

In (& around) fair Verona

Many of northern Italy's key wine-growing regions are to be found between the city of Verona and stunning Lake Garda. Our guide to the area takes in wineries, ancient monuments, top restaurants and more, as we pass through illustrious wine zones and historic villages and towns

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Wander among the squares, lanes and shady courtyards of the dreamily romantic city of Verona – a UNESCO World Heritage site – and you're sure to be captivated by its timeless allure. Verona's treasure chest of historic wonders even includes a legend: the star-crossed lovers. *'There is no world without Verona walls / But purgatory, torture, hell itself / Hence banishèd is banishèd from the world / And world's exile is death'*, as Shakespeare famously described it in *Romeo and Juliet*. Where better to bring your beloved than to the city of love? On a balmy summer evening, you can stroll along the

'liston' (what the locals call the wide pavement made from Prun marble dotted with ammonite fossils) to Piazza Bra. Once there, close your eyes and be carried away on the notes floating over from the Arena, one of the world's best-preserved Roman amphitheatres. Whether you're visiting during the famous summer opera festival or attending a rock concert, a night at the Arena is a thrill that everyone should experience.

A walk around town reveals traces of more than two millennia of history, spanning Roman (Verona had been an ancient settlement, but the Romans founded the city in the 1st century BC), ►

The historic city of Verona sits on the banks of the Adige river





the Middle Ages (Basilica di San Zeno, a Romanesque masterpiece), the Scaliger ruling dynasty (the monumental gothic Scaliger Tombs), the Venetians and the Habsburgs.

Nestled in the bends of the Adige river that flows through it, Verona boasts many attractions: Europe's first music academy, the Accademia Filarmonica, was established here; the Biblioteca Capitolare is one of the world's oldest libraries, and in January 2020 established a foundation for research, exhibitions and educational activities; and the Palio del Drappo Verde is the longest-running foot race in the world, first held here more than 800 years ago. Nowadays, Verona is a lively provincial capital and a shopper's paradise: luxury boutiques line Via Mazzini.

Traditional Veronese cuisine has its roots in the kitchens of the nobility, and makes ample use of local produce. You can sample classic dishes at the **Dodici Apostoli** (12apostoli.com), a historic restaurant that boasts innovative gourmet menus; afterwards, sleep it off at the **Hotel Accademia** (hotellaccademiaverona.it), the ideal blend of old-world charm and modern comfort.

Verona is a major player in global wine, its annual trade fair Vinitaly the first – and still the largest – international wine fair. With its strategic position, the city makes the perfect starting point for our tour of some of northern Italy's most important wine-growing areas.

SOAVE

We start in the medieval town of Soave, about 20km east of Verona, crammed with charming lanes and porticoes to explore. The church of San Lorenzo stands in the central Piazza dell'Antenna; opposite is the Venetian-gothic-style Palazzo

Cavalli and the law court – stop for a glass of fine Soave at **Il Drago** wine bar (enotecaildrago.it) on the ground floor. From here, it's a 15-minute walk to the **Castello di Soave** (castellodisoave.it), past the church of Santa Maria dei Domenicani with its beautiful frescoes, along a cobbled path edged with drystone walls. The castle's crenellations, drawbridges, tower and display of weapons are sure to impress, but the panorama from the ramparts will leave you speechless: the hill of Monte Tenda, on which it sits, offers stunning views over the rolling vineyards below. The colourful landscape is poetic in all seasons.

Afterwards, shop for cheese and cured meats at La Casara, and Soave bread from Felisi Angelo bakery. If you've worked up an appetite, head to **Damaranto** (damaranto.com), a friendly restaurant (with rooms) that offers a sophisticated take on regional cuisine.

Garganega is the main grape used in Soave. The appellation comprises 13 municipalities, the best known being Soave and Monteforte d'Alpone. Heading to the latter, its impressive square, dominated by the striking, neoclassical Santa Maria Maggiore church, complete with belltower and 15th-century bishop's palace, is a must-see.

