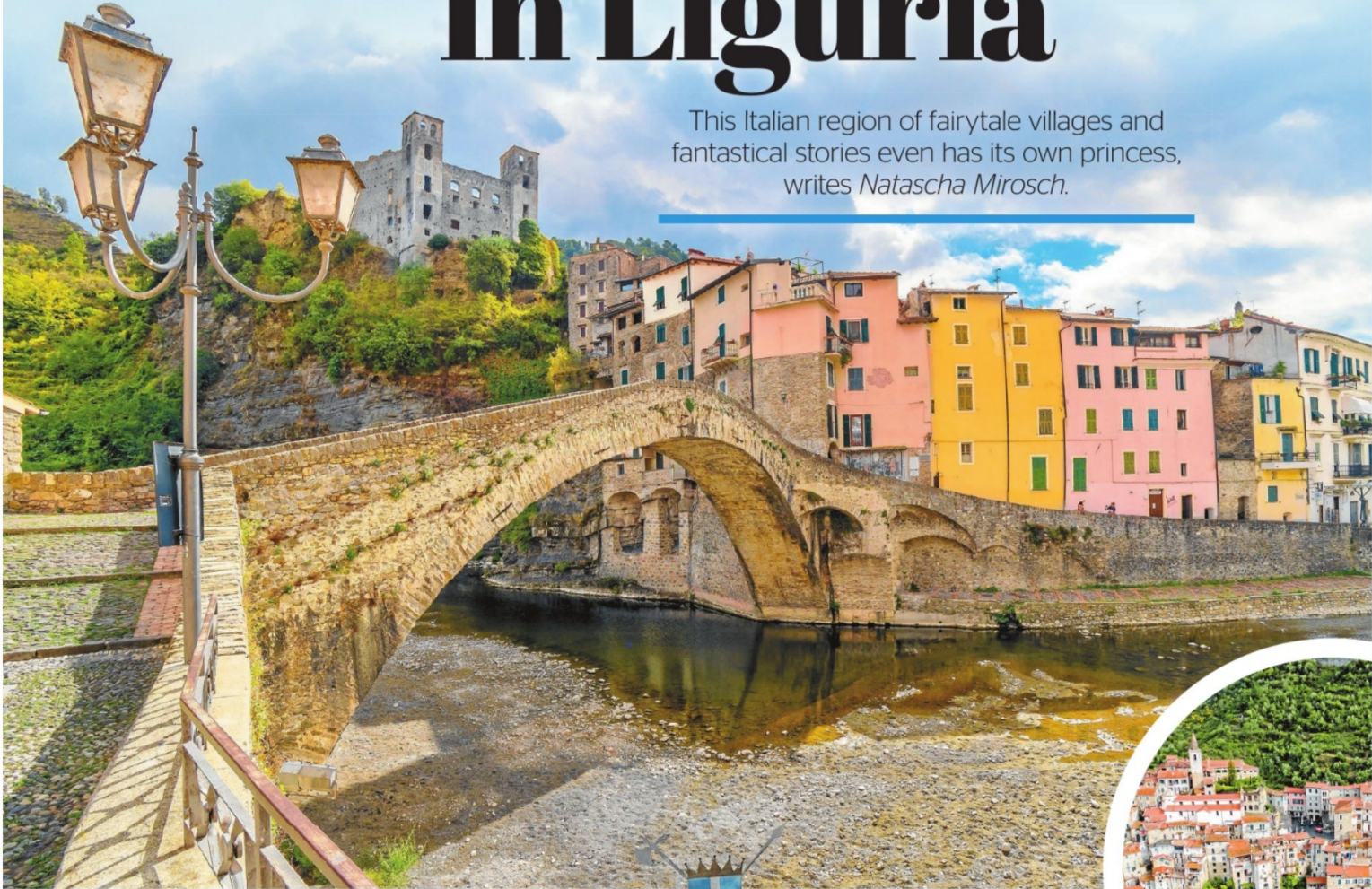


## COVER STORY

# Once upon a time in Liguria

This Italian region of fairytale villages and fantastical stories even has its own princess, writes *Natascha Mirosh*.



**T**HE first indication that this isn't just another pretty Italian hilltop village is a sign on the road with an official-looking crest: "Welcome to the ancient principality of Seborga."

Behind the western Ligurian coast in northern Italy, close to the French border, the slopes of the densely wooded Maritime Alps are populated with perfectly preserved medieval villages; fairytale places fortified with castles, towers and maze-like laneways built as protection from marauding Saracen pirates and invading armies.

It's a region that attracts curious wanderers and lovers of history; enthusiasts of the esoteric and the eccentric.

Seborga most definitely fits the latter category.

We are visiting from our Ligurian base, Dolceacqua, via a corkscrew road lined with houses with terraces boasting multimillion-dollar views over neighbouring France.

