



This fabulously Fifties-glam hotel in Italy has long been a favourite of Hollywood stars

The 'regroomed' hotel Splendido Mare is as visually striking as Portofino itself

By Kate Bolton

'I found my love in Portofino/Because I still believe in dreams.' So goes Dalida's 1959 hit song, and indeed, it's impossible not to be seduced by this voluptuous haven on Italy's

Riviera di Levante – "the coast of the rising sun". When Dalida's song scaled the charts in the 1950s, the somnolent fishing village of Portofino and its pastel-hued houses had been transformed from "a small forgotten world of happiness" into a technicolour backdrop for a parade of international film stars and celebrities.

In that decade alone, Ava Gardner and Humphrey Bogart lingered here when making *The Barefoot Contessa*; Rex Harrison bought a villa in the hills (Noël Coward and John Gielgud were guests); Maria Callas and Margot Fonteyn glided in on *Christina O*, the 325ft-long yacht belonging to Aristotle Onassis; Truman Capote and his partner, Jack Dunphy, played out a bohemian summer on Portofino's shores, hosting Cecil Beaton; then came Greta Garbo ("looking like death with a suntan," Capote said); and here, too, Richard Burton proposed – for the first time – to Elizabeth Taylor.

The setting for Burton and Taylor's tryst was the Hotel Splendido, a rambling former monastery in the hills above the port, wrapped in gardens of bougainvillea and jasmine with seraphic views across the Gulf of Tigullio, around 20 miles south of Genoa. That hotel is one of two properties in Portofino owned by the Belmond group; the other is the [Splendido Mare](#), which shelters in the cobbled piazzetta down in the town, overlooking the crescent-shaped cove, where wooden fishing boats bob alongside luxury yachts. The Mare has

recently been regroomed in chic 1950s style, recalling the glamorous golden days when silk-scarfed Hollywood stars padded in espadrilles along the port.



Natural, local materials and colours dialogue in harmony with the environment | CREDIT: Tommy Picone/tommypiconefotografo

The Parisian studio Festen Architecture, known for its purist approach to contemporary design, reimagined the interiors. Its guiding ethos was to capture the genius loci with natural, local materials and colours that dialogue in harmony with the environment. Against a palette of soothing neutrals, subtle hints of olive, amber and coral mirror the hill-clasped harbour and its painted houses; there are faint memories of yachts and barques in the glossy wood-and-brass fittings, and in handcrafted bedheads, coiled with delicate ropes.

Bathrooms are lined in veined white marble from nearby Carrara with jaunty shower cabins in cabana stripes – a nod to the Ligurian beach huts that dot the nearby shores. Downstairs in the restaurant-bar area, 7,000 artisan tiles in unglazed terracotta map out rippling patterns like the waves of the sea.

A breezy, familial atmosphere wafts through the Mare, whose 14 rooms and suites occupy a former guesthouse for fishermen. Sunlight streams in through lofty French windows, and from the pretty wrought-iron balconies that grace the facade you can watch the yachts and sailboats drifting in and out of the “Port of the Dolphins”, as the Romans called it. Sprawling across the top floor, the Ava Gardner Suite enjoys an ample roof terrace with views over the harbour to the breast-shaped promontory beyond.

The furnishings mix sleek, retro designer pieces (think Gio Ponti, Paolo Buffa) with vintage objects and bespoke wooden cupboards, yacht-cabin style. Luxurious wools and linens are, naturally, by Rubelli and Loro Piana. More than 100 contemporary artworks line the walls, including several paintings specially commissioned for the Mare, along with tactile, textured paintings by the American artist Holly Miller and abstract oils by the Italian painter Gabriele Cappelli, whose golds, blues and olive greens create a silent polyphony with the sunlight, sea and Ligurian landscapes.



The Mare's 14 rooms and suites occupy a former guesthouse for fishermen | CREDIT: Mattia Aquila/www.aquilamattia.it

Also revamped is the restaurant. It sports a trendy new name, DaV Mare, to signal its partnership with Enrico and Roberto Cerea, the sibling chefs of Da Vittorio, a relais near Bergamo that glistens with three Michelin stars. Their vision respects the spirit of “slow food” and menus reinterpret local traditions, such as cappon magro (“fast-day capon”), a bouquet of briny shellfish on a bed of local vegetables – a dish historically served on Catholic fast days when meat was banned. I prefaced the meal in the bijou bar, sipping a luscious cocktail fragrant with Genoese roses, Ligurian basil and bittersweet myrtle orange.

There are endless ways to fill Portofino’s sunlit days. I took a dreamy dip in the ocean at the sandy Bay of Paraggi, cool and quiet in the early morning, then idled in the shady churches of San Martino and San Giorgio – the latter, set on the high cape, is said to contain the relics of St George brought back from the Crusades. Down by the port, one can take a leaf out of Truman Capote’s travel diaries and simply enjoy the “people, cafés and the stuff in shop windows”, or clamber up the promontory to Castello Brown, a fortress-cum-neo-Gothic villa with seraphic views to the blue horizon. Inspired by a sojourn here, Elizabeth von Arnim’s novel *The Enchanted April* helped engrave Portofino’s dreamlike image in popular consciousness.

Guests of the Mare can also enjoy the many facilities of its big sister, the Belmond Splendido, in the hills above the port, where you can bathe in a saltwater pool, twirl forkfuls of spaghetti alla Elizabeth Taylor (said to have been the violet-eyed star’s favourite dish), sip prosecco in the perfumed gardens or simply drink in the priceless views. Don’t miss a magical excursion to La Portofinese, an eco-farm, hop plantation and winery high above the port, whose vertiginous terraces have been recultivated after decades of neglect using traditional methods of agriculture and animal husbandry. There, I sampled malty beers and “heroic wines” (made from vineyards inaccessible by vehicles), and basked in the silence as the sun sank below the legendary promontory “where the gulf of Genoa sings its melody to the end”.

Doubles at the Belmond Splendido Mare cost from £654 (00 39 0185 267802; belmond.com)