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Pampered in Piedmont: Hunting the elusive white truffle in Italy's secret foodie region

By MAYSA RAWI
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I remember asking, at some point on the motorway during the two-hour drive from Milan airport, what would attract a person to Piedmont, directing the question at James, our half-Italian, half-English driver/barman/tour guide/translator for the weekend.

He explained that, other than the elusive Alba white truffle, which Gordon Ramsay recently described as 'a unique culinary experience' on Radio 1, it's an ideal place for those looking to wander off the beaten Italian track.

I am just happy to be away for the weekend for a spot of R&R – and definitely pleased I hadn't settled on a major town with a guilt-inducing litany of sights to see.



Idyllic: The rolling hills and vineyards of Piedmont are the perfect escape for a short break

While Rome, Venice or even the rolling hills of Tuscany seem the obvious choice for travellers wanting a slice of la Dolce Vita, Piedmont, James tells me, has a surprising amount to offer.

While I am sure that is true, my criteria consists of not much more than one box – a pool – which has been vigorously ticked.

Having come off an early morning flight, my husband, Karim, and I are keen to bask lazily in the sun with, honestly, no expectation much higher than a bit of a tan maybe. How wrong we were.

Piedmont, James tells us, produces around 380 million bottles of wine a year. I think a new box just formed.

As we exit the motorway and approach our destination, the sun-bleached fields and blue skies are simply stunning, with vineyards and hazelnut trees as far as the eye can see.

Le Relais San Maurizio – part of the Relais & Chateaux chain (whose hotel guide book is known as 'the white bible') - is the ultimate place to switch-off, crack open a bottle of Barolo and get stuck into some truffle pasta.

Set on the highest of hilltops overlooking the town of Santo Stefano, the former monastery turned luxury hotel looks more like a castle.

Think Merchant Ivory - or where the film Sideways would be set if they made a European version.

We are greeted on the gravel driveway and shown through some wrought iron gates to the estate, stopping to take in the panoramic views from little wooden benches scattered on the grass before checking in.

The 31 rooms may have originally been monk cells, but there is nothing sparse about them.
Country decor meets mod cons – Sky TV and wireless are available in the room - though with so much to see and do, as we discovered, you won't need it.

After a quick change and a spot of lunch on the terrace, we were lying lazily by the impressive, luxurious pool, nestled in the hills.

Surrounded by stylish, good-looking Italians, I almost hoped to become one by osmosis.
This is definitely my kind of holiday and I almost regret taking James up on his offer to show us around the following morning.

After an afternoon of lazing, we enjoy dinner at the hotel's restaurant.

Da Guido is surprisingly relaxed for a Michelin-starred restaurant – but then we are in Italy – and I feel overdressed in heels and jeans.

In the cellar, the cosy but intimate atmosphere makes us feel as though we are on a second honeymoon. Which is particularly indulgent as our first one was only a few weeks ago.

I could definitely get used to this. And with such a short flight from Milan, I try and convince Karim we should visit on a regular basis.

Relais & Chateaux prices are only for special occasions, I am warned.

The sommelier picks a bottle of red from the novel-sized wine list and we start with Piedmont's specialty, vitello tonatto, slices of tender veal with a creamy tuna dressing, followed by melt-in-your mouth black truffle ravioli.



Truffle trove: A selection of local produce available at the market

The white truffle season starts at the end of September and it is actually illegal to sell them until then to ensure quality – whereas black truffle is available all year round.

Are they similar? I ask the waiter. He informs me black truffle to white truffle is what Cava (Spanish sparkling wine) is to a bottle of Dom Perignon.



Spoiled for choice: Maysa is given a taste of some of Piedmont's finest wines

I try not to take offence - we served Cava at our wedding - but I get his point.

White truffles grow deep in the soil under trees and are difficult to find, but it is well worth the effort as a kilogram can fetch up to £2,500.

They are eaten raw in small quantities and when grated over pasta, risotto, eggs, salads or meat dishes, only a few grams give a distinct flavour.

