



Portofino

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Exploring the Portofino Peninsula

The *Portofino Peninsula* juts out a few miles to the south of the city of *Genoa*, on the iconic Italian Riviera. Since the early 20th century, the towns of the Italian Riviera have been a place to see and be seen. Today, although not exactly off the beaten path, tourism in this area has calmed down a bit, making the Portofino Peninsula a wonderful bite-sized destination for travelers who enjoy seaside towns, hiking and great food.

While the Mediterranean civilizations have indeed been focused on the sea for trade and commerce, the shore was once a destination for pirates and slave



traders. It was not safe to live on the coast until about the year 1000 AD, when the cities of *Pisa* and *Genoa* (and in other parts of Italy, *Amalfi* and *Venice*) created maritime republics to control and defend the seas. (This is also the reason Rome was built 12 miles up the Tiber River and why the Etruscans built their cities inland.) It was during this period that the seaside villages such as those of the *Cinque Terre* and of the Portofino Peninsula were built.

The main towns of the Portofino Peninsula are *Portofino*, *Santa Margherita Ligure*, *Rapallo* and *Camogli*. Connected by trains, buses, boats, and hiking trails, the curious and active

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Castelmezzano

The Most Beautiful Villages in Basilicata

It's late afternoon in May, and I'm winding through hills dotted with *ginestra* in glorious yellow bloom. As we get higher, hawks circle overhead, my ears pop. I'm filled with thoughts of *Papa* (my grandfather), who was born in this southern region of *Basilicata*, the instep of Italy's boot. How bizarre it must have been for him to leave this quiet countryside behind in 1917, head to noisy Naples, and then get on a ship for the American dream, landing amidst the brick and crowds of Manhattan.

I'm doing Papa's trip in reverse. Having spent the morning jostling around the *Pignaseca* market and gorging on *sfogliatelle* in Naples, I'm now in Basilicata's central province of *Potenza* to explore three villages: *Castelmezzano*, *Pietrapertosa* and *Acerenza*. They're among a group of 200 destinations chosen by an association called *I Borghi Più Belli d'Italia*. These "borghi" are selected not only for their beauty, but also because they showcase cultural and culinary traditions. The association has been key in boosting tourism to these hidden treasures, perfect for travelers like me, who are always after unique experiences and the chance to meet locals.

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Portofino is home to around 500 people.

At the wheel is *Pasquale Stasi*, enthusiastic mayor of Pietrapertosa, accompanied by a darling *signorina*, *Antonella Amico*, of the Castelmezzano tourist board. “*Siamo tutti Lucani!*,” shouts Pasquale, pleased when I tell him my grandfather was born nearby.

Lucania was the original name of this region, believed to have come from the Latin word for “sacred wood”. Though the name was changed to Basilicata in the 10th century, natives hold their ties to the ancient Lucani tribe who occupied this area before the Greeks, Romans, Lombards and Normans took over. A flash of memory brings me back to my grandparents’ dining room table, where meals always ended with Papa pouring an herbal digestivo, *Amaro Lucano*, from a bottle decorated with a smiling dancing signora.

The road winds around gorges, through tunnels, and suddenly a “wow” escapes me as I catch sight of the Lucanian Dolomites, cutting into the blue sky. These jagged sandstone mountains are the major landmark of my companions’ neighboring villages, that I’ll explore one by one...

Castelmezzano

The main *piazza* is dramatically set over a deep ravine, with an enchanting jumble of homes set into the rocks across the way. I stand in awe with Antonella by my side, savoring a perfect silent moment, inhaling cool mountain air. Then bells clang behind us from the 13th-century *Chiesa Madre di S. Dell’Olmo Maria*.

Antonia tells me the church was built by the Knight Templars, and that’s their eight-pointed cross on the door. The inside is elegantly decorated. Especially beautiful is the church’s most famous statue, the Madonna of



Castelmezzano



Volo d’Angelo

the Elm, with the Virgin seated majestically, babe in one arm, in the other a sphere. “The knights believed she held the power, the world,” says Antonia, “she was their key to the Divine.”

