



Monferrato

Landscape Itineraries

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MONFERRATO
ROERO

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The Home of BuonVivere.

Langhe Monferrato Roero: a series of hills which rise uninterruptedly up to the Ligurian Apennines, among valleys and ridges, castles and towers, art and history, great wines and excellent products. A fairytale landscape that alternates rows of vines neatly combed like gardens with truffle groves, hazelnut groves and the pastures of the Alta Langa. A unique feature that UNESCO has rightly recognized as a World Heritage Site specifically for this cultural landscape which has been persistently created by mankind over centuries of hard work.

A landscape with subtle but significant nuances meant to enhance these itineraries, confident that every corner of this magic territory deserves attention, with eyes able to understand it and feet ready to tread it.

An unhurried journey which, *en passant*, will tell the great story of Piedmont along with the various minor stories collected by the singers (poets, writers and storytellers) of these lands, which were once very poor and harsh, always on the margins of big politics and, at the same time, at the centre of the routes of merchants and pilgrims who moved from the sea to the plains.

These routes will lead you to discover some minor hamlets, often treasure troves of great art, and enchanted villages with just a few houses, extraordinary viewpoints and remote 1000-year-old country chapels, through endless ridge paths like the long hills of the Langa, winding ups and downs among the thousand waves of the Monferrato hills, steep paths in the “canyons” of the Rocche



del Roero and unexpected shores of a sea which disappeared millions of years ago, and yet, still provides fossils and memories.

A journey, as it should be, through one of the most renowned cuisines of the Bel Paese, one of the few that truly succeeds in combining rustic, frugal and cheap dishes with noble wines - red, white and sparkling - which are

the genuine ambassadors of Italian oenology worldwide. A cuisine where the White Truffle, the ultimate gift of a perfectly happy nature, also reigns supreme, the magic that delights gourmets all over the world and that is revealed not through a magic wand but thanks to the generosity of the dog that finds it, and thus confirms itself as man's (and the cook's) best friend.





Lower Monferrato of Moncalvo.

Few places can embody so many traditions and images of Piedmont as **Moncalvo**: Italy's smallest city (raised by the Gonzaga in 1705 and then confirmed by the Savoy in 1774) was the capital of the Marquisate of Monferrato, strategic fortification blocking the way to Casale, the cradle and tomb of many Aleramici and Paleologi families, but also a charming garden amidst rich convents and hills, the adoptive home of the painter Guglielmo Caccia and of his school (he was the main Piedmontese painter of the Counter-Reformation, known as "Il Moncalvo") and a dynamic Jewish centre with a synagogue and an Israelite cemetery.

In Moncalvo you can really perceive the Piedmont of glories and legends that hover in the hills like the early morning mist and the flaming sunset clouds. All around is a crown of villages with epic names that recur in the annals of Monferrato's endless wars with Asti, the Savoys or the Viscontis, and which today decorate a perspective view of a hundred hills stretching out towards the Vercelli plain, as if on the darker line of the Langhe, down to the south like a distant wall holding Monferrato in a single embrace with the Alps outlined on the horizon.

From the surviving donjons of the imposing Gonzaga castle, you can enjoy a view which opens your heart and refreshes your spirit, which is magic because it is real, and authentic because it is like a fairytale.

Next stop is the nearby village of **Penango**, dominated by the Magnocavallo parish Church dedicated to San Grato, thaumaturgic protector of harvests. The rural vocation of the village is reflected in the many monumental historic farmhouses that can be found throughout the area, a direct expression of the wealth of the landowners of the time. The route then passes through the “rival hamlet” of Cioccaro (another parish Church, San Vittore, by the same architect, but on a Romanesque plan that is still partly visible), where legend has it that the

Inquisitor of Casale had his house, and finally the route joins the ridge leading to Grazzano Badoglio.

The road meanders lazily through crops, rows of Barbera vines, truffle groves and meadows for calves, horses or free-roaming sheep, undulating over the ridges towards the historic village. The architecture on this watershed between Asti and Casale is particularly striking due to the soft “pietra da cantoni”, a sandstone that is commonly used to square the corners of houses which still reflect wealth, ambition and a taste for two-tone colours. Villages, convents and remote churches multiply this typology, so that at sunset the sun spreads a dominant ochre colour over the hills, almost like a combination of greens, reds and yellows fading into the air. A kind of magic indeed.





Grazzano Badoglio pays tribute to its fellow-citizen Marshal of Italy with a small Museo Storico (Historical Museum), while the parish Church houses one of Monferrato's best-kept secrets: the tomb of Aleramo, the legendary hero and founder of the Marca, which he gained from Emperor Otto I, riding for three nights and three days after kidnapping Adelasia, the Emperor's favourite daughter. Courtly love, chivalrous deeds, happy endings and divine blessings created the myth on which the marquises (first Aleramici, then Paleologi and finally Gonzaga) firmly based their power for seven centuries. The ancient Benedictine Abbey of San Salvatore is partially incorporated into the parish Church of Santi Vittore e Corona: as you enter the church, one chapel on

the right features a mosaic on the ground and a fresco by Moncalvo portraying an elderly Aleramo gathered in prayer; two plaques state that the remains of the first Marquis were moved here. The building is interesting for its many works of art (from the paintings by Moncalvo and Pozzo to the 16th-century choir) and for a Roman tombstone dating back to the 2nd century in memory of a Hellenic perfume merchant whose name sounds quite evocative: Hermes.

The wall where children and adults spend their Sundays playing tamburello (the Monferrato version of pallapugno, which is played with a so-called *tambass*) is one of the regular features of these medieval villages where the ramparts are often



the only remains of former fortresses that no longer exist and still define the long rectangular squares of farmers' markets.

The landscape continues in the same, almost dreamlike way up to **Casorzo Monferrato**, a village famous for its Malvasia wine (red, sweet and sparkling or spumante) and therefore more willingly embraced by the vineyards; worth mentioning is the curious Church of San Giorgio and Madonna delle Grazie of Romanesque origins (and rich in inscriptions), later remodelled in the 19th century in the Palladian style; whereas the parish Church of San Vincenzo is a fine example of late Baroque style by Magnocavallo (some works by Moncalvo are preserved inside, just like in other places around here). In

the open countryside, you can see the first and most famous of the "bi-trees" of the Asti area, an odd spontaneous grafting of a cherry tree on the trunk of an old mulberry tree which features a sensational double flowering and a rare symbiosis between tall trees.

From Casorzo, after a series of ups-and-downs we pass through **Grana Monferrato**, with its imposing Baroque parish church enclosed between a few narrow streets which stretch along the ridge towards Montemagno (see itinerary Lower Monferrato of Castagnole) and Calliano, our next stop. In Grana Monferrato, mention must be made of the small Museo Parrocchiale Sacrestia Aperta di Grana (Parish Museum Open Sacristy of Grana), a collection of sacred art objects and furnishings, inside the

Church of Santa Maria Assunta, and the panoramic Santa Maria cemeterial Church of Romanesque origins.

All that is left of the massive fortress of **Calliano Monferrato**, for centuries a Monferrato stronghold against Asti's expansionism (the customs house was in the small hamlet of San Desiderio, *buen retiro* of the great set designer Eugenio Guglielminetti) is but a memory: it was destroyed in the Franco-Spanish wars of the 17th century and today there are only a few bastions which can be seen around the panoramic esplanade, just above the parish church. On the other hand, the pattern of the mediaeval old town can be clearly seen, as can the beautiful Romanesque parish Church of San Pietro (with an original 9th-century

apse, but 19th-century façade), which once had three naves. In the parish church there is an altar by Vittone and carvings in the choir by Bonzanigo, as well as numerous works by Moncalvo and a 15th-century wooden Christ. But the crowning glory of Calliano is its gastronomy: agnolotti with donkey stew, a rare and particularly tasty dish whose tradition starts here. As a tribute to the generous quadruped, a Palio is also scheduled here, like in Cocconato (see itinerary Romanesque in and around Castelnuovo Don Bosco).

