

In search of France’s most charming villages P.14

# TRAVEL

## Seek out secret Italian shores

As the familiar favourites fill up for summer, Kiki Deere reveals the tranquil spots that are loved by locals



Think of a beach holiday in Italy and you'll likely envisage ranks of sunbeds, every scrap of sand filled by sun worshippers. The Amalfi coast is packed, Capri is crammed and seaside villages like Cinque Terre are overcrowded.

And it's not just tourists visiting in their droves. Come July, most Italians are busy packing their bags, ready to flock to the beach to escape the stifling heat that engulfs the country. By August, cities inland are deserted, their inhabitants seeking respite along the coast or in the cooler climes of the mountains as temperatures soar.

Yet the country is still home to a handful of quieter, untamed stretches of coastline that Brits are yet to discover. Many are part of national reserves, meaning they have retained all their pristine, natural beauty.

In Italy's south, Puglia's Gargano promontory, with its Mediterranean vegetation and white cliffs, is little explored compared with the rest of the region, while neighbouring Basilicata and Calabria remain virtually untouched. Campania's Cilento, lying south of the ever-popular Amalfi Coast, remains overlooked, despite being home to some of the world's best-preserved Greek temples. Italians have been holidaying here for years, of

course, but the lack of mass tourism means there has been minimal development. The result? Ravishing stretches of coastline offering a real flavour of local life.

To the east of Italy's boot, the Adriatic coastline offers some spectacularly wild stretches – along Le Marche's Riviera del Conero, where dramatic cliffs plunge into deep blue waters, and on Abruzzo's delightful Costa dei Trabocchi, dotted with ancient fishing platforms.

Brits have been visiting Tuscany for decades, yet its Maremma lies largely unexplored; a wild, unspoilt stretch where mother nature prevails, cows graze wild and butteri (local cowboys) herd cattle on horseback.

In the far north, the lagoon city of Venice is flooded with visitors each year, but head east to Friuli-Venezia Giulia and you'll find some blissful stretches of coastline away from the hordes, most notably along the Karst Plateau that runs all the way to the Istrian peninsula.

The islands of Sicily and Sardinia have long attracted with powdery white sand and clear waters – yet some corners of the islands remain little explored.

If you're in love with Italy's coast, but not with its crowds, these are the places to be.

▲ Escape the crowds: the town of Vieste on Puglia's Gargano promontory

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A photograph of a middle-aged couple smiling and holding a glass of champagne. The man is wearing sunglasses and a grey shirt, and the woman is wearing sunglasses and a black top. In the background, there is a classical building with columns and statues.

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Cover story

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WINDSWEPT WALKS

# KARST PLATEAU

*Friuli Venezia Giulia*

One stormy day, as the cold bora wind blew from the northeast, Austro-German poet Rainer Maria Rilke was walking the bastions of the Castello di Duino, where he was a guest of Austrian princess Maria von Thurn und Taxis. He heard a voice floating in the air: “Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic orders?”, which inspired him to pen his celebrated *Duino Elegies*. These days, the poet’s name is immortalised in the two-and-a-half-mile Rilke Trail, a coastal footpath that snakes from the 14th-century Castello, which has a dramatic cliff-side location, to the seaside village of Sistiana. With its white cliffs plummeting into the sea, this is the most dramatic stretch of the Trieste Karst, a rocky plateau that rises from the Venetian plain stretching across Friuli Venezia Giulia to the Istrian plateau. The limestone landscape is characterised by shallow depressions formed over time by the rain and wind, creating huge caverns and rivers that flow underground (with its 350ft-high chamber, the nearby Grotta Gigante is impressive and well worth a visit).

Mediterranean vegetation including oak and wild olive thrive along the plateau, providing a habitat for wildlife and more than 200 species of birds, including sparrows and ravens. Dotted along the shoreline are tiny hidden coves such as Canovella de’ Zoppoli, a secluded little bay sheltered from the winds, where farmers and fishermen once moored their *zoppoli*, traditional wooden boats carved out of a single log. A fisherman’s path leads down to the beach from the coastal road, with about 300 steps descending through Mediterranean scrub and vineyard landscapes to reach a small pebbly beach, home to a breezy waterfront restaurant where you can tuck into local fish and seafood specialities.

