves, a few centimetres deep, carved into the wall, both vertical and rectangular. For the people of Modena, these represent standardised measurements, used to determine the length of an object or the size of a brick. But there are also circular grooves marking the shape of the coins used in trade.

The city has deep roots in classical music, dating back to the time of the Este Duchy and continuing into the 20th century with internationally renowned opera singers such as Mirella Freni, Raina Kabaevskaya and Luciano Pavarotti; every year, the Teatro Comunale presents a rich programme of opera performances, concerts and ballets, open to new musical and visual forms, making it one of Italy’s most important theatres. But Modena is also the “capital” of 1960s Beat music, represented by Equipe84, Caterina Caselli and i Nomadi, and a point of reference for Emilian artists such as Guccini, Vasco Rossi and Modena City Ramblers.

A must-see for a car-loving audience is “Motor Valley”; Modena is the birthplace of Enzo Ferrari, where racing cars and luxury cars are internationally renowned, symbols of passion, creativity and beauty. In the city, we find the Enzo Ferrari Museum, the Maserati factory and showroom, the Umberto Panini Museum of Vintage Cars and Motorcycles, the Stanguellini Museum and the Modena Circuit. Just a few kilometres from the city lie the museums and factories of Lamborghini and Ducati, alongside the Ferrari Museum in Maranello, the Righini Collection and Pagani Automobili.

We are in Emilia, where gastronomy reigns supreme: Modena is one of the Italian provinces richest in products with Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status: Balsamic Vinegar, Lambrusco and Parmigiano Reggiano are among the best known. On a gastronomic tour, we can therefore enjoy



gnocco fritto – a dough usually shaped into rectangles, made from flour, water and salt; *crescentine (or tigelle)*; tortellini (including the “to-go” variety, to meet the demands of street food); Modena ham – made from the hind leg of heavy white-breed pigs, born and reared in Italy, and aged for at least 14 months; *cotechini* and *zamponi*. For a break, we recommend trying a platter of cured meats and Parmigiano Reggiano at the historic Mercato Albinelli. But also fruit: Vignola cherries, sour black cherries and the many varieties of pear from Emilia-Romagna. Lambrusco di Sorbara, Grasparossa di Castelvetro and Salamino di Santa Croce are the wines most closely associated with the city.

Inland, in addition to the vast Modena Apennines Regional Park, a natural curiosity is the Salse di Nirano, formed by seepages from the depths of mainly gaseous hydrocarbons, creating distinctive mud cones that evoke an unusual lunar landscape. For a relaxing break, the Terme di Salvarola are highly recommended, with waters of various types suitable for treating respiratory, joint or skin conditions; or simply for those who wish to enjoy the experience of a wellness centre equipped with thermal pools.

4 – PASSO DELL’ABETONE

At an altitude of 1,388 metres, it owes its fame to the high peaks that crown it; the ancient, colossal fir tree that gives the pass its name was felled in 1766 when the Lorraines and the Este family had the trans-Apennine Road built to link the duchies of Tuscany and Modena.

A well-known summer and winter holiday resort, and the heart of the ski area of the same name—one of the most important in the northern Apennines—it boasts around 50 km of slopes, spread across some 30 routes served by 22 ski lifts.

One of its historic symbols is the Pyramids, commissioned to mark the opening of the pass to celebrate the importance of this route, which would facilitate trade between the Este and Lorraine families; the two structures are situated one in what was the territory of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and the other in that of the Duchy of Modena. Linked to the opening of the Modena Road, at an altitude of over 1,000 metres stands the church of San Leopoldo all’Abetone, named in honour of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Pietro Leopoldo.

In terms of nature conservation, the area is protected by the Abetone Biogenetic Nature Reserve, extending from an altitude of 1,060 m to 1,560 m above sea level, within a mountainous landscape featuring mixed mesophilic woodlands, beech forests, coniferous forests, ridge grasslands, mountain heaths and rocky outcrops.

It boasts a rich fauna: three representative species are the wolf, the roe deer and the golden eagle.



Of particular interest is the Forest Botanical Garden in Valle del Sestaione, a splendid high-altitude garden; it is home to plant species characteristic of the Upper Pistoia Apennines: colourful mountain flowers, carnivorous and medicinal plants, and majestic trees. Thanks to the low temperatures and the area's unique microclimate, the Garden also features many alpine species, which have found their southernmost limit of distribution in this part of the Apennines, such as the Norway spruce, a relic from the last ice age.

