

CRUISING THE RIVIERA DI LEVANTE By Patricia Arrigoni

SESTRI LEVANTE, ITALY - For a mere 24.50 Euros (around \$35), I learned that a passenger could board a ferryboat from Sestri Levante south of Genoa, and enjoy an excursion down along the Ligurian Sea in an area locally known as the Riviera di Levante. I decided to try it and while there were a variety of boats and schedules from which to choose, I picked a roundtrip to Portovenere which sounded just about perfect. The trip included an hour's stop in Vernazza along the famous Cinque Terra, and three hours in Portovenere before cruising back to Sestri Levante.

My husband and I left at 10:00 am on a warm September day on the *Blitz*, identified from several other boats in port by the bright red head of a cartoon roadrunner. I was told the vessel could carry 400 people but, thankfully, there were less than half the day we went.

Unlike other European boats we had traveled on, this one had no class restrictions so we were free to rush up to the top deck for the best views taking photographs, or purchase snacks and drinks below.

Shortly after taking off we passed Riva Trigoso and Punta Baffe, and then I saw a familiar tower identifying the beach town of Moneglia where my husband's Italian cousins own a condo downtown.

The hills above the sea were dotted with houses all with stunning views of the sea. These same cousins once summered in a house they owned on this hillside, and I remembered feasting at dinners on a roof deck decorated with colorful outdoor furniture, tablecloths, napkins and endless platters of food and drinks.

I remembered too that it was all so stunningly beautiful that we once considered purchasing an adjoining lot and building our own place - one of those dreams that never become a reality but are fun to recall.

It was windy on the top deck. We sat on hard white plastic seats and stared at the rocky coastline dotted with fishing villages and medieval hill towns. My husband had stayed below out of the wind sitting in the back on a wooden bench beside a pile of coiled black ropes. I decided to continue on top a while longer and though we were really rocking and rolling, the fresh air was exhilarating.

An announcer on the boat gave us periodic updates of what we were looking at in three languages, but the wind carried the sound away making it hard to understand. The sea was rough but better than the day before when we had tried to catch a boat north to Portofino and were told it had been cancelled because heavy waves made it too dangerous to land.

I checked my small brochure which had a map of the area. It was 10:40 am and we were approaching the Cinque Terra.

The first time we were here some years ago we drove to visit the five towns which are located between Punta Mesco and Capo di Montenero. It took hours and hours of hairpin curves and heart stopping cliffs. The next time we visited we were smarter and rode the train which raced between the towns in minutes. We found we could jump off one train, explore an area, then board another when we felt like it.

We had explored Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore and greatly enjoyed seeing their lively harbors, and ancient churches. Their medieval streets contained alluring arches, gates and ancient fortifications along with charming shops. Once we hiked the famous path between the towns called *Via dell' Amore* (path of love) with views of vineyards and olive trees carved into rock hanging above a crashing surf.

The *Blitz* arrived in Vernazza at 11:00 am and we had an hour to go exploring. The harbor was alive with boats and passengers, sunbathers and fishermen. I felt like I had stepped into an opera set.

Beyond the harbor were tall apartment buildings painted in pastels. As we started up the main cobblestone street past shops set up for tourists, I paused a few minutes to purchase a long sleeved blouse in bright stripes of pink, yellow, green and purple which seemed to match the colors of the town. We explored some more, took photographs and then stopped for a cappuccino.

We were back on our boat at 12:05 pm and by 12:30 pm had arrived into the harbor of Portovenere where we had three hours of leisure time to explore and eat lunch.

We immediately hiked up to an imposing castle which we had climbed through in greater detail some years earlier. Our brochure said that the ancient people of Portus Vesneris settled on the western height of La Spezia's gulf which became a Genoan colony in 1113 AD. The new lords built the group of fortifications facing the sea.

We strolled down a narrow medieval street which followed the sea at a higher level and checked out the local stores. We also read menus of a few restaurants, but decided to go back down below and dine where we had a view of the harbor and the boats anchored there. There were million dollar yachts, more ferries of all sizes, fishing boats, and even the Italian Coast Guard with uniformed men lounging in the sun.

We found an outdoor restaurant and ordered Liguria's famous basil pesto and mixed salads with delectable sardines. All was delicious accompanied by a little regional white wine plus tea.

After lunch I purchased a souvenir tile which outlined the buildings of the city, and then boarded the *Blitz* leaving at 3:35 pm. It was a straight shot back to Sestri Levante and the captain really moved. I found out we were making between 20 and 21 knots per hour (25 mph) and seemed to fly back along the same route. We arrived early at ten minutes to 5:00 pm both "shaken and stirred" after a spectacular day of fabulous cruising.

IF YOU GO:

People interested in taking this trip can also catch a boat in Chiavari or Lavagna just north of Sestri Levante. Most cruises run from Easter in April to the end of September with this proviso: "In the tiny villages of the Cinque Terra the piers are very small and shelterless from the waves so it (is) up to the Captain of the ferry to decide in any moment to cancel one or even more stops of the excursion or to change the program of the cruise." (No refunds.) While I could not find the exact cruise I made, the following website is in English and Italian and includes a photo of the *Blitz* and other boats, lists cruises and provides a map:

<http://www.traghettiportofino.it>.