



THE LAND THAT ITALY FORGOT

Bill Kean heads off the tourist map and explores the wild, untamed and spectacular region of Calabria to discover whether it deserves its tough reputation

Unusual destinations, it seems, are the thing these days and these occasional forays of the mind can be seen as fashion statements as much as what you wear. On Italy's southern tip, contained by the Tyrrhenian and Ionian Seas, lies such a place – a region of Italy that offers great riches of a unique kind.

It is, of course, Calabria, a little known Italian haven for those with an adventurous nature. It is situated in the heart of the Mezzogiorno, named in reference to the unremitting midday sun which bakes this area of Italy's deep south. Its rugged, essentially mountainous terrain hosts the densely wooded Apennine range, acting as a seemingly never ending link to the rest of Italy. But Calabria could almost be another country compared to the provinces further north. Explore its valleys and you discover a »



Above: Thistles growing at Montepaone Lido
Previous page: Wild flowers in Montepaone

culture apparently untouched by recent centuries. Its effect on the visitor is quite distinct and, offering extremely good value for the euro, a little goes a long way in this wonderful land.

THE CALABRIAN WAY

How is it that I attach myself in such a way to this wayward region of Italy? Many, many years ago I shared my flat with a young Italian student teacher called Piero from the south of Italy. He was working as an Italian assistant in the schools in the area west of Glasgow and we lived in Dumbarton. He arrived with packets of Italian food brought fresh from Calabria in his suitcase. It was as if he carried the very essence of southern Italy with him at all times and in all ways – he would live day to day in the “Calabrian way” and he was proud and willing to show all aspects of his



“THE STAUNCH, WARM CALABRIAN FOLK HOLD TO THEIR OLD TRADITIONS BASED ON FAMILY AND FAITH”

homeland to anyone who ventured an interest.

The tourist brochures still call Piero’s corner of the world *la perla dello Ionio* (‘the pearl of the Ionian Sea’) and one mere glance at the beaches testifies to the truth of this. Piero came from Soverato on the Ionian Sea where Calabria has mile upon mile of sandy beaches, rocky coves and spectacular headlands. There seems to be glorious sand always at your feet, slipping under aquamarine waters. Boats, cars and debris lie strewn on the beaches to carefully claim them territorially from the increasing numbers of tourists.

The staunch, warm Calabrian folk hold to their old traditions based on family and a solid Roman Catholic faith. Although there are no grand squares or buildings like those in Venice or Rome, Calabria offers character in the streets, churches and shops of everyday life.



Calabria is a region with very ancient roots. The oldest traceable inhabitants are the Bruttians, an Italic tribe. Greek invaders arrived in around 800BC and times were at their best for these early Calabrians when they were part of Magna Grecia, as the Greeks laid out an efficient system of agriculture. The mathematician Pythagoras was a native of the town of Crotona on the east coast.

The Romans and Visigoths came and went and, like Malta and Cyprus, many invasions followed. The Goths, Byzantines (who named it Calabria), Lombards, Saracens and Normans colonised or pillaged the land, which then eventually became part of the Kingdom of Sicily in the early Middle Ages. Refugees from Albania arrived around the year 1400, bringing their language. To this day, there is a village near the northern border with Basilicata called Castrovillari, where medieval Albanian is the local language.

More recently, Calabria was a stronghold of republicanism and Garibaldi's march through this region was welcomed as Italy grew into a politically unified state. To further understand progress in the region, you have only to look back at Calabria's geography and note that, up until unification in 1871, Calabria had only one road that crossed it from the border in the north to Reggio in the south. In addition, the railroad was non-existent and most of the towns had no roads, in or out. This phenomenon created internal and external isolation, with populations in

the highlands and valleys unable to communicate with each other, all hindered by impassable tracks during the winter.

VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

With a choice of ancestries such as this, one certainly can expect a great deal of colourful characters to emerge, so when Piero brought his country to me all those years ago, he had an amazing resource of culture and tradition as part of his baggage. It was a fascinating voyage of discovery for me, not least in the kitchen!

Being a fairly typical Scot, I had survived on a restricted diet up until then but Piero introduced me to Italian cooking with a vengeance. His family ran a hotel in Soverato and his mother was a wonderful cook. Piero gradually took over the task of cooking as if he was born to it. He never tired of telling us of his culinary roots in what was once a poor, peasant country.

From what was once a sparse, mountainous region in southern Italy, one might expect the phrase 'peasant food' to refer to less than appetising fare. While much of the soil may not be ideal for farming, the people of Calabria took what the earth gave and created foods that are still being enjoyed today.

