
Introduction

Stretching between the French frontier and the borders of Tuscany, Liguria comprises the narrow strip of land lying between the Mediterranean and the Maritime Alps and the Apennines, and a small part of the Po River basin beyond the watershed. Because the mountains shelter it from winter winds, the region enjoys an exceptionally mild climate. Delicate plants from the Mediterranean basin, California, Chile, South Africa and Australia thrive along city streets, in the countryside, and in formal gardens. In the western section of the region vegetables and flowers are grown out of season for export to northern markets, and everywhere olives and grapes flourish on the steep hillsides. The gentle climate, combined with the grandeur of Liguria's rugged coastal scenery and the attractions of the sea, have for over a century drawn visitors from less fortunate places, especially during winter. This tradition gives Liguria's many coastal resorts a timeless quality that is difficult to find elsewhere in Italy, and is perhaps the region's most attractive feature.

HISTORY OF LIGURIA

It is hard to say when the first humans came to Liguria. At the Caverna delle Arene Candide near Finale Ligure, archaeologists have found stone implements dating back at least 25,000 years, as well as several graves. The oldest is that of a fifteen-year-old boy who died more than 20,000 years ago. Ten thousand years later the cave became the burial site of 23 individuals, whose tombs make up the world's earliest known necropolis. The cave cannot be visited today, but the finds can be seen in the superb archaeological museum in Pegli, Genoa's elegant western suburb.

Liguria receives its name from the *Ligures*, a loose grouping of Neolithic peoples who lived in village settlements on the Mediterranean coast from Spain to Tuscany in the 1st millennium BC. They established early contact with the first known navigators of the Mediterranean, the Phoenicians and Greeks, and in the 3rd century BC they allied with Rome against Carthage. In the 2nd century BC the region came under the dominance of Rome, whose fortunes it followed until the fall of the Empire. After brief Lombard and Frankish rule, the city of Genoa emerged as a leading power in the 11th century. Its sailors liberated the coast from the attacks of Saracen pirates and captured their strongholds of Corsica and Sardinia. After loosening their ties with the Holy Roman Empire and establishing a self-governing republic, its citizens went on to build one of the principal maritime and commercial

three or four storeys high and combine an elaborate entrance hall with spectacular courtyards, open staircases and loggias overlooking luxurious gardens arranged on different levels. Nearly all have illusionistic façades with painted and/or stone elements, and interiors adorned with stuccos and frescoes. This same grand style of construction was taken up again in the palaces of the second *Strada Nuova*, built for Giacomo and Pantaleo Balbi (1618–45), Agostino Balbi (1618–70) and Stefano Balbi (1643–55). The Savoy rulers chose Stefano Balbi's mansion as their residence in Genoa, and that palace is now known as Palazzo Reale.

A senate decree of 1576 placed the aristocratic palaces on the three *strade nuove* on an official list—the *Lista dei Rolli*—which obliged owners to give hospitality to distinguished guests of the Republic during state visits. The Rolli list was divided into three categories: the first, which included the most luxurious palaces, was reserved for royalty and high clergy, the second for governors and nobles, and the third for guests of lesser standing. The palaces of the *strade nuove* were invariably listed in the first category.

The model of the Genoese palaces was exported to other states in Italy and the north, thanks to the work of artists such as Rubens (who published drawings of the palaces), Giorgio Vasari, Vincenzo Scamozzi and Joseph Furtenbach. It profoundly influenced Baroque town planning in Germany, Britain and the Netherlands.

Today Via Garibaldi is one of the most handsome streets in Europe. Most of its magnificent palaces have been painstakingly restored, and to stroll from one end of the street to the other is an unforgettable experience. With this in mind, the street has been pedestrianised. Three of the palaces are superb museums.

GENOESE ART AT THE TIME OF THE GREAT PALACES

The greatest name of the 16th century is Luca Cambiaso (1527–85), a precocious talent who frescoed the Palazzo Doria (now the Prefettura) aged only 17. The geometric forms he uses in his drawings almost foreshadow Cubism. Cambiaso's influence carried over into Lazzaro Tavarone and Bernardo Castello, though their derivative Mannerist style lacks true originality. Genoa's most fruitful time was her Seicento. The city has always been receptive to foreign ideas, and interestingly it was the influence from outside Italy that inspired the art of this period. Through its close commercial links with the Netherlands, the city acquired many Dutch and Flemish paintings; Rubens and Van Dyck were in Genoa in the early 1600s; other influence came from the Urbino-born Federico Barocci and from Caravaggio. The greatest native artist of the age is Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (c. 1610–65, known as Grechetto), who is said to have invented the monotype. He was much influenced by the Netherlandish painters, and was in turn much admired by Tiepolo. Bernardo Strozzi (1581–1644) took monastic vows as a young man, but cast aside his habit and went on to leave his artistic mark on the city. Domenico Piola (1628–1708) was a fresco artist of some genius. Also important is Domenico Fiasella. Though not a notably great artist, he was much sought-after in his day, and extremely prolific. He, like so many of his contemporaries, was a confirmed Caravaggist.