We take a path up narrow cobblestoned vias, moving closer to the towering mountains. Antonella points out their distinctive shapes—one resembles the beak of an owl, another a golden eagle. We climb higher around ruins of a Norman castle, which inspired the name Castelmezzano from *Castrum Medianum*, castle in the middle of this range. There are worn steps carved into the rocks, where warriors once scurried to look out for attackers, with views at the top that stretch to the Ionian Sea.

As I catch my breath, Antonella gestures towards a wire over the gorge in the distance. It’s the area’s major tourist attraction: The *Volo d’Angelo*, a zipline that takes adventurers on a scenic flight, from Castelmezzano to

Pietrapertosa—a 75mph, 90-second, adrenalin-inducing ride. Antonella loves working for the Volo during the summer season.

“Besides bringing in visitors from all over the world, the Volo has brought our two villages closer together,” she tells me. “It’s so much quicker than driving, so us locals use it regularly to save a half hour on the road.” Scaredy-cat that I am, I’m relieved to not be offered the Volo ride, as I’m here on one of its closing days. Pasquale is waiting for us down below, to drive us on another windy road to the highest village in the region..

Pietrapertosa



We pass through an oak tree forest to reach the village, which sits inside the *Gallipoli-Cognato National Park*, a popular spot for hikers in the spring and fall. The sun is beginning to set, casting soft shadows on the valley below. Mayor Pasquale proudly takes me through the Arabata, Arab quarter, a labyrinth of narrow streets, where



Fortress in Pietrapertosa

homes are stacked in jagged rows against the rocks. He stops along stairways to pet wandering cats he knows by name, gives a *buona sera* to a signora in a housecoat who is out tending her tiny vegetable patch.

Beyond the quarter comes the adventure of discovering the fortress. It was originally built by the Saracens, then enlarged in the Middle Ages by the Normans. Vice Mayor *Rocco* joins us, unlocking a gate set in an ancient archway where stone steps take us higher and higher, circling through and around the castle towers.

The region of *Basilicata* makes up



An eagle swoops by as we ascend to the highest point along a narrow ledge. "Are you afraid?" Pasquale asks. By now I'm too wrapped up in the natural beauty for fear to factor in—the gorgeous views from up here of rich green forests below, first golden rays of sunset, church bells clanging faintly in the distance... *Glorious!*

Acerenza



A little over an hour's drive north brings me to this village that the Roman poet Horace, who was born nearby, described as "an eagle's nest". The *centro storico* is a flat-top perch, sitting above fertile plains and olive groves, surrounded by rivers. I can walk from one edge of the medieval wall to another in about 10 minutes, and am on my own in the early morning, wandering past homes adorned with charming lace curtains, window boxes filled with vibrant geraniums.

While I've poked around many small Italian towns as a solo traveler and have often been met

with suspicious stares from the natives, here in Acerenza, everyone I pass—from the signora out sweeping her steps to the barber opening his shop, gives me kind *buon giornos*.

The village centerpiece is the 11th-century *Cattedrale*, dedicated to the Madonna of the Assumption and Saint Canio. It's an awesome, massive structure, inspired by the Abbey of Cluny in France, and one of the finest

examples of Clunaic-Romanesque architecture in all of Italy. Some say that the name of the region, Basilicata, came from this church, which was classified as a basilica in the Middle Ages, when Acerenza held the area's judicial power.

On the cathedral steps, I meet another Lucani named *Antonella (D'Andria)*, a chic black-bobbed-haired signorina, from the *Acerenza ProLoco*. I'm taken by the outside columns, decorated with twisted Gothic animals and tortured human figures. "Yikes," I say, "let's get inside for our blessings!" Below the vast interior is a gorgeous Renaissance chapel, all sculpted curves, lovely painted frescos, and the crypt of Saint Canio.



