



Friuli Venezia Giulia, Italy

Italy's north-eastern jewel is too often overlooked for its Venetian neighbour. But while the latter wrestles with overtourism, this former Habsburg outpost offers a welcome antidote, writes Kiki Deere



Comfortably tucked away in Italy's north-eastern corner, bordering Austria to the north and Slovenia to the east, Friuli Venezia Giulia is all too often forgotten in favour of its neighbouring region, Veneto. Yet venture here and you'll discover an amalgamation of cultures and landscapes that make this unlike anywhere else in Italy. This is a place of magnificent Roman riches, Venetian architecture, Habsburg cities, marshy lagoons, snowy mountains, karst terrain and rolling vineyard landscapes.

The Romans were quick to acknowledge the region's strategic location at the crossroads of East and West, building one of the Empire's foremost outposts at Aquileia. The town's Basilica harbours exquisite Roman finds, not least an early Christian mosaic floor that is the largest – and oldest – surviving example of its kind in the Western world.

Beautiful Udine served as one of the Venetian Republic's most important cities. As a result, many of its porticoed loggias and elegant palazzi bear the image of the winged lion of St Mark – the symbol of the Republic. Art abounds here, and Udine is dubbed the 'Città del Tiepolo' for its spectacular Rococo fresco cycles by the

18th-century painter Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, which are among the artist's most significant.

Regional capital Trieste was the Austro-Hungarian Empire's first port city, and once imported tonnes of coffee to serve Vienna's cafés (even today, it still imports 40% of Italy's coffee). It became a city of grand boulevards and elegant Neoclassical cafés, where writers, intellectuals and artists gathered to exchange ideas. The border town of Gorizia, too, was long under the thumb of the Habsburgs, and a distinctly Central European feel still pervades its streets today.

Spend a few days exploring the region and you'll soon discover a cuisine that is as varied as its cultural offerings, with rich culinary traditions marrying Italian, Austrian, Slovene and Venetian flavours.

The region's topography is no less diverse. The limestone karst plateau stretches into Slovenia, dotted with secluded beaches and offering no shortage of trekking opportunities. To the north are the jagged Dolomites as well as the Carnic and Julian Alps, playgrounds for outdoor enthusiasts, while the central plains run down to the Adriatic, where thatched fishermen's dwellings dot lagoons that serve as important wintering grounds for birds.

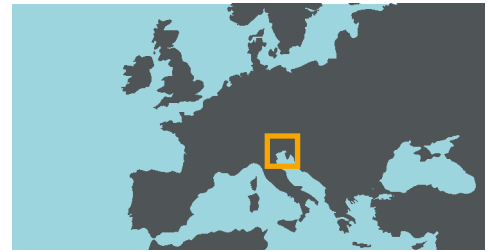
Ask a local

"Overlooking the Gulf of Trieste, the Castello di Miramare is a highlight, surrounded by lush gardens offering breathtaking sea views. You can also take in glorious vistas as you walk the Rilke Trail, where cliffs plunge into the Adriatic. And make sure you experience an *osmiza* in the Karst, savouring local wines and homemade charcuterie. Discover the medieval streets of Cividale, a UNESCO World Heritage site, hike the majestic peaks of the Carnic Alps and learn about creativity at the ITS Arcademy – Museum of Art in Fashion in Trieste. History, nature and tradition intertwine here at every corner."

Barbara Franchin,
director of the ITS
Arcademy Foundation
(itsweb.org/its-arcademy/)



Making an impression (this page; above) At 760 sqm, the extravagant 4th-century mosaic at the Basilica of Aquileia befits a city that was one of the wealthiest in the early Roman Empire, until it was sacked by the Huns in 452 AD; (previous spread) Trieste's Miramare Castle was once the home of Maximilian of Habsburg, an archduke who met his end in Mexico after trying to set himself up as the head of the short-lived Second Mexican Empire



The region in six days

Day 1: Trieste

This elegant port city on the Adriatic is an architectural delight, with Neoclassical buildings lining grand boulevards that spill into large piazzas such as the magnificent Unità d'Italia. Take a stroll along the Canal Grande in the Borgo Teresiano, named after Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, who left an indelible mark on the city. Climb up to the Castello di San Giusto for a bird's eye view of Trieste and beyond.

Day 2: Udine

Pretty Udine is a feast for the eyes. Its historical core is laced with cobbled streets and Venetian palazzos and churches, many embellished with beautiful frescoes by Tiepolo. Head to the Gallerie del Tiepolo to take it all in. This is a vibrant student town with a laid-back vibe and restaurants serving traditional specialities such as *frico*, a crispy potato-and-cheese pancake.

