

Piemonte

A Green Giant

The Coliseum in Rome, Venice's Piazza San Marco, and the Leaning Tower of Pisa may be among the top 'must-see' sites for most tourists visiting Italy for the first time, but any seasoned traveler will tell you that the real magic of Italy lies in the sheer diversity and richness of her culture, countryside, and cuisine that seems to be waiting to be discovered around each and every corner. Nowhere is this more true than in the country's north-western region of Piemonte.

From the alpine splendor of Lake Maggiore and the ski resorts of Val di Susa, to the vineyards and truffle-rich hills around Alba, Piemonte's terrain and environment are as diverse as any that Italy has to offer – as is its cultural heritage. Probably best known as the home of the eponymous Turin Shroud, Piemonte's capital Turin is a living testimony to the civilizing influence of the café society culture with its baroque cafes, arcaded shopping promenades, and many museums peacefully rubbing shoulders with the *bianconeri* – local soccer giants Juventus.

But there is another dimension to Piemonte that sets it apart from most other Italian regions – its industrial heritage. It is highly significant that two of its most famous families are the Agnelli and Olivetti dynasties, founders of Fiat and the Olivetti typewriting company respectively. Invention and reinvention seem to be part of Piemonte's DNA and are now resurfacing as the region takes affirmative action to reposition itself as an industrial and commercial hub in tune with the 21st century.



The driving force behind this initiative is Regione Piemonte's President Signora Mercedes Bresso. A former academic, MEP, and President of the Turin Province, President Bresso took up her current post in 2005 on a ticket to transform the region by encouraging business start-ups and inward investment (FDI) in four sectors, all compatible with a commitment to preserving the natural beauty and wellbeing of Piemonte's environment – Renewable Energy, ICT, Life Sciences, and Research and Development.

In economic terms, 2005 now seems like a lifetime ago, but in fact Bresso's election manifesto has even more resonance with the reality of today's straitened financial circumstances than it did when she was running for office. Turin was once (inaccurately, as it happens) known as Italy's Detroit, a one-company town whose fortunes rose and fell in line with those of Fiat; and although the automotive giant still employs 15,000 workers at its plant in the city, only about one third of the two million vehicles it produces annually roll off domestic production lines. Piemonte's industrial engine room is badly in need of some new direction.

"The major challenge is naturally around the automotive sector," Bresso readily admits, "and we have launched projects to develop solar cells and electric cars." She must also be reassured that Fiat management share her conviction that the future is green, and are themselves in the process of

developing electric modifications of the Punto and Alfa Romeo Mito for sale in the US.

Fiat's research arm, CRF, is deservedly recognized worldwide for its excellence in automotive-related R&D. Under President Bresso's watch the Piemonte region as a whole is also building up a reputation as a center for cutting-edge research – and not just for cars.

In fact, the comparison with Detroit's dependence on the automotive sector has been wide of the mark for some time; Piemonte is also where the MP3 file format was invented and for a while now has been home to a highly regarded network of R&D centers specializing in information and communication technology, and bio- and nano-technology, among other things. It has reached a critical mass of some

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18,000 R&D technology professionals, and this has played its part in persuading over 650 foreign companies to set up operations in the region to date.

These sector-specific R&D and business nuclei are now gradually coalescing into a larger green hub which Bresso hopes will establish Piemonte as the renewable 'ecological engine' of Italy. Her motives are partly social and partly economic; and she



Regione Piemonte's President Bresso and Regional Minister Baiardi at a local green car launch.



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Giardini il Parco Alto.

intends to make it happen through a combination of central funding, seedcorn investment, and the delivery of a business-friendly infrastructure.

Piemonte has, firstly, been galvanized by its obligations under the Kyoto treaty, which requires Piemonte to reduce its dependence on fossil energy and to switch to alternative and renewable energy sources. To Bresso and her colleagues this is both a challenge and an opportunity. "We would like to invite foreign companies that focus on green energy and green energy development technology to establish themselves in the region," she says, "because here we have the technology, the human capital, the know-how, and the R&D facilities that such companies need."

If access to Piemonte's infrastructure is not enough of an incentive to persuade companies to relocate here, then there is also the small matter of the €500m that the EU and the region itself have committed between them to the renewable energy initiative. By Bresso's reckoning, €160m of the EU's fund is still there for the taking.

Conscious of Italy's (generally deserved, it must be said) reputation for red tape and bureaucracy, the region has also set up the Piemonte Agency for Investments, Export and Tourism – the first of its kind in Italy – to give companies considering starting up in the region a single point of contact, advice, and help. Regional Minister Signor Andrea Bairati believes that this innovation is absolutely critical to Piemonte's

