

PLACES

GENOA: THE ITALIAN RIVIERA DONE DIFFERENTLY

Genoa has long been the gateway to the Italian Riviera's polished pockets, but Millie Field stays put in the portside city that's fast becoming a destination in itself



BY MILLIE FIELD 30 SEPTEMBER 2024

I'm not big on betting, but I'm taking a gamble on Genoa — a centuries-old maritime hub where today's visitors seem to be as fleeting as the sailors that once called into its port. Most people pass through en route to the starrier hotspots of Cinque Terre and Portofino, but I'm sticking around, and I'm in good company too: Nigella Lawson is on my flight. I take this as a sign that my punt on the Ligurian capital might pay off.



Capitolo Riviera

Once we land, there's no time to give the celebrity chef a 'wah-vay', for I'm heading straight to seaside suburb Nervi on Genoa's eastern fringes. As the train trundles along, the city gives way to panoramas of glittering sea and pastel-hued houses — a view that

feels more fitting for the Italian Riviera. September sun greets me warmly on arrival, as do my hosts at Capitolo Riviera, a biophilic boutique hotel with a sustainable ethos. Its wood-and-stone architecture blends in with the leafy setting, but sits in stark contrast to the surrounding sorbet-shaded buildings — a pioneering design in the contemporary in frozen-in-time Nervi.

But I soon start to relish the suspended sense of time. This slice of seaside preaches *dolce far niente* (the sweetness of doing nothing) over *la dolce vita*, which the rest of the Riviera abides by. My day takes on a suitably languorous pace: after a slow breakfast on the sun-dappled terrace, I stroll through the hillside Parchi di Nervi, which is scented by rose gardens and sea breeze, and along the Passeggiata Anita Garibaldi, a pine-shaded promenade that winds past swimming spots. Maybe something is in the water here, or — more likely — in the jars of herbal tea dropped to my door each night.

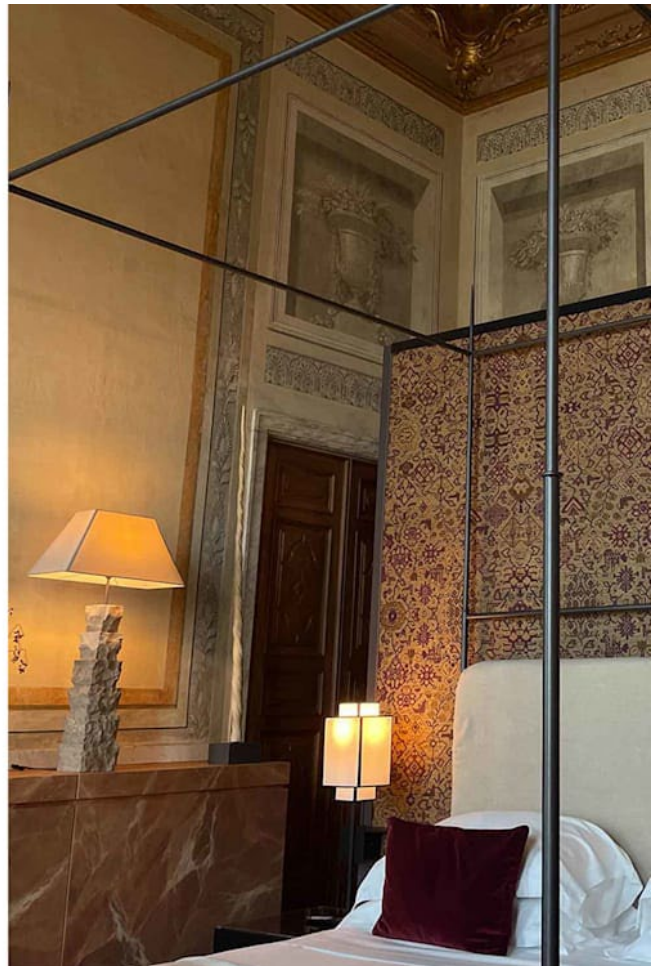


Nervi

Nervi's not exactly a nightlife hotspot, but tonight it's quite lively. Hotel manager Sabine tells me that the *Sagra del Fuoco* (nearby comune Recco's 200-year-old firework competition) has been postponed until this evening. The overall approach to timings is, for want of a better word, Italian. I catch half of the awe-inspiring spectacle at the seafront, in between pop-up bars and *porchetta*-serving stands, and the rest from the train back to Nervi.

