

Discover Liguria...

Many of us are eager, the first chance we get, to embark on a dreamy Tuscan vacation...to gaze upon the works of Giotto and Michelangelo in Florence...to stroll the cobblestone streets of Siena on their winding way down to the Piazza del Campo. We long to see for ourselves the famously leaning tower of Pisa and to watch the sun set over the Chianti hills. But where do the Florentines most often go when their precious days of vacation roll around? Where do the Sieneese and the Pisans go, and the farmers and vintners of the Tuscan countryside? They go to the Italian Riviera! Nearest is the stretch known as the Versilian Riviera, which, with its attractive beaches and lively nightlife, has long been a popular destination. Still, many prefer the Ligurian coastline farther north and west. Quite a world apart, the Ligurian Riviera distinguishes itself by its spectacular landscapes (including breathtaking beaches!) and a refreshingly different Northern Italian cultural heritage. Extending from the enchanting string of fishing villages known as the Cinqueterre all the way westward where it cuddles up next to the illustrious French Riviera, the Riviera of Liguria gracefully marries rocky ruggedness with seaside chic.

Cinqueterre

Cinqueterre a certain music in the name seems to promise an otherworldly delight, some magical realm a few steps removed from the everyday. And Cinqueterre does not disappoint. Draped delicately like a string of pearls across the rugged cliffs of the Ligurian Riviera, five ancient villages preserve a centuries-old way of life while welcoming visitors with open arms. This unique and enchanting chain of villages, overlooking the stunning blue of the Mediterranean from a craggy Apennine cradle, has long been known as the “Five Lands”—or Cinqueterre. Part of the ineffable charm of Cinqueterre is the series of well-worn shepherds’ paths winding through the fragrant Mediterranean *macchia* past olive groves and vineyards (local grapes are used to make the Cinqueterre’s renowned white wine, which shares the same name). Connecting each village to the next, the paths offer breathtaking views out over the cliffs to the sea. Another great pleasure of Cinqueterre is that of dining out of doors on cliffside terraces. Many of the local restaurants are thus favorably positioned, and what better setting could one find, in which to discover *cacciucco*, the uniquely Ligurian rich fish soup, or *burridda*, a local fish specialty prepared with a spicy sauce? Not every Ligurian delicacy comes from the sea, however. Ligurian cuisine is also known for *pansoti*—a type of ravioli stuffed with ricotta and chard and topped with a walnut cream sauce, and for *cima*—a dish of veal stuffed with vegetables and herbs, eggs, nuts and cheese.

The Riviera di Levante

Within the immediate environs of Cinqueterre are a couple of other notable attractions. Just to the south is the Golfo dei Poeti, named for Byron and Shelley, the two most legendary of its many enthusiasts. Surrounded by foothills peppered with medieval castles, the serenely beautiful gulf is a setting made for relaxation, ideal also as a launching point for excursions to Cinqueterre, via boat from the elegant port town of Lerici. Portovenere, a pretty little town across the promontory, is a popular resort destination boasting a string of lively bars and a remarkable old ruined fortress. Along the coast north and west of Cinqueterre lie Monéglià—with its two castles—Bonassola and other villages, any of which makes a delightful home base for exploring the coastline. Of the Riviera’s beautiful beaches, nearby Sestri Levante offers a standout, the Baia di Silenzio.

Still farther west, towards Genoa, a promontory juts out into the sea, and at its tip lies Portofino, one of the loveliest and most exclusive resorts on the Italian Riviera. Fashionable boutiques alternate with busy caffès along Portofino's lively streets. For a break from the hustle and bustle visitors can take a stroll to the Castello di San Giorgio and its little church, or simply amble without aim along the beautiful promontory, much of which is protected by the Italian government as a nature preserve. The nearby village of Camogli provides a striking contrast to the refinement of Portofino: Charles Dickens used the words "salty" and "piratical" in describing this fishing locality, and it retains to this day much of its erstwhile air. Another favorite among local destinations is Rapallo—a time-honored resort town with long beachfront promenades, a fine castle and a civic museum. Rapallo is also known as a host to many concerts and other cultural events.

