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Source URL: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/italy/secret-escapes-on-the-italian-coast/>

The Telegraph

Travel

10 secret escapes on the Italian coast

As the familiar favourites fill up for summer, we reveal the tranquil spots only the locals know

By Kiki Deere, Destination expert

24 Jun 2023 08:00:00

Think of a beach holiday in Italy and you'll likely envisage ranks of sunbeds, every scrap of sand filled by sun worshippers. The Amalfi coast is packed, Capri is crammed and seaside villages like Cinque Terre are overcrowded.

And it's not just tourists visiting in their droves. Come July, most Italians are busy packing their bags, ready to flock to the beach to escape the stifling heat that engulfs the country. By August, cities inland are deserted, their inhabitants seeking respite along the coast or in the cooler climes of the mountains as temperatures soar.

Yet the country is still home to a handful of quieter, untamed stretches of coastline that Brits are yet to discover. Many are part of national reserves, meaning they have retained all their pristine, natural beauty.

In Italy's south, Puglia's Gargano promontory, with its Mediterranean vegetation and white cliffs, is little explored compared with the rest of the region, while neighbouring Basilicata and Calabria remain virtually untouched. Campania's Cilento, lying south of the ever-popular Amalfi Coast, remains overlooked, despite being home to some of the world's best-preserved Greek temples. Italians have been holidaying here for years, of course, but the lack of mass tourism means there has been minimal development. The result? Ravishing stretches of coastline offering a real flavour of local life.

To the east of Italy's boot, the Adriatic coastline offers some spectacularly wild stretches – along Le Marche's Riviera del Conero, where dramatic cliffs plunge into deep blue waters, and on Abruzzo's delightful Costa dei Trabocchi, dotted with ancient fishing platforms.

Brits have been visiting Tuscany for decades, yet its Maremma lies largely unexplored; a wild, unspoilt stretch where mother nature prevails, cows graze wild and butteri (local cowboys) herd cattle on horseback.

In the far north, the lagoon city of Venice is flooded with visitors each year, but head east to Friuli-Venezia Giulia and you'll find some blissful stretches of coastline away from the hordes, most notably along the Karst Plateau that runs all the way to the Istrian peninsula.

The islands of Sicily and Sardinia have long attracted with powdery white sand and clear waters – yet some corners of the islands remain little explored.

If you're in love with Italy's coast, but not with its crowds, these are the places to be.

Windswept walks

Karst Plateau, Friuli Venezia Giulia

One stormy day, as the cold bora wind blew from the northeast, Austro-German poet Rainer Maria Rilke was walking the bastions of the Castello di Duino, where he was a guest of Austrian princess Maria von Thurn und Taxis. He heard a voice floating in the air: "Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic orders?", which inspired him to pen his celebrated Duino Elegies. These days, the poet's name is immortalised in the two-and-a-half-mile Rilke Trail, a coastal footpath that snakes from the 14th-century Castello, which has a dramatic cliffside location, to the seaside village of Sistiana.

With its white cliffs plummeting into the sea, this is the most dramatic stretch of the Trieste Karst, a rocky plateau that rises from the Venetian plain stretching across Friuli Venezia Giulia to the Istrian plateau. The limestone landscape is characterised by shallow depressions formed over time by the rain and wind, creating huge caverns and rivers that flow underground (with its 350ft-high chamber, the nearby Grotta Gigante is impressive and well worth a visit).

Mediterranean vegetation including oak and wild olive thrive along the plateau, providing a habitat for wildlife and more than 200 species of birds, including sparrows and ravens. Dotted along the shoreline are tiny hidden coves such as Canovella de' Zoppoli, a secluded little bay sheltered from the winds, where farmers and fishermen once moored their zoppoli, traditional wooden boats carved out of a single log. A fisherman's path leads down to the beach from the coastal road, with about 300 steps descending through Mediterranean scrub

and vineyard landscapes to reach a small pebbly beach, home to a breezy waterfront restaurant where you can tuck into local fish and seafood specialities.

