

PRESS ON CALABRIA

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MOST PEOPLE 'S perceptions of Italy have been moulded by images of Tuscany or Venice or Rome. We're all too familiar with the stock shots of Chianti-shire's rolling hills and picturesque farmhouses. The crooning gondoliers of Venice's waterways represent one of the most enduring Italian clichés while the stock shots of The Vatican and the Colosseum will always remind one of Rome, the Eternal City.

But, outside Italy's hard-sell tourist destinations, there is wealth of as yet undiscovered beauty waiting for the intrepid traveller. Calabria in the far south of the country is one such destination. The area is well off the tourist trail, right at the tip of Italy's toe with only the Straits of Messina separating it from Sicily.

Calabria boasts some of the most spectacularly rugged scenery available on the Italian peninsula. It borders Basilicata and stretches between the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Ionian Sea in the direction of Sicily.

Reaching Calabria has been something of a problem in the past. The mountainous terrain and forests, which give the region its stunning natural beauty, have also contributed to its isolation. There is an airport in Lamezia Terme, which can be reached from Heathrow via British Airways, but the ideal way to reach Calabria is by rail. The train journey from Roma Termini, the capital's main train station, to Calabria takes one down the Mediterranean coast and is a treat in itself. A word of advice for travellers by train, book couchette or sleeping compartment when buying your ticket, especially on the night train. There can be few more enjoyable ways to travel than by train: to be lulled to sleep by the mesmerizing clackety-clack of the tracks as the train pulls out of Naples and then to awaken fresh at one's destination.

Calabria's main city, Reggio di Calabria, is truly ancient. Founded in the eighth century before Christ by Greek settlers, it was taken over by the Romans in the second century AD and after the fall of Rome it was ruled by groups as diverse as the Saracens and the Normans before Calabria became part of what we perceive as modern Italy in 1860. In 1908, Reggio di Calabria was destroyed by a dreadful earthquake and later rebuilt, using anti-seismic criteria, to an orthogonal plan. Practically all the monuments in the city were totally destroyed; however, those worth visiting are the Duomo, rebuilt in Romanesque style, with interesting works of art; the partly ruined castle, of medieval origin; the church of the Ottimati; and the Madonna dell'Eremo Sanctuary.

A most interesting place is the Lungomare Matteotti (the promenade), with its vegetation and several Greek and Roman remains, described by the poet D'Annunzio as "the most beautiful kilometre in Italy". The futurist sculptor Umberto Boccioni and the world-famous designer Gianni Versace are among Reggio's famous sons.

Villa San Giovanni, the main ferry crossing to Sicily, is a couple of kilometres from Reggio and a person can be in downtown Messina within half an hour. If you do cross over to Sicily, be sure to visit Taormina: medieval village high in the mountains overlooking the Ionian Sea. The town also boasts a Greek amphitheatre with breathtaking views of Mount Etna, Sicily's active volcano.

A wealth of splendid scenery lies along the Calabrian littoral which, including the Tyrrhenian

and Ionian coasts, stretches for nearly 800 km. and is characterized by a tremendous variety of panoramas, ranging from delightful rocky coves (especially on the Tyrrhenian) to vast beaches fringing a clear, sparkling sea.

The magnificent inland area is dotted with tiny picturesque villages hugging the hills that slope down to the water, with colourful and typically Mediterranean citrus plantations and olive groves. Those in search of a more conventional resort holiday can find this in Tropea or Gioia Tauro.

Food in Calabria defies superlatives. It would be impossible to recommend a particular restaurant. That would be to take away from the spontaneity of what is a personal experience. Rest assured, though, that stopping at any restaurant on the roadside, particularly on the coast, would mean a real culinary treat. Calabrian food, however, is cooked with lots of chilli, so watch out!

It's hard to avoid talking about organized crime in Southern Italy and it has in the past been a real problem. The local mafia in Calabria are known as Ndrangheta and were very active after martial law was declared in Sicily following the death of Judge Falcone in 1991. However, this is certainly much less of a problem now than it has been in the past. In any event, tourists are largely left to their own devices. In short, don't believe the hype; a holiday in Southern Italy does not mean running the gauntlet with Don Corleone.

A holiday in Southern Italy probably wouldn't be for everyone. This is an area that is not yet geared towards intensive tourism and, as such, some people might find it basic, backward even. Few people speak English so be prepared to break out the phrase book quite regularly. However, that backwardness has an upside in that the people of the region are friendly and helpful; these are proud and generous country people. This is an unspoilt paradise and thankfully it has avoided the pitfalls that characterize so many tourist traps the world over.

Commercialism has yet to sully the area and you'll be pleasantly surprised at how cheap accommodation and food are. The people of Calabria are derided by other Italians as coming from Paesa de Testa dura (the country of hard heads) but once you meet the Calabrese you'll be taken in by their sunny disposition.

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