

# BELLISSIMO

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A narrow, colorful street in Porto Venere, Italy. The buildings are multi-story, with warm tones of yellow, orange, and peach. Many windows have green shutters. The street is paved with stone and has a few people walking and sitting on the steps. There are potted plants and a bicycle parked on the street.

# Everyday Poetry in and Around Porto Venere

*Porto Venere in the province of La Spezia is often used as little more than a crash pad before or after a trip to the Cinque Terre. But we suggest making like Lord Byron and staying put for a while.*

**By Mary Gray**

There's not been a whole lot going on in Porto Venere — sometimes written as "Portovenere" — since the days when Lord Byron was bumming around town. The Romantic poet purportedly drew inspiration from a jagged-edged grotto in the area, now collapsed but re-christened in his honor; today, "Byron's Grotto" is one of the three or four brochure-backed things to see in the sleepy fishing village. Don't bother hunting for other attractions; here, your time is best spent lazing on a motorboat, climbing the cobblestone streets, or simply "sittin'" and "watchin' the tide roll away," à la Otis Redding.

Byron and the Shelleys, who lodged temporarily in nearby Lerici, may no longer be around, but the poetic sensibility of the area remains. Sometimes you'll see this play out in local events; for 70 years, in fact, bookish types in the larger Bay of Poets have hosted literary initiatives linked to a poetry prize known as the Premio LericiPea. But mostly, that "poetic sensibility" is just an enduring local mood



of waterfront wistfulness. Perhaps it arises from the town's strange duality; Porto Venere is little more than a quick prelude to the Cinque Terre for most travelers, yet it's etched permanently in the psyches of those who are from around here. (Take it from Sergio Guidotti, the young house manager at the Capitolare Tower, who told me upon meeting, and with disarming conviction, that he "will one day die here in Porto Venere.")

If we're all going to depart this mortal realm eventually, we could do a lot worse than leaving from Porto Venere. But the town makes an ideal resting place long *before* you reach, well, your final one. Instead of arriving by ferry some balmy evening and scurrying on to the Cinque Terre the next day, take a deep breath and dock here for a while. You won't find much to "do," but there are few better places to simply "be."

#### **IF YOU GO**

*Stay at Grand Hotel Porto Venere (pictured above) and spring for a boat rental. Head to Venus Bar for sunset cocktails.*