

Uncovering the undiscovered Calabrian frontier

BY PHOEBE TILELLI

REGGIO CALABRIA - Many visitors bypass this sun-drenched region to take the 20 minute ferry straight to Sicily not knowing that it occupies the entire toe of the Italian boot, poised and ready to kick Sicily out of the water. Calabria is largely under developed and untouched by tourism despite its alluring and rugged coastline.

Although a great deal of Calabria has been left abandoned, it is as authentic as it gets as far as Italian summer holidays go. It's one of the few undiscovered frontiers left in the country and arguably the whole of Europe. Think abandoned villages, empty beaches and rustic Italian cuisine. Many of the coastal towns are like diamonds just waiting to be uncovered. Perhaps in need of a little polish here and there, but with a rare beauty under the surface.

The region suffers due to the lack of public transport including flights with the main airports Lamezia Terme and Reggio Calabria having minimal service. Poor driving conditions and the absence of resorts and tourist facilities don't make it easy but this is how the region has kept its honest Italian roots and traditions when most commercial destinations have been overrun by souvenir shops and tourist menus featuring hamburgers and 'Mac n Cheese'.

What the region may lack in facilities,

is made up for by the people. The Calabrian locals are some of the most welcoming and hospitable you will come across. Their cuisine is something they are very proud of like in most regions of Italy. Here, you can expect to find dishes you may not have seen anywhere else in the country and an array of products that come directly from the farm, to the table. Pecorino, fresh Ricotta and the local spicy N'duja salame are just a few of the local specialties sold in both the market places and street corners as well as from the trunks of cars. Because what could be better than black market cheese?

What you hear about the region being inundated with garbage can be true of the outskirts of major Calabrian cities and much of the infrastructure was left to crumble since the earthquake of 1908. This should in no way discourage an adventurous traveller. Before judging a book by its cover, dig a little deeper. The small town centre of Reggio Calabria around Corso Garibaldi is in pristine condition with the perfectly paved 'lungo mare' or promenade that stretches along the beachfront. It's known among locals and northern Italians alike as the most beautiful kilometre of Italy. Stroll or bike ride along this strip for a view over the beach and beyond to Sicily. After dark, sparks of light like natural fireworks, burst from the still active (and in winter, snow covered) Etna volcano on the other side of the

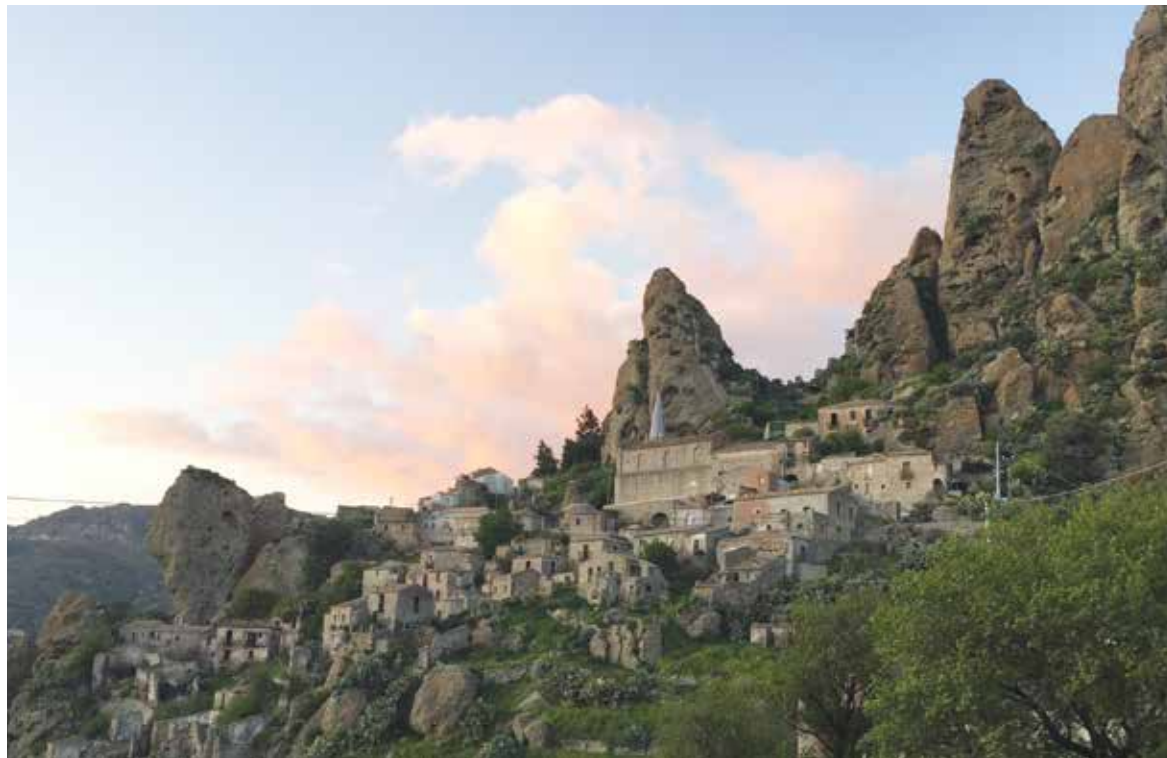
Messina Strait.

