



I N S I D E R ' S

I T A L Y

Explore three contrasting perspectives of Italy from writers in the know. Sarah Barrell embraces la dolce vita in Liguria, Katie Parla samples undiscovered rural fare in Campania, while Kate Simon goes on a cultural tour of Lecce

IMAGE: GIULIO MAZZARINI. COURTESY: CARLINDYPROVIDED BY MAGGIORE (WWW.MAGGIORE.COM)



L I G U R I A

ON THE MOVE IN LIGURIA, ALTERNATE VIEWS OF PORTOFINO AND IMBIBING THE VIBE OF LA DOLCE VITA

WORDS: Sarah Barrell
PHOTOGRAPHS: Giulio Mazzarini

The bike is uncomfortably close to the edge of the cliff. The fact my brother-in-law, Bobby, is driving only adds to my all-round sense of edginess. More adept at piloting a pizza oven than a moped, this is nonetheless Bobby's one day off from cheffing, and he's damned if he's going to spend it stuck behind a queue of spluttering tour buses. I've talked him into taking me to Portofino — the pristine, craggy bay beloved of yachties, billionaires and Japanese tourists, shopping for overpriced designer linen. And the only way he's prepared to undertake this touristy outing is on a queue-dodging moped.

I love Portofino. This tiny jewel in Liguria's coastal crown is the one place most British travellers can name on the Italian Riviera; the switchback coastal stretch between the French and Tuscan borders is often overlooked in favour of southern beaches in Amalfi or Puglia. Yes, Portofino is packed to the pierside in summer months, and an espresso in one of its waterfront cafes costs as much as a modest yacht mooring elsewhere, but... those views. Its deep half-moon bay is jewelled with priceless palazzi, strung like chandeliers under knuckles of overhanging cliffs; its headland arcs into heady blues on a pine-fringed spit of land.

And those views don't have to come at a price. Bobby drops me at the edge of town and I skirt the bay before following a marked path onto the Portofino promontory for a hike towards the brightly painted harbour village of Camogli. Unlike the route to Cinque Terre — the string

of coastal villages to Liguria's south — few walkers venture here, deterred by Portofino's ritzy atmosphere (and the steep climb out of its bay). Instead, I find a nature reserve thick with heavy-scented pines, wild thyme and holm oak, clifftop clearings revealing grotto-like coves and the occasional billionaire's balcony.

The morning's walk brings me, knees humming, to 'the wife's house' (the dialect meaning of Camogli), a village whose fishermen were at sea so often their wives were the only real residents. Wiped out by the descent, I flop onto the shingle and spend a happy half-hour selecting my favourite hue from the town's rainbow display of painted houses — each tone a navigational beacon for its fisherman owner. Legs recovered, it's off to the nearest tabacchi (bar/newsagent) to buy a train ticket, and down a fortifying glass of Sciacchetrà — the glorious, golden dessert wine of Cinque Terre — before heading for the station.

It's rare that a rail ride brings you as close to the coast as walking does, but the line that runs south from Genoa to the beach town of Sestri Levante is almost within paddling proximity at points. I manage the five-minute journey to Santa Margherita before I'm seduced by the sun-drenched blues and hop off for a swim. There are, arguably, better places for a dip but the turquoise waters of this smart seaside town have inspired everyone from Nietzsche and Pirandello to Clark Gable. I do a languid backstroke around a phalanx of shiny speedboats (most of which belong to moneyed Milanese city folk rather ➤



Previous pages:
Camogli, Liguria.
This page: Santa
Margherita, Liguria.
Opposite, clockwise
from top left: Portofino;
Camogli; restaurant,
Camogli; local dish,
Camogli

EBAIA DELLE FAVOLE (BAY OF FAIRYTALES) IS NAMED IN HONOUR OF HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN, WHO SOJOURNED HERE IN THE EARLY 1800S. WITH ITS BLACK-AND-WHITE-STRIPED GENOESE GOTHIC CHURCH OVERLOOKING THE BAY, AND PASTEL HOUSES, IT'S THE STUFF OF CHILDREN'S STORYBOOKS

than locals, hence the town's nickname, Port of Milan), hoping I might be invited on board.

