

## Gardens of Piedmont: May/June 2018. 23 May to 4 June 2018

*Visiting some of the finest gardens in Italy, this wonderful two-week walking tour of Piedmont will show you the full diversity of one of the most fascinating regions in Italy.*

Interspersed with gentle walks, we will explore the UNESCO-listed royal palaces and gardens in and around Turin (ruled by the Savoy family for nearly 800 years); the vineyards of Le Langhe (one of Italy's finest wine-producing areas, also UNESCO-listed for its unique landscape and traditions); high altitude gardens in the foothills of the Alps (including a visit to the Gran Paradiso National Park, once the hunting demesne of the Savoy); and finish with the luxuriant gardens of Stresa and the Borromeo Islands on Lake Maggiore (the most romantic of the Italian lakes).

### The gardens

The House of Savoy is one of the oldest royal families in the world and they were nothing if not aspirational. With each step up the aristocratic ladder achieved, the Savoy deployed their vast wealth and resources to embellish the palaces and gardens of their realm, using some of Italy and Europe's finest architects and artists. While the Savoy heritage will be central to the tour, it will not be all palaces and formal gardens! We will also visit: stately parklands; one Italy's oldest botanical gardens (in Turin); one of its highest (above Lake Maggiore); its oldest and largest national park; the Zegna Oasis, a 100 kms square nature park in the foothills of the Alps (Italy's first example of environmental patronage); and the lush private gardens of the Italian lakes, as well as staying on one of the country's best vineyards (in the Langhe).

### The accommodation:

The accommodation is one of the highlights of the tour. We spend three nights in four different places: a chic 4-star hotel in a historic building in one of Turin's most beautiful residential areas; a beautiful vineyard, the family estate of an ex-president of the Italian Republic in the Langhe; a magnificently restored and converted former Carmelite convent, on a hilltop in the foothills of the Alps, whose previous house-guests including Eleonora Duse and Ginger Rogers; and a lovely family-run hotel on a picturesque island on Lake Maggiore, whose visitors have included Toscanini, Hemingway, GB Shaw, the Emperor of Japan and Charles and Diana!

### The walks

The walks are walks, not hikes! They will enable you to experience first-hand the stunning gardens, parklands and natural heritage of this beautiful and diverse region. They include two walks through some of Italy's finest vineyards, a day exploring Italy's oldest national park, a stroll around the shores of Lake Orta and an easy walk through an alpine botanical garden high above Lake Maggiore to a peak from where you can see three countries, seven lakes and the Po Valley. The walks are from four to fourteen kilometres, follow good paths and can be shortened or skipped, if you wish.

### The food

Piedmont cooking may have certain refinements (it does after all border with France and there has been a flourishing exchange of gastronomic ideas going back some 800 years under the Savoy) but it is deeply rooted in a tradition of simple wholesome cooking, which relies on first class, very tasty ingredients. Truffles, garlic, game and crisp vegetables, together with cheese and rice are the basis of Piedmont specialties, accompanied by some of Italy's finest wines. Apart from excellent meals in a variety of settings, two of the highlights of the tour will be having our own chef for the three nights in the Langhe and dinner in a private home on one of the Borromeo Islands on the last night.

### Who's leading the tour?

The tour will be led by Paul Blanchard, art historian, landscape designer and lecturer at Florence University. He is the author of a number of guide books, including the Blue Guide to Northern Italy and the forthcoming Blue Guide to Piedmont. A New Yorker who has married and lived in Tuscany since 1980, Paul will use his extensive knowledge and excellent contacts to give you an extraordinary introduction to this fascinating region. Paul also leads the Hidden Italy Gardens of Tuscany tour.

# Gardens of Piedmont itinerary: May/June 2018

## Day 1: Turin and the Savoy:

Our tour begins at the 'Polo Reale', the cluster of museums and gardens that now occupies the former palaces of the Royal House of Savoy in the heart of Turin. Here we'll explore the magnificent Galleria Sabauda, set in a beautifully restored wing of the Royal Palace, the Royal Gardens and the Archeological Park, which forms the eastern boundary of the 'Quadrilatero' the area of Turin that now stands on the ruins of the old Roman settlement. We'll dine this evening at a restaurant popular with artists and writers, overlooking the scenographic Piazza Vittorio Veneto.