▼ Exploring the Karst Plateau area by boat

ANTONIO D’ANNUNZIO CORNERS IMAGES; LUCA DA ROSA CORNERS; FABRICE GALLINATIAN TOURIST BOARD



**How to do it** Tivoli Portopiccolo Sistiana Resort (0044 203 4998 27; [nhhotels.com](http://nhhotels.com)) sits to the east of the Rilke Trail overlooking the Adriatic Sea, with Portopiccolo marina right on the doorstep – meaning it’s easy to nip off by boat when you want to explore the area. Doubles from £341 per night  
**Nearest airport** Trieste

HEAVENLY BEAUTY

## COSTA DEGLI DEI

*Calabria*

Myths and tales shroud the Costa degli Dei (the Coast of the Gods), a ruggedly beautiful 35-mile stretch of coastline in sun-soaked Calabria, which occupies Italy’s toe. Legend has it that the Gods

chose to reside along this stretch of the Tyrrhenian Sea for its striking natural beauty and arresting panoramas, and Hercules is said to have founded the city of Tropea, the coast’s bijou town that perches atop sheer cliffs. The views from the town are divine, with the Santuario di Santa Maria dell’Isola sitting astride an island rock making for an imposing sight.

On a clear evening, you can see as far as the Aeolian Islands’ Mount Stromboli, one of the country’s four active volcanoes, its cone often seen spewing lava. Along the coast, hidden coves washed by turquoise waters offer fantastic snorkelling and kayaking opportunities. Less active types can explore the coastline aboard a pedalo, diving into crystal-clear waters along the way for a refreshing swim.

The Gods may have chosen Calabria for its natural splendour, yet the region’s culinary offering is equally divine. This is the home of *nduja*, a spreadable, fiery pork sausage made with local chillies known to provide a touch of pizzazz to any dish. These days, *nduja* is considered something of a trendsetting exotic addition on menus of hipster cafés and chic eateries around the UK – and Calabria is the place to try it. Tropea is also famous for its deliciously sweet red onions; so sweet and crisp, in fact, that the Calabresi claim you can munch them like an apple. They’re most often enjoyed raw, served as a salad with plump, juicy tomatoes that burst with flavour. You can even cool off with a Tropea onion ice cream as you take your evening *passaggiata*.

**How to do it** With its manicured terraces overlooking the Costa degli Dei, Villa Paola (0039 0963 62370; [villapaolatropea.it](http://villapaolatropea.it)) is set in a former Franciscan monastery situated right in the heart of Tropea. Doubles from £250 per night  
**Nearest airport** Lamezia Terme



Trabocchi is punctuated with both low, sandy beaches and pebbly, rocky stretches. Along the coast lies Punta Aderci, a protected area of untouched wilderness with towering sandy dunes where egrets, kingfishers and Kentish plover are a common sight. Cycling enthusiasts can pedal along the 26-mile Via Verde that traces the coastline along a now-abandoned railway track, while avid walkers can meander along scenic coastal trails that snake through valleys and shaded pine forests.

**How to do it** The seven-day Cultural, Culinary & Walking Experience in Abruzzo with Italia Sweet Italia (0039 349 863 0483; [italiasweetitalia.com](http://italiasweetitalia.com)) costs from £1,607pp, including all accommodation, activities, and most meals  
**Nearest airport** Pescara Abruzzo



## UNSPOILT COASTLINE

# RIVIERA DEL CONERO

*Le Marche*

Arguably the northern Adriatic’s most picturesque stretch of coastline, the Riviera del Conero is all white cliffs making a precipitous descent into deep blue waters, speckled with tiny bays and inlets accessible on foot or by boat. Dominating this stretch of coastline is Mount Conero, a 1,876ft promontory carpeted in Mediterranean scrub and dense pine forests, which plunges into the Adriatic, providing a habitat for foxes and skunks, along with birds of prey including peregrine falcons and hawks. The Riviera is part of the Parco Naturale Regionale del Conero, making this one of Italy’s most unspoilt stretches of coastline, harbouring blissfully pristine beaches that haven’t been subsumed by tourism.

Mezzavalle Beach has a wonderfully wild and long sandy shoreline reached by descending a steep coastal path, while Spiaggia delle Due Sorelle is only

Made of Aleppo pine and acacia, these intriguing platforms, which stretch into the sea, are thought to have been built as a way to fish without having to face the dangers of the ocean. These days, most *trabocchi* (there are about 30 dotting the coastline) have been converted into laidback restaurants serving up fresh catch of the day.