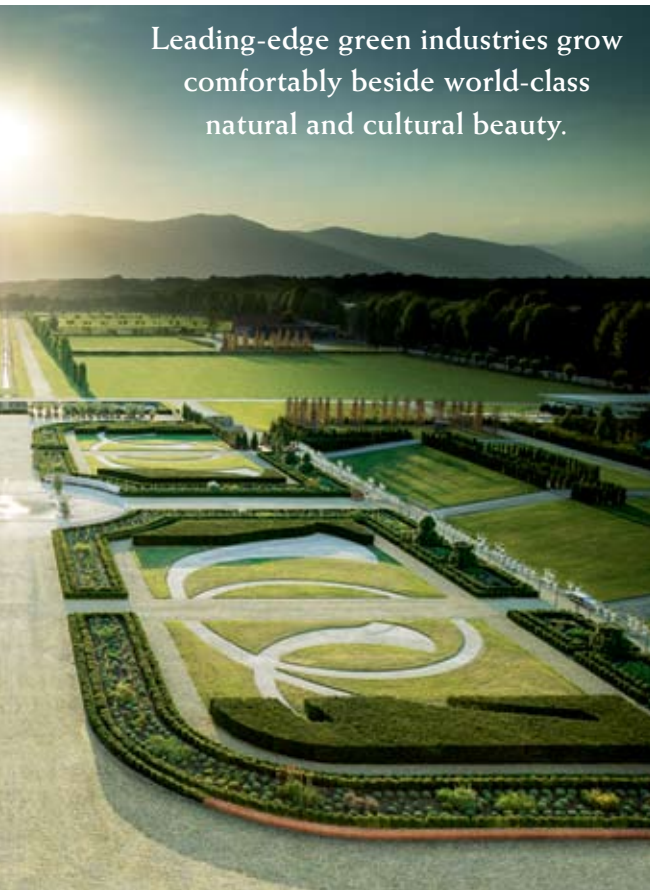
future prosperity. "Piemonte cannot remain its old closed economy or that economy will shrink," he says. "Barriers must be broken down and doors opened to bring in new investors and new businesses."

There is one other and extremely important reason why Bresso and her colleagues are demonstrating such a commitment to the 'greening' of Piemonte, and that is the long-term sustainability of its tourist industry which relies so much on preserving the natural beauty of the area. So far, Piemonte has not been unduly hit by the global downturn in tourist numbers, but it is taking nothing for granted.

"I believe we can increase our tourist numbers," predicts Giuliana Manica, the region's Minister for Tourism, "because we are creating tailor-made packages in diverse sectors to suit the different needs of our tourists. These packages include a combination of food and wine, culture, sport, and health – and we are paying close attention to the pricing so that we can attract young people on low budgets as well as more affluent visitors."

This strategy plays to the region's great strength – the variety of activities on offer – so Signora Manica is not spoilt for choice. Piemonte's love affair with tourism as we know it in its modern sense can probably be traced back to 1896, when a pair of skis was worn for the first time in Italy with the province of Turin laying claim to being the birthplace of Italian skiing. Not long after this

Leading-edge green industries grow comfortably beside world-class natural and cultural beauty.



Piemonte – a true 'year-round' destination for tourists.



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the first international skiing competitions were organized in her mountains, and the region's popularity as a skiing destination culminated in 2006 when the modern Winter Olympics were held in the Val di Sousa, reaffirming the popularity of such resorts as Bardonecchia, Sestrie, and Sauze d'Oulx.

The appeal of Piemonte's mountains is not limited to winter sports. Its lake district is one of the most varied and beautiful in Europe, including as it does the Lakes Maggiore, Orta, and Mergozzo. But the lakes and the water sports they support are only half the story; the more adventurous traveler can also experience Europe's second highest waterfall – Val Formazza – as it cascades 143 meters down a sheer rock face, join a glacier study trail at Valsesia, or simply enjoy the nature reserves protected in the Piemonte section of the Parco del Po.

One accusation that can never be leveled at any part of Italy is that it lacks cultural heritage and tradition, and Piemonte is no exception. One of its most popular tourist destinations is the former royal residence of La Venaria Reale, which was restored in 2007 to its former baroque magnificence. Originally

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built in the mid-17th century for Duke Carlo Emanuele II di Savoia, it has been reinvented as a fusion of the historic and contemporary where visitors can appreciate the original concept but can also actively participate, as it is now a center of cultural attractions including events, concerts, and exhibitions.

Its director, Signor Alberto Vanelli, is now working towards turning La Venaria Reale into a commercially sustainable entity. “This is culture married to the logic of business,” he says. “We are working towards turning La Venaria Reale into a brand, and we are now looking for sponsors and partners from a wide range of sectors from gastronomy to telecommunications.” With over one million visitors in its first full year of trading, that may not prove too difficult.

Napoleon Bonaparte – who in 1800 fought and won the pivotal Battle of Marengo near the Piemontese city of Alessandria – once said that an army marches



Piemonte's *enoteche* allow visitors to sample a range of high-quality wines.

on its stomach. Visitors to the region will never be short of good food to sustain them on their adventures, even if they come with less hostile intentions. The region's traditional cuisine has been going through something of a revival and is in the process of boosting the local agricultural industry. Among the local delicacies that the regional Minister for Agriculture, Mino Taricco, singles out are the rice from Novara and Vercelli, the raw beef dish *came all'Albese*, and the kiwis, peaches, and apples from the orchards at Monviso.

In Piemonte, choosing a wine to accompany the food can become part of the tourist experience in its own right, as the region has 12 *enoteche* – wine 'libraries' located in beautiful castles where visitors can sample a range of high-quality wines. Nearly 90% of Piemonte's wine has a DOC certification (the Italian equivalent of Appellation Contrôlée), and the Barolo and Asti wines are just two of the more well known on offer.

If they are anything, the Piemontesi are realists and nobody expects the next year or so to be easy, but there is a feeling that the region is adopting the right strategy to ensure its long-term growth. Reinvention is, after all, in its genes. As its Director of Communications Enzo Carnazza puts it: “As a region, Piemonte is always changing and never stays the same, but it is always authentic.”

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