Next, we go down to the lower part of the Valle del Versa and reach **Castell'Alfero**, noble village, for centuries the "bridgehead" of Asti against the aims of Monferrato: the name of the village has no *liason* whatsoever with the historical



Alfieri family of Asti, but it was here that the Baroque genius of Benedetto Alfieri created one of his masterpieces (with Piovà Massaia, see itinerary Romanesque in and around Montechiaro d'Asti) i.e. the Castle of Counts Amico which, together with the parish church, transformed the oldest part of the medieval fortification into a lace embroidered "with wonder". A splendid balcony overlooking Monferrato, the castle houses the town hall and the *'L Ciar*, the Museo delle Contadinerie (Rural Museum). The rest of the village, well enclosed within massive walls, is definitely worth a stroll which can also be extended onto the cosy hamlets of Serra Perno and Callianetto. Right here, in the open countryside, there is still the makeshift refuge of two Turinese puppeteers known for their Napoleonic satire and most wanted by the authorities for the Gironi character they created. They were hosted by a family of patriots, the De Rolandis, whose son Giovanni Battista was tortured and hanged in Bologna in 1796 by the Pope Pius VI. It seems that he invented the Italian Tricolour by replacing the blue of the French Revolution flag with the green of "hope". The two puppeteers were Giovanni Battista Sales and Gioacchino Bellone, and here hidden, they transformed the puppet into a mask: a jovial man who summed up the qualities of the Piedmontese people, from honesty to love of food and wine: *Gian d'la Doja* (Giovanni della Brocca), who would later become Gianduja, with a ponytail, tricorn and a tricolour cockade in full view. Thus, in the "*Ciabot 'd Gianduja*"

(open on reservation), one of the few masks which were not based on the Commedia dell'Arte, nevertheless it was instantly loved and popular.

On the way to Frinco, a stop at the beautiful panoramic Church of Madonna della Neve is a must. The apse and parts of the bell tower are Romanesque, a truly peaceful hermitage set in beautiful countryside.

Frinco is all "perched" on its thousand-year-old Castle, a massive fortress which preserves much of the grim fortification of the Turco family. After the defeat of the Ghibelline party, the Turcos gave the fiefdom to the Mazzetti family, whose traces can often be found in houses and palaces as "Marquises of Frinco". The name of the village, like many similar ones nearby (Tonco, Zanco, Rinco, Ranco) is of Longobard origin, as many of the oldest fiefs in Monferrato.

On the other bank of the Versa river lies **Tonco**, another beautiful rural village marked by the distinctive silhouette of its pointed church tower (built on the site of the former Natta Castle). Here, in April, the Giostra del *Pitu* (the turkey, in dialect) is held, an ancient local tradition which replaces the scapegoat with the poor bird, with identical expiatory intentions, featuring also a trial and (mock) execution.

From Tonco it is best to follow the winding ridge that, passing through Alfiano Natta, takes us back to the bastions of **Moncalvo**, meandering through the slopes and vineyards.



Top Art and Culture

- Castell'Alfero – Castle of Conti Amico and 'L *Ciar* Museum
- Frinco - Castle
- Grana Monferrato - Church of Santa Maria Assunta - Parish Museum Open Sacristy of Grana
- Grazzano Badoglio - Church of Santi Vittore e Corona - Aleramo's Tomb
- Grazzano Badoglio – Badoglio Historical Museum

Top Food and Wine

- Grazzano Badoglio - The *Infernot*

Top Nature

- Casorzo Monferrato – Double Tree

PLEASE NOTE:

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Romanesque Network of the Hills

Itineraries through ancient villages, woods, parish churches and abbeys. A circuit of small churches and Romanesque parish churches between Lower Monferrato and Turin area: this is the thematic route designed to enhance these millenary places of inestimable cultural value. Right here, where history and legend often overlap, visitors can take a trip back in time, totally engrossed in a landscape full of charm.







Lower Monferrato of Castagnole.

The hills around Castagnole Monferrato are famous for the production of Ruché, the most spicy of Piedmont's aromatic red grape varieties: it ranges from Dolcetto (see itinerary Langa of Dolcetto) to Pelaverga (see itinerary Langa of Barolo) and then to Gambarossa (see itinerary Langa of Moscato), without forgetting the two Malvasia astigiane (see Romanesque in and around Castelnuovo Don Bosco and Lower Monferrato of Moncalvo), although in different vinifications.

The Ruché hills are seven: fertile, beautiful and very hospitable; after all, the sign at the entrance to the village is more eloquent than a thousand words: *"If someone in Castagnole offers you some Ruché, it is because they like you"*. This is truly the case: visitors here feel at home and, as they are already spellbound by the fairy-tale unreality of hills, basins and groves, they will find a smile and a warm welcome in every village on these dreamlike hills.

The landscape *“unrolls like the film of a movie”* to quote a singer-songwriter from Asti, and former lawyer who, incidentally, chose to live right in this area, and you will be truly enchanted as you contemplate this Monferrato, which casually flows from the songs of Paolo Conte to popular ballads, from wine to truffles, from Romanesque churches to mediaeval castles and you will feel just like Giovanni Gerbi the cyclist from Asti (known as the “Red Devil”) who *“forgets about the road”* and remains motionless in his little paradise kissed by happiness, while *“against the light, time goes away”*.

Our itinerary traces a vine leaf, an embroidery of paths up and down these gentle hills, from which all of

Piedmont can be suddenly breathed in from the top of a ridge, or gathered in the secret of an intimate oak wood, hidden from the world, just like the truffles under our feet.

In **Castagnole Monferrato** the treasures are all enclosed within the walls of the Fortified Ricetto (the medieval fortification known as *la Miraja*) just beyond the big parish Church of San Martino: from the theatre to the beautiful mediaeval houses on which 17th-century farmhouses and ambitious late-19th-century buildings are nestled. The ruins of the former castle have been replaced by the charming neo-Gothic space of the former kindergarten with the old seat of the Philharmonic Orchestra next to it.



As you walk along the circular route, you will embrace the entire horizon that fades into endless hills, a view that can bring a sense of peace and curiosity at the same time. Some winter mornings, when the mists of dawn recede and the slanting sun kisses each hilltop *bric* with light, it feels like being in a sea of white foam and shimmering waves.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the village was the birthplace of two quite dissimilar artists such as the engraver and watercolourist Delfino Marengo and the futurist painter and sculptor Mino Rosso. This was also the birthplace of the Casa degli Alfieri theatre workshop run by the late Luciano Nattino. Also, worth of a mention is the Mercantile (a Baroque villa with an Italian-style garden-labyrinth) and the beautiful Festa del Ruché.

The shortest route to Viarigi meanders towards Montemagno, soon after the cemetery, but we will take a broader route, travelling from Castagnole Monferrato past the stretches of truffle woods which suddenly appear to the south-east: we descend along a few bends and then go through a rural valley to the nearby village of **Refrancore** (once known as *Rivus Francorum*, due to a victory of the Lombards over the Franks), a grid of houses once fortified on the Gaminella stream. The oldest group of houses was, however, located on top of the short hill, where we can still find the old Church of San Martino, with traces of its gate-tower found in the bell tower.

From the village square, on the other hand, the slender 18th-century bell tower of the now lost Church of San Sebastiano stands out, the symbol of the village, along with the Finocchini, delicious aniseed biscuits (baked three times) that should definitely be taken home as a mouth-watering *souvenir*. We should also mention the sensitive 20th-century painter Massimo Quaglini and the small church with its Romanesque apse in Borgo Maddalena (towards Valenzani).

