



Liguria, Piedmont & Valle d'Aosta

Italy's most seductive attributes – stone villages baking in the sun, rows of vineyards, castles, palm-shaded beaches and rich cooking traditions – all abound in this trio of regions.

Shaped like a rainbow, Liguria arcs from Tuscany to the French Riviera. Its ancient maritime capital, Genoa, is a seething port city with a maze of medieval passageways. Liguria's coastal walking paths wind past pastel fishing villages tumbling down vine-terraced cliffs to the sea; while dazzling marine life lures divers below the surface.

Piedmont's gentler green hills are also ribboned with grapevines, producing prestigious reds and sparkling whites. The region's hazelnuts, white truffles and cheeses inspired the Slow Food Movement's inception here. A baroque showpiece of arcaded walkways and squares, revitalised Turin entranced international audiences when it hosted the 2006 Winter Olympics and later took on the mantle of Europe's Capital of Design, showcasing its industry and artistry. Turin now has one eye on its upcoming role hosting the sesquicentenary of the Italian unification, which took place in the city, making it Italy's inaugural capital.

Crowning the trio, the snow-blanketed Valle d'Aosta is cradled beneath Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn. Mountain villages dot the valley's slopes, which are traversed by hiking, biking and ski trails.

Less than a day's travel apart, each of these three contrasting regions will see you fall in love with Italy – for the first time, or all over again.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Dare to open your eyes in the glass elevator gliding up through the centre of Turin's **Mole Antonelliana** (p219)
- Hike across three countries, nine villages and 169km of heady Alpine scenery on the **Tour du Mont Blanc** (p245)
- Forage in Piedmont's forests, such as those near Asti, for **truffles** (p231)
- Zoom along the Ligurian coast from San Remo on a **scooter** (p210)
- Drift over the Barolo vineyards at dawn in a **hot-air balloon** (p229)
- Ski in the tracks of Olympians through the **Milky Way** (p225)



■ POPULATION: Liguria 1.5 million; Piedmont 4.2 million; Valle d'Aosta 120,900

■ AREA: Liguria 5413 sq km; Piedmont 25,399 sq km; Valle d'Aosta 3262 sq km

LIGURIA

Liguria has the same ingredients as the adjoining French Riviera – *belle époque* villas, palm trees and sun lounge-strewn beaches – but an unmistakably Italian flavour that extends well beyond its famous pesto and focaccia. Less polished than its neighbour, Liguria is lively and laid-back. Summer in particular sees it swarming with scooters and with gelati-carrying families strolling along its shores.

Midway along the Ligurian coast, the region's capital, Genoa, is a mass of history-steeped streets plummeting down to its port. A wealth of museums, many housed in grand palaces, interpret Genoa's rich history, which still lingers in its warren of alleyways.

To Genoa's west, artists, writers and wealthy hangers-on have frolicked along the waterfront from the early 1800s onwards, giving rise to fashionable resort towns such as San Remo. Between the resorts, there are also some enchanting, little-visited medieval villages to explore. East of Genoa, the coastline is equally captivating, especially around the Unesco-protected Cinque Terre villages clinging to the cliffs.

You could easily laze away your days on the beach, but there are plenty of opportunities to get active too. Water sports abound, including some fascinating wreck dives. A few kilometres inland, Liguria's cool mountains offer hiking and biking challenges.

GENOA

pop 604,800

The first thing you notice when you arrive in Genoa is that its hilly terrain resembles a bowl of spaghetti piled high. Liguria has virtually no flat land, and its capital is a roller coaster of winding streets and staircases sliced into the footpaths. Squashed into the hillsides, Genoa's tall, narrow, green-shuttered buildings, painted tomato-red, orange and yellow, squeeze in alongside palaces, hanging gardens, church spires and the crumbling remains of the town's old walls.

From the main shopping streets and squares, descending into Genoa's medieval old town takes you into the belly of its *caruggi* – a dense tangle of dark pedestrian alleys that evoke the back-stabbing dramas and intrigues of Genoa's golden age. At the base of the old town is the city's historic port and newer

dockside areas. Cruise liners, fishing boats, ferries and yachts crowd the waters, while Genoese architect Renzo Piano's transformation of the waterfront includes a panoramic elevator and a glass biosphere.

A day or two will give you a good overview of the city – unless you're a history buff, in which case its museums could keep you occupied much longer.

Although your calves might feel like spaghetti after scaling Genoa's streets, exploring this ancient maritime city gives you an insight into Italy's past and present that is truly unique.

History

Founded in the 4th century BC, Genoa's name is thought to come from the Latin *ianua*, meaning 'door'. An important Roman port, it was later occupied by Franks, Saracens and the Milanese. The first ring of Genoa's defensive walls was constructed in the 12th century (the only remaining section of these walls, Porta Soprana, was built in 1155, although what you see today is a restored version).

A victory over Venice in 1298 led to a period of growth, but bickering between the Grimaldis, Dorias, Spinolas and other dynasties caused internal chaos. The Grimaldis headed west, establishing the principality of Monaco (hence the similarity of Monaco's language, Monegasque, to the Genoese dialect).

