

Travel

POSTCARD FROM ITALY

THE MED'S TOP TIP

The thrilling coast of Calabria, Italy's toe, is opening up to tourism. *Mia Aimaro Ogden* shares the secrets of the south

No one is quite sure what time it is in Tropea. At the blue-and-white-striped beach shacks on this blistering piece of Calabrian coast, there's a lazy, late-afternoon air of 1956. Renato Carosone's 'Tu Vuo' Fa' L'Americano crackles through tinny speakers; a gang of grandmas, waist deep in the waters of the Tyrrhenian, lament the price of onions; a fisherman mends his nets in the shallows; and a small boy drops his *gelato* in the sand.

Calabria, in Italy's toe, has never really made it onto the international tourist trail, thanks to a historic combination of extreme poverty, ropy infrastructure, a savagely rocky interior and the activity of the 'ndrangheta, the local mafia. But intrepid northern Italians have long summered on its 485 miles of often gorgeous coastline. It has two seas – the Tyrrhenian and the Ionian – deserted beaches, three mountain ranges (the Sila, Pollino and Aspromonte) and a string of national parks. Why would they want to share?

Over at Villa Paola, a cliff-top hotel on the outskirts of Tropea, one local, Domenico Ventrice, has the answer. "In Calabria, we have enough for everyone," he says. "And we are a generous people, if a little misunderstood. When I told one of my northern friends that my father was a doctor, he said, 'What, you have doctors down there?'"

One of only a handful of five-star hotels in the region, Villa Paola has just seven cool rooms, set round a 16th-century cloister, an infinity pool and layer upon terraced layer of gardens in riotous bloom. Luna, a portly dog, waits expectantly at the table in the hope of a dropped morsel of breakfast cake. Later, she's hoping to go out on the boat with her chum Sabatino, on his morning jaunt down to the lighthouse at Capo Vaticano, but he says no: her life jacket doesn't fit. Her diet begins tomorrow.

At the top of the steep steps winding 300ft up from the beach to the old town, they're serving lunch in La Lamia's crumbling courtyard: a sensational antipasto of aubergine with citrus ricotta and sweet Tropea onions, fat twists of *fileja* pasta with white beans, and anchovies stuffed with pecorino and sultanas, chased down with a sharp white greco wine. It's *cucina povera* – the cooking of the poor south – at its finest.

Up here in Tropea's jumble of ancient lanes, time has gone wonky again. The tranquil cathedral says we're still firmly in the 12th century, but the ruins of Magna Graecia, Byzantine churches and Aragonese castles aren't far away, and provide a snapshot of the invading hordes who tried to take this country: Greeks,



HAPPY ENDING
The cliff-top Sanctuary of Santa Maria dell'Isola, in Tropea. Below and right, food in Calabria is often laced with the local chillies



Romans, Saracens, Ostrogoths, Normans, Spaniards. It still rankles today. When I tell one local my roots are in Piedmont, he's momentarily angry – "You northerners wanted to steal everything we had" – then gives me a rose.

We drive up into the mountains on our way to the Ionian coast, just before Santa Severina, we're stopped in the road by a flock of sheep. They're driven by a leathery shepherd who commands five dogs with the crack of a whip. In summer, he lives high in the Sila mountains, with only his beasts for company. There are wolves here, and wildcats, in the depths of the forest.

Even the people are somehow lost in time. Up in the Aspromonte, they still speak something very close to ancient Greek. An 'ndrangheta boss was arrested there last year: he'd been hiding in plain sight for 20 years.

The mountain villages here are some of the most beautiful in Italy. Tiny Santa Severina has a Byzantine baptistry, a Norman fortress and the matchbox church of Santa Filomena, where the gnarled guardian, with a tear in his eye, relates the legend of the Madonna of the Well, who saved a boy from drowning many centuries ago. I, too, will be safe in the arms of the Virgin if I hand over 100 lire. I don't have the heart to tell him about the euro.

Over in Fiumefreddo Bruzio, they take their status as the sixth-most-beautiful village in Italy, as it was voted last year, rather seriously. Seven hundred feet up from the beach, this ancient hilltop community has opened the six-room Residenza d'Epoca Borgodifiume, a hotel split between two 17th-century buildings, with its own Slow Food canteen. Maria Teresa, who has lived in the village all her life, knows how important it is to keep these places alive. "There's such peace

here, great food, strong traditions. It would be great if more people could experience that."

Our final stop is rather more about indolence. The Praia Art Resort, on the edge of the Capo Rizzuto marine reserve, bills itself as "the secret destination in Calabria". They've got that right. The sat nav goes crackers, and just before we nose-dive into the silvery sea, we find a sign welcoming us to a bougainvillea-wreathed "village" of 16 funky rooms, clad in rough-hewn timber and hand-carved stone. From my balcony, I smell bergamot and pine.

Down at the beach, hammocks are strung across the shallows. The sands stretch for miles. In the late afternoon, I walk west for an hour and meet a lone fisherman reeling in a bass. Dinner (the bass) is by the pool, under an ultra-modern loggia, in candlelight. The chef, Alfonso Crescenzo, has just won his first Michelin star, but he cleaves to the hearty cooking that prevails all over the region. Lunch the next day features hot *nduja* sausage, laced with fiery local chillies; sardella, a rough sardine paste; salty pecorino; and smooth ricotta with honey.

It's all so elegantly civilised, the stories of wolves, wildcats and 'ndrangheta shoot-outs seem utterly unreal. Bandit country? We couldn't be further away.

Mia Aimaro Ogden was a guest of Villa Paola (doubles from £200, B&B; villapaolatropea.it); Praia Art Resort (doubles from £343, B&B; www.praiaartresort.it); and Citalia, which has seven nights in Tropea, at Hotel Tirreno, from £899pp, B&B, including car hire and flights (citalia.com). Residenza d'Epoca Borgodifiume has doubles from £61, B&B; borgodifiume.it. Fly to Lamezia Terme from Stansted with Ryanair, from £50 return