One of the region's oldest estates, run by the **Gini** family (ginivini.com), has been growing grapes since the 1600s. Try its memorable Contrada Salvarenza, from 100-year-old vines. Higher up, another winery, **Le Battistelle** (lebattistelle.it), practises 'heroic viticulture' on dauntingly steep slopes, and is home to a riding centre. Enjoy a glass of its eponymous wine on the terrace at its Rocolo del Durlo vineyard. The nearby **Roxy Plaza Hotel** (hotelroxyplaza.it) is a comfortable place for an overnight stay.



Above: beauty spot Punta San Vigilio on Lake Garda
Above left: the Montonale winery (p77) offers estate tours and vineyard dinners

VALPOLICELLA

About 14km northwest of Verona is Valpolicella. Its name is derived from the Latin *vallis-pollicellae* or 'valley of many cellars'. Wine has been produced here for millennia, and excavations have uncovered traces of winemaking from the Iron Age. The historic Classico wine-growing zone includes three valleys: Fumane, Marano and Negrar, as well as the hills of Sant'Ambrogio di Valpolicella and San Pietro in Cariano.

The Valpolicella hills are dotted with Renaissance villas among impressive parks and formal gardens (Villa Mosconi Bertani in Novare, Villa Rizzardi in Negrar and Villa Sarego in Santa Sofia are just some you can visit). Climb up to the charming medieval village of San Giorgio di Valpolicella: its Romanesque church is one of the area's oldest.

Explore the Valpolicella area on foot, by mountain bike or on horseback. At Molina, nature lovers will enjoy the **Parco delle Cascate** park (parcodellecascate.it) with its beautiful woods

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and waterfalls. Or, near the village of Pescantina, treat yourself to a pampering spa experience at **Aquardens** (aquardens.it).

But this area's main draw has to be its wines. Meet the four 'brothers': Amarone, Valpolicella, Valpolicella Ripasso and Recioto, all made with the same grapes (Corvinone, Corvina, Rondinella and other lesser-known varieties), but using different vinification techniques. Founded in 1857, Grezzana-based **Bertani** (bertani.net) is a pioneer and upholder of this terroir's values, with wines that are worth tasting. At Arbizzano, a little to the southwest, you can take a tour around its Tenuta Novare vineyard, set in a stunning



The imposing entrance to the old town of Sirmione, set on a peninsula on Lake Garda

natural amphitheatre. I recommend the Ognisanti di Novare Valpolicella Classico Superiore, the result of some painstaking work.

Take a short drive to stay in Ospedaletto at the **Villa Quaranta Tommasi Wine Hotel & Spa** (villaquaranta.com), a modern hotel built around a 17th-century mansion and its gardens, with a thermal spa and pools, not far from the Aquardens resort. Up in nearby Fumane, sample the offerings at **Allegrini** (allegrini.it), particularly the La Grola, produced from a premium Valpolicella vineyard, and visit the estate's Renaissance gem Villa della Torre. Dine at **Enoteca della Valpolicella** (enotecadellavalpolicella.it) for creative local cuisine in traditional surroundings.

BARDOLINO

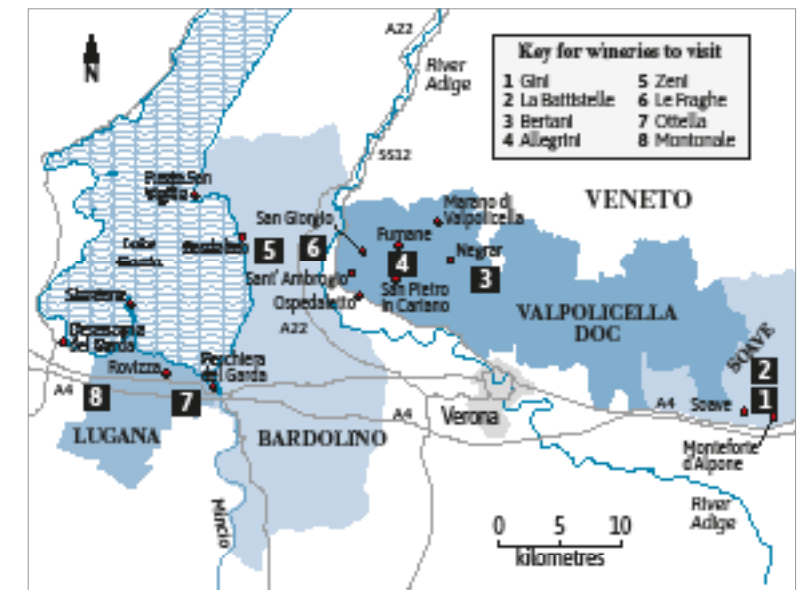
We're now in the middle of the Riviera degli Olivi, about 30km from Verona in a pretty town overlooking Italy's largest lake, Lake Garda, sheltered by the morainic hills. Whether you prefer basking in the sun, cultural tours, sport (rowing, windsurfing, sailing) or gourmet food and wine, Bardolino has it covered.