The ancient town of Seborga was once owned by prince-abbots and protected by two chivalric orders: the Knights of St Bernard and the White Knights of Seborga. While it dates back to CE945, the town's modern story begins in 1729 when the monks sold the town to the House of Savoy. However, that act was never officially registered. In 1963, a local flower exporter, Giorgio Carbone, discovered the subsequent annexation of the town by Italy was illegal

and that Seborga was, to all intents and purposes, still an independent principality.

Despite Italy refusing to ratify its status, Seborgans elected Carbone as "Prince for life", with the title of His Royal Tremendousness, and he "ruled" until his death in 2009. Through his long reign, he reintroduced the town's former currency, the luigini, named for King Luis of France, reinstated the flag and coat of arms and produced a national anthem, *La Speranza* (The Hope).

Today, the monarch of the Principality of Seborga, nominally ruling over a population of about 300, is Her Serene Highness Nina Menegatto. The princess divides her time between her residences in nearby Monaco and here in Seborga.

We visit the small Luigini Museum to see



a 1669 luigini coin said to be worth 25,000 euros (\$41,000), as well as more contemporary currency iterations, including a new three-luigini note featuring Princess Nina.

You can use the currency in the town but generally, it's bought as a keepsake. In the souvenir shop, I buy a mug bearing the town's coat of arms, a Seborgan "passport", postcards and some local stamps.

"You also need to put Italian stamps on them," the owner tells me, but knowing the Italian predilection for anti-authoritarianism, I take a chance and my postcards, bearing only the unofficial Seborgan stamps, are all safely delivered to their recipients.

Aside from its unique story, Seborga is a charming place in its own right.

The historic centre, which has remnants

of the ancient gates that once enclosed it, is well-maintained; its tiny piazzas feature fountains or monuments, overlooked by tall stone houses often flying the blue and white Seborgan flag, and with flowers cascading from their wrought iron balustrades.

We walk through the medieval square of Piazza San Martino, its paving stones a mosaic of the Knights of the Templar Cross. To one side is the unusually colourful 17th-century San Martino church with a frescoed exterior, on the other, the Palazzo des Monaci, the former Monk's Palace, now a private home.

At the highest point of the town, where there are two blue sentry boxes and a cannon, fired in salute every fourth Sunday of the month, the view is spectacular: directly ahead, the Tyrrhenian Sea and to the right, France and the principality of Monaco.

After admiring the town's street frescoes and poking our heads into the old dungeon, where the heavy chains are still attached to a rudimentary wooden bench, we make a lunch stop at the quaint Osteria del Coniglio, where the speciality is rabbit.





**Clockwise from bottom right:** The once-grand Pigna Antiche Terme and Spa; village of Apricale; welcome to Seborga; Dolceacqua's medieval bridge Ponte Vecchio; Her Serene Highness Nina Menegatto; Osteria Martini in Pigna; making pastries in Apricale; street art in Triora; Knights Templar tribute in Seborga; witch heritage in Triora. **Pictures:** Shutterstock; Natascha Mirosh; Getty Images, Kaidi-Katrina Knox **ON THE COVER:** The village of Apricale. **Picture:** Getty Images



## TRIP NOTES

**Getting there:** The closest airport to western Liguria is Nice, just across the border in France. Qatar fly to Nice from Australia via Doha from about \$1987 return. You can also fly into Genoa in Italy with Qatar via Doha from about \$1947.

**Getting around:** There are frequent trains along the coast, from both Nice (50 minutes, around \$17) and Genoa to Ventimiglia (two hours, around \$31) which is the nearest coastal town with a train station. You'll need to hire a car to visit the hinterland villages,

however. Budget has cars for hire from Nice airport from about 80 euro (\$130) a day or about 45 euro from Genoa. [budget.com.au](http://budget.com.au)

**Staying there:** Le Gemme is an atmospheric B&B in the carugi in the old part of Dolceacqua. The two suites have views over the old bridge and there's a third smaller room without a view. Prices are from 95 to 120 euro per night for two people. [le-gemme.it](http://le-gemme.it)

**Explore more:** [lamialiguria.it](http://lamialiguria.it)

## MONET'S MUSE

The town of Dolceacqua is renowned in its own right. While the name might not be familiar, the 15th-century stone arched bridge, Ponte Vecchio, may well be. Monet painted it, along with the austere ruins of Castello Doria on the hillside above it.

We're staying in the oldest part of this ancient town, in Tere, a labyrinth of lamp-lit passageways known as carugi. Inhabited by cave-like

shops, galleries and barrel-roofed cellars that offer tastings of the local rosse wine, they wind up to the castle, stronghold of powerful feudal lords who once ruled this region with casual cruelty.

According to legend, Castello Doria is haunted by the ghost of a young woman who refused to sleep with a Doria lord and was imprisoned in the dungeon, where she died. Walking through the cobblestoned carugi, particularly at night, it seems entirely plausible.

In the "new" part of the town known as Borgo is the 17th-century Oratorio di San Sebastiano and the baroque San Antonio Abate, whose Angelus bells coincide fortuitously with aperitivo hour.

Within a short drive of Dolceacqua is a handful of Italy's official 313 most beautiful villages, as judged by the association I Borghi pi belli d'Italia.