In good weather, there's an hourly boat between the coastal towns of Rapallo, Santa Margherita and Portofino — a fun ferry jaunt rather than a speedboat but with perfect photo ops back to the bays. But my timing's out. So I hop back on the train south to Sestri Levante, where two sandy bays back a terracotta town on a narrow isthmus — one of my favourite places to swim in Italy. I plough into the water, looking back to the Baia delle Favole (Bay of Fairytales), named in honour of Hans Christian Andersen, who sojourned here in the early 1800s. With its black-and-white gothic church overlooking the bay, and pastel houses, it's the stuff of children's storybooks.

Later, washed and dressed, and almost shaken from hair, I rejoin my in-laws under the vaulted shopping arcades in Chiavari, the neighbouring coastal town. It's time for the passeggiata (evening stroll), to scout for salty slices of farinata (local chickpea bread) in the town's 19th-century pasticceria (pastry shop). Chiavari is little known to Brits but is one of Liguria's most quietly elegant, food-focused towns. Its cuisine centres on seafood but also features earthy produce from its vast interior. Pesto was born here, thanks to lush sea-front mountains that encourage the sweetest of basil — found on every menu — along with local rabbit, beef, dairy, chickpeas and myriad veggies from organic smallholdings.

But for now, those stone farmhouse hamlets, cliff paths and copses, where coastal kids often dance the night away at free parties, feel a world away. As the moon climbs above the coast, the beach is calling. At sandy-floored bars and then a nightclub set into the cliffs like a James Bond villain's lair, we'll dance and find more excuses to swim, until the sun comes up over the bay again. How to do it: Seven nights at Hotel Jolanda in Santa Margherita Ligure from £544 per person, including B&B and return flights from Gatwick to Genoa. citalia.co.uk

Clockwise from top: Making farinata, Luchin restaurant, Chiavari; farinata; chef, Luchin.

Right page: Sextantio Albergo Diffuso



SARAH BARRELL'S SECRET SIX

1 THE BIKE TRIP: BAY-HOP NEAR THE FRENCH BORDER

Liguria has some very challenging terrain for serious cyclists and hikers. But if you just want to pedal peacefully along the coast, head to the seaside town of San Remo, near the French border, and hop onto a 13-mile greenway running along an old railway line just above the town. You can hop off at various bays along the way and bike hire is available in the town of San Lorenzo al Mare.

More info: pistaciclabile.com

2 THE RESTAURANT: LATTERIA DI SAN MARCO, MILAN

There are no reservations, barely any tables, the menu is minuscule and it's only open during the week. But this little 'nona's kitchen'-style restaurant, a former newspaper journalists' haunt, has delivered some of the best meals I've ever had in Italy. Expect simple Northern fare: stews and roasts, plenty of rosy veal, and if the endive and anchovy salad is on the menu, order it (and courier it to me if you don't like it).

More info: T 00 39 02 659 7653.

3 THE WILD BEACH: PARCO NATURALE DELLA MAREMMA

It's one-in, one-out at the car park in summer (almost entirely full of Italian holidaymakers) but this is one of my favourite stretches of beach in Italy. There's not a lido or sun lounger in sight; instead, wild, dune-backed beaches, long sandy paths shaded by sweet-smelling pine, little kiosks selling cold drinks, and endless views of the Med. South of the park, the promontory of Monte Argentario has little fishing villages and superb snorkelling in crystal-clear waters.

More info: parco-maremma.it

4 THE CITY BREAK: THE ANCIENT TOWN OF GENOA

A port since before the days of Columbus (who's claimed as a native), Genoa is a gritty and gothic city against a mountain backdrop. Alleys and piazzas conceal medieval palazzo — many, former bank buildings that are now museums, galleries and hotels. Don't miss the dockside Maritime Museum, and check into the former HQ of Ilva, Italy's biggest iron and steel manufacturer — now the ritzy Meliá Genova. melia.com