Given the environmental characteristics, there are numerous hiking options starting from Abetone: to the peaks of Monte Gomito via the well-known CAI 00 trail; to Monte Libro Aperto; to Alpe Tre Potenze and Lago Nero; in Val di Luce (Passo Annibale) – a valley that retains its "U"-shaped morphology resulting from Quaternary glacial erosion; finally, to Casetta di Lapo – an easier route suitable for families, nestled in the woods. For motorbike enthusiasts, the North-Western Grand Tour is recommended: starting from Pistoia, you reach Abetone and then continue along the ridges of the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, making the most of the route's elevation profile, with a succession of bends for a ride that's always "on the ball".

Mushrooms and chestnuts are the staple ingredients of the local mountain cuisine: hence potato tortelli with meat sauce; necci – chestnut flour fritters; polenta, including its sweet variant made with chestnut flour: manufatoli. Rounding off the picture are raw-milk pecorino – made from sheep grazing on local pastures – and wild berries: strawberries, raspberries and blueberries.

Finally, a local legend remains: one of Italy's greatest skiers, Zeno Colò, born in 1920 in Cutigliano, world record holder for the flying kilometre and world and Olympic champion in the 1950s; in 1973 he designed three ski runs descending from Monte Gomito, named after him: Zeno 1, 2 and 3 (the first a black run, the other two red).

5 – MONTECATINI TERME

It owes its success to the therapeutic properties of its waters and its Art Nouveau architectural heritage: this is why Montecatini is a destination for those seeking rejuvenating holidays, a warm welcome, entertainment, shopping and relaxation. The elegance of its numerous palaces envelops the town in a refined and timeless atmosphere, evoking the many famous figures who stayed here between the 19th and 20th centuries, from Giuseppe Verdi to Pietro Mascagni, from Ruggero Leoncavallo to Trilussa, right up to Beniamino Gigli and Luigi Pirandello, ...

Its extremely pure mineral waters allow for both treatments based on thermal water and mud, and dips in the thermal pool fed by the spring at a temperature of 33°C; they are classified as sodium-sulfate-bicarbonate-saline, used therapeutically for metabolic



disorders, digestive system ailments, and liver conditions, as well as for wellness treatments. Since 2021, Montecatini has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site, one of the eleven Great Thermal Cities of Europe representing the European thermal phenomenon, active from the 1700s until the 1930s.

But Montecatini is also an attraction for shopping, with its many high-fashion designer boutiques; in this regard, it hosts "Fashion Week" in April, an event featuring leading Italian designers, with shows showcasing the latest fashion trends.

From the spa centre, you can take the funicular up to the hilltop village of Montecatini, operated by two little red trains – Gigio and Gigia; inaugurated in 1898, it exudes old-world charm thanks to its wooden benches, the small external balcony and the regular passing of the cars halfway up the route. The village lies 300 metres above sea level, has medieval origins and still preserves the route of the ancient walls destroyed by the Florentines in 1554. In the upper part, we find the Rocca and the Torre del Mastio; in Piazzetta Giusti, the medieval remains of the Palazzo del Podestà and the Loggia del Parlascio; finally, climbing further up, we reach the Church of San Pietro, dating from the early Middle Ages but remodelled in the 18th century. Finally, the Torre del Carmine or Torre dell'Orologio is strategically important for its commanding vantage point.

But what to eat, after all that drinking? (NB: thermal water! ...). Montecatini lies in the Val di Nievole, the area between Pistoia and Lucca, formerly known as the "valley of mist" or "valley of clouds" due to its marshy terrain; wine and olive oil are traditionally produced here, including the Val di Nievole DOC. But we are in Tuscany and meat reigns supreme, with the famous "Fiorentine" steaks from the Chianina breed. And cured meats such as *finocchiona*, *prosciutto* and Tuscan salami, to be enjoyed with "sciocco" bread, which contains no salt. The selection of pastries is rich, led by the Montecatini cialde, delicious round biscuits made from two layers of pastry with an almond filling in the centre, produced by hand since 1920. Traditional sweets include *necci*, castagnaccio (made with chestnut flour from the Apennines), *brigidini* – very crumbly wafers made with sugar, flour, eggs and liquid aniseed essence – and *confetti*.

In the surrounding area, there are also thermal waters at Monsummano Terme, with its Giusti Grotto. Of natural interest is the Padule di Fucecchio, a wetland covering approximately 1,800 hectares, the largest inland marsh in peninsular Italy; a paradise for birdwatchers, it is home to 200 species of birds, including cranes, black storks and numerous herons. It is a remnant of a much larger area prior to the land reclamation works, initiated by the Medici and continued by Pietro Leopoldo of Lorraine, which transformed the originally unhealthy environment into a fertile agricultural valley; evidence of this remains in the drainage channels and the system of ports, as the Padule also served as a transport route across the plain.



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