Triora's, however, is a dark beauty. The village is most famous for the witchcraft trials

that took place here between 1587 and 1589. The name comes from the Latin for "three mouths" referring to the food resources produced locally: wheat, wine and chestnuts.

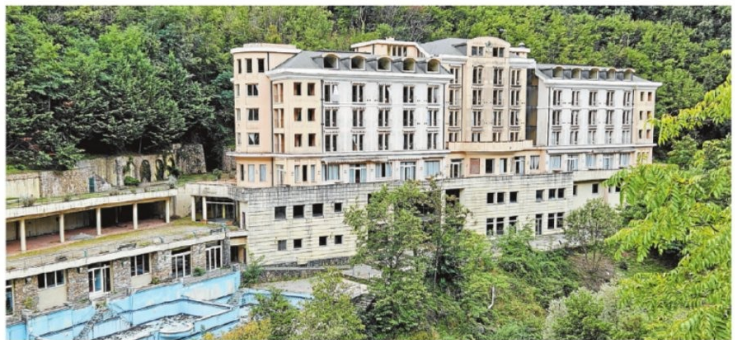
However, in 1587 an extraordinarily hot summer resulted in a poor harvest and an ensuing famine. The council elders attributed the crops' failure to black magic and pointed the finger at a group of women, herbal healers who lived on the fringe of the town. The church sent a special envoy who asked locals to inform on anyone who they thought might be a witch and they began to turn on each other, making accusations based on old feuds and grievances. In the end, 19 women and one man were deemed witches and imprisoned.

“ In this part of Liguria, you'll find no selfie queues, no inflated prices nor hostility from fed-up locals.

Most of the exhibit labels and the extensive collection of books on witchcraft are in Italian, but the Regional Ethnographic and Witchcraft Museum, set up inside former prison cells, gives an excellent if gruesome illustrated history of the persecution.

This dark period in the town's history aside, its maze of alleys, stone archways and preserved medieval features, from churches to cellars used for storing salt, make it an interesting place to explore.

Another "borgo piu bello" (most beautiful village) is Apricale, where the honey-hued houses seem to tumble down the chest-



nut-wooded slope. We make our way along cobblestone laneways past doorways painted with cherubs and knights, ducking under stone archways hung with bunting, and find a festa in full swing in the piazza. Tables and chairs are set beneath umbrellas and to one side huge vats of oil are being managed by men in caps and aprons with long metal-handled scoops. At another table, women are rolling out the pastries which are then delivered to the oil vat, fried, then dusted in sugar and served with a little bowl of sweet, custardy zabaglione for dipping.

Naturally, Apricale has its own ghost story. It's said the house once occupied by the "boia", the local executioner, is haunted by the spirits of those he executed.

## PIGNA'S PLAY

At the foot of the Ligurian Alps Regional Natural Park on the edge of the village of Pigna, white gauzy curtains flutter in the broken window of an abandoned thermal spa and hotel. The healing powers of mineral-rich waters were said

to have been discovered by a farmer who noted his donkeys' skin condition improving after being in the water. The once-grand Pigna Antiche Terme and Spa was opened here in 1903 but went into bankruptcy in 2018. It was allegedly bought by a Russian consortium in 2020, but global events conspired to see its doors remain closed, the blue pools sadly empty, and the decay evident as nature starts to reclaim the hotel.

Pigna has another card to play, though - in this quiet mountain town of less than 800 people, there is an excellent restaurant. We leave our car at the bottom of the hill and

walk up to the highest point, where Osteria Martini's tables spill out onto the plant-filled Piazza Castello which has soaring views of the forested Val Nervia. It's a cool day though, so we opt to eat in the lovely dining ruins, at tables set under a ceiling of huge wooden beams. Owner-chef Federico Martini's menu is pure Ligurian cuisine, gathered, grown or hunted from the surrounding fields and forests and transformed with alchemical skill into contemporary dishes.

One of the local specialities of Pigna is white beans, which here come served in a large ceramic egg. They have been mixed with goat's cheese and a sous vide egg into a creamy puree, dusted with beetroot powder and topped with crispy fried onions. Then there's paper-thin local bresaola with a wild herb salad, ricotta gnocchi, Ligurian rabbit with mountain potatoes, and a brace of sausages with olives ... plus a couple of glasses of Ligurian vermentino.

There are other fascinating villages within striking distance of Dolceacqua. Like Perinaldo, the birthplace of the astronomer and mathematician Cassini, who discovered the four satellites of Saturn. Or Isolabona - divided by a river and dominated by castle ruins, it has a summer festival dedicated to the most fairytale of instruments, the harp.

In this part of Liguria, you'll find no selfie queues, no inflated prices nor hostility from fed-up locals as you might well encounter in the heavily toured towns of Portofino or the Cinque Terre in the region's south. We get to explore all these enchanting hamlets, rich in history and legend and immersed in nature, pretty much on our own. And that is pure magic.

*The writer travelled at her own expense*