



Italy's *Natural Wonders*

The parks and wilderness areas of Italy are some of the most dramatic on the continent, ranging from Europe's highest active volcano to the last refuge of the Marsican bear. We pick 21 of the wildest to explore...

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High value
The tiny town of
Santa Maddalena
offers a scenic
base for the trails
and peaks of
Puez-Odle
Nature Park.

The North

ITALY



1 Adamello Brenta Nature Park, Trentino

In the late 1990s, the brown bear was on the brink of extinction in the Italian Alps, with only a handful of individuals thought to be left in the wild. Across three years, ten were released into the wilds of the Trentino region through the LifeUrsus project; now more than 100 brown bears are estimated to be roaming the dense woods of western Trentino.

These large mammals have become the symbol of the Adamello Brenta Nature Park, Trentino's largest natural park. Rising between 477m and 3,558m, this mountainous reserve takes in a diverse array of habitats and supports a wide biodiversity. Chamois, deer and ibex defy gravity as they navigate the jagged rock faces of the Dolomites, while marmots, squirrels and badgers can be spotted playing hide and seek in the rock piles and alpine meadows.

Around a third of the park is carpeted in forest, with conifers giving way to spruce, larch and Swiss pine at high elevation. Yet what strikes you most is the sheer number of waterways and lakes (pictured above) that you'll find here, not to mention the thundering cascades.

Best for... waterfalls. The park is home to around 20 remaining glaciers, including the Adamello Glacier – Italy's largest. You'll find hundreds of spectacular waterfalls that, come winter, freeze over to offer some excellent ice-climbing opportunities. The most famous are Val Genova's Nardis cascades, which plunge 130m down a wall of slate-grey rock. ▶

W. Sturrock



2 Gran Paradiso National Park, Piedmont & Valle d'Aosta

When King Carlo Felice of the House of Savoy outlawed the hunting of ibex (*pictured left*) in 1821, he did so not so much to preserve the species (it was on the brink of extinction) but to claim exclusive hunting rights. A few decades later, in 1856, his nephew, King Vittorio Emanuele II, declared what is now Gran Paradiso a royal hunting reserve, building a network of trails and lodges in which he would spend his summers while governing remotely.

The area was eventually declared a national park in 1922, becoming the first of its kind in Italy. The ibex is today the symbol of the park, with more than 2,500 individuals now inhabiting the area. Scores of trails snake through the valleys and dense woods of larch, spruce and Swiss pine, giving way to alpine pastures and glaciers in the high mountains. Alongside ibex, it's not uncommon to spot chamois, marmots, hares, foxes, stoats and weasels.

Best for... alpine birdwatching. More than 100 bird species are known to nest in the park, including alpine tree creepers, woodpeckers, hazel grouse and the green woodpecker. Birds of prey such as eagles, bearded vultures and buzzards are also commonly spotted patrolling the skies overhead.



4 Val Grande National Park, Piedmont

Occupying swathes of rugged mountains smothered in dense chestnut and beech woods, the Val Grande lies wedged between Lake Maggiore (*pictured above*), Val Cannobina and Val d'Ossola. Said to be the largest wilderness area in the Alps, it is little visited and virtually uninhabited – its only settlement is the hamlet of Cicogna,

home to fewer than 20 residents. The park also has a dramatic modern history, having served as a refuge for Italian partisans fighting German forces in the Second World War.

Largely untouched by human activity since the war, the Val Grande harbours rare species of flora such as the alpine columbine and alpine tulip. It's also possible to spot chamois, deer, marmots and black grouse as you hike its well-marked paths. Wolves are

known to inhabit the area (although they are rarely seen), while trout flourish in the crystal-clear waters of the rivers.

Best for... hiking through unspoiled wilderness. With its deep valleys, precipitous gorges and rushing torrents, Val Grande offers fabulous trekking opportunities, including a network of trails that take you past ancient rock carvings, Second World War military fortifications and votive chapels. ►

3 Puez-Odle Nature Park, South Tyrol

The sheer variety of landscapes here is truly staggering: karstic highlands, verdant pastures, deep valleys carpeted in coniferous forests. Then there's the limestone rock faces of the Dolomites, with their slate-grey saw-toothed pinnacles (*pictured right*). Only tundra willows and cushion plants can survive the conditions in the karstic highlands, with scree giving way to cembra pines and colourful alpine flowers in the valleys.

Be sure to stop by Santa Maddalena, a picture-perfect village (and this issue's cover star) that is well-placed for hikes in the beautiful Val di Funes. The nearby Adolf Munkel Trail (9.2km) offers a perfect half-day looping trek, passing many scenic viewpoints without being too strenuous. Look out for hares, badgers and foxes, while marmots are commonly sighted on the plateaus. At higher altitudes, you can spot chamois and ibex, and even golden eagles can be seen circling above.

Best for... climbing a via ferrata. These fixed-cable routes are among the best ways to get up close with the park's flora and fauna, and spectacular panoramic views reward those who reach the top. Head up at sunrise or sunset to watch the sun paint the Dolomites a rosy pink.



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5 Dolomiti Bellunesi National Park, Veneto

Taking in a truly wild variety of landscapes – from the streams, rivers and grasslands of the low valleys to the coniferous forests and jagged rock faces of the high Dolomites – this park harbours exceptionally rich biodiversity. Over 3,000 chamois and more than 2,000 roe deer inhabit the park alongside stoats,

marmots and martens. Wildcats have also been spotted over the last decade.

Botanists have visited this area for centuries to observe and catalogue its plant populations. The park was eventually established in 1993 to protect the incredible variety of plants found here, and it is thought to be home to more than a third of Italy's flora. The dozens of trails and mule tracks that snake through

the park's wilderness offer great hiking opportunities (*pictured below*), with several equipped with via ferrata – climbing routes with fixed ropes, ladders and rungs.

Best for... alpine plants. The park harbours some 1,400 species of plant, including endemic and rare alpine flora. Lady's slipper, lowage, shuttlecock fern and rock jasmine thrive here alongside edelweiss, fire lily and Moretti's bellflower.



6 Stelvio National Park, Lombardy, Trentino & South Tyrol

Straddling three regions, this national park is named after northern Italy's famous Stelvio Pass, a serpentine road with 88 hairpin bends that twist and turn through the alpine landscapes, attracting keen cyclists come summer. Known for its dramatic high passes, Stelvio National Park is a high-altitude landscape that mostly rises above 2,000m, centred on the Ortles-Cevedale mountain group. Its dense forests and ample clearings provide the perfect habitat for the park's 6,000-plus red deer (*pictured right*).

In late spring, as you hike Stelvio's trails, it's not uncommon to hear the rustling sound of red deer rubbing their antlers against trees – a process that enables them to strip off the velvet coating from their antlers while marking their territory with their scent. In early autumn, when the mating season occurs, you have the best chance for close encounters. In September and October, the bellowing of red deer echoes across the mountain forests.

Best for... red deer spotting. Join the park's wildlife experts on hikes through the fir and larch forests of the Val di Peio and Val di Rabbi during rutting season in search of red deer. Thermal imaging cameras can help you observe the animals in complete darkness.



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