The strong scent may not be to everyone's taste, but for an addict, the unique pleasure is reason enough to travel to the region. Although we were disappointed not to partake – we traded the experience in for late summer sun and a promise to return.

The next morning, rested but slightly worse for wear, we leave the luxury and forgo the pool (not before Nutella on toast for breakfast though) for a short car journey to Alba.

The small town, with a population of 31,272, is home to the Ferrero factory and the white truffle fair that runs from September to December.



The fair attracts thousands of customers to the bustling auction in the main street's courtyard - where you can smell truffles a mile away. There's not much to do in Alba off season, with only one town square – but the shopping is still rather impressive with major designer stores lining the main street.

And we even managed to pick up some black truffle for my mother-in-law, despite it being nowhere near the delicacy of its noble sibling.

Still, got to get her something.

Our next stop is a local vineyard in Barolo – a must-see if you love wine, or like me, know nothing about it. We are greeted by Giuseppe, a young Italian who helps run the Vajra winery that has been in his family for centuries.

He tells a fascinating tale of how his grandfather, then in the army, took his children to live in Turin to give them a better life. But one day he found his son, Giuseppe's father, protesting against war - as you did in the Sixties - outside the town hall.

Outraged and feeling disrespected, he took him to spend the summer in the countryside to keep him 'out of trouble.'

Little did he know his son would subsequently fall in love with the business and move there to raise a family. Giuseppe has developed his father's obsession for wine and is both charming and extremely knowledgeable.

I am already plotting how to bring him home to meet my single friends. He's so hospitable, in fact, that he insists on inviting us out to lunch at a restaurant in nearby Verduno – with his girlfriend. There goes the matchmaking idea.

Giuseppe is so passionate about his profession, it's almost contagious and it's not long before I am thinking up ways to convince my husband to invest in a piece of land. The eyebrow raises again.

Giuseppe compares the wine-making process to music, and insists he only sells his produce to people who appreciate art and culture.

His father even had stained-glass windows built in the barn to 'bring beauty to the fermenting process'. If only everyone ran their business this way. I suppose having the Italian countryside as your office helps.

I discover his wines are stocked in London's River Café and Locanda Locatelli and make mental notes to book dinner there when I get home.



Wine heaven: Piedmont produces up to 380million bottles of wine a year

Giuseppe sets up a tasting session, between the kings of red wine, Barolo and Barbaresco, and several minutes later, we start to feel light-headed.

Can I now tell the difference between the two? No, but they were certainly delicious to drink.
We feel sorry for poor James though, who is on the job and not allowed even a small sip – very professional.

After another tasty lunch at Real Castello di Verduno, of vitello tonnato - we are hooked - overlooking the hills, we are sad to say goodbye to our new friends but vow to keep in touch as Giuseppe is often in London for tastings.



Cooling down: Le Relais San Maurizio is just the place to relax after a morning hunting the elusive white truffle

With our trip almost over, we make an essential visit to the hotel spa. Named Via del Sale (the salt road), we aptly have a salt and honey massage where we experience the pleasure/pain phenomenon as we are scrubbed to within an inch of our life before the masseuse pours warm, soothing honey onto the skin.

The modern spa is heavenly and free use of the treatment rooms is encouraged – with one pool containing more salt than the Dead Sea. This results in an unfortunate stinging sensation in places that should not sting for fifteen minutes, but makes skin feel divine afterwards.

After another tasty (Nutella again) buffet breakfast, we head back to Milan feeling refreshed and wondering why Piedmont isn't the number one Italian holiday destination.

If only we hadn't forgotten the black truffle in the hotel room mini bar…

Travel facts

British Airways fly direct to Milan and Turin, www.ba.com. Rooms at the Relais San Maurizio start from £230 per room per night, for more information call +39.0141.841900, or visit www.relaissanmaurizio.it

Restaurant information:

Real Castello Di Verduno, +39 0172 470 125, info@castellodiverduno.com

Azienda Agricola G.D Vajra +39 0173 56257, gdvajra@tin.it