Antonio Saluzzi



Church of Acerenza

Antonella shows me a glass opening in the tomb where you can see the saint's staff, which she says has miraculously shifted positions at random times over the years. We move on to the *Museo Diocesano*, an impressive two floors displaying Greek vases from the ancient days of the village, along with vessels that once held tears of

the deceased, and miniature figures of mourners used in funeral rituals.

Outside the *centro storico*, *Saverio Cancellara*, the Mayor's gentlemanly sidekick, drives us to delightful discoveries. In a cool, quiet cave, is the *Grillo Winery*, where I taste local rich red *Aglianico* straight out of a barrel. Further along, off a dirt road, we get to the workshop of master artisan Antonio Saluzzi, who treated me to a

passionate demo of casting a bronze medallion, following a three-thousand year tradition.

I met the village hero: *Vincenzo Tiri*, a 35-year-old baker, aka *Re Panettone*, King of Panettone. For the past two years, Tiri has won this honor in a Milan competition, where the sweet treat was first mass-produced in the early 20th century. Since panettone has always been known as a northern Italian specialty, Tiri's triumph rocked Italy's culinary scene.

The *Tiri 1957* bakery is humble as can be, with locals slipping in and out to pick up *biscotti* and breads. Vincenzo's parents proudly stand by, flanked by their son's many framed awards, as the *continued on page 7*

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the "instep" of the Italian boot.

traveler can easily spend a week exploring and getting to know this little slice of Italy. Each town offers something a little bit different. To truly experience the local culture, be sure to



Belmond Splendido

leave time for the *passaggiata* — around 4:30 p.m. at any of the promenades — and the pre-dinner *aperitivo* — around 6:30 p.m. for a glass of *Prosecco* and some snacks.

Portofino: People Watching

A former fishing village, today's Portofino is a lovely small town of colorful Ligurian houses. Although no longer at the height of its glitz and glamour, the town is still a popular destination for the rich and famous and a place to see and be seen. Visitors will see million-dollar yachts in the harbor and maybe witness a movie crew setting up or a live photo shoot taking place. Definitely allocate some time to people-watching in Portofino!

But, with just 500 permanent residents, this influx of visitors can make the town feel very touristy, especially on spring and summer weekends. To get away from the fray, luxury travelers willing to splurge who want to stay right in Portofino can book a room at the 5-star *Belmond Hotel Splendido*, an oasis with gorgeous gardens and a fantastic spa that will make you feel like you've gotten away from it all. It is nestled in a verdant hillside just above the town of Portofino but still an easy walk to town.

Or, if a super luxury hotel doesn't work with your budget, consider visiting Portofino as a daytrip. Portofino has no train station, and driving and parking is a hassle.

However, arriving by boat is amazing: there's nothing like rounding the bend into the Portofino bay and seeing the picturesque town and harbor for the first time. (Boats depart from both Rapallo and Santa Margherita Ligure.)

What to Do in Portofino

This area is an ideal spot to incorporate into a hiking vacation. Even visitors who don't want to go for a proper hike should wear comfortable shoes and prepare for some walking while in the area.

Walk up to the *Castello Brown*, which sits on a hill above Portofino and offers wonderful views of the town and the sea. Yeats Brown was the British Consul to Genoa in 1870 and the castle contains furniture and artwork that belonged to the family. (www.castellobrown.com; open daily until 7 p.m. in the summer.)

From the Brown Castle, an easy and short walk takes visitors on a scenic trail with breathtaking views to the *Punta del Capo* to see the lighthouse (*faro*). Walkers will notice many security cameras along this path, because it passes behind the residence of the owners of *Dolce & Gabbana*. The small bar on the cliff below the lighthouse is a wonderful place to have

a glass of wine while enjoying the sea views.

Another pretty walk goes along the coast, to the nearby town of Santa Margherita Ligure. This walk used to be terrifying for pedestrians, as they flattened themselves along roadside walls to avoid two lanes of traffic traveling along the same road. But a couple of years ago, the path was updated and is now a lovely walk with sea views. Walkers pass little chapels, gardens, flowers and forests. It's somewhat hilly but is just a few miles so is fine for energetic children.

