

The most stylish hotel on the Italian riviera

The Belmond Splendido Mare in Portofino is a favourite of the jet set and is back with added glam after a three-year renovation. Mary Lussiana checks in

Portofino ranks as the richest per capita spot in all of Italy — and it has only about 300 residents. The villas and castles on the forest-clad slopes of the fishing village on the Ligurian Riviera are mostly the preserve of weekend escapees. Dolce and Gabbana and Armani are among the glitterati to have homes here.

Celebrities are old news in these parts, however. In its dolce vita heyday Greta Garbo strolled the waterfront, Ava Gardner filmed *The Barefoot Contessa* there and Rex Harrison lived above the town. Around the same time Dalida released *Love in Portofino* and its sultry lyrics have since been taken up by Andrea Bocelli.



Portofino
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Portofino has been immortalised in literature too, including in *The Enchanted April*, a novel written by Elizabeth von Arnim in 1922, about four women holiday ing together in the wisteria-clad, medieval Castello Brown above the harbour. The book was later made into a film starring Miranda Richardson and Jim Broadbent. Pliny the Elder mentioned the town in his

writings, referring to it as Portus Delphini — the port of the dolphin.

In short it has pedigree. Little wonder, then, that the reopening of the Belmond Splendido Mare right by the Piazzetta under new LVMH management has been highly anticipated. Not just by tourists but also by the locals, who see it as a beacon of hope after a severe lockdown.

Tatiana Nicolini, whose excellent craft beer La Portofinese (she grows vines and hops on the green mount of Portofino above the town) can be tried at the hotel's bar, is thrilled to be in business with them. "We believe in the preservation of our heritage," she tells me, delighted that by selling wines and beer, olives,

honey and even the favourite local myrtle liqueur to visitors her family can at last live off their land rather than depend on the sea.

I'm standing in the Piazzetta — which you'll know from all the pictures of Portofino — with the hotel's glamorous general manager, Michela Nicosia. Here tall, narrow houses in sea green, burnt yellow and terracotta curl like a crescent around the natural harbour. "Remember that no one has been allowed to be build anything new here since the 1930s," Nicosia says.

"This was the first inn in Portofino," she says, pointing to the façade of the Splendido Mare, "run by an old, retired fisherman called Silvio Gazzolo, who called it the Nazionale." Visitors used to come here in their horse-drawn carriages to stay and dine and it was looked after by the same family for four generations. In 1997 one of the two brothers who were

running the inn sold his half of the building to Belmond.

This explains the higgledy-piggledy layout of the rooms, with some located on top of the remaining half of the Nazionale. Belmond turned 35 simple rooms into 16 more luxurious ones, but in this new chapter the room count has been reduced even further to 14.

From my flower-filled terrace I can gaze at the harbour over a coffee and survey the scene; Castello Brown and the Church of San Giorgio, the harbour and the Piazzetta. From behind me the church bells of the 10th-century St Martin's ring out eight times.

The sun is already glinting on the water and beneath me I can hear chairs being readied for breakfast. On my right the cobbled street leading to the square is busy with children being propelled to school, dogs led out for walks, shop fronts being rattled up. I have the

best seat in the theatre, and there isn't another tourist in sight.

The hotel has been closed since 2018 for refurbishment. It's a happy coincidence that the decision to renovate it completely came at the same time as LVMH bought Belmond, making this its new calling card.

The design is the work of Festen Architecture, a Paris-based practice whose young designers Charlotte de Tonnac and Hugo Sauzay were responsible for the acclaimed Les Roches Rouges further along the coast beyond Nice.

The idea was to ensure the Splendido Mare stepped out of the shadow of its big sister, the Splendido, a former 16th-century monastery that opened in 1901, perched high up above Portofino. It was where Richard Burton proposed to Elizabeth Taylor.

The Splendido Mare, young by comparison, had previously been considered



The view of Castello Brown from a terrace at Splendido Mare
MATTIA AQUILA

Need to know

Mary Lussiana was a guest of Belmond. B&B doubles at the Splendido Mare from £519, belmond.com. Fly to Genoa

as simply another floor with room numbers continuing where the Splendido's ended. Now they start afresh and include marine-inspired names from La Marea (tide) to Riva (shore).

pieces of handmade terracotta have been designed to look like waves. Jaunty tiled showers, striped in red, yellow or green, are a reference to the beach cabins in neighbouring Santa Margherita Ligure. Bedrooms have parquet flooring that nods to the marble version in the Church of San Giorgio up the hill.