How to do it: Tivoli Portopiccolo Sistiana Resort (0044 203 4998 271; nhhotels.com) sits to the east of the Rilke Trail overlooking the Adriatic Sea, with Portopiccolo marina right on the doorstep – meaning it's easy to nip off by boat when you want to explore the area. Doubles from £341 per night

Nearest airport: Trieste

Heavenly beauty

Costa degli Dei, Calabria

Myths and tales shroud the Costa degli Dei (the Coast of the Gods), a ruggedly beautiful 35-mile stretch of coastline in sun-soaked Calabria, which occupies Italy's toe. Legend has it that the Gods chose to reside along this stretch of the Tyrrhenian Sea for its striking natural beauty and arresting panoramas, and Hercules is said to have founded the city of Tropea, the coast's bijou town that perches atop sheer cliffs. The views from the town are divine, with the Santuario di Santa Maria dell'Isola sitting astride an island rock making for an imposing sight.

On a clear evening, you can see as far as the Aeolian Islands' Mount Stromboli, one of the country's four active volcanoes, its cone often seen spewing lava. Along the coast, hidden coves washed by turquoise waters offer fantastic snorkelling and kayaking opportunities. Less active types can explore the coastline aboard a pedalo, diving into crystal-clear waters along the way for a refreshing swim.

The Gods may have chosen Calabria for its natural splendour, yet the region's culinary offering is equally divine. This is the home of nduja, a spreadable, fiery pork sausage made with local chillies known to provide a touch of pizzazz to any dish. These days, nduja is considered something of a trendsetting exotic addition on menus of hipster cafés and chic eateries around the UK – and Calabria is the place to try it. Tropea is also famous for its deliciously sweet red onions; so sweet and crisp, in fact, that the Calabresi claim you can munch them like an apple. They're most often enjoyed raw, served as a salad with plump, juicy tomatoes that burst with flavour. You can even cool off with a Tropea onion ice cream as you take your evening passeggiata.

How to do it: With its manicured terraces overlooking the Costa degli Dei, Villa Paola (0039 0963 62370; villapaolatropea.it) is set in a former Franciscan monastery situated right in the heart of Tropea. Doubles from £250 per night

Nearest airport: Lamezia Terme

Seafood and sand dunes

Costa dei Trabocchi, Abruzzo

"Colossal spiders" is how Italian poet and eccentric Gabriele d'Annunzio once described Abruzzo's trabocchi, traditional wooden constructions on stilts that dot the region's coastline. Made of Aleppo pine and acacia, these intriguing platforms, which stretch into the sea, are thought to have been built as a way to fish without having to face the dangers of the ocean. These days, most trabocchi (there are about 30 dotting the coastline) have been converted into laidback restaurants serving up fresh catch of the day.

Stretching about 38 miles along the southern coast of Abruzzo, the Costa dei Trabocchi is punctuated with both low, sandy beaches and pebbly, rocky stretches. Along the coast lies Punta Aderci, a protected area of untouched wilderness with towering sandy dunes where egrets, kingfishers and Kentish plover are a common sight. Cycling enthusiasts can pedal along the 26-mile Via Verde that traces the coastline along a now-abandoned railway track, while avid walkers can meander along scenic coastal trails that snake through valleys and shaded pine forests.

How to do it: The seven-day Cultural, Culinary & Walking Experience in Abruzzo with Italia Sweet Italia (0039 349 863 0483; italiasweetitalia.com) costs from £1,607pp, including all accommodation, activities, and most meals

Nearest airport: Pescara Abruzzo

Unspoilt coastline

Riviera del Conero, Le Marche

Arguably the northern Adriatic's most picturesque stretch of coastline, the Riviera del Conero is all white cliffs making a precipitous descent into deep blue waters, speckled with tiny bays and inlets accessible on foot or by boat. Dominating this stretch of coastline is Mount Conero, a 1,876ft promontory carpeted in Mediterranean scrub and dense pine forests, which plunges into the Adriatic, providing a habitat for foxes and skunks, along with birds of prey including peregrine falcons and hawks. The Riviera is part of the Parco Naturale Regionale del Conero, making this one of Italy's most unspoilt stretches of coastline, harbouring blissfully pristine beaches that haven't been subsumed by tourism.

Mezzavalle Beach has a wonderfully wild and long sandy shoreline reached by descending a steep coastal path, while Spiaggia delle Due Sorelle is only accessible by boat, sitting at the foot of precipitous jagged cliffs. Portonovo is no less beautiful – a wild and pebbly white bay that is home to the 11th-century Santa Maria di Portonovo, a Benedictine church constructed entirely from white stone, which provides a striking contrast with the surrounding bottle-green vegetation and deep blue hues of the sea.