We move up and down over gentle hills to reach Accorneri, a densely populated hamlet shared with **Viarigi**, which is our next stage. The village is quite unique in its genre with its strips of multi-terraced houses and with the beautiful Torre dei Segnali (Signals Tower), the first outpost of the Marquisate of Monferrato's surveillance system on this disputed borderland: after all, the castle was already destroyed in the 14th century and the tower was built using waste material. However, many of these "lost castles" of the Asti area can be found intact in the *Codex Astensis*, an exceptional document preserved in the Historical Archives of Asti (see Asti, Urban Itineraries).

Viarigi definitely deserves a stroll through stairways and vaults to discover views, courtyards and doorways, surrounded by a flood of red tiled roofs. The beautiful 14th-century parish Church of Sant'Agata, with its 17th-century façade, preserves a triptych of the Madonna by

Gandolfino da Roreto (d'Asti), along with Macrino, one of Piedmont's most important Renaissance painters. The nearby Church of San Silverio is also worth a visit, with its Greek-cross plan and alternating two-colour ashlar, overlooked by a medieval palace, one of the oldest in the village.

All around, as far as the eye can see, there are more woods than vineyards, to the extent that there is a Consortium for the Protection of the White Truffle of Viarigi, a clear indication of the truffle-growing vocation of this corner of Piedmont. And then, just above the woods, the tiny 11th-century Church of San Marziano stands out. It is the last (or first) country church on the Via Francigena of Asti area, with its refined Romanesque architecture of yellow sandstone and splendid, isolated viewpoint.

The ups and downs begin again in one of the most beautiful valley basins in the province, where woods and streams alternate with vineyards and fields to create a harmony of ancient agriculture, where what is good inevitably becomes beautiful too. **Montemagno** awaits us at the end of a short ascent, revealing the glaciis of its castle from afar. Actually, the whole village is perched on the other side of the hill, on the sunny side; from the Castle of the Calvi di Bergolo family, a fortress that was converted into an evocative Baroque mansion while preserving its typically medieval appearance, there are 12 alleyways (numbered as such) which branch

off by maintaining the fortification's original layout: you can access through an old gatehouse and, of course, it is a good idea to leave the car for a healthy walk in one of the most beautiful villages in Monferrato.

The old parish Church has a bombastic staircase, columned façade and, although uncommon in these areas, it has a remarkable scenic impact. However, Montemagno's secrets are mostly well hidden, such as the frescoes of Santa Maria della Cava (1491), among the most important in the Asti area along with those of Sant'Andrea in Montiglio Monferrato (see itinerary Romanesque in and around Montechiaro d'Asti), or the charming ruins of the Romanesque Church of Santi Vittore e Corona (12th century). Finally, here comes the surprise of a daily celebration, that of bread. The typical "*griva monferrina*" is given due consideration in an event dedicated to what is seen as man's first and most important food. And along with bread you must also eat salami which, throughout Monferrato, is cooked, handmade (each butcher's shop makes its own), spicy and fatty: an unforgettable treat for the senses.

Every road that branches off from Montemagno provides a fully immersive experience in a rural landscape bordering on reality. Next, the route takes us towards **Grana Monferrato** (see itinerary Lower Monferrato of Moncalvo), a compulsory junction for Moncalvo (see itinerary Moncalvo, Italy's Smallest town) and





a panoramic viewpoint over the other Ruché hills. The village is entirely clustered around the imposing parish Church of the Assunta (1776), with its Museo Parrocchiale Sacrestia Aperta di Grana (Parrish Museum Open Sacristy of Grana) whose altarpiece is the “Madonna col Bambino e Santi” (Madonna with Child and Saints) of 1595, one of Moncalvo’s most beautiful works of art.

The road heading towards Calliano takes us to the San Desiderio crossroads, the ancient border between Monferrato and Astesana and lovely hamlet of peaceful life (it was the last residence of the great set designer Eugenio Guglielminetti), which allows us to make a U-turn to go along the ridge which from San Pietro

(where we can take a nice shortcut to Castagnole Monferrato) descends to the main road of **Scurzolengo**. There is in fact only one road which runs through the whole village and there are just a few streets in the centre built around the imposing castle. Actually, the grim castle also incorporates the parish church which further increases its overwhelming size.

Opposite Scurzolengo we find **Portacomaro**, homeland of Asti’s most deeply rooted grape variety: Grignolino, a red wine that is difficult to interpret but which, despite being “*anarchic and headstrong*” (to quote a famous definition by Veronelli), or perhaps precisely for this reason, has die-hard fans and a handful of heroic producers, gathered around the

Bottega del Vino (Local Wine Shop). This wine shop is housed in the scenic donjon that completes the village's beautiful medieval fortification (Portacomaro, located on the border between Asti and Monferrato, was demilitarized in 1179 by mutual agreement and, for this reason it never had a castle) and a walking tour is a must here. Another must-see is San Pietro, the small 12th-century Romanesque Church (one of the few without a circular apse), curiously located at the end of a steep flight of steps just outside the old town and which houses frescoes dating back to the 14th and 16th centuries.

There are many legends here, from echoes of Catharist heresy as in Monforte d'Alba (see itinerary Langa

of Barolo) to Barbarossa who is said to have barricaded himself in the fortification during the siege of Asti. There is then the happy ending story of Giuseppe Berruti, a local dialect poet who never managed to publish a book with his writings or recipes during his lifetime, but he was posthumously granted this honour as a future memorial to the stories and skills of popular knowledge. Portacomaro is also widely known as one of the undisputed capitals of *Tambass*, the tamburello ball game of Monferrato, which is similar but distinct from the Langa-based pallapugno game.

The surroundings of Portacomaro are by far the most charming of this itinerary, whether you get to the remote little Church of Sant'Evasio,



immersed in the Miravalle woods, or run along the parallel Castellazzo ridge, or take the other road leading to Scurzolengo: a wide tour which, from Monterovere, seems to have been created specifically to fill your eyes with these unspoilt views.

Our route, meanwhile, follows the ridge to Castiglione passing through *ciabòt* and Liberty-style villas, it is by far one of the most beautiful routes in the whole of Monferrato. Castiglione, once a municipality and today a “ventina”, i.e., hamlet of Asti (these are the municipal identities which joined the city and made it the capital of the province in 1935), is another small hilltop village famous for the Fagiolata di San Defendente a bean feast held on 2 January, which has been a

religious festival and food distribution to the poor for over 800 years (as for the Santi in Dogliani or precisely in Portacomaro for the “*caritin*”).

From here, passing through Cornapò, you reach Migliandolo (another municipality, now hamlet of Portacomaro), a peaceful country village that you go through in slow motion to descend on the other side into the Valenzani valley (almost all toponyms refer to the Roman Via Fulvia, which passed nearby, connecting *Hasta Pompeia* to *Forum Fulvii*, today’s Villa del Foro), from which you return to **Castagnole Monferrato** in a few bends, with your eyes and heart full of this landscape which is truly closer to paradise than to earth.



Top Art and Culture

- Castagnole Monferrato – Fortified Ricetto
- Grana Monferrato - Church of Santa Maria Assunta - Parish Museum
Open Sacristy of Grana
- Montemagno – External Walkways of the Castle and 12 Alleys Circuit
- Montemagno – Gatehouse
- Viarigi – Signals or Look-outs Tower

Top Food and Wine

- Portacomaro – Local Wine Shop

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From Tower to Tower

All the charm of the towers. Strong and strategic, yet also noble and aristocratic. These are the towers of Langhe Monferrato Roero, a sighting system which nowadays allows you to enjoy a 360° view of landscapes, while imagining the history that has been written in the place you are visiting. Towers in towns as well on the hills, an ideal tour not to be missed, a journey through the centuries that will surprise us.





