



PORTOFINO, ITALY

There is no butcher in Portofino, the tiny, implausibly quaint fishing port on the Italian Riviera.

There's not even a fishmonger. There is a Gucci, though, and a Dolce & Gabbana and an Armani and a Zegna and a Missoni and a Louis Vuitton and a Loro Piana... It tells you everything you need to know about what's happened to this Ligurian village of 700 inhabitants. It is, undeniably, one of the most beautiful spots on the Mediterranean. But its beauty has also been its undoing and now the lifeblood is being sucked out of it as more and more small businesses close and the residents flee from the crowds, the joyless winters and the staggering price of living there. Many have sold up - and with property going for 35,000 euros per square metre, who would blame them?

Yet, for all that, when visited in low season, in May or September, Portofino has a charm all its own and, shop fronts aside, has shown itself so commendably resilient to change that today it is much the same as it was when Rex Harrison bought his villa here back in the Fifties. Today the villas, discreetly nestling into the hillside, are occupied by luminaries such as Giorgio Armani, Dolce & Gabbana and Silvio Berlusconi.

The ultra-chic northern Italian elite use the villas to escape the insanity of their lives in Milan. In the right car (an Aston Martin DB9 ideally), it's only an hour and a half from the fashion capital and two hours from Florence.

If it's excitement you're after, you can take the coastal road from Santa Margherita, with its heart-attack-inducing bends. Better still, though, arrive by yacht. The porters at the Hotel Splendido Mare will happily offload your luggage and wait while you enjoy a plate of the renowned Ligurian seafood at the Mare's Chufly restaurant overlooking the harbour. The Splendido Mare is the sister hotel to the far more splendid Hotel Splendido, which is where you must stay. When you are ready, you and your luggage will be transported in a shuttle car to the Splendido, a former monastery perched 50 metres above the port on a verdant, odiferous hillside of palms, pines and cypress trees, blessedly detached from the clutter of fashion boutiques and the ceaseless onslaught of day-trippers.

The Splendido has now enjoyed just over a century of famous visitors. Their photo-

graphs hang everywhere: Cary Grant, Ava Gardner, Alain Delon, Clark Gable, Bogart and Bacall, Taylor and Burton, Ingrid Bergman, Marcello Mastroianni, Churchill, Roosevelt, Groucho Marx, Michael Winner... well, they can't always be lucky. The hotel's glamorous history imbues it with a romanticism that is impossible to ignore. Indeed, you only have to stroll on to the terrace bar overlooking the gardens and, beyond, the Tigullio

Hotel Splendido

Gulf, and the air of elegance will instantly revive you. Order a Canaletto - Prosecco with raspberries - and you will wonder if life can get any better. I found it did by taking a long midnight swim in the hotel's wonderful 25m seawater pool.

Only the hotel's restaurant disappoints: a slightly undercooked risotto, an overcooked fish, a tomato sauce for pasta but no basil - this in the home of the Genovese sauce! Americans gush compliments but in truth it's the one area where the hotel needs to raise its game.

Liguria is famous for its focaccia, the flat oven-baked bread that has countless toppings but is best eaten with the simple addition of olive oil, salt and rosemary. So at least once during your stay you should descend the steps from the Splendido and make your way to the one remaining bakery in Portofino. Ask them to cut you wide wedges of their various focaccia. Pack them into your bag with a bottle of something good and take one of the paths that lead into the hills. As the old song goes: 'I found my heart in Portofino, because I still believe in dreams.' hotelsplendido.com

COWLEY MANOR, ENGLAND

Those of you who have visited the regenerated Spitalfields market in London's East End will be aware of how wrong the human race can go when it decides to crowbar needless modernity into magnificent aged splendour. It's like choosing to watch a film on the tiny screen of your mobile telephone rather than admiring the view that whistles past from the window of the Orient-Express. History is pretty spectacular as it is - it doesn't need chrome fittings. Notre Dame is better for not having buttons. La Sagrada Familia doesn't want an elevator.

On the opposite side of the coin is Cowley Manor, where the architecture has embraced the 21st century seamlessly. At the heart of the rolling green of the Cotswolds, this majestic hotel offers escapism done as only the English can - eccentrically and magnificently. Little surprises live in corners, be they clever bits of design - the entire hotel is festooned with unique pieces of furniture designed by up-and-coming British talents and resplendent in bright, clean shapes and colour - or rooms you'd not expect to chance upon in a country estate. The award-winning C.Side spa is implanted



Cowley Manor

Nosy Iranja, Madagascar

This tiny island resort off the north-west coast of Madagascar is a secret (better) Maldives or Mauritius; a proper miniature paradise - you can walk from one end of the island to the other in 15 minutes and in every direction is blinkingly white sand and shallow pastel-blue waters. It's a honeymooner's dream. But no rose-petal baths or brides in pergolas here. Nothing as manufactured as that.

Take a speedboat out and race against pods of dolphins and whales - there are so many

in the water you have to be careful not to hit them, or go deep with Fabrice, who knows where all the manta rays and hawksbill turtles are. Whatever you choose, make sure you're back for tea: ginger cake with Madagascan chocolate sauce.

Oh, and don't be alarmed if there's a knock on your door in the middle of the night, it's just the management letting you know that turtles are hatching from one of 47 nests on the south side of the island. Time to put your slippers on. **LB** legacyhotels.co.za

into the hotel's surrounds, and the restaurant is superb, the food simple and British. I sit in it and look around at the rest of the clientele. At each table is a couple; all the women appear to be pregnant. Perhaps, I wonder, Cowley Manor is built on some kind of fertility ley line. It wouldn't surprise, as the whole setting has a magic about it. Having said that, the rooms are the kind of place you'd want to spend quite some time unclothed. cowleymanor.com

Quintessentially member benefits apply to all three hotels. quintessentially.com



Nosy Iranja