Or if the water is more your thing, take the 15-minute ferry to Portofino from the town of Santa Margherita Ligure (get the boat schedule at www.traghettiportofino.it). However, even better is hiring a private boat for a couple of hours to admire the villas along the coastline. Let *Andrea Vicava* at *Portofino Taxi Boat* show you around: ask him to also take you to see the



Abbey of San Fruttuoso

Abbey of San Fruttuoso and the site of the underwater Christ, *Christo degli Abissi*, who protects divers and sailors. (39-338-3168058;

www.portofinotaxiboat.it; 150€ for a two-hour tour.)

The beautiful *Abbazia di San Fruttuoso*, built by Greek monks in the 10th century, is on the other side of the peninsula and can be reached only by boat or on foot. Starting in Portofino, the Abbey is a challenging two-hour walk along a marked trail. The hike is not busy, and in addition to water, sunscreen, hats, and a snack, hikers should make sure to bring a hiking map, which is easy to pick up locally.

The *Portofino* Peninsula offers

Leaving Portofino, the trail passes villas of VIPs surrounded by terraced gardens, continues with views of some of the peninsula's beautiful bays, and then descends to the village of San Fruttuoso. Hikers can then continue to the town of Camogli for a total hike of four hours, or end the hike at the abbey and take a boat back to any of the local towns.



Grand Hotel Miramare

seaside promenade, lots of little shops, a few churches worth a look, and a great selection of restaurants. It's easy to get to by train, well-connected by boats and hiking trails, and although traffic can be terrible, it has better parking compared to Portofino. SML is an ideal base for a short stay in the area, or for a group that wants to travel together but includes both hikers and non-hikers.

A bit of uphill, lots of steps, and then a gentle slope takes hikers to the pretty hamlet of San Rocco, with under 300 inhabitants, and centered around a small parochial church with a beautiful vista over the gulf. The walk goes through olive groves and has views of Camogli and even of Genoa in the distance. We recommend stopping for a homey lunch and amazing views at

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Santa Margherita Ligure: Down To Earth

A lively town spread in a semi-circle around its harbor, *Santa Margherita Ligure* (we'll refer to it as SML) has a perfect waterfront for strolling. It doesn't have the glitz — or the prices — of Portofino, yet is just as pretty. Unlike Portofino, it has lots of locals (read: great *passaggiata*) many good dining options, and is easily reached by train. It's also home to one of our favorite hotels in Italy, the *Grand Hotel Miramare*.

Recently renovated, ideal for families (and they even accept pets!), the 4-star hotel is a few minutes' walk from the center of Santa Margherita Ligure, yet one minute from the beach. The staff at this hotel bends over backwards for guests, and the views of the sea on one side and the mountains on the other are hard to beat. The breakfast buffet is excellent, and free parking feels like the cherry on top!

While SML doesn't have significant art museums or a castle, it has a beautiful



Santa Margherita Ligure

A lovely small fishing village on the north side of the Portofino Peninsula, the town of Camogli is a less-touristy base for a hiking-focused vacation. The name *Camogli* is derived from the Italian phrase *le case delle moglie*, which means houses of the wives — referring to the fishermen's wives. Even today at dusk you will see men heading away from the harbor in a small procession of fishing boats. Camogli is also known for its lovely painted houses with *trompe l'oeil* facades. While walking through the town, see whether you can spot the illusions: look for windows, shutters, or

window embellishments that are painted on the buildings.

You must stop at *Revello Foccaeria*. Allow time to wait in line because this place serves the best *focaccia* in town. Watch it being made through the viewing window, then choose one of the many freshly made varieties offered.

Camogli: Hiking Base

Where to Stay

Belmond Hotel Splendido

Salita Baratta, 16
Portofino

www.belmond.com

(39) 01 852 67801

Rates: Start at about 1,000€ (yes, you read that right) per room per night during high season.

Grand Hotel Miramare

Via Vilite Ignoto, 30
Santa Margherita Ligure

www.grandhotelmiramare.it

(39) 0185 287013

Rates: Starts at about 250€ per night, with breakfast, during high season.

