

MEDITERRANEAN

## Secret Italy: discover the glorious coast of Calabria

This unsung region in the far south of Italy is full of surprises — from its sublime food and great beaches to its ancient culture. Sean Thomas goes exploring

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One of the beaches at Tropea  
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It doesn't always get a good press, Calabria, that rocky toecap of Italy that looks ready to drop-kick Sicily right between the Balearics. In Roman times Virgil claimed that "the entire Calabrian coast is inhabited by evil Greeks". Over the ensuing centuries it has earned a reputation for malaria, mafia and murderous earthquakes.

Later writers have been equally unkind, in Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped At Eboli*, Calabria is described as "that other world, hedged in by custom and sorrow . . . where the peasant lives out his motionless civilisation on barren ground, in remote poverty, and in the presence of death".

Fantastic, right? Even more reassuringly, I can see exactly what Levi means by the presence of death. I'm in a car driven by the owners of a new boutique B&B — the rickety yet charming, furiously historic Palazzo Carratelli — through the higger-mugger streets of old Amantea. The palazzo is perched on a perilous cliff (like so many things in Calabria), but has stirring views across the sizzling Mediterranean to the distant pyramid of volcanic Stromboli, calmly vaping on the blue horizon.

My hosts are splendidly eccentric. He's a proper aristocrat – Baron Gianludovico de Martino di Montegiordano, a former ambassador to Australia and descended from an ancient Neapolitan family, with elegant manners to match his lineage. His wife, a spirited Englishwoman named Camilla, is a talented sculptor and painter (ask nicely and she'll show you her gallery on the first floor).

Neither, however, is the most relaxing of drivers, and given that we are barrelling down steep cobbled roads barely wide enough for a pair of Vespas, this is concerning. They're not even focusing on the road, more on their animated conversation, as they point out sights and locals of interest.

"Oh Amantea is fascinating, absolutely fascinating, it's full of . . . you know . . . full of . . ."

The baron smiles. "Bigamists, darling?"

"No! Oh no, not bigamists. Well maybe. But intellectuals too. It's full of intellectuals and artists. Look, there's an intellectual. *Buona sera!*"

A good-looking woman in glasses smiles our way, while keeping her distance from the car as we swerve giddily away, scraping past a church, nearly flattening a terrified cat. Camilla points at another woman in a doorway. "She's not an intellectual, not so much. Makes lovely bread, though. My word, there's a parking space!"



The historic town of Amantea.  
ALAMY

In the congested roads of Amantea, parking is not always easy, so this is a relief. (Take note, if you're hiring a car in Calabria – and it is the best way to get around – make sure it's small. Big cars are a hassle.)

Stepping out of our little motor, I look up. It's a restaurant, Le Clarisse, carved out of an ancient convent and blessed with a breezy terrace overlooking the lower, modern town and the glittering sea. The view is distracting, until I start eating. And then I don't want to concentrate on anything but the dishes in front of me. I'd heard that the food in Calabria was special, but this is something else. From moreish home-made broths – *brodo* – to smoked duck breast with black pepper brioche, and angelic pastries confected that morning. Bravo.

Next morning I squeeze my slightly larger self into my stupidly small car and head west. I'm aiming for one of the few famous towns in Calabria, Tropea, beloved by trillionaires and film stars for its long and lavish beaches, which are spectacularly sited under the ancient clifftop town hewn from golden stone. The drive is exhilarating, along a cantilevered autostrada that occasionally seems to leap out over the sea, before swinging back into dark rock tunnels – but my journey also reveals the sketchier side of Calabria.

Everywhere there is overdevelopment, or abandoned development, or cement works. This ain't no Tuscany. Half-built apartment blocks, with bristling crowns of iron spikes, moulder in the sun. Slightly impoverished-looking people sit on plastic chairs by the road, selling delicious Belmonte tomatoes (they're world class), red Tropea onions (sweet and yum), and home-made, chilli-infused *peperoncino*, the fabulously spicy Calabrian condiment (a perfect souvenir).

Finally, my car makes a dazzling descent down a whiplash-inducing cliffside lane and I'm into Tropea. Turns out it's terrifically cute, fairly touristy, and the beaches are indeed excellent (great for snorkelling and diving). It has more sublime views to the Aeolian isles, strung along the horizon like the trinkets from a broken jet necklace. Happy and aimless, I have a cold Moretti beer. Then a little siesta. Then another beer. The autostrada can wait.



A room at the Tropea Art Resort.