More info: visitgenoa.it

5 THE HOTEL: ALBERGHI DIFFUSI

If agriturismo was the accommodation choice of the 1990s, then today's Italian tourist address has to be the alberghi diffusi. These 'scattered lodgings' have saved some of Italy's deserted rural villages by converting crumbling houses and medieval palazzo into loosely formed resorts of hotels, villas and restaurants. There are around 40 dotted around Italy, but the best-known is Sextantio Albergo Diffuso, in the mountains of Abruzzo. sextantio.it/santo-stefano

More info: alberghidiffusi.it

6 THE MUSIC CLASS: OPERA IN FLORENCE

Stay at Florence's Hotel Savoy and you can book a one-to-one opera class. Take a day or weekend course, learning scales and arias with a professional, learn about the art in a lively lesson, tour the city's musical sights (opera was born here in the Medici courts) and then see an opera. The Opera Masterclass package costs from €1,011 (£815) per person, based on two people sharing, including two nights' B&B, accommodation.

More info: roccofortehotels.com ➤



CAMPANIA

EXPLORE THE FRESH FLAVOURS OF THE CAMPANIA COUNTRYSIDE AND FEAST ON LOCAL OLIVES, TOMATOES AND CHEESE

WORDS: Katie Parla

Speeding down the A1 — the Italian traffic artery playfully dubbed the 'Motorway of the Sun' — I exit at Capua. Slowing my pace to navigate the series of increasingly curvy roads leading to my destination, Le Campestre, an agriturismo buried deep inside Campania. While most visitors to this southern region continue onwards to Vesuvius, the Amalfi Coast and the ancient cities filling the wide crescent bounded by the Sorrento Peninsula and Naples, I'm after the little-known flavours of Campania's interior.

My hosts are the Lombardi family, ambassadors for a regional cuisine that, after years of decline and neglect, is experiencing a full-on renaissance. After decades in Belgium, the Lombardis returned to their native land where they have married a passion for their

agricultural ancestry with their exposure to northern European sustainability. In doing so, they've created a peaceful retreat where they nourish visitors with their own wine, olive oil, cheese, vegetables and livestock.

At Le Campestre, citrus groves and olive orchards give way to pastures where sheep graze on a diet of herbs. Their chickens supply eggs and poultry, while heritage-breed Nero Casertano pigs appear on the table as cured meats and mains. The quality and integrity of the ingredients attracts overnight guests like me to their three well-appointed rooms, but their onsite restaurant serves a larger audience of locals who come to imbibe the flavours of their land and its past.

My feast at Le Campestre's table begins with a plentiful antipasto spread — homegrown ➤

Clockwise from top left: making cheese, dining area, Le Campestre; Conciato romano cheese, Le Campestre; sheep, Le Campestre

IMAGES: LE CAMPESTRE



LASBECCIATRICE OFFERS TOMATO VARIETIES WITH COMPLEX FLAVOURS SO VARIED THAT NOT TWO ARE SUITED FOR THE SAME USE. THEIR SUMMER CROPS ARE SERVED SLICED, DRESSED IN OIL, TOSSED WITH PASTA, SEASONED WITH SALT OR BOTTLED FOR WINTER USE

vegetables preserved in oil, house-cured olives, homemade primo sale cheese — and scialatelli (fettuccine-like pasta) with squash and herbs. The family beam with pride as they recount the history of the cheese they grate onto this dish; conciato romano verged on extinction before the Lombardis helped to revive it. This sheep's-milk cheese is aged in terracotta vessels, a process that can be traced back to Roman times.

These ancient flavours have also been championed at Pepe in Grani (pepeingrani.it), in nearby Caiazzo. Since opening in October 2012, Franco Pepe's pizzeria has become nothing less than a pilgrimage destination. I join the ranks of his disciples and descend a stone alleyway towards the pizzeria, a three-storey stone building in Caiazzo's dense and diminutive historical centre. As I approach the entrance, I'm greeted with the fragrant aroma of baking dough, wafting through the alley. I spot Franco Pepe hard at work near the oven. He and his assistants work in unison as pizza after pizza is prepared, topped, and baked in the domed, wood-burning oven.

