

# Escape the CROWDS

Lesser known than the Cinque Terre but equally beautiful, Pete Thompson marvels at the northern Italian delights of Porto Venere.

**T**he Ligurian Sea glistens under a clear blue sky as I admire a view of the colourful historic village of Porto Venere.

I could not wish for a better vantage point to marvel at such a beautiful coastline across the calm turquoise water following a leisurely walk on Palmaria Island.

Nestled away in the Italian Riviera, near the border of Tuscany and Liguria, Porto Venere tends to be overlooked by the hordes of holidaymakers who flock to the nearby Cinque Terre.

I soon discovered they are missing out on a picturesque haven in a bay that was dubbed the 'Gulf of Poets' – due to the literary legends who drew inspiration from these shores.

Lord Byron, D.H. Lawrence, Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Sand were among the esteemed creative greats who found this stunning part of the world so alluring.

As I gaze out to where Lord Byron braved tempestuous waters to swim across the bay from Porto Venere to visit Shelley in the village of San Terenzo so many years ago, the welcome sight of a boat arriving at Palmaria Island captures my attention.

And before I know it, I am being treated like a nobleman after stepping on board for a tour around the bay with Associazione per il mare.

Prior to our voyage, sumptuous fresh oysters were served up along with mouthwatering mussels and pasta that had been cooked at the front of the vessel.

Fine local wines and conversation flowed on a glorious day in an idyllic setting for lunch as we bobbed gently on the water –

lapping up the exquisite scenery and bright sunshine.

We were then treated to a cruise past the striking mix of brightly coloured houses in Porto Venere's charming harbour, just a short stroll from the magnificent Church of Saint Peter – which was transformed into a Christian temple in the first years of Christianity and is a spectacular sight perched above the rocks by the sea.

Back on dry land, I meander through the narrow, winding cobbled backstreets, marvelling at ancient architectural wonders such as the Doria Castle – built around 1160 – and taking in jaw-dropping vistas in a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

And all this just a stone's throw from the Grand Hotel Portovenere – which very much lived up to its name during my magical stay.

Originally a 17th-century convent, the five-star boutique hotel overlooks the marina and the old town and is just a short boat or train journey away from the Cinque Terre.

I could never tire of the captivating views from the balcony of my room, or the smiles of the welcoming hotel staff who worked so meticulously throughout my visit.

There is a lovely laid-back feel in the hotel's Palmaria Restaurant, where I sampled moreish freshly-baked focaccia, scrumptious pumpkin gnocchi and luscious octopus dishes.

I had worked up an appetite on my first day by clocking up the miles on the nearby scenic coastal hiking trails of the Cinque Terre – which we reached by train, as the choppy sea prevented us from taking the boat.

The Cinque Terre is made up of five picture-postcard villages - Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore – along a rugged coastline and you are certainly rewarded for stretching your legs.

I can be guilty of turning a walk into a route march, but I was in no rush to finish this adventure after starting out from Monterosso as I took in the splendour of sharp cliffs overlooking the crystal-clear sea, small coves and an array of yellow, pink, green and orange homes.

It was only right that we raised a glass or two after finishing such an enjoyable walk and a trip to the Possa Winery in Riomaggiore ended our excursion on another high note.

Heydi Bonanini spoke with passion high on the hillside as he showed us where 11 generations of his family have farmed land on steep terrain, producing top class wines that have won awards at home and overseas.

We sampled some of the fruits of his labour in an atmosphere tasting room, whetting the appetite for further Ligurian delights back in Porto Venere.

And sure enough I was in for another treat at the 3 Torri restaurant, where the seafood special was a shrewd selection as I sampled the very best of the local cuisine.

Porto Venere has been dubbed the Cinque Terre's 'sixth town', but with natural beauty including quiet coves such as 'as Byron's Grotto' you can see why the great poet retreated here to escape the crowds.

*Book your stay at the Grand Hotel Portovenere at [www.portoveneregrand.com](http://www.portoveneregrand.com)*