Monferrato di Costigliole.

The Rocca of **Costigliole d'Asti**, perched on the massive Asinari Castle, is one of the most beautiful and important old towns in the province. After all, the name of the village has an ancient, almost mythical gastronomic reputation; a page in the history of Italian cuisine was written here. And it is no coincidence that ICIF, a prestigious school of Italian cuisine for foreigners, was founded here, with headquarters in the castle. The excellence continues with the square pepper of Motta, the hamlet in the Tanaro Valley which, together with nearby Isola d'Asti, is the area's real vegetable garden, with its wonderful vegetables, fruit and flowers; and the sea of vines extending as far as the eye can see which surround the village and make it the most vineyard-covered village in Piedmont (together with Santo Stefano Belbo).

The geography of Costigliole d'Asti is quite complex, with about a dozen hamlets forming a crown shape all around the old town, which is located slightly lower and more hidden, and this makes it one of the few villages in Monferrato that cannot be seen from the neighbouring hamlets. The location was chosen precisely for this reason, following the destruction of the Castle of Loreto by Asti in 1255 (it was one of the counties left by Bonifacio del Vasto, at the origin of the Aleramic fiefs) and so, while Loreto was consigned to legend, Costigliole d'Asti entered the history of these hills. A stroll in the centre, through the steep alleyways and stairways of the Rocca, is an absolute must: here, you will find plenty of art treasures, including the Confraternity of San Gerolamo, with its fine Museo di Arte Sacra (Museum of Sacred Art), and, of course, the castle, a well-renovated 19th-century building that retains its fine Juvarra-style staircase and houses the ICIF (the Italian Culinary Institute for Foreigners) as well as the Consorzio Barbera d'Asti e Vini del Monferrato (Barbera d'Asti and Monferrato Wines Consortium).

The Countess of Castiglione, considered as "*the most beautiful woman of the 19th century*", also lived in the castle. She married Count Francesco Verasis Asinari of Costigliole when she was very young and then became a protagonist of Cavour's Risorgimento plots, as Napoleon III's lover. Count Filippo Asinari di San Marzano, a refined diplomat of the *Ancien Régime*

and a passionate winegrower, also lived here and started a collection of grape varieties from all over Europe (he was the one who first brought Chardonnay in Piedmont), whose legacy continues to make Costigliole d'Asti a place of special wines, even if of small production, such as Uvalino.

The several "satellite hamlets" are immersed in the Barbera vineyard, which is the lion's share here, among spacious farmhouses, agricultural sheds (the famous *ciabòt*), bourgeois villas and small country churches. It is worth visiting also the nearby Castle of Burio, a grim fortress that has remained faithful to its original architecture, the beautiful parish Church of Nostra Donna di Loreto (with an altar by Juvarra) and the stunning panoramic viewpoint of Bricco Lù, with its demonic legend of Poldo and Gentucca, the Monument to the Peasant Woman and the far-reaching view over the whole of Monferrato and beyond.

So, we immerse ourselves in this sea of vineyards by taking the road to **Isola d'Asti** which, with nearby Mongardino, is the closest municipality to the city of Asti (see Asti, Urban Itineraries). It is worth climbing up to the small village of Villa with its bell tower (the only vestige of the castle). The General and Minister Giuseppe Govone, who is remembered in the homonymous palace located in the hamlet of Mongovone, is a local glory (shared with Alba). An interesting place to visit in Mongardino is the Sacro Monte (Holy Mount), a private site that



can be visited by appointment: a place of religious worship consisting of the small Sanctuary of the Beata Vergine and a series of small chapels with plaster statues portraying scenes from the Passion of the Christ, and around which it is possible to walk.

The surrounding Asti countryside around Mongardino is fertile and peaceful, as is the nearby village of **Vigliano d'Asti**, right at the entrance to the Val Tiglione, which we will follow for a few stretches from here on. In Vigliano, the privately owned Monte Castle is more of a late-medieval house-fortress with a 19th-century façade superimposed; however, it is underground that the village has found fame thanks to the discovery in 1959 of the extraordinary minke

whale today displayed at the Museo dei Fossili - Parco Paleontologico Astigiano (Fossils Museum - Astigiano Palaeontological Park - see Asti, Urban Itineraries) an almost intact 8-metre fossil dating back to the Pliocene.

Montegrosso awaits us a few kilometres away: a pyramid of houses overlooked by the private castle, whose shape is very similar to the Calosso Castle. The large village dominates the vast valley, acting a bit as a road junction between Agliano Terme, Mombercelli and Costigliole d'Asti. The route then continues to the tiny village of **Montaldo Scarampi**, which has a side slope featuring fine historic vineyards and the other one overlooking the truffle strongholds, a

“vein of white gold” that runs through hollows and ravines to Rocca d’Arazzo and the Tanaro river. The traditions of the past are collected in the Museo della Vita Contadina (Museum of Rural Life), a remarkable collection of testimonies of the life on these hills just a few decades ago.

Mombercelli is the first of many long-lost castles in the Asti area. The high tower built by the people of Asti collapsed on the houses of the village in the 1940s following an earthquake, and the rest of the castle was gradually destroyed by vegetation and collapses: nowadays, only the imposing bastions and the high defensive walls are left. The MUSarMO Modern and Contemporary Art Collection, curiously located

in the former prison, now exhibiting space, is definitely worth a visit. The 17th-century three-nave parish Church also houses an altarpiece by Moncalvo. Finally, in the old town centre, there is the Evangelical Christian Church dei Fratelli, which was built by a Protestant community founded towards the end of the 19th century. Mombercelli, alongside its Barbera production, is famous for the distillation of grappa (historic distillers can be found also in Canelli, Boglietto, Mombaruzzo, San Marzanotto, Castelnuovo Don Bosco, Vigliano and Cunico).

Within a short distance we find the village of **Belveglio** which has some scary medieval legends to tell about ghosts and secret rooms full of gold,





which also led to real searches for gold after the war, but obviously they were unsuccessful. The Castle is hardly reminiscent of the old Ghibelline fortress and today is home to a music association. Worthy of mention here is the figure of Umberto Calosso, the Italian speaker of Radio Londra during World War II who later became an intellectual, journalist, politician, and writer of national importance.

Next, we pass through the beautiful little valley of Fontanabuona (with its homonymous Sanctuary dating back to the 16th century) to go up to **Castelnuovo Calcea**, the village of Angelo Brofferio, Cavour's political opponent, but also an inexhaustible poet, author of songs and satires in

Italian and Piedmontese language, and to whom a cultural centre has been dedicated here. The ruins of the castle provide a scenic backdrop to the village, setting up an open-air route ending on the very scenic surviving tower. The seventeenth-century parish Church of Santo Stefano made in exposed brickwork featuring niches, statues, pilasters and a fine entrance porch is quite charming, as is the staircase on the bridge that recalls the old medieval entrance.

However, the most beautiful surprise in the village is the Art Park La Court, a project by an enlightened family of winegrowers, supervised by the genius of the great set designer Lele Luzzati (who fled to Calosso before managing

to escape to Switzerland) and designed by Giancarlo Ferraris, where the four natural elements become art on two scenic slopes covered with vines right in front of the village: several artists have collaborated on the creation of the park.

The landscape is a constant elegy to vineyards and the rural architecture which is particularly well represented here: the hamlets between San Marzano Oliveto and Moasca (two neighbouring villages) are an expression of the best Monferrato wine. In **San Marzano Oliveto**, the Asinari Castle (which, together with the parish Church, forms a harmonious square overlooking the hills) is privately owned, while the

Moasca Castle, which almost fell into oblivion after the war, has been given a new lease of life thanks to a public project that has restored its interiors and hypogeous rooms by creating a futuristic structure between the two teeth of the circular towers. This was completed by the beautiful garden/terrace, and today it houses the collections of the Fondazione “Davide Lajolo”.