This coastal corner is more laid-back than its Riviera neighbours, perhaps because it's retained its authentic local feel, a sentiment confirmed by the presence of many resident Genovese at beach club Bagni Medusa. Here, ivory parasols appear piped like meringues onto platforms carved into the cliffside, ladies in flower-adorned swimming caps lap the sheltered rockpool, and stony lifeguards cautiously watch teens jump into frothy waves. These idyllic everyday vignettes are soundtracked by all-Italian conversations, and are measured in spritzes, cigarettes and espressos on the restaurant terrace.

Fostering a sense of place is also the *modus operandi* at Capitolo Riviera: most staff are as Genovese as the art adorning the hotel walls, sourced from small-scale galleries in the city centre. And, in the same way that Capitolo's green-minded structure brings a modish edge to quaint Nervi, traditional Ligurian delicacies and home-grown ingredients (sage, basil and rosemary plants line the pool patio) are given a modern makeover at Botanico. Plates of *cappon magro* (seafood salad) and *ciuppin* (rich fish stew) are a refined alternative to the fuss-free cooking at hotel-recommended Bistrot del Porticciolo in the harbour, but there is an undeniable shared respect for the region at both.



Palazzo Durazzo

So far my bet on this growing-in-popularity destination has felt low-risk, high-reward, so the next day I up the stakes and head into the city, leaving the gentle pace of the Riviera behind. Candy-coloured façades still line the streets, but I won't sugarcoat it: there's a

grit to Genoa, most notable along its graffiti-clad *caruggi* (narrow alleys) and seen-better-days port. But amid the industrial gloom, the bright exterior of Palazzo Durazzo hotel calls like a sunshine-hued siren. As its studded door closes behind me, the sounds of the city are shut out, and I'm met with eerie silence in the cavernous atrium, before a man in a *Nutcracker*-like uniform ushers me upstairs.

This 17th-century *palazzo*, once the private home of the Durazzo family, is a treasure trove of original cornicing — the lilies carved into it are the family emblem — and jaw-dropping frescoes. The rooms are individually styled with heirlooms; I'm staying in Le Ceramiche, where centuries-old ceramics flank an Ikat-print headboard. Upstairs, I drink in the Negroni-hued lounge before heading to the even more spectacular breakfast room. The Ligurian-leaning buffet is distracting (as is Nigella's brother at the table next to me), but I spend more time gazing up at the gilded *Metamorphoses*-depicting fresco than at my plate. If Nervi taught me how to act like a local, Palazzo Durazzo showed me how to live like a *doge*.



Bagni La Scogliera

The contrast between the understated and opulent is notable in Genoa: I weave down the labyrinthine *caruggi*, past humble hole-in-the-wall shops, and then an open doorway catches my eye, revealing a Unesco-protected hallway or mural-clad atrium. The Strada

Nuova Museums, a dazzling trifecta of private residences, celebrate the grandiose amid the grit, and next door at decades-spanning interiors shop Via Garibaldi 12, I turn green with homeware envy (or maybe the copious amounts of fresh pesto I've been eating).

I find Italian alt fashion in Tug Store, and head-turning artworks at Rossetti Arte Contemporanea and Johanna Wahl's studio, before taking in the Chefchaouen-blue courtyard at Giardini Luzzati. After a pit stop for *panera*-flavoured *gelato* (an indulgent combination of coffee and whipped cream) at Cremeria Buonafede, I soon rack up a step count as high as the price tags in Via Roma's designer boutiques, so back at the hotel I book the sauna and steam room for a private early-evening hour.

There's only an hour's time difference here, but my body clock has reset since being in Genoa: I crave *aperitivo* each evening. I quench this newfound thirst at fresco-framed Les Rouges Cucina & Cocktails, with a basil-infused Genovese spritz, and at cosy wine bar Cantine Matteotti, where regional bottles line the darkwood interiors. Later, a nightcap on Cantine Camilla's twinkly terrace is marked with biodynamic fizz amid kitschy seashell ashtrays.



Tug Store / Via Garibaldi 12

Animated families share *panissa* (chickpea fritters) and seafood plates at rustic Osteria di Vico Palla, a loud and local eatery in the port; the traditional pesto lasagne at bottle-

lined Trattoria Rosmarino matches its forest-green banquettes. I rejoice at hearing only Italian voices wherever I go (and feel quietly smug about tourist-dodging, too).

Use Genoa as your basecamp for day trips to fishing village Bocadasse, glitzy Cinque Terre and the lower-key Riviera di Ponente, or as the starting point for the wine-growing Langhe region and fashion-hub Milan, both an easy journey away.

If I were a betting girl, I'd wager Genoa as your next Italian-Riviera getaway. Scratch away at its surface and you might win big, like I did.

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All photography by the author.