

# **Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz**

**Corsica + Italy: two new discoveries**



## **Chapter 26**

**January 2015 - May 2015**

## Corsica + Italy: two new discoveries

Also during winter 2014/15, the weather at Vera Playa was more inviting to just sunbathe “au natural”, than to “work” on our travel itinerary for the coming summer. Never the less, somehow we still managed to make a plan that should satisfy our itchy feet! This year, we shall travel again more intensely than during the past ones. We focus on places where we hadn't been yet, or where we hadn't been for a long time. By the end of the summer, we shall have visited a good dozen countries. Apart from Corsica and Italy, we were going to discover Europe's eastern part.



## From Andalucía to Nice

It was February 18<sup>th</sup> 2015, when we left our sunny top floor apartment at Natsun in Vera Playa. Corsica was our next major destination, and we allowed ourselves ten days to get there. This gave us plenty of time to visit some pretty sights en-route through Spain and France.

After admiring the almond blossom in the Alpujarras, we dived for two days into historic **Granada** that charmed our pants off, as did the impressive Alhambra-Fortress. Further north, we've admired the picturesque villages of Alcalá la Real and



Priego de Córdoba, before crossing the no less impressive Sierra de Andújar. After visiting the 12 delightful old windmills at **Consuegra**, we drove along the deep blue artificial-lake “Embalse de Buendia”. After a last night in Spain and a great Japanese evening-meal in **Lleida**, we crossed the Pyrenees into France. There, we spent our first 2 days city-strolling and gourmandizing in delightful **Perpignan**.

As the ferry to Corsica left from over-developed and hectic **Nice** (Côte d'Azur), this touristy town had to be our next overnight stop. However, strolling along the splendid “Promenade des Anglais”, visiting the charming old-town and the harbour, all of them lined with uncountable (a good many of them gourmet-) restaurants, rewarded our two nights stay.



# Corsica: a beauty with some scars

Corsica is an island that was often recommended to us, so finally we made a move to discover it. This diverse isle measures 8'680km<sup>2</sup>, has mountains of up to 2'706 m of altitude and is inhabited by 322'000 people.

Located roughly between Nice and the Italian Island of Sardinia, Corsica has been disputed for a long time. After being occupied by Greek, Phoenicians (ancestors of Libyans) and Romans, it fell to Italy, meaning thereafter it was disputed between rulers of Rome, Pisa and Genoa. After Corsica declared unilateral independence, the Genoese ceded it to Louis XV of France in 1769. Except for a three-year period, when it was ruled by the English, Corsica remained French ever since.



In 1976, a militant independence movement was created, forcing the French Government into negotiations. Soon, the independent movement got more and more radical. Finally, it split up in several armed and violent splinter groups, thereby digging its own grave and losing support of the Corsican people. In 2003, when the island could hold a referendum for greater autonomy, the majority of the Corsicans preferred to "remain suppressed" by the French rather than bow to armed, self declared patriots.

## Travo: our introduction to the diverse island

After a very quiet crossing, we alighted from the large luxury car-ferry Mega Smeralda to the Corsican harbour-town of **Bastia**, on February 27<sup>th</sup> 2015. We arrived just in time for dinner, and stayed at a nice hotel in a little hamlet north of town. Our first impressions were gained by driving to the northern tip "Cap Corse". Temperature-wise, it was about as "warm" as in Andalusia (~15°C), but much greener and much more fertile. Corsica's hills are covered in mainly evergreen bushes and trees, and spring was already in the making with lots of mimosas and clover in bloom.

As the weather was not that inviting, we soon made our way southward to our first holiday house, situated in **Travo-Ventiseri** on the east coast, about 50km north of Porto Vecchio. The new and modern detached house, which we had booked from the owners after seeing their add on the internet, turned out to be rather luxury, and was located in a new residential area with many young families.

As the weather turned nice again, we soon started to sight-see the island. Many villages, beaches, étangs, mountains, narrow gorges, picturesque river valleys and stunning cliffs were all waiting to be discovered. Corsica's only plain, and therefore the island's only "fast" roads are to be found on the east coast. They allowed us to reach our sight-seeing spots quickly, which meant with average speed of up to 45km/h. That's assuming you stay on the main road. However, if you venture into the mountains or out to the peninsulas, there are so many hairpin bends, and the roads become so narrow, 30km/h is certainly reckless driving! As addicted drinkers shy away from Scandinavia, Corsica is for pathologic hellbent drivers a cure at best.

Let's start the account of our discoveries with cliffs. The east coast doesn't boost any, only the south. The most dramatic can be found around touristy **Bonifacio** that owes fame to its spectacular cliff-top setting. We didn't find much charm in the place itself, though it looks very picturesque from a distance. Despite being well populated, we were surprised about the many crumbling buildings.

Tourist shops and tourists restaurants were now closed but abounding in summers, when the lowered awnings prevent visitors from seeing the bad state of the buildings above them. Parking space was a rarity, even in winter. At least now, parking was usually free of charge, but during summer, money buys you only a parking lot if you're lucky to find one. We wonder, how crammed it must be during peak season. Similarly as Bonifacio, we also experienced Porto Vecchio, Corte and other towns.