Of the 430 pizzas Pepe in Grani served that night, four landed on my table, each one delivering the flavours and aromas of the region. A billowing escarole (endive) calzone was followed by heirloom tomato and mozzarella pizza. Cured rabbit was paired with ribbons of celery. The final pizza featured a sharp and tangy conciato romano and fig preserves. Each topping was carefully chosen to evoke Pepe's — and Le Campestre's — native land and doused generously with extra virgin olive

oil from the Petrazzuoli (petrazzuoli.it) olive orchards in Ruviano.

Pepe urges me to visit his oil purveyor, and so the next day I drive to Ruviano, where thick and knotted ulivi secolari — centuries-old olive trees — bear fruit every autumn that's harvested by hand, then pressed. The resulting unfiltered oil is fruity, green and herbaceous. Just as with conciato, a revived appreciation for quality, cold-pressed oils has grown in this part of Campania.

Tomatoes, the region's other famous fruit, have also seen a resurgence. Beginning in the 1950s, heirloom tomato varieties were increasingly forgotten, as farming communities lost many of their inhabitants to the cities.

At La Sbecciatrice (lasbecciatrice.it) brothers Lino and Domenico Barbiero are dedicated to protecting native produce species and have a particular interest in the pomodoro (tomato), which arrived in the region in the 16th century and is now virtually synonymous with Campanian cuisine. La Sbecciatrice offers varieties with complex flavours so varied no two are suited for the same use. Their summer crops are served sliced, dressed in oil, tossed with pasta, seasoned with salt or bottled for winter use. They might not be reinventing the wheel, but sometimes, the simple pleasures are the best. How to do it: Le Campestre charges €35 (£30) per person for a double room. This includes breakfast. Lunch costs from €30 (£25) per person, while dinner is from €20 per person (£17); following regional tradition, dinner is lighter than lunch. Therefore, half pension (lunch) is €65 (£54), full €85 (£71). lecampestre.it ➤

KATIE PARLA'S SECRET SIX

1 BEST FOR PALATIAL SPLENDOUR:
REGGIA DI CASERTA

Begun in 1752 by Charles VII, the Bourbon king of Naples, the Royal Palace of Caserta was intended to house the royal court and to provide a Versailles-like, defensible alternative to the more vulnerable residences in Naples. The palace sprawls over a plateau and its gilded ceremonial halls and grand residential apartments give way to gardens, pools and baroque fountains. More info: reggiadicaserta.beniculturali.it

2 BEST FOR GODS & GLADIATORS:
ANFITEATRO DI CAPUA

The ancient city of Capua — and its gladiatory school — was the staging ground of the most famous slave rebellion in Roman times. In the first century BC, a Thracian slave called Spartacus led an uprising against his captors who'd enslaved him to train and fight as a gladiator. Although Spartacus and his compatriots ultimately succumbed to the Roman legions, and few traces of them survive, Capua's mighty amphitheatre survives as a reminder of their defeat. Beneath the stadium ruins lies a sanctuary to Mithras, god of a popular mystery cult. More info: cir.campania.beniculturali.it/archeocapuvavetere/history-of-site

3 BEST FOR MONUMENTS & RELIEFS:
BENEVENTO & THE ARCO DI TRAIANO

The ancient Samnite city of Beneventum fell to the Romans in the third century BC and for the next 500 years occupied a strategic position along the Appian Way, a 350-mile road linking Rome to the Adriatic Sea. Due to its location, Republican generals and subsequent emperors erected monumental structures in the city, including the triumphal Arch of Trajan. Today, traffic circles the second-century marble work, which is embellished with reliefs commemorating the emperor Trajan's triumphs over his adversaries in Dacia.

4 BEST FOR MEDIEVAL MONASTERIES:
SANT'AGATA DEI GOTI

Chosen for its highly defensible position on a sheer volcanic ridge, this pristine medieval village is populated with irregularly-shaped military towers, fortified palaces and austere monasteries. A stroll through Sant'Agata's stunning labyrinth of stone-and-brick structures provides a peaceful counterpoint to the city's bellicose past.

