

PRESS ON CALABRIA

THE TIMES

Why it's time to catch up with Calabria.

By Richard Morrison

[...] Am I being presumptuous? Is it possible to claim that Calabria is the last region in Italy, indeed in the whole Mediterranean Europe, that the British have not discovered, drooled over, and colonized annually from the second week of July to the first week of September?

Well, spare me a sackful of reproachful epistles. Almost certainly, I am being presumptuous. Nevertheless, I have been amazed at the number of well-travelled folk who give me that slightly shifty, "I should know where that is but I don't have a clue" look when I tell them that the family has just spent a sun-soaked, culture-packed week in Calabria.

It's down at the bottom, of course. If Italy is a leg, Calabria is its ankle-sock. But some sock! Barely 20-miles wide at its narrowest point (from some high-lying villages around Squillace you can see the Tyrrhenian and the Ionian Seas at the same time), it stretches downwards for 150 miles, almost kissing Sicily across the Straits of Messina. In many ways, it is much like Sicily, too: very agrarian, very poor (some of the lowest wages in Europe), slow-moving and timeless.

But we found the Calabrese more welcoming and humorous than the Sicilians. English is hardly spoken in the countryside, and Italian vocab is not a noted strength of the Morrison family – myself and wife Marian, and children Katharine, 15, and Eddie, 12.

Yet by marshalling our combined knowledge of musical terms, Martin Scorsese films and cobwebbed Latin we managed to hold a surprising number of entertainingly surreal conversations.

Getting to Calabria can be tough if you don't like long drives. There is a handy airport at Lamezia-Terme – handy for Calabria, that is, but not for Britain, because there are not direct flights. And even if you drive in the preferred Italian manner – 110 mph, headlights flashing, six inches behind the bumper of the car in front – it is a good four hours journey from Naples. Quite a journey, though! The majestic A3, the Autostrada del Sole, is a motorway of which the Romans would have approved. Straight as a ruler, it spans ravines and burrows deep through mountains with insouciant engineering virtuosity. And along the way it passes at least a dozen of those medieval hilltop villages that seem to defy not only gravity but also the Italian reputation for dolce vita languor. How did untutored village workmen build houses that have clung so tenaciously to sheer rock faces through several centuries of earthquakes?

Calabria is full of such surprises – though in this mostly undeveloped region there is no such thing as a tourist trail, and you have to discover the hidden jewels by yourself. And the biggest surprise, perhaps, is the contrast between the sun-backed coastal plain and thickly forested interior.

The former is a paradise for beach lovers and tan-fetishists. Katherine and Eddie – regrettably going through a period of zero tolerance towards and recreation that does not include a thumping heavy-metal beat – preferred the west coast, where a string of gorgeous little resorts teeters on the brink of "doing an Ibiza" without quite toppling into that gruesome abyss of unbridled hedonism. And since that coast also includes such pleasure as the Church of the Madonna dell'Isola, sitting in the gloriously perfumed Mediterranean Gardens atop the cliffs of Tropea, or the largely unspoiled fishing village of Scilla, or the ravishing Costa Viola, Marian and I felt romantically fulfilled too. In general, however, we wrinkles were keener on the east coast. It, too, has the odd built-up resort: Soverato is celebrated for its broad and leafy promenade and its white beaches. But the gentle Ionian coast craftily conceals its lovely seafronts: little coves, almost Cornish in their enchanting ensemble of rocks, sand and waves. The only drawback to the east side is the dreaded SS106: a coastal highway treated as a kind of Grand Prix circuit without the safety measures. Unfortunately, you need it to reach Calabria's best known seaside sights: Le Castella, the mighty Aragonese fortress that rises out of the sea.

Built to repel Turkish pirates, and farcically unsuccessful at this task (it has seen more sackings than the Tottenham Horspur board-room), it is now chiefly besieged by small children who play hide-and-seek around its towering parapets.

So much for the Calabrian coast. What of its interior? Well, let's start with our home for the week: a tranquil former farmhouse, perched on a small hill overlooking a Lorenzetti landscape of orange groves.

Did I fall in love with it? Put it this way. When we drove away for the last time, along a pot-holed track that only added to its quixotic allure, I turned to Marian and said: "I'd like to die here". To which she replied, with rather

unnecessary sharpness: “Considering how much pasta and wine you have consumed in the past week, you probably will”.

Barely ten miles from the biggest town in Calabria (the hilly and frenetic Catanzaro), our temporary home felt a world away from anywhere. We rented it from a company ... which also arranged for local cooks to prepare the odd evening meal for us – magnificent spreads of traditional Calabrese food. Rich, creamy and dripping with garlic. The house was barely three miles from the sea, but the country surrounding it was hillier, the temperature cooler. To sample the full glory of Calabria’s alpine interior, however, we needed to drive up one of its multitude of twisty, precipice-clinging roads until we reached the great mountain plateau of the Sila. Majestic pines overshadow the road on every side, except where the trees give way to poppy-strewn meadows or heart-stopping views of valleys. This is a fantastic walking country, but be careful. Our ‘detailed’ map, purchased back in London, turned out to be merely an impressionistic approximation of a maze of unsignposted paths. Luckily, you cannot walk for long without coming across a bunch of Australian backpackers who know exactly where they are going, and are usually only too happy to aid a family of helpless and hopeless Poms.

It is up in these hills that you discover little villages that boast amazingly elaborate baroque churches, or squares of perfectly preserved classical mansions that would not disgrace Cremona. The pity is that, too often, the outskirts of the same villages are scarred by post-war housing that makes Birmingham’s Bull Ring look picturesque.

Even though it means a long drive down the ghastly SS106 to Reggio (the port overlooking Sicily), you must see the celebrated Riace bronzes – superb ancient Greek statues miraculously discovered, half-protruding from a sandy beach, only in 1972.

Calabria was part of “Magna Grecia” long before the Romans reached it, and there are Greek ruins dotted across the region. However, they are presented to tourists in a matter-of-fact and uninformative way.

On the other hand, the wonderful churches – from the glorious Norman majesty of Gerace Cathedral to the tiny, startling 10th century La Cattolica in Stilo – need no guide to interpret their wonders.

We left Calabria feeling enchanted, refreshed and slightly dazed: as if we had popped in and out of a time warp. You can travel for hours in its interior and see nothing that wouldn’t have been exactly the same three or four century ago.

Presumably this is a cause of concern to hard-nosed reforming politicians in Rome, who probably view the region as an economically disastrous back-water. But for the visiting British family, it’s still a piece of Heaven on Earth.

END.

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