



Liguria, Piedmont & Valle d'Aosta

Cathedral-like mountains, Fiat cars, ritzy Mediterranean resorts and artistic football – Liguria, Piedmont and the Valle d'Aosta are the country in microcosm: three culture-defining northwestern enclaves that also generously provided the nation with its first king (Vittorio Emanuele II) and its first capital (Turin).

But, fresh from kick-starting the Risorgimento (Italian unification), the northwest didn't just turn around and retreat back into its shell. On top of its valuable historical relics, Liguria-Piedmont has also ignited many of Italy's gastronomic traditions. The fertile plains of the Po river valley harvest culinary delicacies that are an intrinsic part of any Italian dinner plate – arborio rice, grapes for Barolo wine, basil for earthy pesto and wheat for aromatic focaccia, while its seas are awash with anchovies, octopuses and prawns.

Through the annals of history, erstwhile northwestern movers and shakers include Christopher Columbus, the Count of Cavour, Giovanni Agnelli and Giuseppe Mazzini. It's an illustrious list which, along with some cerebral museums and fine architecture, puts Piedmont-Liguria at the forefront of Italian culture. Yet it fails to explain why the region consistently plays second fiddle to other limelight-hogging highlights such as Tuscany, Venice and Rome.

The upside is there's more elbow room here, and more serendipity. Who knew that the Aosta Valley has a German-speaking Walser minority, or that Cuneo's main square outsizes San Marco, or that in Turin you're more likely to bump into a Torino supporter than a Juventus fan?

HIGHLIGHTS

- Have a religious experience at the **Stadio Olimpico di Torino** (p232) in Turin watching Juventus or Torino play football
- Run to the hills with only ibexes for company on the untrammelled trails of the **Maritime Alps** (p237)
- Compare the merits of Barolo over Barbaresco with the wine-quaffers of **Alba** (p238)
- Find simple serendipity at a scenic hostel in **Savona** (p215)
- Work out who's French, Italian and German-speaking Walser in the multicultural **Valle d'Aosta** (p245)
- Ski in the tracks of Olympians through the **Milky Way** (p234)



■ POPULATION: LIGURIA 1.6 MILLION; PIEDMONT 4.4 MILLION; VALLE D'AOSTA 127,000

■ AREA: LIGURIA 5413 SQ KM; PIEDMONT 25,399 SQ KM; VALLE D'AOSTA 3262 SQ KM

LIGURIA

A sinuous arc of land wedged between Piedmont and the sea, Liguria is where the Alps and Apennines cascade precipitously into the Mediterranean. The result is as striking as it is unique, with ancient settlements clinging precariously to granite cliffs, a spectacle that reaches its apex in Cinque Terre: five quintessential Ligurian fishing villages that dangle like crazily perched medieval colonies above the foaming ocean.

Only 7km wide at its narrowest point, Liguria is dominated by Genoa, Italy's largest port. To the west stretches the Riviera di Ponente, a sun-flecked coastal Shangri La that continues as far as the border with France. To the east is the Riviera di Levante, a swankier, more precipitous holiday strip where busy resorts mingle with plusher palm-fringed retreats such as Portofino and Porto Venere, crammed with expensive yachts and Prada-wearing prima donnas.

Despite its diminutive size, Liguria has played a major role in Italian culture. Genoa was once a powerful independent city-state with possessions as far away as the Middle East, while the ingeniously terraced terrain around Cinque Terre remains a showcase for high-quality local produce.

GENOA

pop 604,800

Contrasting sharply with the elegance of Turin, Genoa is a gargantuan port with a seedy underbelly; its narrow, twisting streets (*caruggi*) are more reminiscent of a Moroccan medina than a romantic Venetian cityscape. The birthplace of such groundbreaking Italians as Columbus and Mazzini, Genoa has a markedly cosmopolitan air, with remnants of a once-great empire evident in its concealed doorways and arty museums.

Deep in the maze of the gritty old town, beauty and the beast sit side-by-side in streets that glimmer like a film noir movie set. Old men smoke languidly outside noisy bars and prostitutes stand like sentries in dark doorways, while on the periphery the quintessential Italy awaits – a glistening fountain, a piazza packed with pigeons and tourists, and one of the most spectacular cathedrals (San Lorenzo) on the whole peninsula.

The Most Serene Republic of Genoa ruled the Mediterranean waves during the 12th to

the 13th centuries before deferring to the superior power of Piedmont. Its crusading noblemen once established colonies in the Middle East and North Africa, and its emblematic flag, the red cross of St George, was greedily hijacked by the English.

Since hosting Expo 1992 and being championed as 2004's European City of Culture, Genoa has undergone some radical renovations with its once-tatty port area now boasting Italy's largest aquarium and the Biosfera, a dome-shaped greenhouse crammed with contrasting ecosystems.

History

Genoa's name is thought to come from the Latin *ianua*, meaning 'door'. Founded in the 4th century BC, it was an important Roman port and later occupied by Franks, Saracens and the Milanese. The first ring of Genoa's defensive walls was constructed in the 12th century. (The only remaining section of these walls, Porta Soprana, was built in 1155, although what you see today is a restored version.)

A victory over Venice in 1298 led to a period of growth, but bickering between the Grimaldis, Dorias, Spinolas and other dynasties caused internal chaos. The Grimaldis headed west, establishing the principality of Monaco – hence the similarity of Monaco's language, Monegasque, to the Genoese dialect.

In the 16th century, under the rule of Imperial Admiral Andrea Doria, Genoa benefited from financing Spanish exploration. Its coffers swelled further in the 17th century, which saw an outer ring of walls added as the city expanded, and its newly built palaces filled with art, in turn attracting masters such as Rubens. Celebrated architect Galeazzo Alessi (1512–72) designed many of the city's splendid buildings.

The end of the Age of Exploration came as a blow and as the Mediterranean's mercantile importance declined, so did Genoa's. The city languished for centuries.

Genoa was the first northern city to rise against Nazi occupation and the Italian Fascists during WWII, liberating itself before the arrival of Allied troops. After the war the city developed rapidly along the coast, although, by the 1970s, decline had set in once more as big industries folded.

Christopher Columbus is Genoa's most famous son (if indeed he was – see the