Day 3: Cividale del Friuli

The capital of the first Lombard duchy in Italy, this beautifully preserved medieval town has a dramatic location on a clifftop above the gushing waters of the Natisone River. Wander across the Ponte del Diavolo (Devil's Bridge), a reconstruction of the 15th-century original, to reach the city's main attractions.

Day 4: San Daniele del Friuli

The delightful little town of San Daniele del Friuli produces some of Italy's finest *prosciutto*. Visit one of the town's *prosciuttifici* (ham manufacturers) to learn more about how these guitar-shaped hunks of meat are salted and cured, before sitting back for *aperitivo* – the prosciutto goes down all too well with a glass of white wine.

Day 5: Grado and Aquileia

Explore the Laguna di Grado by boat, refuelling for lunch at Ai Ciodi, an island restaurant serving exquisite fresh fish and seafood. Spend the afternoon at the World Heritage site of Aquileia, where the vast basilica is the highlight of any visit, thanks to its show-stopping floor mosaics. And don't miss the Cripta degli Affreschi, adorned with beautiful 12th-century frescoes.

Day 6: Gorizia and the Collio

Straddling the border with Slovenia, the town of Gorizia has an enduringly Central European flavour. Its 11th-century castello is the city's main sight; once you've taken that in, enjoy a stroll through the streets before making for the rolling hills of the wine-producing Collio region, where you can sample some premium white wines at the family-run vineyards scattering the area. ►



A place to rest (this page; clockwise from top left) Piazza San Giacomo in Udine is a beautiful spot to take in the city's Venetian architecture; after a crushing defeat by Austro-Hungarian and German forces in the Battle of Caporetto in 1917, the retreating Italian troops blew up Cividale del Friuli's 15th-century Ponte del Diavolo (Devil's Bridge) to slow down their enemy – it proved fruitless, and the bridge was later rebuilt by German forces; the waterfall of Goriuda plummets for around 80m; 90% of the grapes grown in the hilly Collio region produce white wine

Need to know



When to go

Trieste's notorious **bora** wind reach up to 176kph and has even become an attraction in itself. It can blow year-round, although feels most brutal in winter. Bora aside, the climate in Friuli Venezia Giulia is similar to that of other northern Italian regions, with hot summers (up to 28°C) and freezing winters.



Getting there & around

Ryanair (ryanair.com) offers direct flights from London Stansted to Trieste; these cost from £34 return and take two hours. **Bus** and **train services** link major towns and cities, although the network is limited, making hiring a **car** the best way to get around.



Carbon offset

A return flight from **London to Trieste** produces around 194kg of carbon dioxide per passenger. *Wanderlust* encourages you to offset your travel footprint through a reputable provider. For advice on finding one, visit wanderlustmagazine.com/inspiration/sustainable-travel.



Currency

Euro (€), currently around €1.19 to the UK£.



Further information

Visit the **PromoTurismoFVG** (turismoFVG.it/en) for travel ideas and to buy a digital FVG card that entitles you to free or reduced entry at many sights.



Secret worlds (this page; top-bottom) The Castle of Duino was built during the 14th century on the ruins of a Roman military outpost, and it steadily built a reputation as a cultural centre down the years – the 19th-century poet Rainer Maria Rilke (after whom a nearby coastal trail is named) composed the first two of his famous *Duino Elegies* while staying at the castle; the giant Grotta Gigante began forming around 10 million years ago

Don't miss...

Outdoors

Hike the Karst

Occupying Friuli's thin fold of land that stretches into Slovenia, the rugged limestone plateau known as the Karst offers plenty of hikes along scenic paths. The coastal Rilke Trail (2.6km) is the most famous, snaking along the cliffside from the Castello di Duino to the sleepy little marina of Sistiana.

Cycle the FVG3

The panoramic FVG3 Pedemontana cycling route connects Pordenone in the west to Gorizia in the east, offering keen cyclists a great way to explore on two wheels. Picturesque villages and vineyards dot the route, making it all too easy to refuel with hearty fare washed down with local wine. The route runs 182km through largely flat terrain, making it perfect for multi-day escapes or ticking off a section on a day ride.

Piazza della Libertà

You could spend a good while standing in Udine's main square, admiring its exquisite Venetian architecture. The 15th-century Palazzo del Comune is even modelled on Venice's Palazzo Ducale, while its clocktower echoes the one found on St Mark's Square – note the Venetian lion that adorns the façade.

