



Portovenere's Church of San Pietro.

The Secret Italian Riviera

Liguria's Gulf of Poets delivers charm and breathing room in equal measure.

BY INGRID K. WILLIAMS

IT MAY SEEM AS IF THERE are no undiscovered stretches of the Italian Riviera. After all, centuries of visitors, from conquering Romans and Grand Touring Brits to rail-pass-toting backpackers and well-heeled cruisers, have explored the region's splendors. Still, some surprises remain here.

Just south of the Cinque Terre lies a dazzling gulf dotted with small beaches, turquoise coves, and pastel villages hugging the glittering Mediterranean Sea. One of the largest villages, Lerici, which I've called home for several years, is a place that Italians across the boot recognize instantly. "*Che bello!*" they exclaim upon hearing where I live. "*Il Golfo dei Poeti!*" "The Gulf of Poets" is how most refer to what is officially called the Gulf of La Spezia, which owes its nickname to the many poets and writers – D.H. Lawrence, Lord Byron,



From left: Fresh catch at San Terenzo's La Creuza de Mauri restaurant, seaside in Fiascherino, and Lerici's marina.

Percy and Mary Shelley, George Sand, Petrarch, and Eugenio Montale among them – who have sought (and found) inspiration in these serene seaside surroundings.

Ringed by former fishing hamlets, the gulf today is a summertime paradise and a favorite destination among vacationing Milanese on their monthlong August holidays. But among international travelers, the area remains lesser known, in large part because no trains – only local buses – connect these smaller towns. Yet those willing to embrace the buses or travel by car will discover another set of *cinque terre*, or five lands, in the towns of Portovenere, San Terenzo, Lerici, Fiascherino, and Tellaro. Each harbors its own unique appeal.

FIRST STOP: Portovenere

On the gulf's western cusp, just down the coast from the famous Cinque Terre, Portovenere closely resembles its neighboring villages, with labyrinthine lanes and a jumble of tall, narrow houses painted dusty rose, periwinkle, tangerine, mustard, and lemon yellow. Narrow stepped alleyways called *carrugi* wind through the town, from the

main shopping drag of Via Capellini to a medieval hilltop fortress. Just beyond the town center on a promontory jutting into the sea, the twelfth-century San Pietro Church, with its zebra-striped facade, welcomes seafarers to the Gulf of Poets.

ACROSS THE GULF: San Terenzo

According to local lore, when Lord Byron lived in Portovenere in the early 1800s, the athletically inclined poet had a habit of swimming across the bay – a span of nearly four miles – to visit the Shelleys in San Terenzo. The couple then resided in Villa Magni, a whitewashed house with a distinctive arched colonnade that still stands today. But the village itself, which Mary Shelley found terribly desolate, is today a lively beach town with a wide crescent of sand dotted with socially distanced sunbathing locals, paddleboard-playing teens, and children splashing in the shallow waves.

BELOW THE CASTLE: Lerici

A mile-and-a-half-long waterfront promenade connects San Terenzo to neighboring Lerici. The scenic walk passes palm trees,

sandy coves, and beach clubs with neat rows of sun loungers and parasols. The largest of the towns that ring La Spezia's bay, Lerici is home to about 10,000 year-round residents, but typically accommodates thousands more during the summer months. A hulking stone fortress overlooks the town and its bustling marina, where yachts and polished sailing boats drop anchor beside fishing trawlers and weathered dinghies. Restaurants on the main piazza serve Ligurian specialties – steamed local mussels, *trofie* pasta smothered in pesto – but you're more likely to find locals sprawled on the large rocks of the breakwater with take-away focaccia and gelato.

SECRET SHORES: Eco del Mare and Fiascherino

If Lerici's beaches begin to feel cramped, quieter coves await south of town. A narrow two-lane road snakes high above the sea past olive groves, backyard vineyards, and trees heavy with oranges and lemons. A small parking area marks the entrance to Eco del Mare, an exclusive beach club in a small cove nearly 200 feet below the road. Those who make the descent will find an

Local Culture

idyllic bay ringed by high cliffs and a golden beach with a few gauzy umbrellas. Farther down the road, in the hamlet of Fiascherino, fewer bathers find their way to the town's adjacent coves, both with fine, soft sand. The larger, fronting Locanda Il Senatore, offers the added opportunity to dine on fresh seafood on the restaurant's pergola-covered terrace.

SEASIDE PEARL: Tellaro

Beyond Fiascherino, the coastal road ends at Tellaro, one of the most beautiful hamlets in all of Italy, according to a national association that lists villages of exceptional beauty and culture. But ask locals what Tellaro is best known for, and they'll tell you it's octopus. Legend maintains that the villagers were once saved from marauding pirates thanks to an octopus that climbed the bell tower and sounded a warning. At the town's much-anticipated summer Octopus Festival, the cephalopod is served *alla tellarese* (boiled until tender and served with potatoes and local olive oil). But it's hard to consider anything but Tellaro's beauty while wandering along its brick-and-stone alleyways, past candy-colored houses and the rose-colored chapel beside the sea. At sunset, with views of Portovenere across the Gulf of Poets, it's a scene as magical as any to be found in the Cinque Terre, on the greater Italian Riviera, or beyond.

TIP

"As an alternative to hiking from village to village in the Cinque Terre, there's a great hiking trail starting in Lerici that extends down to Bocca di Magra, on the border with Tuscany. It's a scenic experience that's certainly up to the standard of the most exacting of hikers."

— Adamarie King, Virtuoso travel advisor, Raleigh



Tellaro and the Gulf of Poets.

POETIC PURSUITS

Planning for a Gulf of La Spezia getaway.

STAY The seaside **Grand Hotel Portovenere** stands at the western edge of the Gulf of Poets, with 47 rooms in a sixteenth-century former Franciscan monastery. The surrounding area is well within reach here, especially with the hotel's Soleil 33 motorboat, available for guests to rent. *Doubles from \$425, including complimentary parking, breakfast daily,*

and a \$100 dining credit.

CRUISE Ponant's 184-passenger *Bougainville* kicks off an eight-day round-trip sailing from Nice next spring with a stop in Portovenere. It's an opportunity to explore the Gulf of Poets before moving on to Viareggio, Livorno, and other Italian ports. *Departure: May 17, 2022; from \$3,320.*

Next summer, **Star Clippers'** 166-passenger *Star Clipper* sails from Rome to Cannes. The ship calls in the Gulf of Poets town of Lerici, where travelers can stop by the fortress and stroll the waterfront, gelato in hand. The six-day sailing also calls in Portoferraio on Elba Island, Portofino, and Monaco. *Departure: June 6, 2022; from \$1,300. VI*



Grand Hotel Portovenere.