Genoa

During the fourteenth century Genoa thrived—along with Pisa, Venice and Amalfi—as one of Italy's great maritime republics. Though the city is still Italy's largest port and is heralded as the birth city of Christopher Columbus, modern Genoa's most splendid expression of its maritime spirit is undoubtedly its tremendous aquarium, one of the largest in Europe. Its forty-eight tanks are designed to reproduce as accurately as possible a great variety of ocean habitats. More than just a tourist attraction, the Genoa aquarium has set itself a goal: "to help visitors discover and develop a love for the sea and to illustrate how man's destiny is bound to that of the oceans." The opening of the aquarium in 1993 ushered in a renaissance of sorts for a city that had for some time been overlooked by visitors to the area. Though Genoa's overall attractiveness is compromised somewhat by a tendency toward suburban sprawl, the historical heart of the city is and has always been a delightful place to visit.

Among the remaining vestiges of Genoa's days as a powerful republic is a series of proud palaces lining the grand Via Garibaldi, two of which—the Palazzo Bianco and the Palazzo Rosso—house impressive collections of fine art. Genoa is home to a great many additional exhibits and galleries, including a prestigious collection of oriental art at the Museo Chiossone, a Museum of Natural History and a fascinating Naval Museum. Impressive churches also abound, including the striking Romanesque-Gothic San Lorenzo Cathedral. But let us not forget to mention *pesto*: the internationally adored green culinary treat originated nowhere else but in Genoa!

The Riviera di Ponente and San Remo

San Remo, best known perhaps for its casino, provides an ideal base for exploring the western stretch of Ligurian Riviera often referred to as the Riviera dei Fiori—or "Riviera of Flowers." A popular *belle époque* resort town with a picturesque medieval quarter, San Remo itself answers in no small part for the area's reputation as a floral wonderland: passers through the Corso Garibaldi any morning of the week (save Sunday) risk becoming lost among the blooms of one of Europe's greatest flower markets. A more general open-air market daily fills San Remo's old Tower Square, offering arrays of fresh fish and vegetables as well as every manner of house ware and other bargains. San Remo's old town, La Pigna, is so nicknamed after the pinecone, for the peculiar way its medieval edifices protrude out from the cliff side to which they cling. Strolling the thousand year-old streets and alleys of La Pigna gives one a keen sense of that long ago time. History buffs will not want to miss San Remo's splendid archeological museum for a journey to an even earlier age; the museum is housed in the 15th century Borea d'Olmo Palace, which holds many delights for art lovers as well. Before traveling on from San Remo, take the

cable car up Monte Bignone for a perfect panorama; on a clear day, even Cannes may be visible in the distance.

From San Remo one easily reaches many highlights of the Riviera di Ponente. True to its reputation, this stretch of Italian coastline offers access to the French Riviera, as well as its own many attractions, at a cost more within reason (for many of us) than the cost of a French Riviera vacation. West of San Remo toward the French border lies the estate of the Villa Hanbury where one finds a fine array of botanical gardens. The nearby cluster of caverns known as the Balzi Rossi is known for the many traces of “early man” discovered within. Dolceacqua is a charming medieval town in the hills to the north, while Bordighera boasts a fine beach and is also unique for its palm groves—the northernmost in Europe—which have supplied the Vatican with Easter-week palms since the 16th century. On the other side of San Remo to the east, Taggia is known for its medieval charm and its sibling Arma di Taggia for its importance to the local olive-growing industry: the Taggia olive is a much prized variety. Indeed, the olive is no less important in Liguria than in Tuscany and other Italian regions to the south, a point which the Olive Tree Museum in nearby Imperia makes with élan. Another superb local attraction is the unique artists’ colony of Bussana Vecchia, a former “ghost town” where painters, sculptors and crafts makers have created studios amid the rubble left by an 1887 earthquake. Still farther east, Alassio, Finale Ligure and Noli all offer more fine beaches.

Walking in Liguria

Beguiled by the sea and by the charms of Liguria’s coastal towns, visitors have been known to forget—or at least to neglect the presence of—the twin mountain ranges of the Ligurian and Maritime Alps, which cradle the entire expanse of the Riviera and ensure its famously mild winters. For those who love to walk, the Alps and their foothills offer infinite opportunity and are generally well marked with trails. In the area of Cinqueterre, avid walkers might wish to venture beyond the local footpaths farther inland to the Apuan Alps or the beautiful Tuscan area known as the Garfagnana. Travelers staying on the Riviera di Levante are well-positioned to explore the Parco Naturale del Monte di Portofino spanning much of the promontory; while those staying west of Genoa might opt to walk through the lovely hilly countryside to the north, known as Le Langhe. Truly devoted hikers might cross over into the Piemonte region to try the Parco Naturale dell’Argentera, or head all the way north to the Valle d’Aosta and its spectacular mountainous Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso.

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