In the 16th century, under the rule of Imperial Admiral Andrea Doria, Genoa benefited from financing Spanish exploration. Its coffers swelled further in the 17th century, which saw an outer ring of walls added as the city expanded, and its newly built palaces filled with art, in turn attracting masters such as Rubens. Celebrated architect Galeazzo Alessi (1512–72) designed many of the city's splendid buildings.

The end of the Age of Exploration came as a blow and as the Mediterranean's mercantile importance declined, so did Genoa's. The city languished for centuries.

Genoa was the first northern city to rise against Nazi occupation and the Italian Fascists during WWII, liberating itself before the arrival of Allied troops. After the war the city developed rapidly along the coast, although, by the 1970s, decline had set in once more as big industries folded.

Christopher Columbus is Genoa's most famous son (if indeed he was – see boxed

HOME OF COLUMBUS?

Genoa is heralded as the birthplace of Christopher Columbus (1451–1506). But some believe he may have actually been born in Calvi, on the island of Corsica (then under Genoese rule and now part of France), which is a ferry ride to Genoa's south.

So the theory goes, when Columbus went looking for underwriting at the Spanish court, he could not very well admit to being of Calvian origin because the Calvians had massacred a Spanish garrison, putting an end to Spanish ambitions there. Certainly numerous Calvians figured in his crews and there's a plaque marking the house in Calvi's citadel where the navigator was supposedly born.

You can make up your own mind during a visit to his alleged Genoa birthplace, **Casa della Famiglia Colombo** (☎ 010 246 53 46; Piazza Dante; admission free; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Sat & Sun).

text, above). In 1992 the 500th anniversary of his seminal voyage to America transformed Genoa's ancient harbour from a decaying backwater into a showpiece for the city. Renzo Piano orchestrated the overhaul, adding a number of striking permanent attractions. Two years later, Genoa was named a European City of Culture, spurring on further renovations and additions to the cityscape, including several new museums and a much-needed metro system. But for all its sprucing up, Genoa retains a rough-and-tumble charm.

Orientation

Genoa sprawls along the coast for 30km and is served by 15 train stations. The city centre stretches between the two main stations, Stazione Principe (to the west) and Stazione Brignole (to the east). Via XX Settembre, the elegant main shopping strip, starts just southwest of Stazione Brignole and spills into the city's focal point, Piazza de Ferrari. The old town winds west of the piazza towards the port and around the waterfront towards Stazione Principe.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

La Feltrinelli (☎ 010 54 08 30; Via XX Settembre 231-233r) English-language novels on the 1st floor.

Liberia Porto Antico (☎ 010 251 84 22; Palazzina Milo, Porto Antico) Limited selection of English-language novels, tourist books on Genoa, maps and Lonely Planet titles.

EMERGENCY

Police station (☎ 010 5 36 61; Via Armando Diaz 2)

INTERNET ACCESS

There's a handful of small internet cafés in and around Via Balbi near Stazione Principe. Others regularly pop up (and close down) in the city centre – check with the city's tourist

information booth for updates. Online access costs around €3 to €5 per hour.

Nonedove Internet Point (☎ 010 570 48 78; cnr Corso Buenos Aires & Piazza Borgo Pila; ☎ 9.30am-8.30pm) Near Stazione Brignole.

LAUNDRY

Ondablu (Via Antonio Gramsci 181; ☎ 8am-10pm) Self-service laundromat.

LEFT LUGGAGE

Expect to pay around €3 for 24 hours.

Stazione Brignole (Piazza Giuseppe Verdi; ☎ 7am-9pm)

Stazione Principe (Piazza Acquaverde; ☎ 6am-midnight)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Ospedale San Martino (☎ 010 55 51; Largo Rosanna Benci 10) Hospital.

POST

Post office Main post office (Via Dante; ☎ 8am-6.30pm Mon-Sat); Stazione Principe (☎ 8am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Liguria's tourist information was in a state of flux during research due to organisational restructuring. Genoa has no main office and many info booths have closed. Keep an eye out, as booths at the airport, ferry terminal and Stazione Principe may reopen in the future.

City centre (Genova Informa; ☎ 010 24 87 11; www.apt.genova.it; Piazza Giacomo Matteotti; ☎ 9.30am-7.45pm) Busy kiosk adjacent to Piazza de Ferrari.

Porto Antico (☎ 9am-8pm) Tiny kiosk with information on the old port only.

Sights

Dozens of Genoa's palaces built between 1576 and 1664 were placed on the Unesco World Heritage list in 2006; the website www.irolli.it maps their locations.

PIAZZA DE FERRARI

A splashing fountain is the centrepiece of Genoa's main square, which is ringed by magnificent buildings. Among the buildings are the Art Nouveau Palazzo della Borsa (closed to the public), which was once the country's stock exchange; and the neoclassical Teatro Carlo Felice (p194).