Cenobio dei Dogi

Via N. Cuneo, 34
Camogli

www.cenobio.it

(39) 0185 7241

Rates: Start at around 200€ per night during high season. This hotel has stunning views over the sea, a gorgeous pool and a private beach with hiking paths just outside the front door.



Cenobio dei Dogi

more than 37 miles of hiking trails.

La Cucina di Nonna Nina.

For a more challenging hike, follow the marked trails from Camogli, past *San Rocco*, to the San Fruttuoso Abbey, a satisfying 2.5-hour hike. Enjoy the Abbey, have a gelato and maybe some lunch, and then continue along the path to Portofino, a further 90 minutes. We love this hike

because when you get to Portofino, you're done. Have a rest and explore, and then take the boat back to Camogli. For more on hiking in the area, visit

www.parks.it/parco.portofino



Hiking path



Fishing in Camogli

night. The inside is open only sporadically for exhibits.

The base of the *Rapallo-Monteallegro* cable car is just a five-minute walk from the Rapallo train station, and a ride of under 10 minutes takes visitors up to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Monteallegro, a beautiful basilica

finished in 1559. The panoramic views of the Gulf of *Tigullio* are spectacular from the top, and the *Hotel-Ristorante Monteallegro* is an ideal place for lunch. Book a table on the panoramic terrace.

Fisherman's wives who mended fishing nets turned their skills to lacemaking in the Middle Ages, so Rapallo has been known for its lace for several hundred years. Visitors to Rapallo can keep their eye out for local women working on *Pizzo Tombolo*, which is a type of lace-making that looks like a cross between crochet,

embroidery and knotting. A tombolo is a cylindrical pillow to which the lace-in-production is attached and upon which it is created and expanded. A pattern is attached to the tombolo, and then

many straight pins are used as anchors for the weaving and knotting. Visit the Lace Museum or shop for local lace in town. (39-0185-63305; check limited opening hours at

www.comune.rapallo.ge.it)

—Madeline Jhawar



Rapallo's castle

For travelers who enjoy a good variety of monuments, history, and activities, the town of Rapallo is another great base for a visit to this area, though it gets busy in high season. It has a beautiful seaside promenade, lined with palm trees, art nouveau-style buildings, cafes, and restaurants. Visitors who are in Rapallo on a Thursday should make sure they don't miss the lively market in *Piazza Cile*.

Rapallo's castle, the *Castello sul Mare* (Castle on the Sea) dominates the harbor and was built in 1551 to defend against pirate attacks. Most visitors enjoy the castle from the outside — it's especially beautiful when lit up at

Where to Eat

Ristorante Puny

Piazza Martiri dell'Olivetta, 5
Portofino
(39) 0185 269037

Open for lunch and dinner. Closed Thursday.

Centrally located on *piazzetta* at the harbor, this restaurant does a wonderful *pappardelle al Portofino*, a pasta dish with pesto and tomatoes. For a second course, order sea bass (*branzino*), which will be filleted in front of you by your server. Reserve ahead for a table with views.

La Cucina di Nonna Nina

Via Franco Molfino, 126
Camogli
www.nonnanina.it
(39) 0185 773835

Revello Focacceria

Via Giuseppe Garibaldi, 183
Camogli
www.revellocamogli.com
(39) 0185 770777

Ristorante La Camogliese

Via Giuseppe Garibaldi, 76
Camogli
www.lacamogliese.it
(39) 0185 776027

Beautiful views over the water make this a perfect place for lunch or a romantic dinner.

Hotel-Ristorante Monteallegro

Salita Al Santuario, 22
Rapallo
(39) 0185 50268

Open daily for lunch and dinner.

Tossini

Via Venezia, 6
Rapallo
(39) 0185 50414

Open daily until 8:30 p.m.

This is the best place in town to try the Ligurian *focaccia al formaggio* or *farinata* (chickpea pancake) as well as pastries.