Each invading population had a strong influence on the culture and cuisine of Calabria and this is precisely what makes the area so special and different. Capicola and hot >>

Above left: Piero looks through his stamp collection

Above right: The vivid blue prow of a fishing boat pulled up onto the sand at Soverato



THE PERFECT ITINERARY: SEVEN DAYS IN CALABRIA

Day 1: If entering the region from Naples, take time to explore the stunning Parco Nazionale del Pollino which straddles the border with Basilicata. Highlights include the Gole del Raganello canyon and the towering Monti di Orsomarso. If you are feeling really adventurous take a white water rafting trip down the Lao River (www.laoraft.it).

Day 2: Head further into the interior using Cosenza as your base. Explore the La Sila region, with its pleasant rolling hills, shimmering lakes and dense forests. In the winter you can ski in the region's higher peaks,

and in summer there is some excellent hiking to be had.

Day 3: Calabria isn't known for its urban beauty – indeed many of its cities are worth avoiding. However, the medieval centre of Cosenza has much to recommend it and rewards a little exploration. Make time for the lovely 12th-century cathedral on Piazza del Duomo.

Day 4: Driving south from La Sila, spend a few hours wandering through the perfect medieval hilltown of Gerace on the edge of the Apennines. It boasts a magnificent 11th-century

Romanesque cathedral and stunning views towards the Ionian Coast.

Day 5: Leave the interior and head for the Tyrrhenian Coast. Having been the victim of many an earthquake, the city of Reggio di Calabria has struggled to retain much of an identity over the centuries. However it has a lovely seafront and some first-rate restaurants to seek out. The Muse Nazionale on Piazza de Nava is a real find too.

Day 6: Having soaked up all that culture, and hopefully plenty of local wine too, it's time to head to the beach. Many of

the resorts are over-developed, but make time for charming Scilla, a lively beach town and the mythical home of the Scylla – a six-headed beast that devoured sailors attempting the crossing to Sicily.

Day 7: Head north to the Tropea promontory, home to some of the best beaches in Italy. It is extremely popular with Italian holidaymakers but captivating nonetheless. Perched dramatically above the sea, the main town of Tropea is a beautiful place to while away an afternoon. The nearby town of Pizzo, famous for its *tartufo* ice cream, is also worth a visit.

“EXPLORE ITS VALLEYS AND YOU DISCOVER A CULTURE UNTOUCHED BY RECENT CENTURIES. ITS EFFECT ON THE VISITOR IS QUITE DISTINCT”

sausages originated here and, though cooking may differ from village to village, both in content and in name, the cuisine remains the same – basic, perhaps a little overspiced, but still delicious.

PERFECT PASTA

The food of Calabria, despite the abundance of fish, is primarily a diet of simple fresh pasta and homegrown vegetables cooked in fascinatingly different ways. Although pasta is important to all Italians, in Calabria it is almost treated with reverence. Each city or town has its own specialities, from chewy fusilli, to various types of lasagne. Calabrians seem to know by instinct, the best sauce to pair with each pasta to create the most delicious dishes.

Piero caused me to sample many varieties of homemade pasta, such as *macaroni alla pastora* (with ricotta cheese) and other sauces, *fusilli* (curly pasta), vermicelli in soup and *tortellini in brodo*. His own favourite was *pollo alla cacciatore* (‘hunter’s chicken’), to say nothing of *uove alla purgatorio* (‘eggs from purgatory’). You can imagine how I gradually became drawn into a cuisine far removed from my own by this expert young cook, backed up by total single-minded enthusiasm for his subject. With youthful exuberance I once suggested fish and chips to him and he returned to Italy with a craving even for that. It fitted the Calabrian palette perfectly – good, simple but tasty basic fare.

As it happened, I visited Piero and his family on several occasions in the years that followed. His family welcomed me with incredible warmth and I felt part of that corner of Italy. We would visit Piero’s mum, who made all sorts of typical Calabrian dishes for anyone lucky enough to visit. Like highland hospitality in my own country, Calabrians regard it as a sacred duty to welcome guests and I was ushered into many a happy gathering under the gaze of Padre Pio, whose caring picture adorned the rooms.

I learned that Piero also had another passion: he was an avid stamp collector and his passionate nature had an outlet here too. Lovingly organized albums of stamps surrounded him in his room. As I met the local folk I discovered the famously proud Calabrian dialect. Its weird and resonant words made me swim as I struggled to understand, equipped only with average Italian, a language I had come to love.

Calabrian is an Italian dialect and a descendant of vulgar Latin, but it has plenty of Greek influence too from the Magna Graecia period. I remember being sent home on one occasion with a bag of *cuddaraci* (Easter buns), one of

Opposite: The rugged peaks of the mighty Apennine range
Left: The local wildlife comes out to play



Image Shutterstock





“UNUSUAL DESTINATION IT MAY BE BUT, LIKE A REAL LIFE PEARL, CALABRIA HIDES ITS BEAUTY”

many words of Greek origin.