Also on the square is the **Palazzo Ducale** (☎ 010 557 40 00; www.palazzoducale.genova.it in Italian; Piazza Giacomo Matteotti 9; admission varies; 🎫 exhibitions 9am-9pm Tue-Sun), which is also accessed via Piazza Giacomo Matteotti. Once the seat of the city's rulers, it hosts a few small specialist museums and archives, including the **Museo del Jazz** (☎ 010 58 52 41; www.italianjazzinstitute.com in Italian; admission free;

GENOA



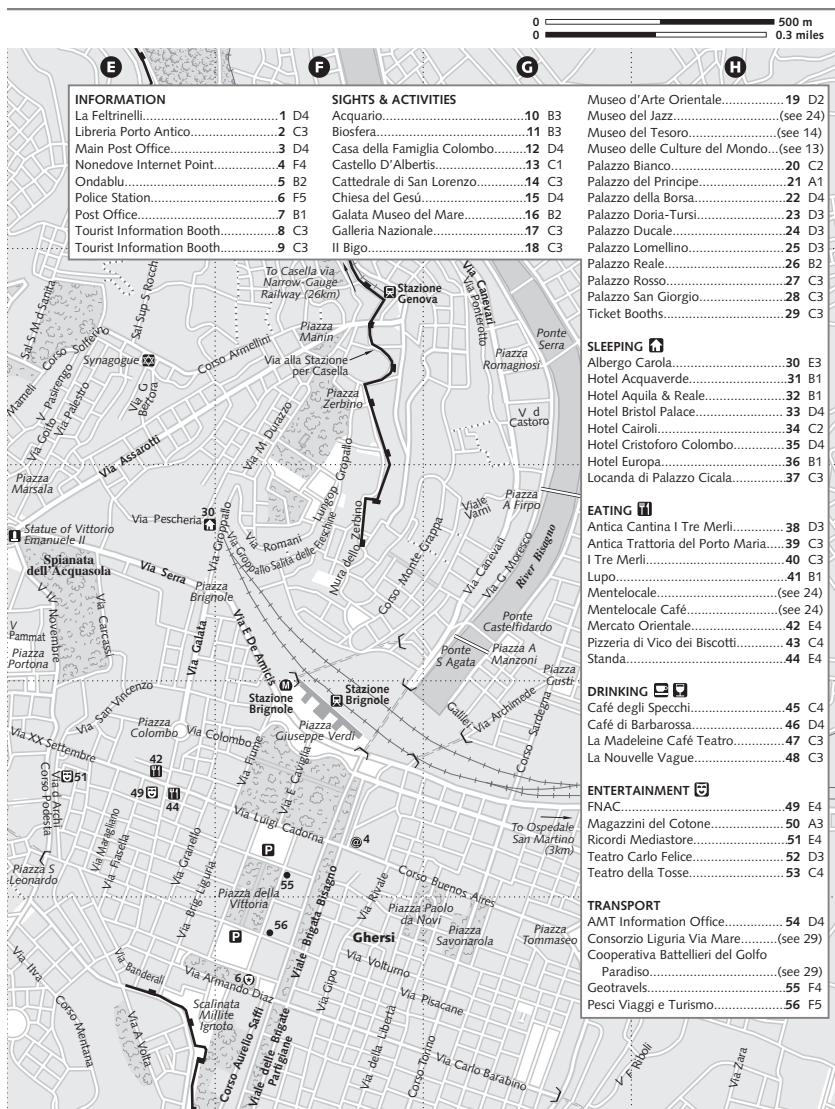
☎ 4-7pm Mon-Sat by reservation), with a collection of original recordings. High-profile temporary art exhibitions are held in the *palazzo*, which also has a bookshop, café and restaurants.

CATTEDRALE DI SAN LORENZO

With its black-and-white-striped Gothic marble façade making it look a bit like a giant

humbug, Genoa's **cathedral** (Piazza San Lorenzo; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3.30-7pm) is fronted by twisting columns and crouching lions. Consecrated in 1118, its two bell towers and cupola were added in the 16th century.

Inside, above the central doorway, there's a great lunette with a painting of the Last Judgment, the work of an anonymous Byzantine



painter of the early 14th century. Look out for the unexploded British bomb, which luckily failed to detonate when it hit the cathedral in 1941. In the sacristy, the **Museo del Tesoro** (☎ 010 247 18 31; adult/child €5.50/4.50; 🗺️ tours 9am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Sat) preserves various dubious holy relics, including the medieval Sacro Catino, a glass vessel once thought to be the Holy Grail. Other artefacts include the polished quartz platter upon which Salome is said to have received John the Baptist's head, and a fragment of the True Cross.

CHIESA DEL GESÙ

The highlight of the **Chiesa del Gesù** (Piazza Giacomo Matteotti; 🕒 4.30-7pm), built in 1597 on the foundations of a medieval church, are two works by Rubens. The *Circoncisione* hangs over the main altar, and the *Miracoli di San Ignazio* is displayed in a side chapel.

VIA GARIBALDI & AROUND

Skirting the northern edge of what was once the city limits, pedestrianised Via Garibaldi (formerly called the Strada Nuova; www.stradanuova.it) was planned by Galeazzo Alessi in the 16th century. It quickly became the city's most sought-after quarter, lined with the palaces of Genoa's wealthiest citizens.

The most elaborate façade belongs to the 1563 **Palazzo Lomellino** (☎ 010 595 70 60; www.palazzolomellino.org; Via Garibaldi 7; admission varies depending on exhibit; 🗺️ vary). The grey-blue exterior is festooned with stucco adornments, while the internal courtyard is dominated by an 18th-century *nymphaeum* (monument to the nymphs). Upstairs, the remarkably preserved 17th-century frescoes by Bernardo Strozzi were only uncovered in 2002, after languishing for almost 300 years above a false ceiling. They depict allegories of the New World, in homage to the palace's one-time owners, the Centurione family, who financed Columbus' voyages.