Stretching about 38 miles along the southern coast of Abruzzo, the Costa dei

## SEAFOOD AND SAND DUNES

# COSTA DEI TRABOCCHI

*Abruzzo*

“Colossal spiders” is how Italian poet and eccentric Gabriele d’Annunzio once described Abruzzo’s *trabocchi*, traditional wooden constructions on stilts that dot the region’s coastline.

► The view from the top: the spectacular view over the Costa dei Trabocchi



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accessible by boat, sitting at the foot of precipitous jagged cliffs. Portonovo is no less beautiful – a wild and pebbly white bay that is home to the 11th-century Santa Maria di Portonovo, a Benedictine church constructed entirely from white stone, which provides a striking contrast with the surrounding bottle-green vegetation and deep blue hues of the sea.

▲ Still waters: the striking Cala Torre dell'Uzzo beach in Sicily's Zingaro Nature Reserve

◀ Time out: relaxing at Villa Paola in Tropea on the Costa degli Dei

OFF-SEASON IDYLL  
**RISERVA DELLO ZINGARO**  
*Sicily*

Tucked away in western Sicily, the Riserva dello Zingaro was the island's first nature reserve. It stretches four miles along the coastline, its mountains carpeted in dense Mediterranean shrub, with dwarf palms, olive, carob and almond trees cloaking the hillside. More than 40 species of bird have been sighted here, including peregrine falcons, kestrels and the rare Bonelli's eagle, which nest above rocky white coves washed by crystal-clear waters. The reserve is only accessible on foot (or by boat), with scenic trails criss-crossing the area, the sounds of nature and the musky sweet scent of Mediterranean shrubs heavy in the air. Hikers are rewarded with superlative vistas and the chance to stop off in secluded coves for a refreshing swim and a little snorkelling under the Sicilian sun. Hemmed in by two rocky spurs, Cala Tonnarella dell'Uzzo is one of the most beautiful, home to a small museum that sheds light on the area's rich fishing traditions. Cala Torre dell'Uzzo is equally striking, its emerald-green waters lapping a white pebble beach. The Reserve is delightful off-season, including in winter, when the island is blessed with mild climes, making it perfect for a leisurely coastal break.

**How to do it**  
*The eight-day self-guided walking holiday Trails of Western Sicily with Macs Adventure (0141 530 8886; macsadventure.com) costs from £975pp, including accommodation and baggage transfers*

**Nearest airport**  
*Palermo*



Beach-lounging aside, the wind-swept coast is great for water sports, including sailing, windsurfing and kite-surfing, while scores of scenic hiking, mountain biking and horse-riding trails criss-cross the park. For fabulous coastal views, head to the belvedere of Sirolo, a delightful cliff-top medieval town amid pine forests and scrub – one of the highlights of the coast.

**How to do it** *A few minutes' walk from Santa Maria di Portonovo, Seebay Hotel (0039 071 801 470; seebayhotel.com) sits among horse chestnuts and oaks and has an inviting pool. Doubles from £246 per night*

**Nearest airport** *Ancona*

RIDE THE WILDS  
**MAREMMA**  
*Tuscany*

To many Italians, the Maremma conjures images of horses galloping across wide plains, slowing to a gentle trot to traverse streams and coastal

marshes before disappearing among pine-wooded hills. Lying deep in the south of Tuscany and spilling into neighbouring Lazio, the Maremma offers some of Italy's wildest landscapes. Local cattle rangers and horsemen known as *butteri* have lived here since time immemorial, raising livestock. To this day, herds of Maremma cows graze wild, living among pine groves and large meadows. This was inhospitable marshland, rife with malaria, before the terrain was drained in the first half of the last century. As a result, the inland hills and coastal strip offer virginal landscapes, with a large chunk of the Maremma falling under the Parco Regionale della Maremma, where lush terrain covered in Mediterranean shrub slopes towards the sea. The Monti dell'Uccellina is probably the wildest stretch, offering a tranquil shoreline with pristine beaches, where fallow and roe deer gracefully roam sand dunes spotted with juniper and sea holly. The park is a habitat for wild boar, badgers, porcupines and wild cats, while the wetlands provide a wintering

▲ Splendid isolation: Maremma's L'Andana hotel is set in vineyards just a short drive from the Tuscan coastline

area for more than 270 bird species, including cranes, woodlarks and wild geese. The best way to explore the area is on foot, on two wheels or on horseback, with panoramic trails and coastal itineraries designed to take in Maremma's wild beauty. The National Park also organises night walks, with guides taking you across meadows and olive groves to spot wild boar, foxes and fallow deer in the moonlight.

