

The Ligurian peninsula

Cruising the Italian Riviera on *Dionea*

words and
photography:
Roger Lean-Vercoe



THE BEAUTY AND CULTURE OF THIS CLASSIC STRETCH OF THE RIVIERA HAS LONG ENRAPTURED SAILORS, INCLUDING THOSE ON *DIONEA'S* CRUISE FROM NICE TO PORTOFINO

Tropical islands with white sand beaches, the fjords and mountains of higher latitudes, and dramatically barren and beautiful desert coastlines – all have their supporters among cruising yachtsmen, but without doubt, the world's most popular destination is the long and varied northern coastline of the Mediterranean Sea. The area offers so much, from warm water to settled summer weather,

superb scenery, fine dining, luxury shopping and immense historical interest. One never tires of it and many spend their whole cruising lives in its confines.

Invited to refresh our knowledge of a small section of this region aboard the motor yacht *Dionea*, we fly into Nice – a convenient starting point as it boasts direct connections with many foreign airports, including those in the USA and

Russia. Launched from the Felszegi shipyard in Muggia, Italy in 1962, the 52 metre *Dionea* was operated as a high-quality 300-passenger ferry on the Trieste to Istria run until 1991. Despite then being laid up for years, the life of this elegant ship was not over. In 2003 she was tastefully converted into a yacht by the Mariotti Shipyard in Genoa, her owners going to great lengths to preserve her classically attractive character, a persona that blends so well with the ancient cities and towns we will visit.

Our cultural cruise will bounce along the Italian Riviera, calling in at the most interesting ports between Nice and Italy's iconic fishing village of Portofino. Purists might argue that this route encompasses a section of the French Riviera between Nice and the Italian border at Ventimiglia, but before the unification of Italy in 1860, the whole area was part of

the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia; much of this Piedmontese/Italian heritage remains, unifying the architecture and culture of this coastline.

Nice might not rival Cannes or Antibes for glamour, but offers fascinations often overlooked by guests aboard a yacht. A well-protected harbour nestles beneath the eastern flank of the imposing Colline du Chateau, and once settled into our spacious cabin, we set out on foot for a swift tour of the historic city before departure that evening. In Place Garibaldi, a huge statue honours Giuseppe Garibaldi, a native of the city and one of the leading lights in the unification of Italy. It also boasts what is widely acknowledged as Nice's best seafood restaurant, the Café Turin, where diners can buy their dish fresh from an upmarket stall outside and have it cooked to perfection within.





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Left: *Dionea* moored in Oneglia harbour. Above: enjoying a sun-drenched drink in the old town itself



Monaco, to drop anchor for the night off the genteel French resort of Menton, often described as the 'pearl of France'. We are the only yacht in the anchorage and dine on deck against a backdrop of the old city with its rich architecture, which climbs up the hill past the distinctive church, whose steps were once the scene of a James Bond motorcycle chase in the film *Never Say Never Again*.

Next day we retrace Bond's route in reverse, climbing the steep steps to the church and onwards to take in the views from the cemetery that crowns the hill, occupied by many European and Russian nobles who spent their twilight years in the resort. Below, the narrow mediaeval streets with their shops and cafés open out past a beautiful market building to a restaurant-lined promenade, where we stroll before turning back towards the harbour for a sumptuous lunch from *Dionea's* Italian chef Franco Solari. He offers a mushroom pasta, fresh sea bass with grilled courgette, and home-made caramel ice cream to finish.

We meander eastwards, crossing into Italy proper and passing the much admired botanical gardens at Villa Hanbury, a UNESCO World Heritage site near Ventimiglia. Beyond, the foothills that rise towards the majestic peaks of the Ligurian Alps become increasingly dotted with greenhouses. Welcome to Italy's Riviera dei Fiori, or Floral Coast, named after the long-established flower cultivation industry based around San Remo. Today, San Remo's principal businesses are tourism and yachting, apparent as we enter its large harbour, home to yachts of all types and sizes. San Remo's charmingly narrow pedestrianised streets are lined with designer boutiques, delicatessens and enticing restaurants, as well as an abundance of bakers, fishmongers, grocers and butchers.

Our next stop is Imperia, a grand name for the two smallish towns of Porto Maurizio and Oneglia amalgamated in 1923 by Mussolini. As a result, Imperia has two harbours, today both largely devoted to yachts,



Right: approaching San Remo. Top: the beauty of Portofino is best seen from the surrounding hills. Above: a Genoa fishmonger discusses the local catch

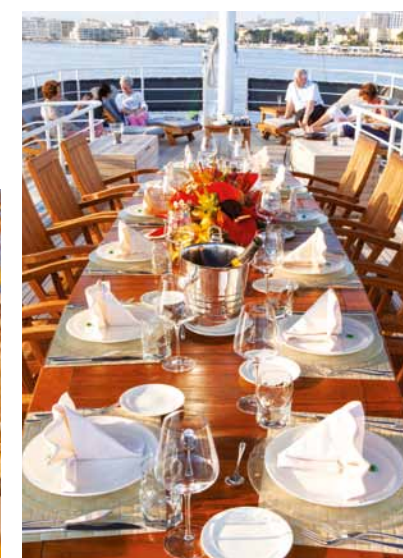
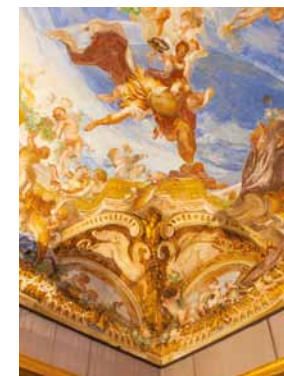