MUSEUM CARD

Serial museum-goers should pick up the **Card Musei** (Museum Card; www.museigenova.it; card €16). The card gives free admission to around 20 of Genoa's museums and discounted access to several more over a period of 48 hours. You can buy it at various locations, including the city centre tourist information booth.

Just east of Via Garibaldi, a path from Piazza Corvetto twists through terraced gardens to the **Museo d'Arte Orientale** (☎ 010 54 22 85; Piazzale Mazzini 1; adult/child €4/2.80; 🕒 9am-1pm Tue-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun). With some 20,000 items, including porcelain, bronzes, costumes and musical instruments, it brings together one of Europe's largest collections of Japanese art. Heading southwest, elegant **Via Roma**, with its Art Nouveau boutiques, and adjacent glass-covered **Galleria Mazzini**, is Genoa's most exclusive designer-shopping street. It links Piazza Corvetto with Piazza de Ferrari.

Musei di Strada Nuova

Three of Via Garibaldi's grand palaces, Rosso, Bianco and Doria-Tursi, comprise the **Musei di Strada Nuova** (☎ 010 246 77 86; combined ticket adult/child €7/free). Between them, they hold the city's finest collection of Old Masters.

Tickets must be purchased at the bookshop inside **Palazzo Doria-Tursi** (☎ 010 247 63 51; Via Garibaldi 9; 🕒 9am-7pm Tue-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun). The palace's Sala Paganiniana has a small but absorbing collection of legendary violinist Niccolò Paganini's personal effects. Pride of place goes to his 'Canone' violin, made in Cremona in 1743. One lucky musician gets to play the maestro's violin during October's Paganiniana festival. Other artefacts on show include letters, musical scores and his travelling chess set. The palace has housed Genoa's town hall since 1848.

Lavishly frescoed rooms in **Palazzo Rosso** (☎ 010 247 63 51; www.museopalazzorosso.it; Via Garibaldi 18; 🕒 9am-7pm Tue-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun) are the backdrop for several portraits by Van Dyck of the local Brignole-Sale family. Other standouts include Guido Reni's *San Sebastiano* and Guerino's *La morte di Cleopatra*, as well as works by Veronese, Dürer and Bernardo Strozzi.

Flemish, Spanish and Italian artists feature at **Palazzo Bianco** (☎ 010 247 63 51; www.museopalazzobianco.it; Via Garibaldi 11; 🕒 9am-7pm Tue-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun). Rubens' *Venere e Marte* and Van Dyck's *Vertumna e Pomona* are among the highlights, which also include works by Hans Memling, Filippino Lippi and Murillo, as well as 15th-century religious icons.

OLD CITY

The heart of medieval Genoa, bounded by Porta dei Vacca, the waterfront streets Via Cairoli, Via Garibaldi and Via XXV Aprile, and the Porta Soprana, is its maze of *caruggi*.

As evidenced by the washing pegged on lines strung outside the buildings, these dark, almost cavelike laneways and dank, odoriferous blind alleys are largely residential, with a sprinkling of bars, shops and cafés. Particularly after dark, parts of the *caruggi* can feel somewhat unnerving. Although it's not overly dangerous (especially compared with a decade ago), take care in the zone west of Via San Luca and south to Piazza Banchi, where most of the old city's lowlife (prostitution, drugs and so on) concentrates. East of the piazza is Via Orefici, where you'll find **market** stalls.

Terraced gardens surround **Palazzo Reale** (☎ 010 271 01; www.palazzorealegenova.it in Italian; Via Balbi 10; adult/child €5/3; ☎ 9am-7pm Thu-Sun, to 1.30pm Tue & Wed), which has a fine collection of Renaissance works. A combined ticket costing €7 also covers admission to the **Galleria Nazionale** (☎ 010 270 53 00; www.palazzospinola.it; Piazza Superiore di Pellicceria 1; adult/child €5/3; ☎ 9am-8pm Tue-Sat, 2-8pm Sun). The latter, a 16th-century mansion, was owned by the Spinolas, one of the Republic's most formidable dynasties. Their ancestral home displays Italian and Flemish Renaissance art, but is also worth visiting to gape at the awesome architecture.

Towering over the western end of town, **Castello D'Albertis** houses the eclectic **Museo delle Culture del Mondo** (Museum of World Cultures; ☎ 010 272 38 20; www.castellodalbertisgenova.it; Corso Dogali 18; adult/child €6/5; ☎ 10am-5pm Oct-Mar, to 6pm Apr-Sep). The neo-Gothic edifice was built in 1892 on the ruins of a much older castle for the globetrotting Capitano Enrico D'Albertis, who hauled back all manner of 'curiosities' from his extensive sea voyages. Where else could you find a stuffed platypus, a fragment of the Great Wall of China and a handful of sand from San Salvador (Columbus' first disembarkation point) in the same cabinet? If you don't fancy the climb up to Corso Dogali, there's a lift from Via Balbi (€0.70) to the castle gates.