In Moasca, both the parish Church and the Confraternity of San Rocco are quite interesting; the same is true in San Marzano Oliveto, where there is also a curious little Waldensian Temple. And while there have been no olive trees here for some time, the San Marzano Oliveto apple is very popular for its sugary





fragrance. In Moasca, there is also a wetland area controlled by the LIPU, i Rivi, located near the Nizza stream (see itinerary Monferrato of Nizza), similar to the Paludo area in Agliano Terme. Both wetland areas build together the Paludo and Rivi di Moasca Nature Reserve.

Our next stop is in fact **Agliano Terme**, another village that lost its castle in the 17th century, but still lives on the medieval echoes of Bianca Lancia, who married Frederick II. From the *stupor mundi* she had two children: Manfredi, King of Naples and Sicily, mentioned by Dante in the 3rd Canto of the Purgatory, and Constance, Empress of Byzantium. A surviving tower of the castle preserves this heritage while offering

a superb view of the village. Not to be missed, within the former Brotherhood of San Michele, is the BAart, both a wine and cultural centre.

The beautiful Sanctuary of the Annunciazione in hamlet Molizzo is another panoramic viewpoint worth seeing, while the *Fons Salutis* thermal establishment (the only one in the Asti area) still preserves the echoes of the glories of the *Belle Époque*. The town's vocation for tourism is also reinforced by the presence of the prestigious Scuola Alberghiera Astigiana. Finally, the parish Church of San Giacomo Maggiore has a beautiful 15th-century wooden Christ which should be seen.

To get to **Calosso**, you can go past Salere or preferably along the ridge which runs from Moasca in a flood of vineyards to the fertile Rodotiglia; in both ways, you reach Piana del Salto, just below the village's medieval old, with its scaled-down castle, the Museo Memorie di Futuro (Museum of Future Memories), and heritage of *crotin*, ancient wine cellars carved into the tuff rock and celebrated during the beautiful Fiera del *Rapulé* in October. The parish Church of San Martino has a beautiful 18th-century wooden choir and the village is very pretty with its Cantina Comunale (Municipal Wine Cellar) and a local glory such as the rare Gambarossa (Gamba di Pernice) vine which produces Calosso DOC wine, the latest Controlled designation

of origin obtained by Piedmont. As you leave, it is also worth stopping at the Crevacuore panoramic viewpoint, just opposite the nearby village of Santo Stefano Belbo (see itinerary Langa of Moscato).

From Calosso you can reach Castagnole delle Lanze by going down to Boglietto and then following the busy provincial road, or more gently you can go through the neighbouring village of **Castiglione Tinella**, and then descend to **Coazzolo**, a pretty village halfway up the hillside with its beautiful castle, the panoramic Little Church of Carmine painted by the English artist David Tremlett, the Vigna dei Pastelli (Pastels Vineyard) and the amphitheatre with piped music (see itinerary Langa of Barbaresco), and





then on to **Castagnole delle Lanze**, the capital of Barbera and one of the Italy's Most Beautiful Villages.

The "Adotta un Filare" (Adopt a Vine Row) initiative has been running successfully for 20 years and has over 15,000 members, and the historic "Contro" music festival is equally successful. The upper village houses a remarkable historic center which ends with the Parco della Rimembranza (Remembrance Park) and the Museum Route dedicated to Count Paolo Ballada of Saint Robert. Strolling in the shade of lime trees and visiting the tower, you can discover the works and passions of the count, expert in ballistics, physics, chemistry, botany and astronomy, and great mountain lover (he was among

the founders of the CAI, together with Quintino Sella). From the tower, built in the nineteenth century, the view takes in another unique and dream landscape. The Confraternity of the Battuti Bianchi, now converted into a pleasant exhibition and conference hall, is also beautiful, as are the stately buildings, all restored and comfortably inhabited. Castagnole delle Lanze contends with Agliano Terme for the birthplace of Bianca Lancia, as the noble Aleramic family was originally from here.

Along the panoramic route of the Annunziata, which once again glides through a sea of rows of vines, you go back to **Costigliole d'Asti**, only a handful of hills further on, yet you wish they would never end.

Top Art and Culture

- Agliano Terme – Tower of the Ancient Castle
- Calosso - Castle
- Calosso – Museum of Future Memories
- Castagnole delle Lanze - Remembrance Park - Museum Route and Tower of Count Paolo Ballada of Saint Robert
- Castelnuovo Calcea – Area around the Castle and Staircase of the Bridge
- Castelnuovo Calcea - Art Park La Court
- Coazzolo – Natural Amphitheatre with piped music
- Coazzolo – Small Church Beata Maria Vergine del Carmine – Wall drawing by David Tremlett
- Costigliole d’Asti - Confraternity of San Gerolamo - Museum of Sacred Art
- Costigliole d’Asti – Rocca and Castle
- Costigliole d’Asti (Bricco Lù) – Monument of the Peasant Woman
- Ferrere, Mongardino, Montaldo Scarampi, Rocca d’Arazzo, Rocchetta Tanaro, Vigliano d’Asti - “Per ferro del mare padano” by Sergio Omedé
- Isola d’Asti – Bell Tower
- Moasca – Castle and Collection of “Davide Lajolo” Foundation
- Mombercelli – MUSarMO – Civic Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art

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Top Food and Wine

- Agliano Terme - BAart
- Castiglione Tinella - Local Wine Shop of Moscato Wine of Castiglione Tinella
- Calosso - Municipal Wine Cellar of Calosso Wines

Top Nature

- Agliano Terme, Calosso, Costigliole d'Asti, Moasca - Paludo e Rivi di Moasca Nature Reserve
- Castiglione Tinella - "Vines in Lines"
- Coazzolo - The Pastels Vineyard
- Vigliano d'Asti - Valmontasca Geosite

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Monferrato of Nizza.

The good old Nizza della Paglia (literally Nizza of the straw, the former name of **Nizza Monferrato**) is the perfect archetype of a provincial Savoy town: the high street, the residences of the nobility, the *Foro Boario*, the main square. It is easy to lose track of time in its streets, watching the wooden signs of the shops and tasting its many typical products. This is where the heart of old Piedmont beats, a heart all about Barbera, the flagship of the region which, on these hills, has gone from *vin dij cartoné* (carters' wine) to a refined lounge wine, with its own appellation which, *ça va sans dire*, could only be called "Nizza" and you can taste it at the Enoteca Regionale (Regional Wine Centre) del Nizza in Palazzo Crova.

Next, we leave Nizza Monferrato and follow the Bricco route where a romantic little Church surrounded by cypresses will take us, also visually, to the sea of vineyards that awaits us.

The road climbs gently (but you have to walk to the church), allowing you to feast your eyes, nose and ears on this perfect viticulture model; amidst villages and country churches (all dedicated to the thaumaturgical saints who protect the farmers' labours) the route continues towards **Castelnuovo Calcea** (see itinerary Monferrato of Costigliole) and then turns right onto Via Momparone; soon it climbs uphill and almost turns back again to ride along one of the most scenic ridges of the Monferrato to our next destination, the small, isolated hamlet of Noche (they call themselves an "autonomous principality"), truly a haven of peace. From here the route takes you immediately past **Vaglio Serra** to descend in a few bends into the Val Sarmassa Nature Reserve (see itinerary Parks of Monferrato Area)

and then onto Incisa Scapaccino. Along the way you should also stop in **Vinchio**, the place most dear to Davide Lajolo's heart, and also a fertile land for Saracen asparagus. The short wooded stretch is very cool and pleasant, especially in summer.