We enjoy a scenic coastal cruise from Imperia to Genoa along a shoreline backed by high mountain peaks and threaded by the amazing engineering of the coastal Autostrada highway



Clockwise from opposite: Oneglia's old harbour; *Dionea* near Ventimiglia, in Imperia; a gaudy Genoa barber shop; dining on *Dionea's* bridge deck aft; ceiling detail of the Palazzo Rosso, Genoa



one in Porto Maurizio and a more charming one in the old port of Oneglia, where Captain Claudio Intrigliolo berths *Dionea* for the night, her stern close to a line of restaurants, charmingly situated behind an arched colonnade, which borders the quay.

Our mission is to visit the village of Bussana Vecchia, a few miles inland. Its unusually sad feature is that it was destroyed by an earthquake in 1887, in which some 2,000 inhabitants perished. It was abandoned and the survivors resettled in a newly built village, but in the mid-20th Century it was reoccupied by a growing colony of artists who chose a simple life of creativity without services such as running water and electricity. Despite attempts by the authorities to evict them, they remain today, creating and selling their art to visitors. The narrow and twisting approach road ends at a delightful barbecue restaurant with amazing views, where we simply have to stop for a coffee, before climbing up a steep path to the village itself. We spend an interesting hour amid occupied houses and their art-filled studios that sit cheek by jowl with total ruins in a disarmingly attractive jumble.

That afternoon we enjoy a scenic coastal cruise from Imperia to historic Genoa – the capital of the region – along an almost continuously built-up shoreline backed by high mountain peaks and threaded by the

amazing engineering of the coastal Autostrada highway, the majority of whose length is in tunnels or on bridges. A surprise awaits when we dock in a private berth near Genoa's historic centre. Dinner is accompanied by a wine tasting at which Vincenzo Vita, the owner of the Vita vineyards in Manduria, in Italy's southern region of Apulia, perfectly matched his wines – made from relatively rare and exclusive grape varieties, such as Primitivo, Sussumaniello, Fiano Minutolo and Negramaro – with the fare of *Dionea's* chef.

Genoa is so large we engage a guide, who gives us an insight into a city whose mediaeval wealth was founded on international maritime trading and investment banking – America might today be Italian speaking had not Genoese bankers refused to finance the voyage of Columbus on grounds of excessive risk. Its ancient wealth is evident from the richly decorated palaces that lined the narrow, canyon-like streets of the old city, although most are now either in disrepair or converted to commercial use. We peer into their once-sumptuous courtyards and gaze into shops long disappeared from most towns – a traditional barber's shop and a well stocked delicatessen – before heading uptown to the Palazzo Ducale, the former ruler's abode.

Erected in 1251, this building was designed to impress – and it still

does with sumptuous frescoed halls and large atriums. On the darker side its notorious Grimaldina Tower was, until 1930, a secret prison for political prisoners, noblemen and sea captains, as the frescoes of sailing warships in one of the more habitable cells indicate. Further on, Strada Nuova is lined with imposing palaces, most notably Palazzo Rosso, dating from 1671, which is today the most important art gallery in the city, exhibiting paintings from Van Dyck, Veronese and Albrecht Durer, as well as incredible frescoed ceilings.

Our next destination is Recco, a small town some 10 miles east of Genoa, where we drop anchor outside the tiny harbour. Recco is famous for its foccacia bread and in particular *foccaccia al formaggio*, a cheese-filled version made famous by its master, Biagio, who owns the waterside La Baracchetta restaurant, where we head for a late lunch. Biagio, who opened the restaurant almost 40 years ago and founded Recco's widespread reputation for the dish, personally demonstrates his skill, placing blobs of the local *stracchino* cheese between two micron-thin layers of elastic foccacia pastry before baking it and serving it to us piping hot. A delicious traditional dish.

It's another 10-mile hop from Recco to Portofino, which *Dionea* completes in under an hour, despite the increasing wind and a rising

swell from the south west. These conditions make the little harbour untenable for larger vessels and we are redirected to the nearby marina in Santa Margherita; we take a taxi around to our original destination. Portofino today is the haunt of the rich and famous, as evidenced by the designer boutiques and jewellers that fill its quaintly cobbled streets, together with chic high-end restaurants and cafés, where celebrities compete to be seen. But to really sample the beauty of the village and the adjacent coastline, we climb, taking in the amazing views of the port's pastel-coloured façade of houses from our position at St George's Church, where memorial plaques recall luminaries resident here such as Guglielmo Marconi. The view can only get better and we climb onwards to the eagle's eyrie vantage point of the prominent 15th Century Genoese fortress, converted in 1867 into a mansion for the British diplomat Montague Brown.

With Castello Brown's wide panorama encompassing the open sea on one side and the Gulf of Tigullio towards Santa Margherita on the other, it's a fitting finale to a delightful cruise aboard *Dionea*, which has sampled the delights and sights of the Italian Riviera – a cruise encompassing so much of interest that it could extend almost indefinitely – and for some, it does.