5 BEST FOR ALPINE EXCURSIONS:
PARCO REGIONALE DEL MATESE

Straddling the regions of Campania and Molise, the Matese Regional Park is home to a dolomitic massif of medieval villages, castles and forests. Summer offers hiking or a dip in Italy's highest lake, while the slopes welcome winter skiers. More info: parcoregionaledelmatese.it

6 BEST FOR MONASTIC ARTISTRY:
CERTOSA DI SAN LORENZO DI PADULA

This vast Carthusian monastery, dedicated to San Lorenzo, sprawls over a plain in the Cilento and Vallo di Diano National Park, near Salerno. Founded in 1306, the Certosa is Italy's second-largest monastery. The finest artists and artisans of the Bourbon age were employed to embellish its chapels, libraries and cloister. More info: parks.it/parco.nazionale.cilento/Eindex.php ►

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Left: Pepe in Grani pizza.

Below, from top: Certosa di San Lorenzo di Padula; Piedimonte Matese, Caserta



IMAGES: FOTOTECA ENIT; LUCIANO FURIA/FRANCO PEPE

LECCE

ACULTURALCITYTOUROFLECCE,WATCHINGARTISANSATWORK,DININGIN RUSTIC EATERIES AND SEEKING OUT THE CULTURAL TREASURES

WORDS: Kate Simon

Marco Epicochi will not be distracted from his work. He's engrossed in modelling a miniature arm from papier-mâché. I shuffle around his small studio-cum-shop, inspecting, if not quite admiring, the saccharine figurines of jaunty swains, gnarled shepherds and pious priests populating the shelves. "How much?" I ask, pointing to a saintly figure captured in prayer. "One hundred euros," he replies, barely looking up from the job in hand.

What most intrigues me is not Signore Epicochi's undoubted skill at furrowing paper into the soft folds of a peasant's cloak or smoothing it into the open palms of a benevolent saint — it's his age. He can't have hit 40 and

yet here he is in his studio in Lecce practising the ancient art for which this southern Italian city is renowned. In fact, he's one of a new generation of artisans securing a future for the tradition.

Marco's Laboratorio della Cartapesta sits in the shadow of the cathedral, in a corner of the vast Piazza del Duomo, the religious epicentre of Lecce. Cartapesta (creating figures out of straw, rags and paper) was initially an act of devotion, spawning an industry that boomed in the 17th century with the — literal and metaphorical — rise of the church here. During that period, no corner of the city was left without a place of worship, no sacred spot unembellished

by adornments hewn from the local tufa (a malleable limestone favoured by sculptors, which remains a major export).

Lecce is a city-size showcase of baroque. The creamy tufa dazzles in the sun and even on a rare gloomy day bestows Lecce with a light, bright, optimistic air. Ornate temples seduce the eye throughout the city, although none is quite so florid as the Basilica di Santa Croce, on Via Umberto I. Onlookers can't help but goggle at its menagerie of creatures — inhabitants of both Heaven and Hell — gamboling around a huge rose window, heaved towards the heavens by grotesque animals and Turkish atlantes (pillars).

Santa Croce — now an official national monument — is just one reason why the city is dubbed 'the Florence of the South'. Yet for all its good looks, there's room to breathe here; Lecce has yet to become congested with throngs of tourists.

The 17th century was a golden era for Lecce, but not its only heyday. The city's importance was confirmed much earlier, when the Roman emperor Hadrian moved the original settlement established by the Messapii a few miles up the road to its position today at the heart of the flatlands at the bottom of Italy's heel.

I head for the Piazza Sant'Oronzo to see evidence of Roman occupation, in the shape of the city's amphitheatre. I find a perfect tiered horseshoe rising up from beneath the square, large enough to host 15,000 spectators and replete with archways through which once entered the beasts and men who performed the gory entertainment on the arena floor. This is only half the story; further ruins lie below the piazza, covered for now by more recent buildings, including stark examples of fascist architecture — a cold and menacing contrast to the warm and exuberant baroque all around.

It's time for lunch, so I make my way to Doppiozero, on Via Arcivescovo Petronelli. This is one of a growing number of smart little eateries that have opened in Lecce over the past few years, as Italians from above the country's ankle and a trickle of holidaymakers from northern Europe have started exploring Salento, the southern tip of Puglia.