A walk among the flower-filled balconies of its picturesque old town takes you to what's left of a Scaliger castle – two main doors and the tower – situated by the pretty harbour. Look in on the church of San Zeno, one of the prime Carolingian (about 750-888 AD) monuments in northern Italy. The **Olive Oil Museum** (museum.it) in nearby Cisano, with its working 19th-century oil mill, is also well worth a visit.

One of Bardolino's most romantic spots is Punta San Vigilio, on the water's edge; it overlooks practically the whole of Lake Garda, with sunsets to sweep you off your feet. One-star Michelin **La Veranda del Color** (laverandadelcolor.it) is a reliable choice for a gourmet experience, with its refined Mediterranean menu. Wines are local: a Bardolino red or a Chiaretto rosé, both made from Corvina but vinified in different ways.

Visit the **Zeni** winery (zeni.it); dating from 1870, it set up its own wine museum 20 years ago. Hospitality comes as second nature to the Zeni family – sample a glass of its fruity, aromatic Bardolino Classico from the Vigne Alte range. Then head inland to nearby Cavaion to admire the town's patrician mansions and gardens and visit **Le Fraghe** (fraghe.it). This winery went organic a decade ago and is situated in the sub-zone of Montebaldo, the mountain clearly visible from the vineyards.

The tasting list is dizzyingly long, so start with a glass of its inimitable Rodon Bardolino Chiaretto. Back in Bardolino, recharge overnight at the **Aqualux Hotel** (aqualuxhotel.com), a heavenly retreat with a spa, pools and thermal baths.



LUGANA

On the Brescia side of Lake Garda and within the district of Sirmione, 40km from Verona, Lugana is a small village that gives its name to Lugana DOC. The appellation straddles the provinces of Brescia and Verona and makes the sapid white wine produced from Turbiana (or Trebbiano di Lugana) grapes, grown on chiefly clay soil.

The neighbouring village of Rovizza, once the domain of the Rovizzi counts, is worth visiting to see the chapel of Sant'Orsola. But don't leave without visiting the 'pearl of Lake Garda', Sirmione itself. The old town lies on a peninsula that projects about 4km into the lake. Elegant and lively, the town's highlights include an imposing fortress surrounded by water, pretty beaches (Jamaica Beach and Lido delle Bionde), excellently preserved ruins of a Roman domus (the 'grotte di Catullo'), and Instagram-worthy panoramic spots.

A distinguished resident of this spa town was the soprano Maria Callas, who declared it 'heaven on earth'. Eat at the one-star Michelin restaurant **La Rucola 2.0** (ristorantelarucola.it), acclaimed for its creative dishes – and ask for a glass of Le Creete Lugana from the **Otella** estate (otella.it). This historic winery, in Peschiera, boasts remarkable wines and an impressive art collection too.

From here, head to the **Montonale** winery (montonale.it), just outside the lakeside town of Desenzano, and try a glass of Orestilla – it's quite remarkable – before an al fresco dinner served among the vines. Back in Sirmione, stay at **Aqva** (aqvaboutiquehotel.it), a minimalist boutique hotel with a pool. Sit back and delight in watching the sun sink behind the lake; it doesn't get more magical than this. **D**