Driving up to the small hamlets glued to the hillsides, rewards often with spectacular views to snowy mountains and/or down to the sea and étangs (saltwater lagoons). Again; from a distance, the settlements look so cutely huddled together, but once you walk around their narrow alleys, you see lots of abandoned and crumbling houses, left behind as most of the remote villages depopulate.

Corsica bears also lot's of unspoiled nature, especially in its interior. Those who think it's all about beach, sun and fun, are wrong! There are also gorges, lakes and tall mountains, even some ski-lifts.

Near **Corte**, we were particularly impressed by Restonica Valley, with its clear green rocky water holes. The valley is framed by towering mountains of which the taller ones were presently snow covered.

On the way back to the coast, we crossed Sorba Pass (1,311m of altitude), where the road had to be cleared from quite a lot of snow just a few days ago. Before reaching the lower plain, we came through two spectacular narrow gorges carved out by Fiumorbo River: "Défilé de l'Inzecca" and "Défilé des Strette". Despite them being only a few kilometres apart, they look a world apart because of their different rock stratum.

## Land submerged

Despite the winter, we still wanted to see the sea and the beaches, so we trudged round the coast near **Porto Vecchio**. If the sea is calm, the water is of a stunning turquoise colour. Somehow it looks almost like in Asia. Seeing the many closed tourist businesses near every beach, it's easy to imagine how popular these places become every summer. At 15°C, we were less interested, how pleasant the swimming would be on the shallow white sandy beaches, but rather how diverse the coastal landscape is. To our big delight, there are plenty of forest- and rock-fringed sandy bays, interspersed with small islets. We often also caught sight of astonishing saltwater lagoons (étangs), lighthouses and peninsulas.

Most of our time, we had pleasantly sunny and warm weather. However, in between there were two severe storms. The sea got so rough that even large ferry boats couldn't enter the harbour for several hours. Hundreds, if not thousands of trees got uprooted, and some smaller buildings had their roofs blown away. In some areas, they had severe downpours causing the rivers to inundate, which unfortunately resulted in some lost lives. The media coverage left the impression that "land submerged" applied to all of Corsica!

Some of our friends worried, but we could assure them we got by with some power-cuts only. Albeit, in a modern high-tech house the lack of power causes much more inconvenience than in a rustic cottage. Even at 11 a.m., we were still sitting in the dark, as the electric shutters wouldn't open. We couldn't even drive out to the next village, to check whether the bakery has been able to bake bread, as our gate relied on electricity as well!

As soon as the weather showed a smiley face again, we were out and about. After touring villages, beaches and gorges, we went up to the mountains again. **Bavella Pass** was a top highlight near our holiday house. Already the drive up there, is an experience in itself, as it constantly reveals fascinating views to craggy mountains in unusual shades of green and red. As Brigitte wanted to see the famous hole in the rock, she had looked us up a hike to get to "*Tafonu di u Cumpuleddu*", among non-Corsicans more commonly known as "trou de la bombe".

Though the sight of the landmark was absolutely worthwhile, the trail bore some unexpected obstacles.



Firstly, we discovered that the signposts had been dismantled for winter. Though the path was initially pleasantly wide, we soon had to cross patches of snow on which we sank in knee-deep. Where it had melted, we weren't sure, if we were still on the track or undergoing a Kneipp cure in a creek bed. As much as we had admired the shapely dead wood in the beginning of our hike, as much we were challenged by a good dozen of uprooted trees from last week's storm, as they barricaded our path. However, the "trou" was truly amazing, though it has nothing to do with a bomb at all; it's a fragile rock arch of about 8m in diameter, solely created by force of nature.



## Pietrosella and the West Coast

After three weeks in Travo, we changed on March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015 from Corsica's east- to the west-coast. Already before arriving on the island, we realized that it is too large, to be discovered from one single place only. Even if Corsica is not all that big, the narrow serpentine roads are time consuming; or as the locals say: "Here we don't speak about distances, we talk about the time it takes to go to a place".

Our second Corsican holiday house was situated in **Pietrosella**, a hamlet at 500 metres of altitude, some 20 minutes drive above the Golf of Ajaccio. It was an old stone building that had been completely renovated and superbly equipped to modern standard. Here, it was the first time we had hosts who really understood our basic needs. They did not only provide coffee and tea, but also 12 (an entire dozen) different homemade jams!

Our first excursion brought us down to **Ajaccio**, with 64,000 inhabitants, Corsica's largest town. It's appearance to us was of a rather new and proper town, meaning: we saw mainly big apartment blocks. Yet, the place is history-charged, as Napoleon Bonaparte was born here. His name still draws crowds of tourists to Ajaccio every summer, and we wonder where they shall park, as parking space was already very scarce in March, without the visitors.



On other days out, we alternated between exploring the coastal regions and the mountainous areas in the interior. Wherever we went, the views were incredibly beautiful (as our pictures proof) and the road was incredibly slow! If we followed the coast, we drove through dense forest most of the time. Once a while a bay with radiant blue colours came into sight. If we ventured to the mountains, we drove through dense forest most of the time. Once a while, a small village or a mountain range came into sight. The west-coast is somehow a succession of craggy rocky parts and sandy beaches. It didn't matter whether we discovered the coast or the mountains, most of the time we were on narrow roads winding their way up and down an endless succession of mountain-passes, even if they weren't always very high.