PALAZZO ROSSO

Via Garibaldi 18. Map Genoa East, 7. Open Tues–Fri 9–7, Sat–Sun 10–7. Café/restaurant and shop.

This magnificent building of 1671–7 was erected for Ridolfo and Gio Francesco Brignole Sale by Pier Antonio Corradi and decorated in 1687–9 by Gregorio de Ferrari, Domenico Piola and others. Like Palazzo Bianco it was bequeathed to the city (in 1874) by Maria Brignole Sale. The collection includes fine portraits of the Brignole family by Van Dyck. There are also works by Dürer, Guercino and Lodovico Carracci. The Genoese School (Bernardo Strozzi, Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione) is well represented.

PALAZZO BIANCO

Via Garibaldi 11. Open as Palazzo Rosso.

Built for the Grimaldi c. 1565 and enlarged after 1711 by Giacomo Viano for Maria Durazzo, widow of Giovanni Francesco Brignole Sale, the palace was presented to the municipality in 1884 by Maria Brignole Sale. It contains part of her collection of paintings, together with later acquisitions, with some particularly beautiful Flemish and Dutch works. The gallery was excellently rearranged and modernised in 1950 by Franco Albini. Only the outstanding pieces are on view. Highlights include a number of works by Luca Cambiaso (*Madonna and Child with St Mary Magdalene, Christ at the Column, St Jerome, Madonna della Candella*). The masterpieces of the collection are Hans Memling's *Christ Blessing*; Jan Provost's *Annunciation*; and Gerard David's *Madonna della Pappa*, c.1510. The greatest highlights are Van Dyck's *Christ and the Coin*, which shows the artist's stylistic debt to Titian; Rubens' celebrated *Venus and Mars*, painted in Antwerp between 1632 and 1635; and Caravaggio's splendid *Ecce Homo*, in which a highly symbolic use of light underscores the purity and meekness of Christ.

PALAZZO TURSI (THE TOWN HALL)

Via Garibaldi 9. Open as Palazzo Rosso.

Flanked by raised gardens, the palace was begun in 1568 for Nicolò Grimaldi by the Ponzello brothers, and the loggias were added in 1597 around the magnificent courtyard. Grimaldi was a multi-titled aristocrat as well as a major private banker, his lead client being Philip II, king of Spain and Portugal. Accordingly, the palace is the most sumptuous on the street. It contains the Guarneri violin (1742), which belonged to Genoa-born Nicolò Paganini (1784–1840), as well as three letters from Columbus.

Most of the other mansions in this street can be admired only from the outside, though the courtyards are usually accessible. **Palazzo Podestà** (no. 7) was begun by Giambattista Castello and Bernardino Cantone in 1563, and has a good stuccoed vestibule and a Rococo grotto and fountain in the courtyard. **Palazzo Spinola** (no. 5) has frescoes in the atrium and vestibule (the fine courtyard has been enclosed for use as a banking hall). **Palazzo Doria** (no. 6), of 1563, was remodelled in 1684, with a charming little courtyard. **Palazzo Carrega Cataldi** (no. 4) is by Giambattista Castello and Bernardino Cantone (1558–60), and has a splendid hall of mirrors

RIOMAGGIORE

The most easterly of the Cinque Terre, Riomaggiore (*map B, C3*) seems to tumble down the cliffside into the water. Its layout is so precipitous that the fishermen have to pull their boats up into the streets in rough weather. The main street is squeezed tightly into the narrow valley of the (covered) Rio Major, and back lanes are so steep that most houses have two entrances—a front door at street level on the bottom floor, and a back door at street level on the top floor.

Tradition dates Riomaggiore's foundation to the 8th century; the first written documents describe its passage from the Fieschi to the Republic of Genoa in the 13th century. As a gateway to the Cinque Terre National Park, it has lost much of its traditional character as a fishing and farming town. The parish church of San Giovanni Battista dates from the 14th century; inside are some unexciting artworks of the 15th and 16th centuries, and a fine 19th-century Agati organ. The Italian landscape painter Telemaco Signorini, a member of the Tuscan Macchiaioli group, often stayed in this village, and Riomaggiore figures in several of his paintings.

IN THE HINTERLAND

Inland from the Cinque Terre, in the Val di Vara, are two very handsome villages that merit a visit for their culinary delights if for nothing else.