Further west, on the waterfront, is the beautiful **Palazzo del Principe** (☎ 010 25 55 09; www.palazzodelprincipe.it; Via Adua 6; adult/child €7/6.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), once home of the 16th-century admiral, Andrea Doria. The sumptuous Renaissance interiors, with frescoes, tapestries, furniture and paintings, have been painstakingly restored, and the formal gardens provide a calm respite from the frenetic city.

PORTO ANTICO

Since its recent face-lift, Genoa's **historic port** (www.portoantico.it) gets packed with locals and

visitors enjoying a *passeggiata* (stroll). The port's information booth (see p187) has details about all of the old port's attractions and events, including various activities here for kids.

Butting out over the water, Genoa's bright-blue **Acquario** (Aquarium; ☎ 010 234 56 78; www.acquariodigenova.it; Ponte Spinola; adult/child €15/9; ☎ 9.30am-7.30pm Mon-Wed & Fri, to 10pm Thu, to 8.30pm Sat & Sun Sep-Jun, to 11pm Jul & Aug) has more than 5000 sea creatures, including sharks, swimming in six million litres of water. The adjoining floating barge takes visitors on a voyage through the Age of Discovery and into a Madagascan rainforest. The aquarium has disabled access.

Two of Renzo Piano's most distinctive new additions to the port are the **Biosfera** (Biosphere; ☎ 335 599 01 87; Ponte Spinola; adult/child €5/3.50; ☎ 10am-sunset Tue-Sun), a giant glass ball housing a humid mini-ecosystem with tropical plants, butterflies and birds; and a panoramic lift, **Il Bigo** (Calata Cattaneo; adult/child €3/2; ☎ 2-6pm Mon, 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), which hoists a cylindrical viewing cabin 200m into the air. The lift has disabled access.

The best place to gain an appreciation for Genoa's relationship with the sea is the excellent **Galata Museo del Mare** (☎ 010 234 56 55; www.galata Museo del Mare.it in Italian; Calata di Mari 1; adult/child €12/5; ☎ 10am-7.30pm Mar-Jul, Sep & Oct, to 7.30pm Sat-Thu, to 10pm Fri Aug, to 6pm Tue-Sun Nov-Feb), which traces the history of seafaring from earliest times through the ages of sail and steam to the present via hi-tech exhibits.

Marco Polo was once an inmate in the frescoed **Palazzo San Giorgio** (Piazza Caricamento). Built in 1260, it became a prison in 1298; Polo worked on *Il Milione* here. These days it hosts occasional exhibitions; the port's information kiosk has information.

GENOA-CASELLA RAILWAY

Spectacular views of Genoa's forts can be seen from the 1929 narrow-gauge railway, which snakes from the **Stazione Genova** (☎ 010 83 73 21; www.ferroviagenovacasella.it in Italian; Via alla Stazione per Casella 15) 25km north to the village of **Casella** (one way/return €2/3, one hour, eight to 12 daily) in the Scrivia Valley.

Tours

Information and tickets for boat trips around the port and destinations further afield are available from the **ticket booths** (☎ 010 25 67 75;

A WHALE OF A TIME

Springtime **whale-watching expeditions** (☎ 010 26 57 12; www.whalewatchliguria.it; adult/child €35/18; 🕒 10am from Genoa, 11.30am from Savona Sat May & Jun), run in consultation with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), include fascinating background on the world's largest mammals provided by an onboard biologist.

The boat sails from Genoa into a 96,000-sq-km protected zone situated between France's Côte d'Azur and Tunisia, and has an estimated whale population of 2000. All up, some eight cetacean species exist here, including the long-finned pilot whale, sperm whale and Risso's dolphin among them. The area's striped dolphin population peaks at 25,000 in summer.

Trips last six to seven hours; you'll need to bring your own lunch. Advance reservations are essential.

Ponte Spinola; 🕒 9.30am-6.30pm Sep-Jun, 9am-8pm Jul & Aug) beside the aquarium at Porto Antico.

Genova Tours (☎ 010 275 93 18, 010 59 16 25; adult/child €10/7) runs three or four open-topped bus tours daily, with headphone commentary in five languages. It's best to confirm the departure point for your specific trip; tourist booths can provide departure details. Tickets are sold on the bus.

Festivals & Events

Every odd-numbered year in early May, Genoa hosts the Slow Food-affiliated festival, **Slow Fish** (www.slowfish.it). The festival celebrates seafood with a fish market and tastings. It also runs free workshops focusing on climate change, water pollution, good fishing practices and protected marine areas, and aquaculture, and fills in fish shoppers and diners on how to help look after fishy environments through better-informed consumer practices.

In homage to Genoese violinist Niccolò Paganini (1782-1849), the **Premio Paganini** is an international violin competition held in September. More musical events take place during October's **Paganiniana** festival. Exact dates and venues change each year.

Genoa is one of four historical maritime cities (along with Pisa, Amalfi and Venice) that race in the **Palio delle Quattro Antiche Repubbliche Marinare** in June. The next regattas in Genoa are in 2008 and 2012.

Sleeping

Dozens of hotels are spread around town. The greatest concentration is near Stazione Principe on and around Via Balbi.