The exceptional beauty of **Col de St Eustache**, led us to drive up there twice. Views here, were not limited by dense forest, as nature was just starting to recover from a severe forest-fire that devastated a big area in 2009.

Corsica's vegetation is dominated by evergreen Maquis shrubland, a wealth of sturdy heat-resistant shrubs that just started to bloom now. To see a patch of meadow, a green hill or valley not covered in bush, is quite an exception, especially along Corsica's west coast. Semi-wild pigs, cows, sheep and goats can be encountered on any road. We were told the beasts have been left behind by farmers who left the island.

## Corsican peculiarities

We got the impression that the Corsican People are distinctively different from the Mainland-French. Many things we've seen here reminded us rather of Southern-European countries like Spain or Italy, where people preferably settle in densely populated areas, and nobody wants to live in an isolated spot.

Firstly, an own language has developed on the island: Corsican. It is more similar to Italian than to French, though we heard the latter much more often. Nowadays, 100'000 Corsicans, and 250'000 Sardinians speak the Corsican language. Also eating preferences vary from the mainland. We almost couldn't believe, how much the Corsicans are fond of restaurants focusing on huge mountains of meat, accompanied by equal portions of french-fries. As much as French cuisine is famous for its creativity, Corsican cuisine is famous for its simplicity.

Corsicans are a proud bunch of people who had been seeking more autonomy in the past. Shortly before the turn of the millennium, militant independent movements went a fair bit over the top, even in the eyes of most locals. Nowadays, most Corsicans seem to be happy with the situation of limited self-autonomy under French rule.

Anyway, it appears Corsicans are warriors by nature. Children and adults alike, roaming around in combat clothing, are common sight, and it seems they love to exercise their combat skills. Used shotgun shells lay on any walking path, in the woods and along every roadside. The Corsican-French road signs have, more often than not, been vandalized by black paint and used as shooting targets!

We often heard that tourists felt Corsicans are not too friendly toward visitors. An impression we didn't get during our March-April stage. However, sometimes we felt the locals didn't want the island's great nature to appear too attractive to visitors. For generations, car wreckages, bulk garbage, aluminium tins, plastic bottles, cigarette boxes, and other rubbish are evenly disposed of along the island's large road network. Whereas most of it is just an eyesore and harmful to animals "only", shards of glass really endanger nature and people! In the summer draught, the sun rays on the glass can start severe forest fires that often plague Corsica.

The island also has a unique funerary cult. Those families who can afford it, lay their ancestors often in a kind of family-temple or family-mausoleum to rest. This is not necessarily situated on the public cemetery, but often on a small private yard on the village outskirts, or sometimes in the garden of a family member. That way, inconvenient parents in law can be sold together with the family-estate, at least after they deceased.

## The bizarre North West Coast

After leaving Pietrosella on April 11, 2015, we took a few days to follow the West Coast up to Cap Corse. The rugged coastline between **Piana** and **Porto-Ota** was very appealing. We were really glad, we didn't do it as a day-trip from our last holiday cottage. That way, we stayed overnight in Porto, and could re-visit this particularly picturesque stretch of road known as "**Calanche de Piana**" the next morning again. It is lined by wind and weather eroded, unique rock formations in red granite. You can recognize big and small shapes, resembling for example a dog's head, or lovers with a heart between them.

Being just a week after Easter, we now had to mingle with other tourists on the small road - a striking difference to the lonely mountain roads we had been used to during the past six weeks.

Driving further north in sunny weather, we enjoyed almost constant views down to the deep blue coast with more bizarre rock formations in various colours and types of rocks. The closer we got to the small town of **Calvi**, the more it got spectacular. Beforehand, we side stepped to **Galéria** where we saw another attractive harbour and fabulous seashore.

The coast between Calvi and **L'île Rousse** is lined by beaches with deep blue, and sometimes turquoise water and considered Corsica's "Côte d'Azur". This resulted in a flourishing tourist industry popping up every summer. Especially Calvi with its citadelle and its harbour, is very pretty to look at. The beautiful coastline between Calvi and Ile Rousse



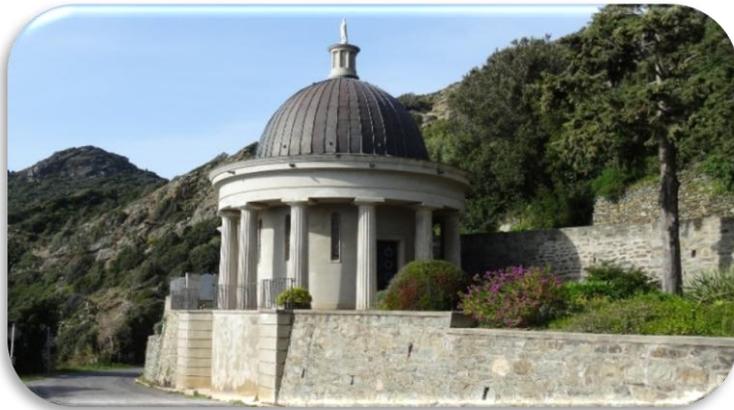
tempted us to so many stops that we ended up staying overnight in both towns, even though they are only 25 km apart. As it was still off-season we could find modestly priced, but nice hotels. However, sometimes we had to search a bit around, as about 80% of accommodations were only opening sometimes between end of April and end of May.

