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I Explored Italy's Ligurian Coast the Old-fashioned Way—By Foot on Its Ancient Paths

How best to see Italy's dreamy Ligurian coast? Follow the ancient cobblestoned paths that wind from town to town.

By [Gina DeCaprio Vercesi](#) | Updated on March 13, 2025



Rapallo as seen from the water. PHOTO: CAROL SACHS

In Genoese dialect they're called *crêuze*—narrow cobblestoned paths that cross the hillsides along [Italy's](#) dazzling Ligurian coast. These centuries-old mule tracks were originally used by farmers to transport grapes, olives, and lemons grown on terraces cut into the steep, mountainous landscape. Today locals use the trails to walk into town from the rural interior. As I discovered late last October, hiking them makes for an enchanting way to experience the Portofino Peninsula, a rocky promontory about 15 miles east of [Genoa](#).

Although it certainly sees its share of visitors—primarily to the stylish town of Portofino—the peninsula tends to be overshadowed by the Cinque Terre, which I first visited after graduating from college in 1995 and returned to on my honeymoon a few years later. At that time, the five villages tucked improbably into cliffs above the sea had barely registered on the tourist radar. Since becoming a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1997, the region’s popularity has exploded—especially during the summer—and it has begun to sag beneath the pressure. Crowds, many arriving by cruise ship, clog the snug streets and queue to hike the once-tranquil trails, namely the Via dell’Amore, the coastal path connecting Riomaggiore and Manarola. After a landslide forced its closure a dozen years ago, the path recently reopened; reservations are now required.



From left: Inside Hostaria Vecchia Rapallo; spaghetti with clams at Portofino’s Ristorante Lo Stella. PHOTO: CAROL SACHS



From left: A stairway at the train station in Camogli; a café on Via della Repubblica, in Camogli. PHOTO: CAROL SACHS

But just an hour's drive north on this same stretch of coastline, known as the Riviera di Levante, labyrinthine *crêuze* recede into the lush quietude of the Parco Naturale Regionale di Portofino, a 2,610-acre swath of protected land, and link the towns of Rapallo, Santa Margherita Ligure, Portofino, and Camogli. There I found not only respite from the fray but also a much less impactful way to visit the area.

At the airport in Milan, sheets of rain fell from gunmetal skies. I slept off my jet lag on my two-hour car transfer to the coast, waking just past Genoa to catch my first glimpse of the sea. It churned and frothed like Neptune had an axe to grind—a far cry from the sun-kissed Italian autumn I'd hoped for.

My outlook improved when I pulled up to the [Grand Hotel Bristol Spa Resort](#) (*doubles from \$353*), in Rapallo. Petal-pink, with white wrought-iron balconies overlooking the sea, the Liberty-style grande dame has been a Portofino coast landmark since 1904. The 80-room property was purchased in 2009 by the R Collection, a group of 12 luxurious hotels owned by the Rocchi family, and has since been polished to five-star standards. I settled in to the Silk Lounge Bar, the name a nod to the town's history in the textile industry, and devoured a bowl of trofie with fresh pesto, a pasta dish long synonymous with Liguria. Bright and delicate, the sauce had the unmistakable perfume of Genoese basil.



From left: Revello Focacceria, in Camogli, Italy; the lounge at Rapallo's Grand Hotel Bristol. PHOTO: CAROL SACHS



The pool at the Grand Hotel Bristol. PHOTO: CAROL SACHS

From my balcony late that afternoon, I spied a valiant ray of sun piercing the cloud cover, casting a glow over Lungomare Vittorio Veneto, Rapallo's waterfront promenade. The evening *passeggiata* was under way. On benches beneath a massive palm tree, a group of older gentlemen talked and gesticulated, umbrellas propped between their knees. Two nuns wearing matching cardigans strolled arm in arm as families walked their dogs and children darted between the fishing boats moored on the pebbly shore. I wandered the rain-washed streets, relishing the rhythm of daily life in a small Italian town.

As night fell, I ducked in to [Hostaria Vecchia Rapallo](#) (*entrées \$15–\$33*), where I ate little pasta parcels called pansotti in a creamy walnut sauce, followed by a dish of potatoes topped with porcini mushrooms.