For a day at the beach there is no shortage of options here between the Tyrrhenian Sea on the west coast and the Ionian Sea to the east. The coastal town of Scilla is located just 20 minutes by train from Reggio Calabria.

The pebbly beach is a favourite among locals dotted with striped umbrellas and beach bars. Scilla is not only famous for its Castle that stands high above the beach on a cliff, but also for its neighbourhood of Chianalea.

They call it 'the Venice of Calabria'

pea certainly is a little slice of heaven. Venture inland and a different world is tucked away among the wild cactus' and rocky mountains. Olive groves, wheat fields, vineyards, citrus farms and grand old villas await you in the country side where abandoned vil-



Pentedattilo



Tropea

which may sound a little far-fetched but the houses and restaurants along this narrow cobbled lane are built directly into the ocean, much like those in Venice. As the tide rises, waves wash up as if to knock against the back doors of local homes. This tiny treasure trove is also home to a number of well renowned seafood restaurants showcasing the local 'pesce spada' or swordfish specialty.

Many of the best beaches of the region are rarely visited by international tourists such as Crotona's protected marina of Capo Rizzuto. Named after the castle that seemingly floats on water, the golden sandy beaches surrounding this area are kept clean and quiet.

Perhaps an exception to these well kept secrets is the more frequented town of Tropea. Located about one hour north of Reggio Calabria with easy access to Lamezia Terme airport, this white sandy beach has water so clear it could be mistaken for a scene straight out of the Maldives. The town of Tropea balances high on a sandstone cliff face looking down on the ocean and the Santuario di Santa Maria dell'Isola. A church on a tiny island just off the shore line. It's no wonder they call this 'La Costa Degli Dei' meaning The Coast of the Gods. Tro-

peas are common place. To go back in time like this to a raw and unspoiled beauty is a rarity in the western world where so much history has been paved over.

The town of Pentedattilo dates back to 640 BC and is named in Greek after the rock formation that towers over the roof tops in the shape of "five-fingers". What is now quite literally a ghost town, abandoned with the only inhabitants claiming to have seen poltergeist on numerous occasions, was once a buzzing centre in Roman times. As the walls continue to crumble on the steep hill top village, locals begin to breathe life back into the haunted streets during the summer months by hosting outdoor cinema nights and celebrations.

In Calabria there are many things that may strike you as unique. Whether it be something as grand as Capo Colonna, an ancient Greek column from 440 BC that stands alone on a cliff's edge where a whole empire once claimed the land, or something as simple as an elderly man selling home-made olive oil from the trunk of his vintage Fiat 500.

With all the grit that comes with Calabria, comes a whole lot of unimaginable rustic beauty. A side to Italy that many will never dare to visit.



Pizzo



Reggio Calabria