BUDGET

Hostel Genova (☎ 010 242 24 57; hostelge@iol.it; Via G Costanzi 120; dm/s/d from €16/23.50/44; 📞 reception

9am-3.30pm & midnight-7am Feb-mid-Dec; 📞) A steep 2km north of the centre, the rules at Genoa's only hostel won't endear it to free-spirited backpackers: its eight-bed dorms are single-sex, there's a lockout from 9am to 3.30pm, a 1am curfew, and Hostelling International (HI) cards are mandatory (although breakfast's included). Catch bus 40 from Stazione Brignole to the end of the line. Has disabled access.

Albergo Carola (☎ 010 839 13 40; Via Gropallo 4; s/d from €28/50, with bathroom from €35/60) Albergo Carola's well-kept rooms can be found on the 3rd floor of a lovely old building near Stazione Brignole. Staff are charming, though if you don't speak Italian, you may want to have your phrasebook handy.

Hotel Acquaverde (☎ 010 26 54 27; www.hotelacquaverde.it; Via Balbi 29; s/d from €30/50, with bathroom from €40/70; 📞) On the top three floors of a restored 17th-century town house (accessed by a lift), the Acquaverde's rooms are simple but comfortable. If you're self-catering, four rooms have their own kitchen facilities. Ask about the hotel's parking arrangements nearby when booking. Has disabled access.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Cairoli (☎ 010 246 14 54; www.hotelcairoligenova.com; Via Cairoli 14/4; s/d from €55/75; 📞 📞 📞) Boat hire (with or without a skipper) can be arranged at this amenity-laden hotel set in a terrifically central location on the continuation of Via Garibaldi. Incredibly for the price, you can work out at the gym, breakfast on the rooftop terrace while reading your free newspaper, or have a nightcap at the 24-hour bar. Nearby parking can be arranged on booking.

Hotel Cristoforo Colombo (☎ 010 251 36 43; www.hotelcolombo.it; Via di Porta Soprana 27; s €55-90, d €85-110) Recently overhauled (with bathrooms for all

16 rooms), this charming family-run hotel is ideally situated in the old town. On balmy nights, take in the twinkling city lights from the rooftop terrace.

Hotel Aquila & Reale (☎ 010 25 61 32; www.aquila-reale.com; Piazza Acquaverde 1; s/d from €70/100;

TO MARKET, TO MARKET...

Shop for everything from fresh fruit and vegetables to cheeses, meat and a plentiful assortment of fish at Genoa's ornate **Mercato Orientale** (covered market; entrances at Via XX Settembre 75r & Via Galata; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-7pm Mon-Sat). Flower stalls are grouped in front of the market hall on Via XX Settembre.

In the old town, fruit and veg stalls are set up on Piazza Banchi and Via degli Orefici, immediately east of the Mercato Orientale.

Works by local artists and secondhand books can be picked up from the open-air stalls beneath the arcades on Piazza Colombo, a pretty square at the southern foot of Via Galata. On the first Saturday and Sunday of the month from October to July, an antique market fills the interior courtyards of Palazzo Ducale.

refined yet relaxed ambience that make you want to find a quiet corner to curl up for a contented nap after your meal.

SELF-CATERING

Standa (Via XX Settembre 46-54r; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 3.30-7.30pm Sun) One of the larger and more central supermarkets, Standa is on the corner of Via Cesarea. It also has a takeaway bakery.

Most cake shops sell *kranz* (honey-glazed raisin bread baked in a twist and topped with sugar crystals) and *pandolce Genovese* (traditional Genoese fruit bread).

Drinking

The revamped Porto Antico buzzes with bars. You'll also find sophisticated new drinking spots intermingled with old-time favourites throughout the city, particularly in the streets just northwest of Piazza de Ferrari. Piazza della Erbe is clad with café terraces where you can linger over a coffee or something stronger.

La Nouvelle Vague (☎ 010 25 62 72; Vico de Gradi 4r; ☎ to 1am Sun-Thu, to 2am Fri & Sat) A bohemian crowd hangs out in this subterranean bookshop and bar. You can sip Italian wine while leafing through a book, or just savour the surroundings over a cocktail.

La Madeleine Café Teatro (☎ 010 246 53 12; Via della Maddalena 103) Live bands blast their stuff from 10pm most nights at this energetic café theatre/music bar.

Café degli Specchi (☎ 010 246 81 93; Via Salita Pollaiuoli 43r; mains about €7-10; ☎ Mon-Sat) In the roaring '20s, this tiled Art Deco showpiece was a favourite hang-out of the literati, and its original vaulted interior was used as a backdrop for some scenes in Dino Risi's film *Scent of a Woman* (1974). Today it's a favourite with fashionable locals enjoying the *aperitivo* (happy hour) buffet.

Café di Barbarossa (☎ 010 246 50 97; Piano di Sant'Andrea 21-3r; mains €10; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon, to 2.30am Tue-Fri, 5pm-2.30am Sat & Sun) A life-size statue of Elvis rocking out on his guitar greets you at the entrance of this good-time bar set in a medieval red-brick cellar below the towering 12th-century Porta Soprana. Outside there's a leafy deck.

Entertainment

At the western end of the Porto Antico, the Magazzini del Cotone, one-time cotton warehouses, have been converted into an entertainment area with a multiplex cinema, games arcade and shops.

Tickets for cultural and sporting events are sold at box offices inside **Ricordi Mediastore** (☎ 010 54 33 31; Via alla Porta degli Archi 88-94) and **FNAC** (☎ 010 29 01 11; Via XX Settembre 58).