The upper part of **Incisa Scapaccino** (the *villa*) is very beautiful (it was the seat of a marquisate of the Aleramici) and is worth a stroll through neo-Gothic palaces, noble residences, convents (the 15th century Sanctuary of the Madonna del Carmine, with important older frescoes, is a must) and surviving traces of the imposing fortifications of this historic Monferrato family. Here, the Belbo River circumvents the fortress, protecting it for almost its entire circumference: the entire area is therefore sparsely populated with





very charming green paths. Incisa Scapaccino owes its second name to the first Carabiniere who fell in service in Savoy during a sortie by Mazzinians in 1834; this is why the Church of San Giovanni (also in the villa) is also the first Sanctuary of the *Virgo Fidelis*, the patron saint of the Carabinieri Force; therefore, every week you can attend ceremonies with all military personnel in full uniform. In the lower part of the village, the neoclassical parish Church of Santi Vittore and Corona is worth a visit and, of course, in season you can buy cardoons, here called “storti” (crooked) unlike Nizza Monferrato, the queen of the Cardo Gobbo (hunchback thistle).

We quickly travel through the rest of the Belbo plain which has its landmark and focal point in **Castelnuovo Belbo**; here we find the Museum dedicated to

Francesco Cirio (credited with being the father of canned foods) and the small panoramic country Church of *Regina Angelorum*, which dates back to the 14th century.

And next, we are in **Bruno**, a small municipality with the medieval Castle of the Faà family set at the far end of the Asti border on the Alessandria area (the border is marked by the Bosco delle Sorti, a protected area of chestnut, oak and acacia trees that extends as far as Maranzana and then into the Alessandria area). After a stop at the local Cantina Comunale (Municipal Wine Cellar), we continue right through the woods and we reach **Mombaruzzo**. This is one of the most historically-steeped villages in the Monferrato area. Situated on the Silk Route from Savona to Flanders,



it used to have a large spinning mill. Today it is famous for its excellent soft amaretti (almond macaroons) which can be found anywhere in the village, and for the grappa. You can discover all secrets of this spirit visiting the beautiful Museo del Distillatore (Distiller Museum).

The historic heart of Mombaruzzo lies in the Ricetto, the medieval fortification still enclosed within four ultra-high walls (some of which are still visible today) with just two entrance points, the Marlera west and the Vignale east. Inside we find the Church of the Maddalena (an expanded Romanesque reconstruction of the smaller original building), various medieval buildings (including Palazzo Marchionale and the Dacia and Ferraris

Houses), the Torre Civica (Civic Tower) commissioned by the Marquises of Monferrato in the 13th century and the Baroque Ex-confraternity of Sant'Andrea.

Beyond the Ricetto, the town is arranged along several ridges and, consequently, it looks rather dispersed. For orientation purposes, we can say that the Municipal Tower represents one extreme and the Palace of the Marquises Pallavicini the other; this is a sumptuous 17th-century building located at the top of Via Roma. Halfway between the two extremes we find the former nursery school which today hosts the Museo del Territorio (Museum of the Territory) "Pinino Nota" and the Church of Sant'Antonio Abate (14th cent.), part

of an ancient Benedictine Monastery, which has been transformed from the original Romanesque to Gothic style, with interesting 15th-century frescoes, including a Madonna which can be attributed to the Maestro di Roccaverano (see itinerary Langa Astigiana in and around Roccaverano).

Outside the old town, we find the ruins of the old convent of the Friars Minor, while the hermitage of the Church of Presepio immersed in the woods is an excellent walk; a trip should also be made to the beautiful “independent” hamlet of Casalotto, the medieval Casal de’ Dagna.

The villages around Mombaruzzo are all very pretty, immersed in the region’s largest expanse of vineyards

and equally divided between Barbera and Brachetto d’Acqui, a rare pink, sweet and aromatic grape variety.

Now we move on to **Maranzana**, passing through the Bosco delle Sorti once again, where, in the shadow of the castle, we find the big “*babaci*” (rag dolls) telling the stories of the village. Worthy of mention is a small exhibition area dedicated to Giacomo Bove, an explorer born in the village who spent his life discovering new lands and supported important expeditions, including the one to South America with Edmondo De Amicis, who was inspired to write the tale “Dagli Appennini alle Ande”. Next we pass through **Quaranti**, the first of a series of smaller medieval fortifications, featuring the lovely





panoramic Church of Santi Cosma and Damiano. Then we reach **Castelletto Molina**, which is nestled around the turreted castle with a curiously low shape, featuring the ancient small *ecclesia castri* chapel and the traditional Langhe game of pallapugno. The route then climbs up to Bricco Oddone, a beautiful spot overlooking the entire itinerary, and past **Castel Rocchero**, another medieval fortification whose main entrance vault is already set on the border with the Langhe.

Finally, we descend again towards the **Fontanile Ricetto**: its modern Church, with a beautiful Baroque statue of Madonna del Rosario (Our Lady of the Rosary) by the Genoese artist Maragliano, has slightly altered

the medieval double-walled plan of the past, but we can still see part of the walls, the two gates and the only surviving tower. The “dome” of San Giovanni Battista (a 52 metres-dome with a 16 metre- diameter) is an eclectic work by the Bolognese artist Gualandi, who was also active in the nearby village of Castel Boglione (the ancient county of Castelveto) as well as in Sezzadio and the Caffi Sanctuary in Cassinasco (see itinerary Langa of Moscato): these buildings use modern materials to evoke the architecture of the past on a grander scale, but today have their own historical dignity. A walk through the village will allow you to enjoy the installations “I Muri raccontano” (Walls tell a story), a creative way of enhancing the old town through art.

From Fontanile, passing through **Castel Boglione**, we travel along the valley of the Rio Bogliona stream to reach the former 15th-century monastery, then we turn right and climb up to **Montabone**, an enclosed village which is already pure Langa as it is located on this intangible orographic border. Montabone is the hometown of Guglielmo Caccia, a prominent Counter-Reformation painter who was very active in and around Moncalvo (that is why he was nicknamed “Il Moncalvo”). Here the view changes completely, and while one side overlooks the thousand hills of the Monferrato, the side towards the Bormida river and Acqui Terme drops steeply down the valley, while the other one, facing south-west, is relentlessly enclosed by the steep slope of Roccaverano (see itinerary Langa Astigiana in and around Roccaverano). Last but not least, the small stone church of San Vittore, isolated on its panoramic hillock for 600 years, and the former Church of San Rocco with the installation “A Cheerful Person” of Zhang Enli, are well worth a visit.

We descend fairly quickly towards **Rocchetta Palafea**, another border village, with its beautiful stone tower (26 metres), Baroque parish Church and the proud home of Massimo Berruti, the local champion of pallapugno. The vineyards clearly reappear now, as we drive along the fantastic Serra road which descends like a funicular railway straight into **Calamandrana** Alta, a small enchanted

village where the castle, garden, churches and the only street form all together a homogeneous *corpus* steeped in poetry. Calamandrana Bassa, on the other hand, is home to the annual gathering of truffle hunters who meet up here at the end of the season. On the other side of the Belbo, it is worth visiting the Romanesque Church of San Giovanni delle Conche where, according to legend, the founders of Nizza gathered in 1225.

Finally, we travel along the “old route” to return to **Nizza Monferrato** on a journey through space and time which, in a few kilometres, will take us back to the *Campanon* of the Town Hall, the undisputed symbol of the city and of its centuries-old freedoms.