Still more spectacular rocky coastline and sandy beaches, as well as more mountainous pass-roads, could be admired en route to **Saint Florent**, another popular seaside town. The harbour was not empty, though for the jet-setters, it was still too early in season to arrive.

The way up north to **Cap Corse** was dominated by steep forest clad mountain slopes, dotted with little hamlets. As usually in Corsica, those were pretty to look at from a distance. Of course, the deep blue sea remained a constant companion. Now, nature was in full bloom with bushes and spring flowers popping up everywhere. The only once blooming industry we've noticed up there, was a huge asbestos mine, abandoned but not dismantled 50 years ago. However, there must have been other thriving businesses, as the private graves are nowhere bigger and more pompous than on Corsica's West Cape. We heard that some of those mausoleum- and chapel-like graves are worth more than many a commoner's house! What you see is only the entrance-hall, the actual grave chamber is underneath. Most private graves are regularly maintained and new ones are still being built.

To finish our trip around Corsica, we went back to "La Corniche", a nice hotel in a small hamlet high above Bastia. Here, we had spent our first night on the island and to us it was also an ideal choice for the last couple of nights. It was nice to have a day just to reflect about our stage on this small island that really takes a lot of time to be discovered well.

## Final thoughts about Corsica



Altogether, we've spent 7 weeks on Corsica, whereby we roughly drove 4,000km. Everybody who sees our pictures, will agree that we have been visiting an extremely beautiful island. Though we liked Corsica a lot and we're so glad that we visited this diverse island, we're not only praising it. Maybe our expectations were just a bit too high, as we had heard so many overwhelming comments about it beforehand. Surely, Corsica's interior boasts a lot of unspoiled nature, from rolling hills to narrow gorges and craggy mountains. It's also true, the island is surrounded by deep blue water and most of the coastline is just breathtaking!

However, it's also true that the ~320,000 soul-island of Corsica is invaded by some three million visitors every summer (nearly 50% during July and August), almost 10 tourists for each inhabitant! Knowing that, it's just natural that not all locals are delighted by the masses of holiday makers. Already during winter (with negligible tourist numbers), parking lots are full and in any sizeable village, traffic gets clogged during rush hour. Locals told us that during summer, all coastal roads are jammed from dusk till dawn. It's also a fact, that most villages are nice to look at from a distance, but rather unappealing if you take a closer look at the façades. But you shouldn't inspect everything closer anyway. Otherwise you'll see rubbish, disposed of the Corsican way along the roadside, which is better visible if you visit during winter. Lovers of French Food shouldn't expect the same, as the Corsican counterpart is rather famous for simplicity than finesse!

Despite visiting in the cold season, we had a look at several naturist resorts. We didn't check facilities for campers and only judge rental accommodation; they were always rather simple and, especially during off season, a fair bit pricier compared to the resorts we know on Mainland-France. It's a fact that many of Corsica's summer cottages have fantastic locations right on the beach-front, but unfortunately, you often pay for the setting, rather than the standard of your holiday bungalow! So, if it's all about bathing, sun seekers and keen swimmers can probably find better-value for money-holiday resorts elsewhere. However, if proximity to the deep blue sea really matters a lot, Corsica is where you'll find it!



As our intention was to explore the island's sea- and landscapes, this request has really been answered. We're so glad we've been here and especially, that we visited so early in the year. During off season, preferably between mid October and end of April, we would warmly recommend a visit to Corsica to all nature lovers, who intend to admire the island's beautiful natural treasures.

# Italy: unexpectedly charming

Despite its proximity to Switzerland, so far Italy remained an undiscovered spot on our travel circuit, as it just didn't seem to attract us. However, just now, this shall change and we will start to discover this 301,338 km<sup>2</sup> large boot with ~61 million inhabitants.

## Tuscany: where paintings are simply unable to do justice to the reality

On April 16<sup>th</sup> 2015, we alighted, after a very calm ferry crossing from Corsica, to the Italian port town of Livorno. We had booked a hotel room in nearby **Pisa**, where our Italian adventure was to start. For most, Pisa stands almost synonymous for its leaning tower. Yet, we never imagined how much it really leans. No matter how hard we tried, our photos wouldn't reflect how lean the tower really stands, as wide angle lenses distort the perspective. The sagging belltower that started leaning already during construction (1173-1372), is depicted dead straight - instead the nearby buildings seem to lean over... The failed structure, "torre pendente" in Italian, stands on "Piazza dei Miracoli" and is linked to the no less impressive cathedral and baptistry. Even though those three buildings are the crowd drawers, in fact the entire old town of Pisa is absolutely worth visiting. Tall colourful and well restored town houses line the Arno River, as well as the streets and alleys of the city. As a student town, Pisa offers a good choice of cheap though excellent restaurants, so we got a perfect introduction to the culinary delights of Italy.



Nearby **Lucca** is another attractive town and we opted to visit it on a day's outing from Pisa. A four kilometres long city wall surrounds Lucca's picturesque, well restored medieval centre with its many churches. It's not a classic fortification wall but a 12m tall dam with a wide walking path on top, very popular with Sunday strollers and cyclists, most on four wheeled family bikes that are being rented out all over the place.

