

## DESTINATIONS

## Take me to the Riviera

### Living la dolce vita comes all along Italy's tony coastline

By LIBBY BOREN McMILLAN

Whether it's the lines of a sleek white Vespa that turn your head, or the high-heeled, helmeted, scantily-clad young woman driving it, Italia has eye candy for everyone. A sojourn to Italy (or, if one is lucky, back to Italy) completely rejuvenates one's spirit and awakens the senses.

Beauty, style and inspiration are as plentiful as air.

Nestled between lush mountains and indigo sea, the Italian Riviera is the perfect place to indulge and recharge. Easily reached via Milano or Genova airports, as well as by car, ship and train, the stunning coastline of Italy's Liguria region is dotted with welcoming towns and villages. American visitors experience few, if any, language barriers.

#### FABLED PORTOFINO

Anchoring a small, mountainous peninsula southeast of Genova is perhaps the most treasured harbor in the world. Spared from German dynamite by the elegant, fast-talking Baroness Von Mumm during World War II, tony Portofino still attracts the rich and famous to its fabled waterfront.

Adorning the ocher and pink-hued buildings ringing the Portofino harbor are inviting cafés, bars and trattorias, where ordering a latte or espresso guarantees a table for as long as one likes.

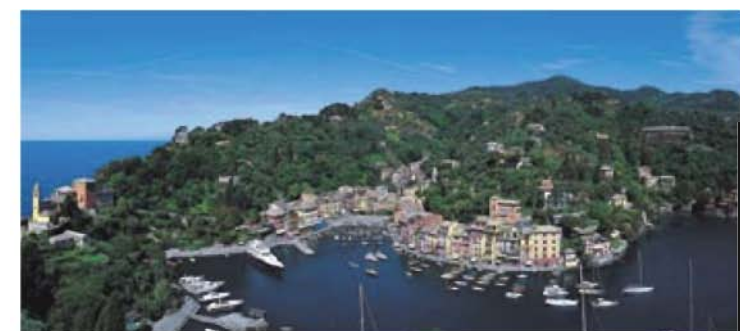


*On a balcony at Hotel Splendido*

Sip a bellini and marvel at how easily le donne d'Italia glide across cobblestones in stiletto heels.

And stay on a casual lookout for faces you recognize. Although Portofino remains home port to generations of working fishermen, you could also bump into regular visitor George Clooney, various European royalty, international supermodels or homeowners Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana.

It's also not unusual for a 200-foot megayacht to dominate this tiny port, surrounded by bobbing rows of colorful skiffs used to haul in a day's catch of anchovies and octopus. Even larger



*Portofino, perhaps the most treasured harbor in the world*

yachts will anchor outside the harbor, having sailed in from ports around the world.

#### SPLENDID SPLENDIDO

Portofino's legendary Hotel Splendido (SPLEN-did-oh) perches high above the harbor entrance, draped in wisteria and oozing Italian ambience. Whether or not you choose to check in, devote one evening for cocktails or dinner, or both.

The Splendido's terrace is unrivaled, mixing a sophisticated air with its casual resort atmosphere in the manner of great hotels. Time spent here will be both memorable and relaxing. (We especially like the macadamia nuts served with each drink.)

A lovely sister property, Splendido Mare, is closer to "the action," situated directly on the village piazzetta, the waterfront square.

Less modern in style but just as nice is the Nazionale Hotel, in the same building. And the Eden is only a block from the harbor. Although it has lower rates and a private garden, light sleepers will struggle with the church bells next door that ring every half hour.

A nice addition to the Portofino hotel scene is the recently renovated Hotel San Giorgio in a quiet spot next to one of the prized restaurants in Italy. The humble Trattoria Concordia, helmed by chef Stefano Macconi, is the perfect place to nix menus and say to your waiter, in traditional Italian style, "We put ourselves in your hands." From fish to cheeses to wines, Concordia delivers a meal that may well be the culinary highlight of your trip.



*Hotel Splendido lobby*

Another sure bet for a nice evening in Portofino is Taverna del Marinaio (known to locals as Nipoti), where meals are paired with a harborfront view. And for a perfect pesto, the specialty of Liguria, head for Tripoli on the right side of the harbor (the fried anchovies here are delicious, too).

## DIVINE DINING

Honestly, it's practically thrilling to get hungry in Liguria. Fresh seafood is served as antipasti or la prima piatta. Olives, fava beans, figs and citrus are farmed on terraced Portofino Mountain, above the village, and figure prominently in local menus.

No meal, of course, is complete without wine; enjoy trying regional vintages, and know you can always trust the house wine to be good.

Cultural tip: Italians consider capuccino a morning coffee and would not be caught dead ordering it after a meal. Consider instead a locally-made limoncino or intense Italian grappa to see how locals end an evening repast.

## INSPIRED SHOPPING

Shoppers, prepare for a heady experience.