Fabrics are in muted shades by the Italian textile luminaries Loro Piana and Rubelli, and contemporary chandeliers and wall lamps are from Murano. Midcentury furniture, such as walnut armchairs by Paolo Buffa and Gio Ponti, reference Portofino's 1950s heyday.

On the walls are works by emerging Italian artists including the London-based Gabriele Cappelli, who is recognised for his exploration of colour. The paintwork accentuating archways or ceilings is in the sea greens, terracottas and

burnt yellows of Portofino's houses.

You can admire this palette from the hotel's restaurant, now called DaV Mare, which opens on to the Piazzetta. A partnership with the Da Vittorio Group has added the culinary weight of the Cerea family to the venture and a few of the signature dishes from their three Michelin-star Brusaporto restaurant in Lombardy to the menu. I am still thinking about my tuna spaghetti with creamy Monterosso anchovy sauce (ribbons of raw tuna under a scattering of green pistachios) followed by the Ligurian speciality of trofie al pesto di mortaio. Finished at the table by the chef, the sauce of fresh basil, pecorino, pine nuts and olive oil is, as per tradition, pounded in a marble mortar with a wooden pestle.

In the bar linen-clad honeymooners are drinking the new creations inspired by Portofino and making use

The designers drew on the history and architecture of the town. "We were inspired," they tell me, "by the humble beginnings of the Splendido Mare as a guesthouse for fishermen." It made sense, therefore, for the sea to be an important reference point.

The hotel's emblem is a nautical knot that appears on the borders of the bespoke porcelain plates. On the ground floor 7,000



of some of the many Ligurian liqueurs. "We've tried to mix the artisanal with the contemporary," says the barman Jeff Zanotti, formerly of the Gritti Palace Hotel in Venice, as he rattles the shaker.

I try the refreshing Oro della Liguria made with Portofino gin, St Germain, lemon syrup and basil before being persuaded to have an Il Gozzo made with the local hazelnut liqueur and Ligurian amaretto with cognac. It's the perfect nightcap.

The next day I have an equally smooth ride on a

Three more grand Italian openings

Hotel Maalot, Rome

A gourmet restaurant with 30 rooms opens in Rome on the July 15. Hotel Maalot is just steps away from the Trevi Fountain and housed in what was once the residence of the Italian composer Donizetti. Rooms are spread across four floors, each with a different but vibrant scheme ranging from dark blue to red. There is also a cosy bar and library, while taking centre stage on the ground floor is the Don Pasquale restaurant, where the local native Domenico Boschi delivers his contemporary take on

gozzo, the traditional wooden fishing boat. As we leave the little harbour, the restaurants and gelateria, the Splendido Mare, the churches and (tempting) shops all dwindle to an indistinct jumble of colour and cupolas framed by

Roman recipes.

Details Half-board doubles from £343 (hotelmaalot.com)

Nordelaia, Piedmont

Set amid the unspoilt landscape of Piedmont, Nordelaia is an 800-year-old farmhouse that has been restored to offer 12 suites and guest rooms surrounded by ornamental gardens. Interiors draw on the work of local artisans using rustic woods, natural stone, burnished metals and wrought iron. Next to the farmhouse is a three-tiered restaurant overseen by the Michelin-starred

Portofino's forest-clad mountain. The sea is too rough to visit San Fruttuoso, the 1,000-year old Benedictine abbey that lies at the water's edge beyond the promontory, so we go to Paraggi, the next bay along, instead.

chef Andrea Ribaldone. Dishes showcase the best of the region's ingredients, such as Roccaverano cheese risotto with "fassone" beef tartare. A spa offers views over the valley of Montferrat.

Details B&B doubles from £279 (nordelaia.com)

Ca'di Dio, Venice

The site of this new five-star hotel has been a resting place for crusaders, pilgrims and tourists since 1272. It's a little more comfortable these days with interiors by Patricia Urquiola, who preserved the original frescoes.

It has just 16 inhabitants and one of the region's few white-sand beaches. A stay at the Splendido Mare includes sunbeds within the price of your room. The waters are so crystal clear that the reflection of the surrounding vegetation

turns the sea an emerald green that attracts travellers from all over the world. It is indeed beautiful, but as the old song goes, I found my love in Portofino. **Travel restrictions are in place. Check gov.uk for further details** ■