Take in a play or opera at **Teatro Carlo Felice** (☎ 010 538 11; www.carlofelice.it in Italian; Passo Eugenio Montale 4), Genoa's stunning four-stage opera house. Casanova trod the boards of **Teatro della Tosse** (☎ 010 247 07 93; www.teatrodellatosse.it in Italian; Piazza Renato Negri 4), the city's oldest theatre, which dates from 1702.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Regular domestic and international services, including Ryanair flights, use **Christopher Columbus airport** (Aeroporto Internazionale di Cristoforo Colombo; 60A; ☎ 010 601 54 10; www.airport.genova.it), 6km west of the city in Sestri Ponente.

BOAT

Ferries sail to/from Spain, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica and Tunisia from the **international passenger terminal** (terminal traghetti; ☎ 24hr information 166 152 39 393; www.porto.genova.it; Via Milano 51). Only cruise ships use the 1930s passenger ship terminal on Ponte dei Mille.

Fares listed following are for one-way, low-/high-season deck-class tickets. Ferry operators based at the international passenger terminal include the following:

Grandi Navi Veloci (☎ 800 46 65 10, 010 254 65; www.gnv.it) Ferries to/from Sardinia (Porto Torres year-round €34/75, Olbia June to September €38/77) and year-round to/from Sicily (Palermo €70/110).

Moby Lines (☎ 010 254 15 13; www.mobylines.it) Ferries year-round to/from Corsica (Bastia €17/32) and Sardinia (Olbia €35/65).

Tirrenia (☎ 800 82 40 79; www.tirrenia.it) Ferries and high-speed boats year-round to/from Sardinia (Porto Torres €25/50, Olbia €28/38, Cagliari July to September €45), with connections to Sicily.

From June to September, **Cooperativa Battellieri del Golfo Paradiso** (☎ 018 577 20 91; www.golfoparadiso.it) operates boats from the Porto Antico to Camogli (one way/return €10/15), Portofino (€10/15), the Cinque Terre (€17/25) and Porto Venere (€17/25) on the Riviera di Levante.

Consorzio Liguria Via Mare (☎ 010 26 57 12; www.liguriaviamare.it) runs a range of seasonal trips from here to Camogli, San Fruttuoso and Portofino, Monterosso in the Cinque Terre, and Porto Venere.

BUS

Buses to international cities depart from Piazza della Vittoria, as do buses to/from Milan's Malpensa airport (€16, two hours, twice daily at 6am and 3pm) and other inter-regional services. Tickets are sold at **Geotravels** (☎ 010 59 28 37; geotravels@statcasale.com; Piazza della Vittoria 30r) and **Pesci Viaggi e Turismo** (☎ 010 56 49 36; pesciros@tin.it; Piazza della Vittoria 94r).

TRAIN

Genoa's Stazione Principe and Stazione Brignole are linked by train to Turin (€15, 1¾ hours, seven to 10 daily), Milan (€15.50, 1½ hours, up to eight daily), Pisa (€15, two hours, up to eight daily) and Rome (€36.50, 5¼ hours, six daily). Stazione Principe tends to have more trains, particularly going west to San Remo (€13, two hours, five daily) and Ventimiglia (€15, 2¼ hours, six daily).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

AMT (☎ 010 558 24 14) line 100 runs between Stazione Principe and the airport at least every hour from 5.30am to 11pm (€4, 30 minutes). Tickets can be bought from the driver.

A taxi to or from the airport will cost around €15.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

AMT (☎ 800 08 53 52, 010 599 74 14; www.amt.genova.it in Italian) operates buses throughout the city and there is an **AMT information office** (Via d'Annunzio; ☎ 7.15am-6pm Mon-Fri, 7am-7pm Sat & Sun) at the bus terminal. Bus line 383 links Stazione Brignole with Piazza de Ferrari and Stazione Principe. A ticket valid for 90 minutes costs €1.20 (single ride €0.70) and an all-day ticket costs €3.50. Tickets can be used on main-line trains within the city limits, as well as on the new wheelchair-accessible **metro** (www.genovametro.com), which has 10 stations across the city.

AROUND GENOA

Nervi

Just 7km east of central Genoa, this former fishing village has been well and truly subsumed into the city's urban sprawl. It does, however, boast four worthwhile museums, which can be accessed on a combined ticket (€10). The most important for aficionados of Italian art is the **Galleria d'Arte Moderna** (☎ 010 372 60 25; Via Capolungo 3; adult/child €6/5; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun), displaying works by 19th- and 20th-century artists such as Filippo De Pisis, Arturo Martini and Rubaldo Merello.

More 19th- and early-20th-century Italian art, including Eduardo Rubino's sensual marble nude, *Il Risveglio*, is displayed at the **Raccolte Frugone** (☎ 010 32 23 96; Via Capolungo 9; adult/child €4/2.80; ☎ 9am-7pm Tue-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun), which is housed in the Villa Grimaldi Fassio, overlooking the leafy, squirrel-filled Parchi di Nervi.

Some 18,000 items of a similar period are displayed at the **Wolfsoniana** (☎ 010 323 13 29; www.wolfsoniana.it; Via Serra Gropallo 4; adult/child €5/2.80; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun). On show are items documenting this turbulent time in Italy's history, including advertising and propaganda posters, along with architectural drawings, paintings and furnishings.