## Day 2: Turin and the Savoy:

This morning we'll walk through Piazza San Carlo, the 'sitting room' of Turin, to the riverside Parco del Valentino with its fine Botanic Garden founded in 1729. We'll have a guided viewing of the garden and its library, a collection of 7,500 botanical drawings dated 1752 to 1868. On the way, you'll visit another of the city's treasure, Turin's most famous museum, the Museo Egizio, whose exceptional collection is comparable to those of Cairo and London. Lunch today is at new small restaurant in the heart of old Turin renowned for its cool, contemporary cuisine.

The afternoon is free to rest up or make the rounds of Turin's elegant shops. You'll also have the option of visiting a magnificent Savoy hunting lodge built for Vittorio Amedeo II in 1729–30 by Filippo Juvarra southwest of Turin.

## Day 3: Turin and the Savoy:

Turin is surrounded by a 'crown' of six royal retreats dating from the 17th and 18th centuries. Today we visit two of the finest. In the morning, we drive 13 kms north of Turin to visit a royal hunting palace, the first and most magnificent of the Savoy country residences, which was a model for the royal palace at Versailles. Its formal gardens, originally laid out by Amedeo di Castellamonte, are exquisite. On the way, we stop at a pretty town with a splendid castle to visit one of the most impressive museums of contemporary art anywhere. Lunch will be on the top floor of the hunting palace. Afterwards we will walk off the meal, strolling through a large park that was once the royal hunting demesne (1 hour). After returning to Turin, the evening is free.

## Day 4: Le Langhe and the vineyards:

Today we head south to the green, rolling hills of the Langhe, one of Italy's most celebrated wine producing areas, where we'll spend the next three nights. On the way out of Turin we will visit another of the UNESCO-listed Savoy 'pleasure palaces' that ring the city, one of the most famous castles in Piedmont, with extensive romantic gardens designed by the German landscape architect Xavier Kurten. After an independent lunch, we'll go for a stroll along country lanes for to a nearby pleasant village, known for its splendid park and castle. We then drive to our lovely accommodation, set in one of the most prestigious vineyards in Piedmont, complete with our own personal chef. (1 hour). Dinner will be at our hotel.

## Day 5: Le Langhe and the vineyards:

We spend this morning exploring Alba, the delightful de facto 'capital' of Le Langhe, one of the oldest towns in Piedmont, its pretty medieval centre following the original Roman layout. It is also one of the culinary capitals of northern Italy. After an independent lunch, we'll take a walk through the heart of one of Piedmont's finest winemaking districts. The walk follows lovely trails through vineyards and forest. At the end of the walk, we'll enjoy an introductory tasting to some of the area's celebrated wines (including Barolo and Arneis) followed by a light dinner before driving back to our base. (3 hours)

## Day 6: Le Langhe and the vineyards:

This morning we'll walk down the hill to the neighbouring village. After visiting this pretty town, we'll follow well-marked trails through vineyards and woodlands to a very pleasant small village situated on a lovely natural balcony overlooking Dolcetto country, where we'll have a picnic lunch. After lunch we return our base where we'll spend the afternoon with the vineyard's own oenologist, who will take us through a hands-on seminar examining all aspects of their wine production: working in the vineyards; working in the cellar and the finally a comprehensive tasting of their fine wines. We'll finish our visit to the Langhe with a delicious dinner prepared by our chef.

## Day 7: The Canavese and the Alpine foothills:

Today we drive north to the foothills of the Italian Alps to an area known as the Canavese. Our base for the next three nights is a magnificently restored and converted former Carmelite convent, on a hilltop with a garden and fine views.

On the way to our new base, we'll stop to visit two of the finest gardens in Piedmont. The first around a castle founded in the 11th century, an attractive formal garden from the 17th century and vast surrounding English parklands, laid out in 1840, designed by Paolo Peyrone. We have an independent lunch at the castle's café.