I was favoured this year by being able to return to see my old friend after a gap of 25 years. In that time, with family and professional matters intervening for both of us, I had never forgotten the pull of this land. Piero welcomed me back to a country that I now think of as my second home. It was the little things that jumped out at me – *zuppa Inglese* ice-cream, *spaghetti alla vongole*, seeing the wonderful way Calabrians use their hands when they speak, young Italians going to school, walks along the beach and meeting folk I had not seen for years. If this evocation persuades you to consider a visit, you should know that I have not even mentioned the archaeological areas of Sibari and Locri Epizefiri, the towns of Gerace and Stilo, to say nothing of the forests of Sila, dubbed the Yellowstone of Calabria. All the more reason to investigate further.

Unusual destination it may be but, like a real life pearl, Calabria hides its beauty. I, certainly, will be among those heading to this land to learn more. **TIM**

Above and right:

Fishing boats sit on the pristine sand of Calabria's famous beaches

Opposite top:

Easter celebrations

Opposite bottom:

Looking out over

Montepaone



essentials

for information on renting or buying property in this area, turn to page 84



✈ GETTING THERE

Fly to Naples with Easyjet from **London Stansted** (0870 6000000; www.easyjet.com), from **Glasgow, Manchester, Durham or London Heathrow** with British Midland (0870 6070 555; www.flybmi.com), from **London Gatwick** with British Airways (08708 509850; www.ba.com) or from **Bristol** with First Choice (0870 850 3999; www.firstchoice.co.uk/flights).



🚶 GETTING AROUND

The region's public transport network is poorly developed outside of the main urban centres so to see the best of the region you will have to rent a car.

🌞 WHEN TO GO

The summer months can be extremely hot and the coastal resorts will be at their busiest, especially in August when the majority of Italians take their holidays. Visit in **May** or **September** when the weather is still relatively cool and roads are quieter.

📍 TOURIST INFORMATION

Cosenza tourist office: Corso Mazzini 92; +39 0984 27485

Reggio di Calabria tourist office: Via Roma 3; +39 0965 21171

Tropea tourist office: Piazza Ercole; +39 0963 61475

THE ITALIAN MAGAZINE RECOMMENDS...

🏠 WHERE TO STAY

💰 VALUE FOR MONEY

There is a distinct whiff of faded grandeur about Cosenza's **Hotel Excelsior** (Piazza Matteotti 14; +39 0984 74383) but it retains a great deal of charm. Doubles from €65.

🏠 MID-RANGE

In Reggio di Calabria, **Hotel Lungomare** (Via Zerbi 13; +39 0965 20486) is a good choice – neat, comfortable and boasting first-rate service. Doubles rooms start from €100.

🏠 LUXURY

Set to reopen in early 2007, Reggio di Calabria's **Grande Albergo Miramare** (Via Fata Morgana 1; +39 0965 812444) is one of the region's finest hotels with plenty of character and a wealth of facilities. Double rooms start from €150.

🍴 WHERE TO EAT

🍕 FAST FOOD

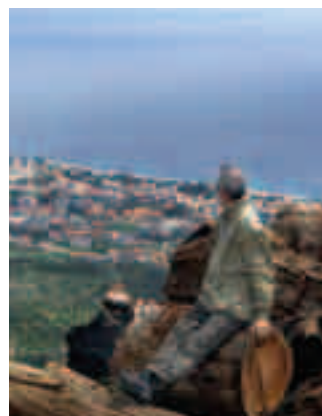
Reggio's **Pizzeria Rusty** (Via Crocefisso) serves up a cracking slice of pizza and is always packed. You won't need to spend more than a couple of euros to feel full.

🍷 TYPICAL TRATTORIA

In Tropea, head for **Osteria del Pescatore** (Via del Monte 7; +39 0963 603018) to sample their excellent fish and seafood dishes, freshly pulled out of the Tyrrhenian Sea. Meals from around €25.

🍷 TOP CLASS

Reggio's excellent **Ristorante Il Ducale** (Corso Vittorio Emanuele III, +39 0965 891520) is one of the region's grander institutions, serving up delicious local specialities and enjoying a great position on the seafront. Meals from €40.



BILL'S CHOICE

"Hotel San Domenico is on the beach in tranquil surroundings and has its rooms facing a limpid Ionian sea. It has a wonderful panoramic view over the beach."

📍 **Hotel San Domenico**; Via della Galleria, Soverato; +39 0967 23121