

TRAVELERS' TALES,
FROM NEAR + FAR

EDITED BY
DENNY LEE



EXPERIENCES



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM
LEFT *Revello Focacceria,*
in Camogli, Italy; *boats*
in the port town of
Santa Margherita
Ligure; *the harbor at*
Portofino; *the lounge at*
Rapallo's Grand Hotel
Bristol; *a cobblestoned*
trail in Portofino.





The Inside Track

How best to see Italy's dreamy Ligurian coast? Follow the ancient cobblestoned paths that wind from town to town.

By Gina DeCaprio Vercesi

IN GENOESE DIALECT they're called *crêuze*—narrow cobblestoned paths that cross the hillsides along Italy's dazzling Ligurian coast. These centuries-old mule tracks were originally used by farmers to transport grapes, olives, and lemons grown on terraces cut into the steep, mountainous landscape. Today locals use the trails to walk into town from the rural interior. As I discovered late last October, hiking them makes for an enchanting way to experience the Portofino Peninsula, a rocky promontory about 15 miles east of Genoa.

Although it certainly sees its share of visitors—primarily to the stylish town of Portofino—the peninsula tends to be overshadowed by the Cinque Terre, which I first visited after graduating from college in 1995 and returned to on my honeymoon a few years later. At that time, the five villages tucked improbably into cliffs above the sea had barely registered on the tourist radar. Since becoming a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1997, the region's popularity has exploded—especially during the summer—and it has begun to sag beneath the pressure. Crowds, many arriving by cruise ship, clog the snug streets and queue to hike the once-tranquil trails, namely the Via dell'Amore, the coastal path connecting Riomaggiore and Manarola. After a landslide forced its closure a dozen years ago, the path recently reopened; reservations are now required.

But just an hour's drive north on this same stretch of coastline, known as the Riviera di Levante, labyrinthine *crêuze* recede into the lush quietude of the Parco Naturale Regionale di Portofino, a 2,610-acre swath of protected land, and link the towns of Rapallo, Santa Margherita Ligure,



A café on Via della Repubblica, in Camogli.

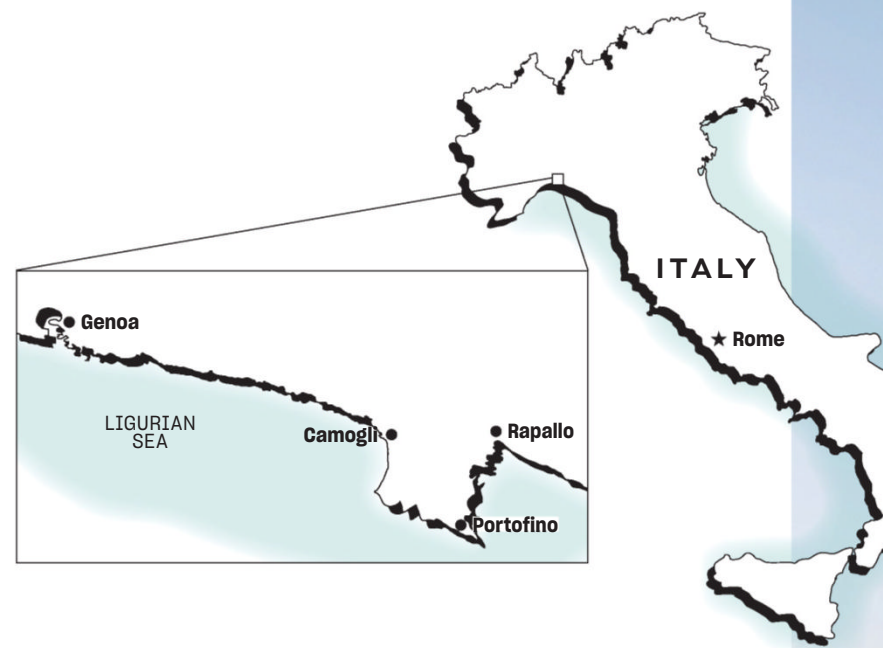
Portofino, and Camogli. There I found not only respite from the fray but also a much less impactful way to visit the area.

AT THE AIRPORT in Milan, sheets of rain fell from gunmetal skies. I slept off my jet lag on my two-hour car transfer to the coast, waking just past Genoa to catch my first glimpse of the sea. It churned and frothed like Neptune had an axe to grind—a far cry from the sun-kissed Italian autumn I’d hoped for.

My outlook improved when I pulled up to the **Grand Hotel Bristol Spa Resort** (doubles from \$353), in Rapallo. Petal-pink, with white wrought-iron balconies overlooking the sea, the Liberty-style grande dame has been a Portofino coast landmark since 1904. The 80-room property was purchased in 2009 by the R Collection, a group of 12 luxurious hotels owned by the Rocchi family, and has since been polished to five-star standards. I settled in to the Silk Lounge Bar, the name a nod to the town’s history in the textile industry, and devoured a bowl of trofie with fresh pesto, a pasta dish long synonymous with Liguria. Bright and delicate, the sauce had the unmistakable perfume of Genoese basil.

From my balcony late that afternoon, I spied a valiant ray of sun piercing the cloud cover, casting a glow over Lungomare Vittorio Veneto, Rapallo’s waterfront promenade. The evening *passeggiata* was under way. On benches beneath a massive palm tree, a group of older gentlemen talked and gesticulated, umbrellas propped between their knees. Two nuns wearing matching cardigans strolled arm in arm as families walked their dogs and children darted between the fishing boats moored on the pebbly shore. I wandered the rain-washed streets, relishing the rhythm of daily life in a small Italian town.