In the afternoon we drive on to visit one of the grandest of the Savoy country residences, which has Italian gardens and a large Romantic park designed by Xavier Kurten between 1830 and 1840. In contrast to the aristocratic grandeur of the castles, we will finish the day visiting a charming little villa, the home of poet Guido Gozzano (1883-1916). It is a short drive to our third home in Piedmont, where dinner will be awaiting us.

**Day 8: The Canavese and the Alpine foothills:**

North-western Piedmont's economy is tightly bound to the wool industry, and particularly to the Ermenegildo Zegna woolen mill. From 1932 until his death in 1966 the visionary industrialist poured money and imagination into his community. His most ambitious venture, however, was the construction of the scenic parkway that still bears his name, a vast program aimed at ensuring the ecological, social and cultural sustainability of a remote corner of the Italian Alps.

We'll explore this immense oasis, then enjoy a private luncheon as guests of the Zegna family. After lunch we'll visit the family's museum, a wonderful collection of 19th-century fabric samples, a permanent exhibition telling the story of the Zegna firm from its origins to the present day.

**Day 9: The Canavese and the Alpine foothills:**

This morning we'll drive into the Alps, to one of the most famous resorts of the Western Alps which was the favourite summer retreat of the royal family and their court in the late 19th century and serves as the gateway to the Gran Paradiso National Park, Italy's oldest and largest nature reserve.

All around tower the vertical rock walls that make the area a favourite destination of serious hikers, but for the less adventurous the streams, waterfalls and flowering meadows are just as attractive. We'll take a full day to explore the park, enjoying a lake side picnic lunch we carry in our backpacks (5 hours) before returning to our hotel in the evening.

**Day 10: Lake Maggiore and Borromeo Islands:**

For the last three nights we will stay in a charming family-run hotel on one of the Borromeo Islands off-shore from Stresa on Lake Maggiore. On the way there we will visit Lake Orta, probably the most beguiling and prettiest of the lakes, taking a delightful lake side path left round the headland, to the oldest town in area, the most beautiful place on the lake. Independent lunch.

In the afternoon we drive on to Lago Maggiore and Pallanza in a charming position in full view of the Borromeo Islands. The town's mild climate makes the flora particularly luxuriant; the lake front is planted with magnolias. We will visit the botanical gardens of a 19th-century villa with an outstanding collection of exotic plants from all over the world created by the Scotsman Captain Neil Mc Eacharn in the 1930s. From here we take a boat to our lovely hotel on one of the Borromeo Islands, dining on the garden terrace overlooking the lake.

**Day 11: Lake Maggiore and Borromeo Islands:**

This morning is spent island-hopping, first taking a boat across to the neighbouring Isola Bella. It was just a barren rock with a small church and a few cottages before the huge palace and terraced 17th century gardens were built by Count Carlo III Borromeo. It is inhabited by white peacocks. After our visit, we cross over to another island, which is entirely occupied by another Borromeo villa and a botanical garden, laid out in the English manner and then replanted in the 1950s by the botanist Henry Cocker. We then take the boat back to the mainland to Stresa, nestled in a charming position on the south shore of the gulf of Pallanza. After an independent lunch, we'll explore the gardens and parks of this charming, if slightly tired, lakeside resort town. We'll boat back to our base for dinner.

**Day 12: Lake Maggiore and Borromeo Islands:**

At the top of the mountains (at 1491m) is a botanical garden founded in 1933, with over five hundred species of alpine plants. This morning we take a cable car up to the botanical garden and then hike to the summit of Monte Mottarone from where, on a clear day, you can see three countries (Italy, France and Switzerland), seven lakes and the wide Po Valley, before returning to Stresa by cableway. The afternoon is free to explore Stresa or head back to our island home. In the early evening we'll transfer by boat to a private villa on the lake, where we will be met by the owners and their friends for cocktails and a private dinner.

**Day 13: Milano Malpensa:**

Tour ends with a transfer to Milano Malpensa airport arriving at 12.00 (trains from here run regularly to Milan Centrale).