

LUNIGIANA

When people think of Italy, images of Rome and Venice often come to mind. Not too many people know about Lunigiana, that finger of northern Tuscany that protrudes into Liguria and Emilia to link the Apennines with the craggy Apuan Alps, providing a beautiful background to Tuscany's Mediterranean beaches. Although Lunigiana remains comparatively undiscovered and unspoiled it is neither isolated nor remote.

Few tourists have penetrated the cluster of little villages which straddle the Taverone Valley linking the mountains to the coast. The rolling landscape is liberally sprinkled with castles of the Malaspina and Medici eras. The many local trattorie are inexpensive and the wine is plentiful and cheap. The villages are warm and friendly and the trust and generosity encountered in shops and bars is a delight.

Yet Lunigiana is only one hour from Pisa, 90 minutes from Florence, Parma and Bologna. Less than 45 minutes drive away lies the Gulf of La Spezia, known as the Bay of Poets since Byron, Shelley and Keats played upon its shores around the old fishing villages of Lerici, Tesserà, Fiascherino, San Terenzo and Portovenere.

There are lots of places to eat in Portovenere, both along the shore and in the narrow streets that wind through the village up to the medieval church of St. Peter's standing on a rocky promontory. Lerici is now a picturesque resort centered around the bustling harbor, where you can buy a wide variety of fresh shellfish or sample some of the local fish dishes at the numerous bars and restaurants. It has hardly changed through the centuries, and the castle which dominates the small harbor dates from the 12th Century. From Lerici you can take boats across the Gulf to the Cinque Terre - five villages strung along the coast north of Portovenere - where you can enjoy a swim from one of the beaches.

It's surprising how many well-known people have managed to discover 'undiscovered' Lunigiana. Not that there has been a stampede - it is the unruffled, 'untouristy' calm of the area that attracts them.

What Lunigiana doesn't have is discotheques, flashy hotels and restaurants, nor any glamour shops. No hamburger places or bars serving draught beer . . . but it has a sense of well being and peace, an enticing atmosphere of antiquity. To lose yourself is to find an almost forgotten dream, a piece of Europe lost in a happy time warp.