As night fell, I ducked in to **Hostaria Vecchia Rapallo** (entrées \$15–\$33), where I ate little pasta parcels called pansotti in a creamy walnut sauce, followed by a dish of potatoes topped with porcini mushrooms.



I WOKE THE NEXT MORNING to a sky so blue it felt like a miracle. I’d planned to hike from Camogli to San Fruttuoso Abbey, a 10th-century Benedictine monastery set in a secluded cove, and return to Rapallo by ferry. But the Bristol’s concierge, Paola Arata, said the seas were too rough for the boat to run. Over breakfast—crusty bread with prosciutto and a white peach—I decided to trek from Santa Margherita Ligure to Portofino instead.

Trains zip along the coastline between Genoa and La Spezia multiple times a day, making it simple to hop from one town to another. From Rapallo it was a five-minute ride to Santa Margherita, where I walked among 19th-century buildings washed in shades of rust and goldenrod, their façades embellished in the fanciful trompe l’oeil style popular throughout the Italian Riviera. The faux balustrades, pilasters, and window frames were so artfully painted I often couldn’t distinguish illusion from reality.

On a side street a few steps from the town’s port, I found the footpath to Portofino. Cement stairs quickly gave way to a cobblestoned mule track that led through groves of chestnut and holm oak. High stone walls cloaked in vines sequestered villas surrounded by olive trees, nets spread out from their trunks to catch late-harvest fruit. At a crossroads in the hamlet of Gave, I filled my water bottle from a spigot beside a small yellow chapel and spied glimmers of azure sea through the thick, pine-scented woods. The trail deposited me in Paraggi, a tiny village where, in summer, well-heeled bathers bask at beach clubs ringing a cerulean cove. I traced the coastal road until Portofino appeared, a jewel box of pastel palazzos balanced on the edge of the sea.

In the spring of 2023, Portofino’s beguiling town square was designated a “no-waiting zone” to prevent the masses from creating what the mayor called “anarchic chaos.” On this autumn Saturday, I found it delightfully uncrowded. I bypassed Dior and Ferragamo in favor of a waterside table at **Ristorante Lo Stella** (entrées \$31–\$46). Over a cold glass of Vermentino from the Cinque Terre and a bowl of perfectly al dente spaghetti heaped with briny little clams, I toasted my efforts, lifting my feet from time to time when the sea rose up and washed over the cobblestones.

THE NEXT DAY, roiling surf again foiled my plans to visit San Fruttuoso. Fortunately, the park’s 50 miles of trails provided plenty of alternatives. This time I took the train to Camogli, a fishing village on the peninsula’s



FROM LEFT
Late-season surf in Camogli;
spaghetti with clams at
Portofino's Ristorante Lo Stella.

westernmost edge. Legend has it that Camogli's multicolored houses once served as beacons for fishermen returning from the sea. Another tale says that the town's name derives from *case delle mogli*—houses of the wives—for the women those fishermen left behind.

A nearly vertical staircase dropped down from the station to Via Garibaldi, the pedestrian esplanade that arcs above Camogli's pebbled beach. Shops lined the walkway, doors thrown open to the salt-tinged breeze. At **Revello Focacceria & Pasticceria** I watched as bakers spooned dollops of creamy *stracchino* cheese onto sheets of dough, so thin they looked translucent, to make *focaccia di Recco col formaggio*, a regional specialty. As I savored my piece, crisp, golden, and bubbling, on a bench by the sea, I chatted with a young woman from Milan, who'd also come by train to explore Camogli's coastal trails. She'd learned about the park from friends, she told me. When I mentioned that I was from New York, she expressed surprise. "A lot of Italians don't even know about the hiking here," she said.

Duly fortified, I headed into the park, scaling hundreds of steps that climbed between mossy stone walls toward the hamlet of San Rocco. There I emerged into a glorious, half-moon-shaped piazza where towering umbrella pines framed a panoramic view of the aptly named Golfo Paradiso. At **Dai Muagetti**—which in Ligurian dialect means "in the small walls"—I paused for a *macchiato*. The tiny bar occupies a grotto carved into the cliff by San Rocco residents for protection from bombing during World War II. Far below, waves lashed Punta Chiappa, a rugged promontory that stretches from the base of Monte di Portofino into the sea.

From San Rocco, the trail meandered past a cluster of tidy houses, their gardens fragrant with rosemary and citrus, before plunging into the forest. I followed the path to La Batteria, a defense complex built by the Italian Royal Army in 1941 to safeguard the Gulf of Genoa. Cloistered within the dense Mediterranean scrub lay crumbling remnants of bunkers and barracks.

A signpost between swaths of gorse and wild thyme marked the rugged descent to Punta Chiappa. Gripping a chain handrail, I switchbacked toward the sound of the sea. Until then I'd encountered very few others on the trails, but at Punta Chiappa a smattering of people strolled the rocky spur—including my Milanese friend, who smiled and waved as I passed.

About halfway out, a dazzling mosaic depicted Stella Maris, or "Star of the Sea"—the title given to the Madonna by sailors and fishermen. High in the hills stands a villa turned hotel named for her, where Lord Byron allegedly penned part of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The words rang true: "There is a pleasure in the pathless woods / There is a rapture on the lonely shore / There is society where none intrudes / By the deep Sea, and music in its roar." 🌐