Brugnato (*map B, C2*) is 5mins from Autostrada A12 ('Brugnato–Borghetto Vara' exit) and is a good place to break your journey if you're travelling between Genoa and Rome or Florence. The seat of a bishop after 1133, it grew up in a circle around its cathedral and bishop's palace, and the street plan of the old fortified village is still visible. The diocese was moved to La Spezia in the 1920s but the former cathedral is still here: a two-aisled church built over two earlier churches, the oldest of which (the main aisle, now) is a 6th-century Byzantine construction. There are two frescoes and some carvings, and glass panels in the floor reveal the remains of the Benedictine monastery that was probably the first settlement here. The adjacent bishop's palace dates from the 12th century but was remodelled in the Baroque style in the 17th, the same century in which the monastery of San Francesco was founded. Come in June for the *Infiolata*, during the which floral compositions fill the streets.

Brugnato is known throughout Liguria for its pastries. *Cavagnetto*, or *cestinetto*, is the typical local Easter cake: it is a doughnut fitted with a handle, just like a small basket, with a boiled egg in the centre. The same dough is used to make *canestrello*, a cake flavoured with wild fennel.

Half an hour further up the Val di Vara is **Varese Ligure** (*map B, C2*), a pretty, colourful place built in a circle at the foot of its 15th-century castle of the Fieschi (well restored). This too was originally a fortified village, with houses arranged around a central square and presenting no doors or windows to the outside. The central square has long since been built over, but the atmosphere of the village remains that of a medieval *castrum*. A single-arched 16th-century bridge crosses the Torrente Crovana a few metres north of the castle, and at the Convento delle Monache Agostiniane the nuns make almond-based sweets, called *sciurette*, shaped like flowers. The recipe is a well-kept secret. Also unique to the village are *croxetti*, round pasta wafers impressed with floral designs and served in a walnut or pine-nut sauce.

THE GULF OF LA SPEZIA

One of the most beautiful places on the Riviera di Levante, the Gulf of La Spezia was once known as the Golfo di Venere; its modern nickname is the Golfo dei Poeti. This appellation was first coined, it seems, in 1910 by playwright Sem Benelli (*The Jester's Supper*), who spent his summers at San Terenzo. It recalls the fact that over the centuries many poets, writers and artists have been drawn to the gulf and the quiet little villages that speckle its shores. The list includes D.H. Lawrence, George Sand, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Byron, Shelley and J.M.W. Turner.

PORTOVENERE AND THE WEST SHORE

Portovenere (*map B, D3*), the ancient *Portus Veneris*, a dependency of Genoa since 1113, is a charming fortified village built on the sloping shore of the Bocchette, the narrow strait (114m wide) separating the Isle of Palmaria from the mainland. The houses overlooking the harbour, with their brightly coloured façades, are tall and narrow and there are no cross streets, just a few arcades with steep stairways connecting the single main street to the harbour of the beach, a reminder that this 'face' of the village was once also its main defence against attacks by sea.

On a rocky promontory at the southern end of the village, the restored 6th- and 13th-century church of **San Pietro** rises over the ruins of a temple of Venus. It commands a splendid view of Palmaria and the lofty cliffs of the Cinque Terre. The Grotto Arpaia, formerly beneath it, collapsed in 1932. It was known as 'Byron's Cave', for it was from here that the poet started his swim across the gulf to San Terenzo to visit Shelley at Casa Magni (*see below*) in 1822.

In the upper part of the village is the beautiful 12th-century church of **San Lorenzo**, above which (steep climb) towers the 16th-century **Castello Doria** (*open daily April–Nov 10.30–5.30*). It is now a cultural centre offering art exhibitions, conferences and performing arts events.

In the 14th century the Florentine painter Botticelli summered in **Fezzano**, near Portovenere, at the same time as Simonetta Vespucci (1453–76), the young Genoese noblewoman reputed to be the most beautiful lady of her time. The painter fell hopelessly in love with her—as did everyone who encountered her—and painted at least two portraits of her before her premature death, of consumption, at the age of 23. He is also thought to have used her as the model for his *Primavera* and the *Birth of Venus* (some say one can see the Gulf of La Spezia in the latter, with the promontories of Fezzano, Pezzino and Varignano on the goddess's left and the Isle of Palmaria on her right).

THE ISLAND OF PALMARIA

The rugged island of Palmaria can be visited by boat from Portovenere (boats are marked 'Traghetto Portovenere Isola Palmaria'; www.barcaioliportovenere.com). The island is noted for its gold-veined black *portoro* marble (the dark stone in the stripes of Genoese churches) and the traces of Mesolithic habitation found in the