The style is rustic. The main counter is heaped with meats, cheeses and breads, and the wall opposite displays a gallery of wines. Along the centre of the space runs a line of wooden tables, above which clusters of empty bottles hang from a long horizontal pole to provide a novel form of illumination.

The chairs are filling up fast with locals and the chatter is exclusively Italian. Lecce is no open-air museum preserved in aspic; this is a living, breathing Italian city. That's undoubtedly part of the Lecce's appeal, but for how long? How to do it: Ryanair flies to Brindisi from Gatwick. Trains from Brindisi to Lecce cost around £7 each way. Double rooms at La Bella Lecce B&B cost from £46 a night. ryanair.com trenitalia.com labellalecce.it ►

Below: Papier-mâché sculpture, Lecce.
Opposite from top: Facade of Basilica di Santa Croce; breads, Doppiozero; exterior, Doppiozero



IMAGES: ALAMY; GETTY; OO DOPPIOZERO



AT BASILICA DI SANTA CROCE, A MENAGERIE OF CREATURES GAMBOL AROUND A HUGE ROSE WINDOW, HEAVED TOWARD THE HEAVENS BY GROTESQUE ANIMALS AND TURKISH ATLANTES



KATE SIMON'S SECRET SIX

1 BEST FOR NEOLITHIC DWELLINGS:
CAVA D'ISPICA

Carol King, an English writer living in Sicily, recommends the Cava d'Ispica, a limestone gorge between Ispica and Modica in the south east of Sicily. Since Neolithic times, people have lived in this eight-mile-long gorge and over the centuries they've carved dwellings, churches and catacombs out of its rocky walls. Enter from the north via the Ufficio di Sovrintendenza or, in the south, at Parco della Forza.

2 BEST FOR COASTAL VIEWS:
CAPO VATICANO LIGHTHOUSE

Head for the lighthouse at Capo Vaticano, just south of Tropea, in Calabria, advises Carolyn Spinks, chief operating officer of the Association of British Travel Organisers to Italy. "Join the winding path leading to the cliff edge to take in spectacular views across the sea to Sicily," she says. "Then pull up a seat in the cafe-bar perched on the cliff here and let mamma knock up a delicious dish of seafood from the day's catch." More info: loveitaly.co.uk

3 BEST FOR ANCESTRAL HOMES:
CAVE CITY, MATERA

If you visit Basilicata, the cave city in Matera is a must-see. But detour to Bernalda, 45 minutes away, too, says Dale Connelly, marketing manager of Discover Basilicata. This beautiful hilltop town is the ancestral home of Francis Ford Coppola, who owns a hotel here. But Dale's special tip is 11-room country house Giardino Giamperduto. More info: discoverbasilicata.com giamperduto.com


4 BEST FOR GREEK TEMPLES:
AGROPOLI

If you're planning a trip to Paestum, in Campania — the site of some of Italy's most magnificent Greek temples — extend your time in the area by taking a short train ride to Agropoli. From here, follow the coastal path to Castellabate, says Christopher Knowles, director of World Walks. "You'll enjoy wonderful sea views, the occasional ruined fort, and a chance for a refreshing swim at the end." More info: worldwalks.com

5 BEST FOR SICILIAN FLAVOURS:
RISTORANTE DIONISO

Follow the locals to Ristorante Dioniso, in Siracuse, says Julie Brown, office manager of Peter Sommer Travels. "The chef, Lele, is a food alchemist," she explains, "who takes fresh local ingredients and turns them into delicious meals with a truly authentic Sicilian flavour." Check out the braised beef in Nerello wine — made from a variety of red grape grown in the Mascali area of the Province of Catania. More info: dionisortigia.it petersommer.com

6 BEST FOR BUDGET SIGHTSEEING:
SITA BUS FROM SORRENTO

Kate Dwyer, press officer at Citalia, has a clever little tip for some budget sightseeing. "Take the local Sita bus from Sorrento up to Termini for stunning views across the bay from the main square," she says. "Or take the bus from Sorrento to Marina del Cantone for more wonderful views, this time of the surrounding countryside." More info: citalia.com 

Above: Temple of Neptune at Paestum, Campania