If you appreciate beautiful shoes, and the exchange rate doesn't nix the notion of rewarding yourself, pack an empty bag. You'll easily fill it with fabulous Italian footwear.

Portofino merchants are also purveyors of luxurious clothing, the finest leather goods and lovely jewels.

Forget saying "Quanto costa?" and remind yourself that it's practically patriotic to purchase Gucci, Fendi or Armani when in Italy. And at that, you're just getting started . . . there's still Versace, Valentino, Pucci, Cavalli, Missoni, Brioni, Ferragamo and Prada!

In fact, travelers who arrived oblivious to the concept of high fashion often come home from Italy with a new attitude. Careful observation of Italians — and how they look so handsomely put together with so little effort — is humbling to some, inspiring to others.

## BEYOND PORTOFINO

Try to allow enough time to explore the coast during your stay. In Portofino's piazzetta, you'll find the ferry landing, where one buys passage on picture-postcard excursions to the abbey at San Fruttuoso, nearby Santa Margherita Ligure, or the scenic lighthouse at Camogli. Adventurous types put on their best walking shoes and buy a ticket for a full day trip to Cinque Terre, five steep, picturesque villages clinging to a mountainside farther down the coast and linked by hiking trails.

Fair warning: Portofino-bound cars often queue up for hours on the weekend, and there's only one parking garage, which is quite expensive and usually full. While most hotels offer parking in the city garage, you can opt out of car hassles altogether by making neighboring Santa Margherita your home base.



*Dinner on the terrace overlooking Portofino*



*Breakfast served on the terrace of the Presidential Suite*

## SANTA MARGHERITA

Dressed in palms and trompel'oeil facades, this stunning seaside resort citta is situated on the large protected bay that is its heart and soul. Filled with sailboats and rimmed by fish markets, cafes, hotels, shops and a constant parade of Italians on sexy scooters, Santa's lively harbor is appealing for a thousand reasons. Locals interact easily with visitors, in English or Italian, so relax and try out your language skills.



Perhaps the most memorable activity in Santa is taking the 10- minute bus to Portofino (another way to avoid the car queue).

Number 82, full of locals and visitors, bulls its way along the winding, cliff-lined coastline, past tiny, jam-packed beaches, honking brief warnings and narrowly missing countless motociclettli, cars and bicycles.

A new pedestrian walkway has lessened the drama to some degree, but this short trip is still a wild ride. Buses run for about \$3 one-way until 10 p.m. or so; cabs run much later but can cost \$50 and up between Santa and Portofino.

Santa's most elegant lodging is the luxe Imperiale Palace Hotel. This exclusive 19th century enclave on the far side of the harbor is secluded above a park that slopes down to the sea. Closer to Portofino is the Grand Hotel Miramare, a sumptuous former private residence with chic piano bar and a private beach open during summer season. In between the two are numerous four-star options facing Santa's waterfront, within walking distance to everything.

### LIVING LA DOLCE VITA

All along the Riviera, la dolce vita is not a cliché. It's a sacred concept, one that Italians have raised to an art form.

With the exception of a few trattorias and some transportation, business snaps to a halt at morning's end so that locals may take a leisurely pranzo from noon or 1 until 2 or 3, followed by a vino-inspired nap. Simply go with the flow, and begin to experience the life-changing part of Italia.

Return, renewed, to your explorations at 4 in the afternoon, then regroup at 7 or 8 (or 9 or 10!) for a light dinner. (Especially romantic is Le Due Querce at Sant'Ambrogio. Take a Santa cab to this lovely spot on the mountain above nearby Rapallo, and enjoy a view of the entire Tigullian Gulf at night).

Wherever you dine, the later your reservation, the more Italians you'll have seated nearby.

After dinner, allow the Santa Margherita harbor to

lure you to its esplanade. As late as 11, you'll find generations of families enjoying the night: bambini playing in the park; older, seated couples chatting or enjoying gelato; lovers whispering to one another as they take their evening stroll or passeggiatta, arm in arm.

### EYE CANDY EVERYWHERE

The Ligurian coastline takes its place among the most alluring spots in the world, exuding a palpable sensuality. Coincidentally, the Italians hanging out along the Riviera are such a striking group, one wonders how so much beauty can exist in one place on earth. So if you find yourself enjoying the two-legged scenery more often than normal, consider it a cultural activity, and enjoy the view! 📷



*The main living area, bedroom and three terraces of the Presidential Suite at the Hotel Splendido*

— Libby Boren McMillan is fortunate to count as friends two Portofino residents who vacation on Captiva Island. She and her husband now visit Liguria regularly. Santa Margherita Ligure has its own train stop, and is only minutes away from the Rapallo station, served by rapid trains from all major cities. Genova's GOA airport is less than an hour away; Milano is about three, and Roma is closer to five.

Photos courtesy of Hotel el Splendido