Driving through Tuscany's pastoral landscape, we came across many well restored pretty villages. Often, they sit on a hill top, like for example **Volterra**. This small medieval town is exceptionally charming thanks to its narrow alleys and nested houses, covered in old round tiles. In its "backyard", there is a Roman Theatre that was used as rubbish dump during medieval times. After being excavated in the 1950s, it had been made accessible to archaeologists and tourists.

**San Gimignano** nestles on one of the next hills and is quite peculiar. This village is sometimes dubbed the "Medieval Manhattan of Italy", due to its many tall towers. They were built to mark power and wealth by prominent families in times before Ferrari and the like existed and became status symbols. If a noble family lost grace, their tower was torn down. San Gimignano once counted 72 of these up to 54 metres tall towers. After the year 1348, the population suffered the plague and everything went down. Today, the 15 remaining towers are still enough to function as tourist magnets. San Gimignano is one of many places in Tuscany, of which the centre is largely "pedestrians only" zone. Even people living within the city walls, only get limited access with their cars. Large parking lots on the outskirts swallow the uncountable buses and vehicles of visitors. In stark contrast to the very pedestrian friendly village- and town centres, is the lack of foot paths only a step away from tourist crowds; probably to make sure, everybody remains near the tourist businesses.



Even though Italian ice cream isn't a suitable souvenir, tourists and locals alike, ride the uncountable "Gelateria's" often several times a day. Almost all of them offer excellent quality, but the master at "Gelateria

Dondoli" in San Gimignano was twice awarded the title of "gelato world champion". Therefore, his shop is even more popular than the others, resulting in long queues. However, even short queues don't mean, you're being served immediately. If four school children and a teacher are in front of you, there's probably a nun outside making sure the children enter the shop two by two until the entire gang of 100 is scooped an ice cream.

## Geothermal energy: steaming power

Next on our agenda, was the geothermal area **Biancane at Monterotondo Marittimo**. The tourist-office, which was no more than a shelf in a local café-bar, provided us with a useful map indicating the nicely set up foot and hiking paths in the geothermal area. Despite having made this extraordinary site accessible to tourists, as often in Italy, nobody dared to charge an entrance fee. Surprisingly, there were almost no other people around, though it was really worthwhile to explore this steaming landscape full of fumaroles emitting vapour, gases and sulphur resulting in colourful sediments on mud and rocks.

The geothermal park itself is not that large, but we have seen several big plants in the area, transforming geothermal energy into electric power. In fact, Italy has the fifth largest national geothermal energy market after the USA, Philippines, Indonesia and Mexico. Italy obtains 7.5% of the worlds captured geothermal energy (~ 901 MW gross electricity generation), ahead of New Zealand, Iceland and Japan.



Overnight, we stayed in **Massa Marittima**. From its ornate old city wall, the view reached over the roofs below the cathedral, over green hills to the sea, where the sun approached the horizon. The next morning, we continued through rolling hills and came into what we considered the prettiest part of typical Tuscan landscapes. Along the way, we visited again and again picturesque villages like **Roccastrada**, **Montalcino** and **San Quirico d'Orcia**, all prominently sitting on a hill top.



xFor the next four days, we based ourselves in **Pienza**, which became a popular tourist destination after it got world heritage listed for its harmonic layout of the village centre. Well, as many Tuscan villages, it's very nice indeed and the surrounding landscape is very appealing - but we didn't find the layout of its centre any different to others! The best harmony reigned probably among the shopkeepers, after having counted the money made every day with the busloads of tourists from all over the globe, looking to see the harmony promised by UNESCO... Anyway, in the evenings, the village was quiet again, and we were pleased about the many restaurants that offered quality dining.

## Slimming by eating

Though it has been said before, eating in Italy was a big surprise to us. Let's start with breakfast: Colazione. For a change, we got fond of bars. Here in Italy, a bar is a place that mainly serves coffee, tea, dolci (sweets), croissants, delicious hot crusty sandwiches and of course pizza slices. As locals have a proper hearty lunch, they don't need heavy bread for brekky. Italians just have a coffee with a croissant, of which most are a filled with either chocolate, custard or marmalade. Lunch and dinner normally are a time consuming affair, served on uncountable plates. The further south you go, the longer it takes. Mamma mia, we couldn't believe how much Italians eat, and even less, how slim they are, despite all this eating! The trick that seems to work is eating slowly, one plate after the next, separating carbon hydrate and meat (food

combining diet), and furthermore, everything is freshly cooked and prepared with fresh ingredients. A traditional Italian feast will start with two to four Antipasti like bruschetta, sausages or stuffed tomatoes, followed by two to eight Pastas, followed by a generous meat and/or fish-dish with or without side-dishes, some cheese and of course, dessert. Washing it all down with water, fizzy or still, and finishing off with coffee, seems to be compulsory. All other drinks are optional. Depending on your mood, you can choose a restaurant that either cooks simple or sophisticated. All in all, our taste buds were more than satisfied, and even though we ate a lot too (if not as much as the locals), we didn't put on weight.

In Pienza, we could easily have spent a week just walking around the hills that presently burst in the first green of spring. Farms accessed by cypress lined tracks, could be spotted in any direction. Never the less, we made also a big excursion to **Montepulciano**, **Bolsena** on Lago di Bolsena and to **Orvieto** enthroning a hill. There, we admired its wonderful medieval old town and the big cathedral.