Top Art and Culture

- Castelnuevo Belbo – Town Hall - “Francesco Cirio” Museum
- Castelnuevo Calcea – Area around the Castle and Staircase of the Bridge
- Castelnuevo Calcea - Art Park La Court
- Fontanile – Murales “Walls tell a story”
- Maranzana – The Village of “*Babaci*”
- Mombaruzzo – Distiller Museum
- Montabone – “ A cheereful person” (former Church of San Rocco) by Zhang Enli
- Rocchetta Palafea – Tower and Walls of the Castle
- Vaglio Serra – Tassi Vertical Garden

Top Food and Wine

- Bruno – Local Wine Shop

Top Nature

- Incisa Scapaccino, Vaglio Serra, Vinchio - Val Sarmassa Nature Reserve
- Maranzana - Bosco delle Sorti - La Communa
- Vinchio – UNESCO Viewpoint

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Parks of the Monferrato Area.

The Monferrato Astigiano is not only rich in castles, towers and small Romanesque churches scattered over its wonderful vine-covered hills, but also boasts a wide range of parks, nature reserves and protected areas, often thoughtfully created and directly encouraged by the local population. After all, to be "attached" to one's land is also a matter of knowing how to defend and protect it. That is why the Ente di Gestione of the Parco Paleontologico Astigiano (the managing body of the Paleontological Park of Asti) was created to manage and enhance the heritage of the past and the areas related to it.

The **Parco Paleontologico (Paleontological Park)** is a widespread park as the finds of mastodons and fin whales (to name the most significant examples, together with thousands of fossil shells dating back to millions of years) have been discovered over time in several areas of the province, not exclusively in the Tanaro Valley.

In fact, since most of the province of Asti (as well as the Roero) was practically the “beach” of the proto-Adriatic, it preserves a sandy subsoil that is perfect for the fossilisation of this marine and marshy world dating back to distant eras.

It is a charming world that partly needs to be imagined and partly comes alive in the beautiful displays of the Museo dei Fossili (Fossil Museum) in Asti, housed in Palazzo Michelerio. Tersilla, the minke whale found in San Marzanotto in 1993, is the Museum’s mascot and, together with the first practically intact cetacean found in Vigliano back in 1959, tells us a story of millions of years when these hills were really nothing but sea. Alongside the secrets of this surprising underground, unspoilt corners of silence, shade and greenery rise to the surface, providing a truly unique tourist destination for those who love open spaces, walks, solitude in the company of a book or a dog, nature trails and ancient trees.

After the dream-like immersion in the “Asti sea”, we leave Asti heading towards **Rocchetta Tanaro**, where in 1980 the first **Park** was created at the behest of Marquis Mario Incisa della Rocchetta who provided a vast woodland between the Sant’Emiliano hill and the Tanaro river so that it could become a 120-hectare protected area. We are on the eastern border of the province, surrounded by a handful of villages to the left and right of the river. As you follow the scenic route you will find Azzano just outside Asti, then Rocca d’Arazzo, up there between canyons and secret valleys

rich in top quality truffles. Next comes Castello di Annone, which has always been the border and customs post of Asti, almost opposite Cerro Tanaro, a fortified Monferrato village on the plains (like all the next ones you will see) and, in-between these two, is Rocchetta Tanaro, one of Asti’s many small villages.

Therefore, our first stop is **Azzano**, a small village overlooking the Tanaro river with an enchanting view of the town of Asti. After the Napoleonic destruction of the powerful Abbey, which stretched its influence over all these fertile river lands, there is nothing left: just a few fields in Località Moglia where, actually, it would be interesting to carry out some excavations. A plaque next to the parish church recalls the monks’ labour and their historical importance.





In **Rocca d'Arazzo** it is necessary to set aside time for a stroll through the village, which has been skilfully restored with paths that enhance the various assets, including Palazzo Cacherano, an imposing 17th-century building that today is home to the Town Hall and the Tambass Museum. Just outside the village, the Romanesque Church of Santi Stefano e Libera is worth a visit. Finally, don't miss the panoramic road towards Santa Caterina and Montaldo Scarampi, a true oasis of truffle woods, from which you can return to Rocca d'Arazzo via the San Carlo "viaduct".

Our next village is **Castello di Annone**, with its parish church (featuring a beautiful polychrome altar, the only vestige of the vanished Abbey of San Bartolomeo di Azzano), while in place of the castle-fortress of Asti, which was lost centuries ago, there is now a small equipped park overlooking the village;

there is also a **WWF Oasis** here, known as the "**Bosco del Lago**", thick with oak and hornbeam trees. There are at least two illustrious citizens of the village worth mentioning: the painter Pistarino (who was also a charitable benefactor) and the poet *Pinin Pacòt* (born Giuseppe Pacotto), founder with Gallina and Formica of the literary magazine "*I Brandè*" and author of grammar and phonetics of written Piedmontese.

From Castello di Annone, there is also a lovely cycle path that runs along the right bank of the river, joining **Cerro Tanaro**, where in a village of a few streets arranged in a grip plan (chessboard-shaped) along the river we find the Adorni Tower, the Natta Castle, both private and the intriguing Museo della Bicicletta (Bicycle Museum). Hosted in the small railway station and dedicated to Sarachèt,



a historic bicycle manufacturer from Asti. The museum tells the story of the two-wheels world through refined multimedia displays, while intriguing visitors with small, great treasures. A must-see is the Luvetta cove, a small, enchanting fishermen's landing place on the still waters of the Tanaro river. The village is worth a detour also for us and we can reach it quickly by car.

Finally, we reach **Rocchetta Tanaro**, which is well-known for Giacomo Bologna, one of the historical fathers of the redemption of Barbera; but it is also famous for its trading skills and the rough but genuine nature of its people, who speak their own autochthonous dialect, and for a vocation for celebrations and ancient and curious traditions such as that of the Frustatori (a sort of "whip" percussion band). We should also mention wines, truffles and a fat and

round cuisine that here is sublimated in the ingenious "Lingue di Suocera" (literally the "mother-in-law's tongues", a sort of mix between a breadstick and a pastry) and in the Raviolo Gobbo astigiano, the apotheosis of all Piedmontese agnolotti.

The Park is home to all the spontaneous flora of the area (oaks, Turkey oaks, English oaks, locust trees, elms, cherry trees, etc.), a 200-year-old monumental beech, a rich variety of flowers and shrubs and, above all, a marvellous avifauna: over 40 species of birds nest here, in an oasis of tranquillity broken only by their chirping.

The area is also enriched by artistic treasures such as the ruined Chapel of Sant'Emiliano, fragments of bastions and castle towers, the Confraternity of the Annunziata with fragments of frescoes and Romanesque traces (now

a multi-purpose hall), the important Romanesque Church of Santa Maria de Flexo (known as “delle Ciappellette”) and several Art Nouveau villas. In the village there is also the Museo del Tanaro e delle Contadinerie (Museum of the River Tanaro and Country Artefacts), a valuable space to narrate the life on these hills tied to the growing cycles and to its river.

The second park is the **Val Sarmassa Nature Reserve**, a hermitage of mushroom and truffle woods, located between the villages of Cortiglione, Incisa Scapaccino, Vinchio and Vaglio Serra. You can get there from Rocchetta Tanaro by following the beautiful Park ridge road to Mombercelli: then our ideal route passes through Vinchio, continues to Incisa Scapaccino, enters Cortiglione and ends in Belveglio, in the heart of Val Tiglione.

The story of this protected area

pays tribute to its local people who stopped the creation of an industrial waste landfill site by engaging in “walks” through woods, bric and *ciabòt* (small stone houses) to regain physical possession of their land. The administrations understood this strong message and the process ended in 1993 when the regional institution defined the Nature Reserve. The symbol is a green lizard, which in Piedmontese is called “*Lajeu*”, which has been italianized into Lajolo, not surprisingly the most common surname in the area. This leads us straight to the real key to understanding this part of the Monferrato area: the books and works of **Davide Lajolo**, partisan, writer and journalist, whose collection of short stories set in these same hills, “*I mè*”, should at least be read, as this work captures the writer’s sense of belonging to a farming community.