Indoors

Aquileia's floor mosaics

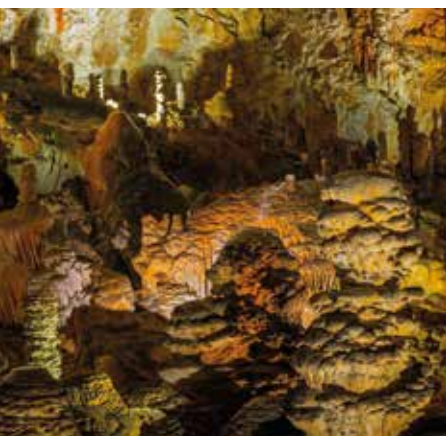
Step into the Basilica of Aquileia and you'll be struck by the beauty of its 4th-century mosaic floor. It is thought to be the oldest surviving in the Western Christian world. It's also the largest, occupying an incredible 760 sqm of the nave. It was commissioned by Bishop Theodore under the rule of Emperor Constantine, and it features allegories, images and representations of the story of Jonah. It was lost for hundreds of years, only to be rediscovered at the turn of the 20th century.

Tempietto Longobardo, Cividale del Friuli

This tiny chapel dates from the 8th century and is a remarkable example of Lombard architecture. Inside, it's adorned with stucco decorations, including six wonderfully preserved female figures (thought to be saints), that were added later, as well as some beautiful frescoes.

Grotta Gigante

The Karst's main attraction is this vast underground cave that is rich in stalagmite and stalactite formations. At a towering 98m high and 76m wide, it is one of the largest in the world. Walkways, steps and platforms lead you through the cavernous space.



Stay here...

L'Albero Nascosto, Trieste

This delightful boutique hotel in the heart of Trieste brims with personality, offering tastefully decorated rooms that come furnished with antiques, rugs and a heavy dose of contemporary works of art. alberonascosto.it

1448 Antica Dimora Al Merlo Bianco, Cividale del Friuli

In a prime location overlooking the river Natisone that runs through Cividale del Friuli, this recently converted stay offers six spacious rooms and also has a popular osteria that includes outdoor seating in the summer season. almerlobianco.it

Tivoli Portopiccolo Sistiana Wellness Resort & Spa

This five-star hotel has a tranquil setting in the marina of Sistiana, overlooking the

Adriatic. The facilities include a beach club and swimming pools. tivolihotels.com

1848 Chef's Rooms, Gorizia

This B&B in the centre of Gorizia offers three rooms in a restored building where original features such as bare stone walls and ceiling beams have been lovingly preserved. milleottocentoquarantotto.it

Mercatovecchio Luxury Suites, Udine

The six themed rooms at this hotel in Udine's historical core come with an eclectic choice of contemporary furnishings and wallpaper designs. mercatovecchio.it

Tenuta Valle Ca' del Lovo, near Marano

This farmhouse with on-site stables has a tranquil lagoon setting outside Marano, offering outdoor activities including fishing, biking and horseback rides. cadellovo.it

4 TOP THINGS TO DO

TRY local specialities at an *osmiza*. A handful of weeks a year, farmers in the Karst area open their doors to the public, serving and selling produce such as eggs, cheeses, cold cuts and wine. Finding these *osmize* is an experience in itself – look out for branches or boughs hung by the roadside.

EXPERIENCE the picturesque waterside town of Muggia. There's no better place to enjoy an *al fresco* lunch. The town was an important Venetian outpost for over 300 years, and its annual Carnevale di Muggia in August sees intricate floats paraded through the city.

HOP in a canoe and glide the canals of Laguna di Marano. The lake is dotted with *casoni* – fishermen's dwellings made from mud and reeds. Afterwards, refuel on fresh seafood at the Bilancia di Bepi – its fish are caught using a huge lift net in the lagoon.

SIT BACK in one of Trieste's Habsburg-era cafés. Triestini are said to imbibe twice as much coffee as their Italian counterparts, and the city even has its own lexicon – a cappuccino is known here as a 'caffelatte', while an espresso is a 'nero'. **W**



Uncovering a gem (this page; clockwise from top left) The mosaic at the Basilica of Aquileia was not rediscovered until the turn of the 20th century, when the floor coverings of later years were removed; the frescoes of the tiny chapel of Tempietto Longobardo are an exquisite sight; Trieste's 18th-century Grand Canal was meant to be part of a larger network of waterways, to allow boats to unload in the city centre, though this was never completed