On April 26<sup>th</sup> 2015, we continued north. "Strada Provinciale del Pecorile 438" was a good road that led over very scenic crests. As on many other Italian main roads, the authorities imposed also here, a 30km/h speed limit for almost the entire 60 kilometres. Probably it's meant that visitors can easier admire the landscape along this lonely country road. That way, tourists with lots of time have the chance to check the nerves of locals completely legally. Whereas in most countries, a solid- or a double white line is considered an invisible wall, in Italy, it's considered an invisible marking, and speed limits are only there to define a culprit in case of accidents.

**Siena** was our next highlight. The bustling town of 50'000 inhabitants charms with its huge main-square, which in fact is oval and called Piazza del Campo. Besides many other remarkable buildings, the tall tower of the city hall and the striped tower of the cathedral, partly built of black and white marble, are Siena's landmarks.

In general, Italians seem to be quite conservative, or religious respectivel; there's even a "Banca Cattolica". However, nowadays the country's thriving tourist-industry uses the inquisition's atrocities as a good source of income, as "Museos della Tortura" can be found in many towns like here in Siena.

Our last sight-seeing stops in the Toscana-Region, were the small but perfectly fortified village of **Monteriggioni** and the not so touristy, but even more charming historical centre of **Certaldo**. Also **Castelnuovo di Garfagnana** wasn't touristy, but we liked its setting between mountains.



## The Ligurian coast: bustling with tourists

Lured by the highly praised coastal villages of the "Cinque Terre National Park", we continued to Liguria-Province, where we found a perfect guesthouse high above La Spezia. During our Italian trip, we had so far stayed at hotels and B&B-accommodations, for € 50-65. "Locanda del Papa", where we stayed now, was marketed by "Agriturismo" (Farmstay) though it was more like an international travellers heaven. The enthusiastic couple who run it, provide guests with excellent tourist information about the area, and furthermore with breakfasts adapted to the different nationalities. While the odd Italians contended with a tiny Espresso and a croissant, Germans enjoyed egg, charcuterie and cheese, we got Muesli, yoghurt and bread, whereas the Aussi couples got spoiled with a real bush-tucker brekky.

As advised, we took the train from La Spezia. We visited four of the **five Cinque Terre villages** with a day-pass. As road access to most of the villages is anything else but easy, and parking scarce, the train that connects the settlements via tunnels, is the best option. Getting out at the first stop in **Riomaggiore**, we got a shock how crowded it was at the railway station despite the long week-end of May 1<sup>st</sup> not even having started. This provided perfect "working environment" for pickpockets, and consequently loudspeaker announcements didn't only warn "there might be thieves", it said: "there WILL BE pickpockets"! Don't wait to see masked rascals, better beware of pretty young ladies.

Most of the small villages consist of tall gaily painted houses clinging to steep hills just above a harbour. Those villages often had to withstand the raging sea and landslides caused by torrential rains. Yet, the people who live here, didn't lose faith, they're very catholic indeed. To get easier access and to cultivate grapes, the hills had been terraced.

Theoretically, a costal hiking path connects one place with the next, but in 2011, floods destroyed it in many sections. As the famous "Via dell'amore" was closed, we opted to follow the signposts alternative path to Manarola. However, had we known that this path literally traverses a pyramid shaped mountain, we would rather have waited for the next train. First, we had to conquer an elevation of 240m straight up, then straight down. It was incredibly steep and sweat driving!

For our taste, **Manarola** and **Vernazza** were the prettiest villages. **Corniglia**, looked lovely from the distance as well, though we didn't visit it. **Monterosso**, Cinque Terre's only beach resort, and relatively easy accessible by car, on the other hand, was rather disappointing. In our opinion, the Cinque Terre villages sacrifice big parts of their appeal to mass-tourism. To us, the less crowded places we had been visiting before, seemed much more charming.

Due to a long week-end, we neither found parking, nor accommodation further west along the coast. So we unexpectedly ended up in **Genoa**. This big city was a pleasant surprise with many attractive sights. We liked the many well maintained historic buildings in the extensive old town. Many Families patiently joined the several hundred metres long queues to visit some of the attractions on the harbour front, like the aquarium.



Driving back half an hour south-east, we were lucky this time to find a hotel room in the very busy seaside resort of **Rapallo**. During summer, when hoards of bathers occupy the rows of sun-beds, we wouldn't want to be here (or anywhere on Italy's coast), but right now, it was a perfect base to visit some appealing coastal villages. **Santa Margherita** could even be reached on foot from Rapallo and there was quite a lot to be seen in the old town, as well as along the harbour. An hour further by man power, lies the charming port of **Portofino**, which nowadays, is the place to be for those who have or assume to have money - or like to mingle with those who have.

To us, the most appealing village on the Ligurian coast, is **Camogli**. It's many tall colourful houses cling to a hillside. A rock outcrop occupied by a fortress and a church, splits the long seafront into a harbour- and beach-side. Unsurprisingly for such a pretty village, the large pedestrian area is lined with café- and snack-bars, gelaterias and restaurants. Unlike Rapallo, however, Camogli has small family run eateries rather than impersonal dining halls.