**How to do it** *Tucked away among vineyards a 15-minute drive from the Tuscan coast, L'Andana (0039 0564 944800; andana.it/en) organises horse-riding trips in the Maremma, with experienced riders able to join the butteri to try out life as a livestock herder. There's an on-site kids' club where you can leave your little ones. Doubles from £375 per night*

**Nearest airport** *Pisa*

*Continued on page 4*

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Cover story

Continued from page 3

SACRED SECRETS  
GARGANO  
*Puglia*

Italian tourists first began to trickle into the Gargano in the 1970s, yet these days the area remains largely unexplored by Brits, who tend to visit the southern part of the region deep in Italy's boot. Occupying the spur of northeastern Puglia, the promontory juts out into the clear waters of the Adriatic Sea, with dense oak and beech trees populated by roe deer and mouflon. For centuries, it was a secluded, remote spot visited only by pilgrims who would stop off at Monte Sant'Angelo on their way to Jerusalem. To this day, the Sanctuary of San Michele continues to be of great importance to pilgrims, its limestone grotto said to be the site of Archangel Michael's apparition in 490.

Since 1991, the area has been part of the Parco Nazionale del Gargano, with 93 miles of coastline where jagged cliffs drop into the sea and charming whitewashed villages perched on limestone spurs spill into the Adriatic. Vieste and Peschici are among the



▲ Get a taste of Puglia on a foodie tour  
▶ Enjoy crowd-free Maratea in Basilicata

highlights, with their delightful historic cores where little alleyways converge with twisting narrow streets.

Inland is the Foresta Umbra, a dense forested area that thrives in biodiversity, with towering beech trees that reach to more than 130ft, offering shaded woodland walks and biking trails. If lazing in the summer sun is more your thing, make for the Tremiti Islands, a tiny archipelago off the Gargano coast where you can snorkel and kayak among limestone cliffs.

**How to do it** *The 12-day Gastronomy of Puglia with Wexas Travel (020 7590 0610; wexas.com) includes three nights in the Gargano and costs from £1,550pp, including flights, car hire and accommodation. Nearest airport Bari*



STEP BACK IN HISTORY  
SINIS PENINSULA  
*Sardinia*

When the Phoenicians made landfall in the Sinis Peninsula's Golfo di Oristano in the 8th century BC, they were quick to establish the trading port of Tharros. With its two headlands, the gulf was perfectly sheltered from the strong Mistral winds, making it a strategic harbour for ships to make port. The city flourished as a major naval base under the Carthaginians, who readily traded with the Iberian Peninsula, Africa and the city of Massalia. You can see the city's remains today scattered along the coastline, although the ruins mostly date to the 2nd and 3rd centuries, when the city was a Roman outpost. You can

also take in the remains of a Bronze-Age Nuragic settlement (renowned for its unusual conical structures), which predates the arrival of the Phoenicians and sits on a hilltop commanding delightful views. The extensive ruins in the Golfo di Oristano make this one of Sardinia's most important archaeological sites, yet this stretch of littoral in western Sardinia remains delightfully uncrowded.

History aside, the Sinis Peninsula also impresses with its natural beauty. It's home to the island's largest wetlands, with ponds, marshes and lagoons attracting numerous species of rare birds, making this a paradise for birdwatchers. Pink flamingos are commonly seen nesting in the ponds that lie behind Mari Ermi, a delightful beach characterised by white and pink quartz pebbles, with a gently sloping

seabed much favoured by families with young children. One of the area's most beautiful beaches is Is Arutas, a dazzling stretch of sand made of tiny grains of quartz that shimmer in pretty shades of soft pink, white and green. The seabed here drops quickly, making it perfect for exploring the fascinating underwater world equipped with a mask and flippers.

**How to do it** *Immersed in lush pinewood forest, Is Arenas Hotel (0039 07831 862320; isarenashotel.it/en) lies to the north of Tharros, just a short drive from Mari Ermi and Is Arutas. There is also an adjacent golf course. Doubles from £213 per night. Nearest airport Cagliari*

ASLICE OF GREECE  
CILENTO  
*Campania*

Greek legend says mermaids once undulated through the deep blue waters of the Cilento, their enchantingly sweet songs mesmerising sailors, whose heads would spin round as they heard their mellifluous, dulcet tones, causing their vessels to crash into the rocks. The Greeks settled here long ago – Paestum was a major city of Magna Grecia lying on the Tyrrhenian Sea, its ruins today among the best-preserved Greek remains in the world.