Madeline Jhawar is the owner of Italy Beyond the Obvious, creating custom Italy itineraries for independent travelers since 2008. For more information, visit www.ItalyBeyondtheObvious.com

Italy has more hotel rooms than

baker shows me his kitchen, where his dough rises in a 40-hour process and he uses only the finest ingredients, including fruit from nearby orchards that he candies himself. I swoon over a taste of his panettone flavored with *espresso* and white chocolate.

As always in Italy, meals make the memories. Salerio invites me to lunch with him and *Mayor Fernando Scattone*, at *Il Duomo Ristorante*, right behind the cathedral. It's a *Lucani* feast, beginning with *antipasti* that showcases local specialties: *cruschi* — red peppers, that add a spicy kick to the accompanying platters of *pecorino* and *salumi*.

Handmade *cavatelli* with mushrooms and scrumptious grilled lamb follow.

Lunch conversation is spirited, with generous pours of wine. Mayor Scattone bears a resemblance to actor *Roberto Benigni*, and I'm entertained as he talks proudly of the people I've met, his love for his village, the *R-r-r-rolling Stones* who he saw recently in Rome.

When *caffè* time comes, he asks, "Is it true Americans drink *cappuccino* all day?" Now I hold court, telling the men about a place called *Starbucks*,



where people line up at all hours for grande cappuccinos in big paper sippy-cups. There's a baffled silence as Fernando and Saverio contemplate something so absurd and we sip our espressos. Then out comes the perfect finish, a cordial glass of *Amaro Lucano*. I feel my Papa smiling down upon the whole scene as we raise glasses for a toast: "*A noi Lucani!*"

—Susan Van Allen

Susan Van Allen is the author of 100 Places in Italy Every Woman Should Go, (3rd Edition recently released). She designs and hosts Golden Weeks in Italy: For Women Only. For more information, visit susanvanallen.com

The Details

Where to Stay

Albergo La Locanda di Castromediano

Via Michele Volini, 50/a
Castelmezzano
(39) 866 209 9122

Rates: Rooms start at 70€ per night, with breakfast.

This cozy *albergo* offers classically decorated rooms with stunning views of the mountains and a great restaurant.

Le Costellazioni

Via della Stazione, 1 (check-in)
Pietrapertosa
(39) 0971 174 6699
www.lecostellazioni.eu

Rates: Small apartments start at 75€ per night with breakfast.

This is an *Alberghi Diffuso*, offering rustic cottages scattered throughout the village that are simply furnished and equipped with modern conveniences. Guests rave about owner *Antonio*, who is on hand to help plan itineraries for trekking or horseback riding.

La Loggia del Monaco

C. da Loggia del Monaco
Acerenza
(39) 338 94 42 271
www.loggiadelmonaco.it

Rates: Rooms start at 30€ per person, with breakfast.

This family-run *agriturismo* is set just outside the village, surrounded by beautiful farmlands. It offers five cozy bedrooms, two restaurants serving excellent local specialties and a swimming pool.

Where to Eat

Al Becco della Civetta

Vico Primo Maglietta
(39) 0971 986 249
Castelmezzano

Enjoy beautiful views of the *Volo dell'Angelo* at this mountainside restaurant/institution as you dine on local specialties with contemporary twists.

I Sapori dell' Parco

C da Battaglia
Pietrapertosa
(39) 0971 983006

This quaint *agriturismo* is set inside the *Gallipoli-Cognato National Park*, serving delicious homemade pasta and locally made cheese and sausages.

Ristorante al Duomo

Largo Glinni, 13
Acerenza
(39) 0971 741 402

www.ristorantealduomoacerenza.it
Behind the *basilica*, friendly staff serves seasonal specialties, including excellent *antipasti* and lamb.

Ristorante Palazzo Gala

Largo Consigliere Gala
Acerenza
(39) 0971 741 616

Closed Monday
www.palazzogala.com
Set in an elegant 18th-century building, famous for its fresh fish and pizza.