*Avanti!* My next stop, next day, is south across the Sila mountains, although they're not so much mountains, more like high, sunburnt, alpine meadows, interspersed with mighty forests. Sila is possibly the biggest national park in Italy, and probably the least visited. Wolves are said to prowl these deserted pine woods. And wildcats. Also 'Ndrangheta (organised crime) gangsters. All I see is a pair of pretty lakes, great for some midsummer swimming, and then some vertigo-inducing views, down to the calm and torpid glitter of the Ionian Sea. I've crossed Calabria.

My destination is the Praia Art Resort. It takes some finding, because it's hidden away on the shore like Roman silver hastily buried before a barbarian invasion. And yet it is, as they say, worth the detour. Recently built by a local football mogul, Praia is small, but perfectly formed; only 15 rooms, all made from local limestone and sculpted wood and all with a path to their own slice of beach.

The pool is surprisingly large, the staff are super-friendly, nibbles at the beach bar are perhaps the best I have experienced in a lifetime of eating extremely impressive nibbles. To use a word I just this moment made up, they are nibblissimo.

The restaurant, remarkably, is even better. If it was anywhere else, and not in remote and unknown Calabria, it would surely have about 17 Michelin stars. I will let one dish speak for all: a helix of tagliolini made from fat Ionian prawns and Sila mountain truffles. It's so good it nearly makes me blub. Instead I ask for a second helping. Then I come back the third night and have it all over again. Suitably fortified, and what feels like 17lb heavier, I am ready to move on after my outrageous and sybaritic indulgence. Piquantly, the remains of the ancient Greek town of Sybaris, the town that gave its name to sybaritic pleasures, is just east of the Praia Art Resort (the Greeks settled Calabria from the 8th century BC). Even nearer is Crotona, the town where Pythagoras lived; it's worth seeing for its tiny museum and its fabulous air of untouched decay – you will be the only tourist, I guarantee. A few minutes from Crotona you'll find the mighty island castle of Fortezza Aragonese, once used by Hannibal, and possibly mentioned in *The Odyssey*.



I've already seen it all, however, and now I am in search of something even more precious. I've heard there are villages in the mountains of Calabria where they still speak ancient Greek, where that noble tongue has somehow endured, from the days when Pythagoras measured triangles in Crotona. Can it be true? It takes me three gruelling hours to crawl along the coast, past towns ruined by earthquakes, past pretty villages where men in dark suits sit outside restaurants and hug and kiss and gesticulate and drink cold white Calabrian wine. As they discuss money. And other things. Under the cypress trees.

The car climbs higher into the Aspromonte, the so-called rough mountains. As the road winds and twists, I note that some of the road signs have bullet holes. Villagers stare at me from their doorways as I pass. Just as I'm thinking I'm rather dangerously lost, I turn a final, hair-raising corner and pull into a little village piazza. I can see a street sign in Italian and Greek. Then an old granny, a *nonna*, runs across the piazza calling to a giggling child.

The old woman is talking Ancient Greek in its purest surviving form; she is talking the language of Plato and Socrates, Aristotle and Homer, the language of the Sybarites, who taught their horses to dance to the flute, on this very same coast by the Ionian Sea.

It's a good place to end, because it sums up this singular, rather secretive corner of Italy. Calabria is scruffy in places, overdeveloped in parts, and yet, and yet, like one of those dense Calabrian pastries studded with delicious fragments of spicy fruit, it has moments of outright sublimity comparable with anything in Italy. You have to seek them out, you have to make an effort. But the taste, when you bite, is nibblissimo.



A pool at Agriturismo Constantino

### Need to know

Sean Thomas was a guest of Sawday's ([sawdays.co.uk](http://sawdays.co.uk)). B&B rooms at Praia Art Resort cost from €380 a night (00 39 0962 1902890, [sawdays.co.uk/praiartresort](http://sawdays.co.uk/praiartresort)). B&B rooms at Palazzo Carratelli cost from €80 a night (00 39 0982 41621, [sawdays.co.uk/palazzocarratelli](http://sawdays.co.uk/palazzocarratelli)). B&B rooms at Agriturismo Constantino cost from €50 a night ([sawdays.co.uk/agriturismocostantino](http://sawdays.co.uk/agriturismocostantino)). [Skyscanner.net](http://Skyscanner.net) has Terme return flights from Stansted to Lamezia from about £230; Lamezia Terme is an hour's drive from Praia Art Resort.



Stay at Palazzo Carratelli, a townhouse in the centre of Amanteo