Lying to the south of Campania, the Cilento is a charming stretch of unspoilt coastline lying mostly within the Parco Naturale del Cilento. Here, the rugged Alburni mountain range meets the sea, with hills carpeted in thick Mediterranean scrub and olive groves gently running down to the sea. Turquoise waters caress natural arches and coastal paths hug the shoreline. Parts of the coastline offer dramatic scenery, with hidden coves such as the glorious Baia degli Infreschi. Nestled at the foot of rocky cliffs, this is the perfect spot for cooling off.



▲ Road to ruin: Tharros, in Sardinia, dates back to the 2nd century as a Roman outpost

Meanwhile, in the marshy Volturno and Sele Plains, buffalo munch grass and lazily wallow in pools of water, producing milk used to make Campania's creamy buffalo mozzarella – make sure to set up a visit to a dairy producer to learn how it's made.

**How to do it** *A 15-minute drive from the temples of Paestum, the family-run Il Cannito (0039 0828 1962277; ilcannito.com/en) offers trips to hidden stretches of the Cilento coast as well as cooking classes. Doubles from £256. Nearest airport Naples*

PADDLE ROCKY COVES  
MARATEA  
*Basilicata*

Sitting comfortably in Italy's Mezzogiorno (southern Italy), Basilicata attracts far fewer tourists than its Puglian neighbour. Only a small 19-mile stretch of the region borders the Tyrrhenian Sea, and it's here that you'll

find Maratea (not to be confused with Matera), a delightful settlement that stretches along the coastline. Small hamlets dot the surrounding hillside, dominated by the towering 69ft Statue of Christ the Redeemer (Rio's is but 29ft higher).

Maratea's coastline is jagged and rocky, intersected by sheltered coves and inlets, some harbouring natural grottoes adorned with stalactite and stalagmite formations (the Grotta delle Meraviglie is the most famous). The best way to get to know the area is to hop on a kayak and paddle the stunningly clear waters, discovering hidden ravines and caves only accessible by sea. Scenes from James Bond's *No Time to Die* gave Maratea, and the wider Basilicata region, some recent prominence.

**How to do it** *Set in a private 25-acre park shaded by pines, maples and oak trees, Santavenere (0039 0973 877 652; santavenere.it) has its own private beach and is just a hop and a skip away from Maratea harbour. Doubles from £212 per night. Nearest airport Lamezia Terme*

SAIL AWAY FROM THE CROWDS

Italy offers superb sailing grounds – its coastline is dotted with small islands, some no more than rocky outcrops, others unsung spots where life has barely changed for decades. For a dose of tranquillity away from the crowds, sailing the cobalt-blue waters is the best way to explore. There's no shortage of stunning seascapes, from powdery beaches washed by crystal-clear waters in Sardinia's La Maddalena archipelago to idyllic coves along the rugged coastline of fashionable Capri.

If you're new to sailing the Italian coast, the most important thing to know is that the lack of natural harbours and limited spaces in marinas can make it challenging to berth in summer months, so it's worth booking ahead.

When it comes to how to do it, experienced sailors can hire their own yachts, while those who have never hoisted a sail are able to charter a fully staffed yacht complete with skipper and crew.

Sunsail (0330 332 1166; sunsail.co.uk) offers



▲ A port of one's own: charter a yacht – and skipper – in Procida

bareboat charters or skippered charters, departing from Portofino, Procida and Sardinia in the beautiful Tyrrhenian Sea, from £882 for seven nights, excluding flights. It also organises flotilla holidays that highlight the best of the coast's islands or cuisine.

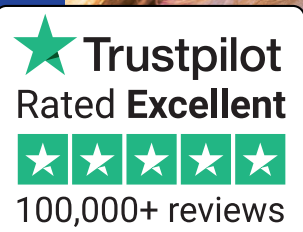
Helm (0207 632 7567; helm.yt) also offers bareboat, crewed, and skippered yacht charters across Sicily, Sardinia, the Amalfi Coast and the Tuscan archipelago. Bespoke holidays cost from £3,500 for a week.

Venture Sail (01872 487 288; venturesailholidays.com) offers several yacht cruises in the Italian Mediterranean, including a newly launched wellness break aboard a luxury catamaran sailing from Sardinia to Corsica, complete with daily meditation, controlled breathing and yoga sessions. It's available both as a private charter and as a small group sailing holiday, making it a great choice for solo travellers wishing to sail the Med in company – and style.

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