A small museum in the village recalls the writer's "nest" in **Vinchio**, his experiences first in Fascism and then as a partisan leader with the battle name Ulisse, his work as a journalist (he was for a long time director of "L'Unità"), as a member of parliament and, above all, as a literary writer and critic. His essay on Cesare Pavese, "Il vizio assurdo", was a milestone, whereas he did not immediately understand Fenoglio, whom he panned in an anonymous review, but to whom he paid a most genuine and honest recognition *post mortem*. Lajolo was also a refined collector of contemporary art, of which we can see two exhibitions, one in Nizza Monferrato (see itinerary Nizza amidst Barbera and *Bagna Cauda*) and one in Moasca (see itinerary Monferrato of Costigliole) featuring all the greatest artists of the 20th century. Davide Lajolo's memory is lovingly preserved by his daughter Laurana together with his library and correspondence.

A tour of the Val Sarmassa Nature Reserve must include a visit to the Bricco dei Cinquant'anni and the *Ciabòt* of Montedelmare to the partisan paths and the tufa caves used as shelters against the Nazi-fascist round-ups and, above all, a climb to the "*Ru*", the huge oak tree that has watched over these hills for centuries.

Next, a scenic road takes us to Vinchio which, with the neighbouring village of **Vaglio Serra**, is almost a *unicum*, well summed up by the famous cooperative winery built right on the border of the two areas, almost at the entrance to the park. We are actually in one of

the finest *cru* of Barbera d'Asti in the sought-after Nizza version, which here displays some unique characteristics in terms of structure and fragrance.

Vinchio was a worthy member of the Partisan Republic of Basso Monferrato, proclaimed in Agliano on 5 November 1944. The village is also known for its prized asparagus, known as "saraceno", much sought after in spring. Sadly, the castle was demolished in the 19th century and in its place there is now a belvedere overlooking the hills of Nizza. By contrast, **Vaglio Serra** still preserves a Baroque aristocratic palace and the adjacent 17th-century town hall. The 15th-century fountain in the parish Church is worth seeing as well as the Giardino Pensile dei Tassi (Tassi Vertical Garden) and the beautiful Cantinone, a cellar used for cultural events.

Our journey draws to a close, passing through **Incisa Scapaccino** where, in the lower part of the village, the Reserve's area ends, right under the romantic rock that was once an independent Marquisate, surrounded by the Belbo river (see itinerary Monferrato of Nizza).

Cortiglione (formerly known as Corticella), a tiny hamlet, offers the shattered ruins of a castle now reduced to two walls, in the midst of lush vegetation facing south across an abundant and well-tended countryside. An important outcrop of Pliocene fossils, further proof of the richness of Asti's subsoil, can be found at the Crociera. Cortiglione stands on yet another hill-watershed that separates

Val Tiglione from the various branches of Valle Belbo. The Associazione “*La Bricula*” is very active here, hosting cultural entertainment activities in the premises of the esteemed Museo di Cultura Contadina (Museum of Rural Culture) “R. Becuti”.

The third park in the Asti area is the **Valle Andona, Valle Botto e Val Grande Nature Reserve**, which in turn was saved from the speculation of the Valle Manina landfill in 1985. A detailed description of this park can be found in the itinerary dedicated to the Ventine Astigiane, the Asti hamlets (see Asti, Urban Itineraries).

There are also several minor protected areas, partly managed by the Ente Parchi Astigiano and partly entrusted to WWF and municipalities, including the wetlands between the towns of

Agliano Terme, Calosso and Moasca (**Paludo e Rivi di Moasca Nature Reserve**) and between the towns of Costigliole and Isola d’Asti (**Rio Bagna Nature Reserve**), and those of the Tanaro Plain (**Stagni di Belangero Nature Reserve** and **Rocche di Antignano Nature Reserve**). The protected areas of **Bosco delle Sorti - La Communa** (between Bruno, Maranzana, Mombaruzzo and the neighbouring villages of the Alessandria area) and the charming **Forteto della Luja** in Loazzolo are also worth a visit. The latter is a project created by the Scaglione family, heroic producers of the prized Passito DOC wine, which proves - just like in Val Sarmassa - that high-quality rural production and the protection of the land can perfectly merge and coexist.



Top Art and Culture

- Castello di Annone – Archaeological Park of the Castle Hill
- Cerro Tanaro – Bicycle Museum
- Ferrere, Mongardino, Montaldo Scarampi, Rocca d'Arazzo, Rocchetta Tanaro, Vigliano d'Asti - “Per ferro del mare padano” by Sergio Omedé
- Rocca d'Arazzo – Palazzo Cacherano and *Tambass* Museum
- Vaglio Serra – Tassi Vertical Garden
- Vinchio – Open-Air Farm Museum “Vinchio and the Hills of Barbera”
- Vinchio – “Davide Lajolo” Museum - Vinchio is my Nest

Big Benches

The small idea with giant effects.

Climb aboard and look at the world through the eyes of a child. You feel so small in the presence of such beauty of nature, these are the emotions ready to pervade you once you have climbed up. A circuit of over 100 giant benches, created by the American designer Chris Bangle who is in love with the Langhe region, and that are just waiting to be discovered and experienced.



Top Nature

- Agliano Terme, Calosso, Costigliole d'Asti, Moasca – Paludo e Rivi di Moasca Nature Reserve
- Antignano, Isola d'Asti – Rocche di Antignano Nature Reserve
- Asti, Camerano Casasco, Cinaglio, Settime – Valle Andona, Valle Botto e Val Grande Nature Reserve
- Asti, Isola d'Asti, Revigliasco – Stagni di Belangero Nature Reserve
- Bruno, Maranzana, Mombaruzzo – Bosco delle Sorti – La Communa Wood
- Castello di Annone – WWF Oasis Bosco del Lago
- Cerro Tanaro – La Luvetta Nature Path
- Costigliole d'Asti, Isola d'Asti – Rio Bragna Nature Reserve
- Incisa Scapaccino, Vaglio Serra, Vinchio – Val Sarmassa Nature Reserve
- Loazzolo – WWF Oasis Forteto della Luja
- Rocchetta Tanaro – Rocchetta Tanaro Nature Park
- Tigliole – LIPU Wildlife Recovery Centre
- Vaglio Serra, Vinchio – “I Nidi” Nature Path
- Vinchio – UNESCO Viewpoint

PLEASE NOTE:

The opening times of the sites listed in this itinerary may be subject to change. Keep updated and please check www.visitlmr.it

Unexpected treasures

Churches and Chapels along the routes

Calamandrana – Romanesque Church of San Giovanni delle Conche

Calliano Monferrato – Romanesque Church of San Pietro

Casorzo Monferrato – Church of San Giorgio and Madonna delle Grazie

Castell'Alfero – Romanesque Church of Madonna della Neve

Castelnuovo Belbo – Church of the *Regina Angelorum* or Madonnina di San Biagio

Incisa Scapaccino – Sanctuary of Madonna del Carmine

Montemagno – Church of Santa Maria della Cava

Montemagno – Remains of the Romanesque Church of Santi Vittore e Corona

Portacomaro – Romanesque Church of San Pietro

Refrancore – Romanesque Church of Santa Maria Maddalena

Rocca d'Arazzo – Romanesque Church of Santo Stefano and Libera

Rocchetta Tanaro – Church of Sant'Emiliano

Rocchetta Tanaro – Romanesque Church of Santa Maria de Flexo (known as “Delle Ciappellette”)

Viarigi – Chapel of San Marziano

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Download here all the itineraries of Langhe Monferrato Roero



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LANGHE MONFERRATO ROERO

The Home of BuonVivere

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