Tiri 1957

Via Antonio Gramsci, 2/4
Acerenza
(39) 0971 749182
www.tiri1957.it

This is the place to try Acerenza's award-winning *panettone*.

Local Tourism Information

Castelmezzano

www.prolococastelmezzano.it

Pietrapertosa

www.prolocopietrapertosa.it

Acerenza

www.prolocoacerenza.it

I Borghi Piu Belli d'Italia

www.borghipiubelliditalia.it/

Volo dell'Angelo

www.volodellangelo.com

The Volo is in operation May through November—check website for opening days. Cost: 35€ per ride.

1€ = \$1.05 at press time

any other European country.

New Market Opens in Rome's Termini Station

A new foodie haven, *Mercato Centrale Roma* (Rome Central Market), has opened in Rome's main train station — *Termini*. The 15 gourmet and artisan food stalls represent the best of Rome's classic and modern gastronomy. Vendors include Roman foodie favorites such as *Pizzarium*, run by *Gabriele Bonci*; *Trapizzino*, which sells a pizza-sandwich hybrid; and a wine bar and restaurant by Michelin-starred chef Oliver Glowig. Guests can sample different foods and purchase products to take home, such as cheese, jam,



pasta, and olive oil. The 6,000-square-foot market has its food stalls arranged in a "market square" configuration and can accommodate 500 diners.



This new Roman market comes on the heels of the now uber-



popular *Mercato Centrale* in Florence, which opened in 2014 and attracted three million visitors in 2016. Both markets were created by restaurateur *Umberto Montano*, who described the Termini market as "a place of interlocking and shared interests with the dream of doing good to Rome, restoring taste and beauty to a city to which we owe a great deal."

The market is open daily, 7 a.m. to midnight. To most easily reach the market, enter the station at *Via Giolitti*. For more information, visit www.mercatocentrale.it/roma

—Elaine Murphy

Spend the Night on A Wild Prison Island

Asinara, a small island off the northern coast of Sardinia, is a former penal colony frozen in time. No inhabitants or construction — other than those related to the prison — have graced Asinara for more than 100 years, and as the island is now a national park, it remains wild. The former prison and the villages that housed and supplied prison staff are still there and waiting to be discovered. You can even spend the night in the former prison barracks!



The island was first used as a prison during World War I and the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1936) to detain prisoners of war from Austria, Hungary, and Ethiopia. In the 1970s, it was converted into a maximum security prison to hold terrorists and Mafiosi. The prison closed in 1997, and in the same year, Asinara was converted into a national park and a nature and marine reserve. Now, the

island is open to the public, with many guests drawn to its dark history.

In 2014, a hostel opened in one of the barracks that once housed the prison guards, and it is now the only overnight accommodation on the island. As in its former life, the *Cala d'Oliva Hostel* (39-346-1737043; www.sognasinara.it) offers very spartan accommodations. From the hostel, guests can hike, sunbathe, and swim in pristine, warm, turquoise waters and the tranquil environment of the island. *Cala d'Oliva* also operates one of the two restaurants on Asinara (there's no grocery store).

There are no cars on Asinara, only bicycles and footpaths, but visitors can rent bicycles and golf carts on the island. About 650 species of animals, including wild albino donkeys, horses,

goats, boars and deer roam the island, which is named for the donkey (asino in Italian). Visitors can take a Land Rover tour, go to a turtle hospital, ride horses, snorkel (with their own equipment), sail, fish or rent bicycles.



Photos by Stefano Bussolon, flickr.com

Ferries run daily in the high season from *Stintino* and *Porto Torres*, both on the main island of Sardinia, to *Cala Reale* and *Cala d'Oliva* on Asinara. Guided day tours — by bike, Jeep, foot, or bus if you prefer not to spend the night "in prison" — are available, and many include a visit to the former prison and a

beach as well as a packed lunch. Sailboat tours allow access to the marine reserves and take guests snorkeling among plenty of fish in clear, deep water. For more information, visit the island's official website at www.parcoasinara.org

—E.M.

Rome's *Stazione Termini* opened in 1950.