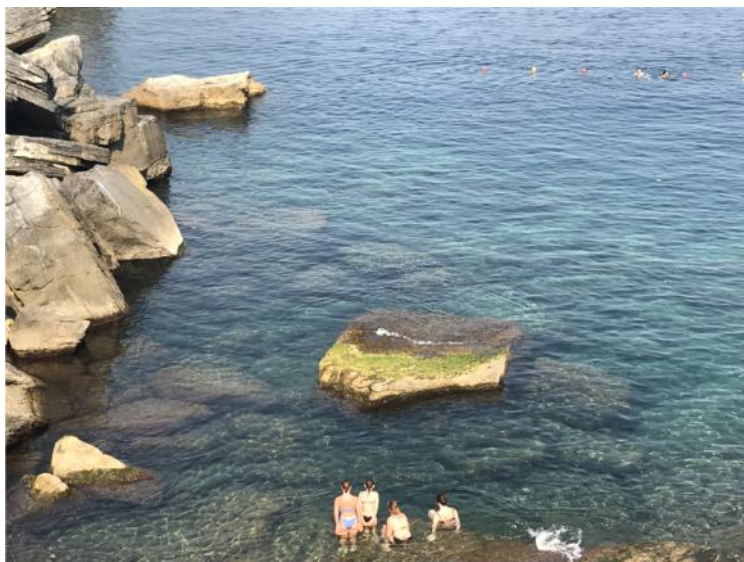


I had never thought of La Spezia as a tourist destination. Until twenty years ago it certainly wasn't, so it was a bit of a surprise to find it full of international tourists. But of course due to its proximity to the wonderful sights of the gulf it is a good base from which to start various trips. The city itself has a lovely palmed seafront promenade and lots of eating places ranging from pizzerias and bistros to sophisticated Michelin guide restaurants. B&Bs and hotels are available at a slightly lower price than in the surrounding destinations along the coast. You can easily get from Lucca to La Spezia by train via Pisa or Viareggio (via Pisa the cost for a return ticket is € 19.60).

August is not the best month to plan a beachside vacation, especially in places like the Gulf of La Spezia where you end up perching on crowded rocks or cliffs, or finding yourself packed in one of the little strips of sandy beach. However, it can be a good idea to enjoy little cruises along the gulf. From La Spezia there are ferry boats to Portovenere, Cinque Terre, Palmaria Island, Levanto and Lerici. To give a rough idea, a return ticket to Portovenere is 15 euros. A daily ticket for the Cinque Terre is 37 euros. It takes approximately two hours from La Spezia to Monterosso, the furthest of the Cinque Terre.

The boat stops in all of the villages (except for Corniglia because it is slightly inland) plus Portovenere which also has dedicated ferries. When you get on the boat make sure that you sit on the side overlooking the coast (right out, left back). The view from the boat is stunning. You can enjoy the sight of the little villages and the big cliffs whose colour varies from grey, to dark grey (due to the slate surfacing from underneath) and red (due to



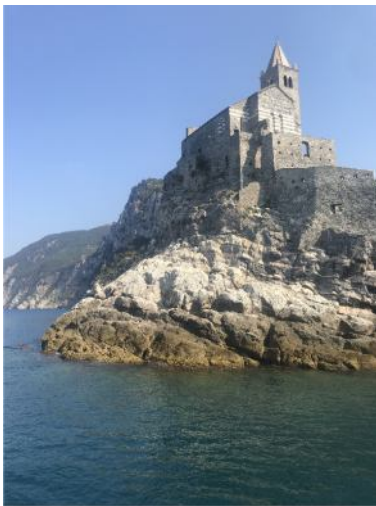
the oxidized iron). The view of the steep terraced hillsides covered in vineyards overlooking the sea is also breathtaking. You can imagine the difficulty of farming and harvesting in such conditions. Not surprisingly, the DOC wine *Sciacchetrà* (or *Sciachetrà*) is rather expensive. This *Denomination of Controlled Origin* wine, whose production is only allowed in this area, is also a *Slow Food Presidium*.

Portovenere is the ideal place in which to spend half a day. If you leave with the first boat at 9.15 am, you'll be there by 10 and it will still be reasonably cool to have a walk around. Standing on top of a rock, the *Doria Castle*, built in the XII-XIV centuries, dominates the place with spectacular panoramic views. Not far from the Doria Castle there are the ruins of two cylindrical structures, which used to be both mills and guard towers. Nearby there is the Church of San Lorenzo built in the XII century. One of the landmarks is the medieval Church of San Pietro, which offers a stunning sight when approaching Portovenere by boat. This area is famous for its beautiful caves. There are 36 caves on Palmaria Island and if you take a special boat tour you can even go inside one of them. *Grotta Arpaia*, a cave located under the Church of San Pietro that can only be reached by sea, is also known as *Grotta Byron* (Byron's Cave) because, as the sign that welcomes you to this enchanted spot reads, the English poet Lord Byron used to meditate there and draw inspiration for his work.

The Gulf of La Spezia is also known as Gulf of Poets or Bay of Poets as many drew inspiration there, among them the English poet P. B. Shelley. On 1 May 1822, he moved to Casa Magni in San Terenzo, near Lerici, with his wife Mary and some friends.

On 8 July, he sailed out of Livorno for Lerici with a friend and a boat boy, but a few hours later they were lost in a storm. Shelley's body washed ashore ten days later in Viareggio. This year we celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of his death.

For lunch at Portovenere, you may choose one of the many bars and restaurants along the *Palazzata*, the seafront of colourful old houses. Staircases of long tunnels connect the seafront with Via Cappellini, the main street of Portovenere lined with shops and restaurants, which you can also access through the *Entrata del Borgo*, the Town Gate built in 1113 with the nearby tower built in 1161. Halfway down, this narrow street widens into a little square where I had lunch in a nice bistro, and where yet another great poet, Eugenio Montale, is remembered in a big plaque with his 1925 poem dedicated to Portovenere. The poem describes the meditative mood visitors sense upon arriving in Portovenere by which they are totally absorbed. The Christian temple mentioned in it is the church of St. Peter. Certainly the crowded tourist season is not the best time to experience such feelings.



Church of S. Pietro

Byron's Grotto

I had expected to eat mainly fish in my three days in the Gulf of La Spezia but, when there, I was more attracted by other Ligurian specialities like *focacce*, *torte salate* (savory vegetable pies) and various *pesto* recipes like the *testaroli al pesto*, on which I indulged. *Testaroli* are made from a mixture of flour, water, and salt cooked into thin, crêpe-like pancakes. Then they are cut, set in boiling water off the heat for a few minutes, drained, and tossed with *pesto*. Traditional *testaroli* are cooked in a blazing hot cast iron vessel called *testo*, hence the name *testaroli*.

However, the real flavour in my trip came from the beauty of this enchanted corner of Italy, truly worth experiencing.

– by Chiara Calabrese

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**ABOVE, RIGHT:**  
 THIS GROTTA WAS THE INSPIRATION OF LORD BYRON IT RECORDS THE IMMORTAL POET WHO AS A DARING SWIMMER DEFIED THE WAVES OF THE SEA FROM PORTOVENERE TO LERICI

**Portovenere (1925)**

*There leaps the Triton  
 out of waves that graze  
 the threshold of a christian shrine,  
 and every nearest hour  
 is old. Every uncertainty  
 lends you its hand,  
 as docile as a friendly child.*

*There no-one's eyes and ears  
 are bent on self.  
 You stand at origins and can see  
 decision ill becomes the place.  
 You will leave presently  
 in order to assume a face.*

by Eugenio Montale (tr. Irma Brandeis)

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