

PORTOFINO: THE FISHING VILLAGE BEYOND ITS BRAND

AS THE VILLAGE RETHINKS ITSELF, STARTING FROM "HEROIC AGRICULTURE", YOU CAN FIND MUCH MORE THAN TOURISTIC CLICHÉS.

"There are 147, in number, real residents of the former fishing village."

Portofino is a living postcard, or so it wants you to believe. Luxury cruise boats dock in the harbor for a day, their passengers spilling into the streets by the thousands and staying just long enough to snap a photo and depart. Some come for a sea-view lunch or an *aperitivo* in the famous Piazzetta. Few walk beyond the tiny maze of streets in the center. One of Italy's most popular, visited, and crowded resorts is, in fact, also one of the least lived-in, beyond the facade of colorful little houses on the harbor. Portofino fills up at 10 AM, but, at dinner time, it is deserted; this is when the town slips off her *bella figura* costume and puts on her house clothes, so to speak. After the sun goes down, Portofino is quiet.

There are 147, in number, real residents of the former fishing village. To this dwindling number we can add Milanese week-enders who are the historic owners of second homes and yachts, and a handful of billionaires who vie for villas—among the most exclusive in Italy. That brings the number of local registered citizens to 355. Portofino, as we have seen it in travel guides and heard of it from glamorous friends, is packaged into a brand and sold to the rich and famous.



Until the early 19th century, Portofino was just an unknown village of fishermen, sailors, and peasants along the Tigullio Gulf. In the mid-19th century, however, it was “discovered” by English aristocrats and German nobles, fascinated by its natural beauty. First, the town’s castle was bought, and restored, by English diplomat Montague Yeats Brown, who turned it into a summer residence and a meeting point for British high society; then, the first hotel, the luxurious Splendido, was built. Bars and restaurants followed, and villas began to pop up all along the coast. Portofino’s soul split into two; on the one hand, that of the Ligurians, and, on the other, that of the wealthy families who would enter the social fabric of the town, forever redefining its identity.

Around the mid-20th century, tourists began to catch wise to this storybook holiday destination, and, for better or for worse, aperitivo in the Piazzetta has now become one of the international clichés of an Italian summer.

In 1954, journalist Guido Piovene in his legendary post-war grand tour, *Viaggio in Italia*, called Liguria “closed, laconic, commercial, reserved with the foreigner, lacking in imagination.” Even today, partly because of its success, many would use the same words. Overtourism and depopulation are two sides of the same coin; there is a collective attempt to keep the area alive—not just a few months a year—and reverse the trend of hit-and-run tourism. But the tides are changing, and gentrification has taken an interesting turn in recent years. Younger generations of locals are opting to stay and redevelop the town, rather than seek opportunity elsewhere. A whiff of newness now blows from Portofino through Levante to Ponente.

To look at it now, the town itself does not seem to have changed over the last two centuries. And, at least in appearance, it hasn't. Since 1935, the whole promontory from Rapallo to Camogli has become a natural park, and the pastel-painted villas, houses, and palaces have remained (fortunately) intact. New builds are forbidden. Every centimeter is, therefore, extremely precious, and in the warehouses where fishing nets were once stored, boutiques and restaurants have opened. The outposts of big brands such as Rolex, Pucci, and Dior alternate with historic restaurants, visible relics of the Portofino of yesteryear.



The Green Side of Portofino

Go behind the facades of those colorful little houses and beyond the tourists taking selfies, and you'll find a lush green territory, rich in springs, dotted with mills and olive presses.

Until recently, agriculture in this region had long been abandoned in favor of building up the touristic center of town. The hills of the region are particularly tough to cultivate and, in Liguria, the term "heroic agriculture" was used for those who tried. Now, projects like **La Portofinese** are reviving this past. The family-run farm, by Mino Viacava, resurrects ancient practices that had been disused, recovering the crops of yesteryear and bringing agriculture and animals back to an area that, prior to the 1930s, had these traditions at their core.

Vineyards and olive groves, a source of livelihood for generations of Portofinians, have now finally been recovered and brought back into full production. Their produce can be sampled at **Ü Caban**, a small indoor room and terrace lined with wood and furnished as if it were a boat; at **Mulino del Gassetta**, a former mill, now a refreshment kiosk, small museum, and information point in the preserved area of **Portofino Park**; and at **Faro**, a lounge bar on the tip of the promontory with breathtaking views of the **Gulf of Tigullio**.

In recent years, these new projects have not only reinvigorated the land, but the gastronomic scene, as these high-quality, local products percolate through restaurant and bar offerings.