## Campeggio Naturista Costalunga: naturism with a personal touch

Meanwhile spring was in full bloom, and temperatures on the rise, tempting us to strip off. Italy isn't a prime destination for naturism and what we read about public nude beaches, even those near naturist resorts, didn't sound very inviting! However, in dept searching on the internet revealed a couple of places in Northern Italy's interior we wanted to give a try.



First, we contacted **Costalunga**, a small camping resort near **Sassello**. The 2ha ground offers 40 pitches, two mobile-homes and two small bungalows that were currently getting their finishing touch. Upon arriving on May 4<sup>th</sup> 2015, we opted for one of the well equipped mobile-homes that come with a large living-kitchen area.

Costalunga is run very personally by Paolo and Enrico, with the help of Enrico's parents. It's a former club ground but some four years ago, the two young guys took over. They invested, improve(d) the facilities and run it now commercially. They just bought more land and were currently adding a few

more camp sites. The ground was already much more lively than we had expected for this time of the year. Quite a few naturists profited from the sunny sites, though shady ones can be found as well. There is a generously sized pool surrounded by plenty of space for sunbathing and a Wi-Fi Hotspot next to it. Parents might appreciate the playground for their little ones next to the pool. Groceries, a Gelateria and restaurants can be found in the nearby village of Sassello.

As naturism is not really popular among Italians, 90% of Costalunga guests come from abroad - mostly from the Netherlands. During our four-day stage, there were 5 Dutch couples, the two of us, and one Italian couple on a day visit.

Daily, Guests can have dinner together with Paolo and Enrico, who both speak excellent English. If you order dinner, you can expect about five excellently prepared courses of traditional Italian fare and an interesting chat with the very sociable owners.

Costalunga is embedded in pastoral landscape with many hills. Nude walks within the ground are limited to a few hundred metres, but on the other hand, the ground can be used as a base to visit some attractive sights on the Ligurian coast and in the nearby Piedmont region. Costalunga is a beautiful intimate place, perfect for people who want to relax and spend a few quiet days or weeks. To us, it was just what we needed for a few days rest, after an intense period of travelling.

## Villaggio Naturista Le Betulle: naturism on the outskirts of Torino

On May 8<sup>th</sup> 2015 we left Liguria and continued to the Piedmont region. After 2½ hours drive through thinly populated pastoral landscape, we bypassed the city of Turin. Only 20km to the north-west, we reached another one of Italy's few naturist grounds; [Le Betulle](#), situated next to the village of La Cassa.

This 12ha estate, a former club ground, has recently been converted into a commercial naturist village. It offers some 80 sites for permanents, another 80 for visitors, as well as about 20 rental accommodations. Among them are various bungalows, mobile homes and on-site vans that offer almost the standard of a chalet, as they all have wooden awnings with fitted kitchen and flat screen TV's. For our 8 day's stay, we got one of three nice wooden chalets with covered terrace. Le Betulle is situated on the slopes of a forested hillside and offers limited, but good possibilities for nude walks. Best of all, after leaving through the backdoor, the village of La Cassa is only ten minutes stroll away. There is no supermarket, but as in old times, a small village shop, a butcher, a baker, a greengrocer, and of course, as in any Italian village: a café-bar and an ice-cream parlour, that here formed a joint-venture. The shop-keepers were all extremely helpful, had always time for a chat, gave us several times some discounts or freebies and had fun with our interpretation of the Italian language. All in all, even in a conservative village, the nude pigs can mutate to valuable clients!



Back at Le Betulle, it was very quiet for the time of the year and the size of the ground. Not even on the weekends, we realized many permanents showing up, only a few foreigners were dropping in for a few days and the Dutch couple next to us, even for two weeks. The big pool was already open and the many sports- and play grounds could be used. Internet-access was available in some communal areas and who prefers to read a book, will find a large library. Later in season, there was to be a big restaurant, BBQ area, sauna, jacuzzi and bread delivery.

We didn't make many excursions but there would be plenty of opportunities in the surroundings. To see Turin from a distance, you don't need to wear anything, but those who want to see it properly, don't need to drive far. Furthermore, there are impressive mountains and picturesque valleys in abundance throughout Piedmont. Sampling the culinary treats of this region, deserves several outings too and luckily, there are some good restaurants nearby.

On a market-day, we visited **Lanzo Torinese**, a charming village that is also famous for its old devil's bridge, which looks quite peculiar with its stone arch in the middle.

To us, Le Betulle is a well equipped naturist ground, with lots of sightseeing opportunities in the vicinity. It's extremely relaxing during off-season, but can also be suitable for a family-holiday during peak-summer.

## Italy's Dolomites: soaring mountains and awesome views

To celebrate Brigitte's mother's 80. birthday, we interrupted our Italian trip for a few days, and headed to **Central-Switzerland**. After attending the party and settling a few things, we drove to **Zernez** in the Engadin Valley. From there, we continued over Ofenpass, before reaching Val Müstair and re-entering **Italy** on May 25<sup>th</sup> 2015. Now, we were in the Alto Adige Region, the German speaking area, better known as **Suedtiro** (South Tyrol).



