Discovering Colli Euganei in just 2 days

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There are many reasons to visit the Veneto region: Venice, Arena di Verona, Lake of Garda, Prosecco, Dolomiti… and much more. It's a shame that a meaningful part of this region between Verona and Venice is generally overlooked. It's like there was a black hole there – or should I say Veneto's best-kept secret? Actually, the Colli Euganei area – with its natural park, a bicycle path more than 60 km long, the largest thermal zone in Europe, and many stunning places – is worth visiting. In just 2 days, you can experience living like a prince (or a princess) without having a royal title.

Grand Hotel Trieste & Victoria in Abano Terme (Padua) is our starting point. If you love the atmosphere of the Belle

Epoque, you'll adore this hotel. Founded in 1912, it's a 5 stars luxury hotel with all the contemporary comforts. One of its strong points is the charm and the wellness benefits of a state-of-the-art thermal spa that makes numerous medical and aesthetic spa treatments: you won't miss a bio-thermal mud treatment because it's an experience that alone is worth the journey. But wellness aside, this hotel is also a piece of European history.

The historic furnishings, the paintings, the porcelain, and the Murano chandeliers speak of the hotel's original style. **The hotel housed the Italian Army's Supreme Staff Command during the First World War. On November 4, 1918, in room 106, General Armando Diaz signed the Victory Bulletin that ended the Great War.** Now his apartment is one of the hotel's most charming suites, with the general's desk and original mirror.

Abano Terme is a delightful small town, but the best is yet to come. Not far from here, the bizarre, surprising Castello del Catajo arises on a hill. **It's an impressive Venetian building with 350 rooms – almost one for each day of the year**! -halls covered in frescoes from floor to ceiling, terraces with breathtaking views, and beautiful gardens. It was conceived in 1570 by the Obizzi family, one of Renaissance Europe's foremost providers of mercenary forces.

Obizzi wanted this incredible building as a representative palace to organize magnificent parties and surprise and entertain the guests. Over the centuries, the castle served as a mansion, a ducal palace, and an imperial residence: the list of historical characters – imperial family of the Habsburgs included – who inhabited this mansion is endless. Nowadays, it is a private property open for visits and personal or business events. **Out of the castle, in just 15 minutes by car, you can reach the suggestive village of Arquà Petrarca.**

It's a tiny village with less than 2000 inhabitants but regarded as one of the most beautiful hamlets in Italy. Is it

just my perception, or does the atmosphere here have a distinctly medieval feel to it? **This place must have something special if the Tuscan poet Francesco Petrarca decided to spend his last years of life here.** When Petrarca was staying in Abano Terme to cure his disease with the local thermal waters, he stumbled upon the humble yet suggestive village of Arquà and fell in love with it. Eventually, he died here in 1374, and you can visit his grave.

Literary allure aside, another more prosaic reason for this village's fame is its jujubes production: many houses here have at least a shrub plant in their garden. The local people make jams and syrups with jujubes or use them to fill dry cakes and cookies. The jujube fruit is also the main ingredient in the recipe for a particular old liqueur known as "jujube broth" – a local delicatessen we strongly suggest trying.

Speaking about drinking, Ca' Lustra is among the best-known wineries of Colli Euganei. This estate was founded in 1977 by **Franco Zanovello, who has always had special care for the environment and the ancient culture of the place**: it's why the labels on the bottles are written with the archaic Venetic alphabet. The winery nowadays is run by Franco's progeny, Marco and Linda, who manage the 45 hectares of the estate with the same spirit. Twenty of them are cultivated with olive trees, chestnuts, and meadows, and twenty-five with numerous Venetian varieties, mainly white (Moscato Bianco, Fior d'Arancio, Garganega, Serprina, Malvasia, Pinella…) and **some historic Bordeaux grapes (Merlot and Carmenere).** The production philosophy is minimalist both in the vineyard and in the cellar. The firm has been fully certified organic since 2010. The outcome is wines that reflect the volcanic mineral origin of the soil and, at the same time, the gentle and flourishing nature of the place: fresh, balanced, juicy Ca' Lustra bottles never disappoint you.

To close this first day, the restaurant Incalmo (Este, Padua)

is a tasty and relaxing break: the cuisine is contemporary, with original combinations and local ingredients of the highest quality. It's a small place, rich in charm, with a young and welcoming staff.

The second day of our exploration started with an immersive experience: visiting the newest Luxardo Museum by the business complex in the village of Torreglia (Padua). Dedicated to the two-centuries-old historic company that invented products such as "Maraschino" and "Sangue Morlacco," this museum develops modern and engaging storytelling in five rooms to tell the dramatic and often tragic stories of the Luxardo family. **Established in Zara in 1821 by Girolamo Luxardo** and transferred to Torreglia in 1947 due to the consequences of the Second World War, Luxardo is still entirely controlled by the founder's family.

Nowadays, they export their famous liquors to 100 countries worldwide. By the museum, you can visit the distillery, with traditional copper pot stills, aging vats, marasca cherry orchards, warehouses, and brand-new bottling lines. **A few kilometers from here, Este is another small and lovely town. Here you find Este Ceramiche Porcellane, one of the oldest ceramics factories in Europe:** a small laboratory where everything is made by hand using often molds some centuries old. You'll be surprised by the modernity of the shapes and decorations of plates, tureens, cups, and trays. They are the result not only of a very ancient culture of modeling and painting but also of the successful current collaboration with some of the most significant contemporary stylists – a reason **why Este Ceramiche Porcellane holds the esteem and sales orders of leading high fashion houses.** If, by chance, in the future, you come across some plate with food or fruit *trompe l'oeil* (namely made in a way that looks real), you know that likely they come from Este.

To continue our immersion in history and beauty, **Villa dei Vescovi (Torreglia, again) is a stunning sample of the Italian**

Renaissance. This exquisite, early 16th-century, proto-neoclassical villa, surrounded by the landscape of the Euganean Hills and adorned with beautiful frescoes, embodies a perfectly balanced fusion of nature, art, and architecture, suspended between reality and illusion.

Not only can you visit every part of this enormous manor: **you can enjoy the gardens, buy the products they make here (like honey), even organize some private events, or spend some days in one of the two apartments…** and feel like an Italian Renaissance noble person. It’s easy losing the sense of the time here: to recover it, the close Antica Trattoria Ballotta is renowned for its warm, familiar atmosphere but mainly for its traditional, carefully prepared, and above all, abundant cuisine. **The perfect conclusion for our tour of Euganean Hills.**