When stopping in **Glurns**, we got to know an Italy, totally different from the one we had been visiting before! Not only that everyone spoke German, the whole culture here felt German. Only the houses looked still similar to those of Switzerland's Engadin Valley. Italian ice-cream was now suddenly sold by the scoop instead of the size of the cup as in the rest of Italy. Some vendors wore dirndl dress and other costumes, and food was as German as it can be. Striking, was also the difference in temperature! Here it was suddenly 22°C warm, which was 10°C more than in the surrounding valleys. Well, that might be the explanation why our ancestors named the 2,149m high pass we just crossed "Ofenpass/Pass dal Fuorn", which translates as "oven-pass", it really seems capable to create this furnace heat.

After Glurns, we crossed the Vinschgau Valley and entered the Eggental, after bypassing Merano and Bolzano. Now we were in the **Dolomite Region**, our chosen destination. During our lunch stop in Welschnofen, we enjoyed a sandwich made of crusty dark bread and some Apple strudel. Next, we admired the small but incredibly beautiful **Lake Carezza**. A very modern pedestrian tunnel connects the car park, the souvenir-shops and snack bars with the lake on the other side of the road. For tourists in a rush, a viewing platform provides some great vistas, but surrounding the emerald green beauty prove absolutely rewarding. The water of this mountain lake on 1,500m above sea level is so crystal clear, you see every log on the ground and every fish. The 300m long lake is framed by tall fir trees. Behind them, there are ranges of impressive Dolomite mountains, and if there's no wind, they even reflect to complete that picture perfect image.

## The Ladins of the Dolomites Region: unique language and interesting food

After crossing Karerpass, we overnighed in **Vigo di Fassa**. This village and all of the Fassa Valley belongs to the Ladin Region, just south of South Tyrol. The mother tongue of most of the inhabitants is Ladin, a language similar to Rhaeto-Romanic. Also Italy boasts an amazing range of languages and cultures. In fact, there are more than 30 different languages listed as "endangered" and this on top of about a dozen "safe" ones, like Friulian, Occitan, Arbëresh, etc.

The area where Ladin is spoken, has also an interesting culinary culture. It appeared to us like a refined fusion of the best the Italian-, and the best the German and Austrian cuisines have on offer.

We were lucky with the restaurant we chose, as it was a real "Ristorante Gastronomico". Well, if we say the one we chose, we actually mean, the one that was open... As most villages in the Dolomites, Vigo di Fassa lies on an altitude of 1,500m above sea level. It's one of many ski resorts and as end of May is neither winter-, nor summer-season, 80% of restaurants and hotels were closed.



Every spring, damned winter behaves like a drama queen, threatening mankind with a stagy comeback. According to weather forecasts, we feared that mountain passes were going to close again. Never the less, we set off to explore the

beauty of the craggy mountain landscape. Having four seasons in one day, was just an additional thrill. Well, it prompted us to many coffee breaks, just to treat ourselves with even more local specialities, until it stopped raining once more. And



if we finally hit the road again, we were never sure, whether it would be rainy, snowy or sunny behind the next mountain, or maybe all at once. At least the fog didn't fall too low, so we still had some great vistas. After some 150km round loop, we ended up in **Canazei**, only 12km from the place where we'd stayed last night.

The next day, the weather was much nicer, so we re-discovered **Grödner Joch** (2,121m) and **Sella Joch** (2,240m), our favourites from yesterday. The views of the towering mountains were very impressive, and as we crossed the pass roads in the opposite direction to yesterday, they appeared now unexpectedly different.

During our second lunch stop in Arabba, we decided not to drive back over **Passo Pordoi** (2,239m), but to head on east to Cortina d'Ampezzo.

Of course, it took time to get there, as we stopped many times again along the way. Once we even made a little side trip to see the ruin of **Castello Andraz**. Very impressed, we were also with the views from **Falzarego Pass** on 2,105m of altitude. The famous "5-torri" peaks looked so close, you thought you could almost touch them, but there were many more imposing mountains in the surroundings.

For our last two days in the Italian Dolomites, we based ourselves at **Cortina d'Ampezzo**. On a daytrip, we visited first picturesque little **Lake Scin**, where we admired its crystal clear green water. Soon, we stood atop of **Passo Tre Croci** that offered again, spectacular views to the surrounding mountain ranges. Not much further, we reached **Lake Misurina**. To walk around it, would take less than an hour, but only, if you never rest in one of the good dozen hotel-restaurants, dotted along the shore. The views to the mountain panorama are rewarding along the entire way.

As we had completed our loop by 5 PM and the weather was still perfect, we took the chance, passed our guesthouse and drove in the other direction, up to **Passo Giau**. Though we didn't stop along the way to the peak on 2,236 m, the panorama that awaited us there, outshone many others, we had enjoyed during the last few days. It was a dream: 360° of spectacular Dolomite scenery!

Olive green **Lake Duern** and emerald-/milky-green **Lake Toblach**, we've passed the next day on our way to Austria, bade a perfect farewell to the Dolomites and to Italy.

## Final thoughts about our stage in Italy

Altogether, we've spent 5 very rewarding weeks in Italy. Europe's boot offered us much more, than we've hoped for: Uncountable, well restored, towns and villages - very diverse cultures - geothermal areas - fascinating coastlines - towering mountains - rolling pastoral landscapes - friendly, helpful people - and last, but not least, heavenly ice-cream as well as a very varied and sophisticated cuisine. It was the first time that we've truly visited Italy, but most probably, if not certainly, not the last time...

Brigitte & Heinz



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