Going back earlier in time, the **Museo Giannettino Luxoro** (☎ 010 32 26 73; Via Mafalda di Savoia 3; adult/child €4/2.80; ☎ 9am-1pm Tue-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) has a rich collection of 18th-century clocks, silverware, ceramics and furniture, displayed in a splendidly restored villa.

On the seafront, live music is often performed at the **Chandra Bar** (☎ 010 860 36 40; Passeggiata Garibaldi 26r; mains €8-12; ☎ 3pm-2am

Tue-Sat, 11.30am-2am Sun), which serves up pasta and daily specials of freshly caught fish, and occasionally spices things up with Thai and Brazilian dishes.

Nervi is best reached by frequent trains from Genoa's Stazione Brignole and Stazione Principe (€1.20, 20 to 25 minutes).

Pegli

Flower-filled parks make Pegli a peaceful spot to retreat from Genoa's urban tumult. Like Nervi, this former seafaring village now lies within the city boundaries of Genoa; it is roughly 9km west of the centre. And, like Nervi, it has yet more museums. A combined ticket for all of the following sights costs €8.

The **Museo di Archeologia Ligure** (☎ 010 698 10 48; www.museoarcheologicogenova.it; Via Pallavicini 11; adult/child €4/2.80; ☎ 9am-7pm Tue-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun), in the striking Villa Pallavicini, holds displays of locally excavated artefacts from the prehistoric through to the Roman period, as well as a collection of Egyptian antiquities.

Maritime matters are covered in the **Museo Navale** (☎ 010 696 98 85; www.museonavale.it; Villa Doria, Piazza Bonavino 7; adult/child €4/2.80; ☎ 9am-1pm Tue-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun), with an exhibition of models, photographs and other reminders of the days of sail.

Also worth a wander is the **Parco Villa Pallavicini** (☎ 010 66 68 64; Via Pallavicini; admission €3.50; ☎ 9am-7pm Apr-Sep, to 5pm Oct-Mar), with its formal lawns, lakes and glasshouse, and the neighbouring **Giardino Botanico** (☎ 010 66 68 64; admission €3.50; ☎ 9am-12.30pm Tue-Sun), home to a small collection of exotic plants.

Genoa's city centre tourist information booth (p187) can advise on accommodation options if you want to stay.

Frequent trains from Genoa's Stazione Brignole and Stazione Principe (€1.20, 20 to 25 minutes) travel to Pegli.

RIVIERA DI LEVANTE

East of Genoa's sprawl, the deep blue seas are edged by some of Italy's most elite resorts, including jet-set favourites Santa Margherita and Portofino. Anything but off-the-beaten-track, this stretch of coast is *hugely* popular with Italian and foreign tourists, but you can escape the worst of the crowds on some exhilarating walks, such as along the cliffs of the Unesco-protected Cinque Terre villages.

Camogli

pop 5750

This charming spot, located 25km east of Genoa, has trompe l'oeil decorating the alleys and cobbled streets, beneath a canopy of umbrella pines and olive groves.

Camogli's name means 'house of wives', hailing from the days when the women ran the village while their husbands were at sea. Fishing traditions continue here, especially during the second weekend in May when fishermen celebrate the **Sagra del Pesce** (Fish Festival) with a big fry-up – hundreds of fish are cooked in 3m-wide pans along the busy waterfront.

From the main esplanade, Via Garibaldi, boats sail to the **Punta Chiappa**, a rocky outcrop on the Portofino promontory where you can swim and sunbathe. The **tourist office** (☎ 0185 77 10 66; www.camogli.it in Italian; Via XX Settembre 33; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3.30-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) has a list of diving schools and boat-rental operators.

If you'd like to stay overnight, the 16th-century villa **Hotel Cenobio dei Dogi** (☎ 0185 72 41; www.cenobio.com; Via Cuneo 34; s €111-155, d €153-208; 📞 📺 🚿) has more than 100 refined rooms yet still manages to feel intimate.

Delve down the lanes away from the water to escape the lunchtime crowd and get a better deal.

ATP Tigullio (☎ 0185 28 88 34) runs buses to/from Rapallo and Santa Margherita at least every hour, leaving from the bus stop just past the tourist office on Via XX Settembre.

Camogli (€2.10, 40 minutes, hourly) is on the Genoa-La Spezia train line.

The Cooperativa Battellieri del Golfo Paradiso (p195) runs boats year-round to and from Punta Chiappa (one way/return €6/7.50) and San Fruttuoso (€6.50/9); and boats between June and September to Genoa's Porto Antico (€10/15), Portofino (€9/13), and the Cinque Terre and Porto Venere (€15/22).

San Fruttuoso

Sheltered within dense foliage in a deep inlet, San Fruttuoso's extraordinary Benedictine **abbey** (Abbazia di San Fruttuoso di Capodimonte; ☎ 0185 77 27 03; adult/child €4/2.50; ☎ 10am-6pm May-Sep, to 4pm Mar, Apr & Oct, also to 4pm public holidays & day prior to public holidays only Dec-Feb) was built as a final resting place for Bishop St Fructuosus of Tarragona (martyred in Spain in AD 259). It was rebuilt in the mid-13th century with the assistance of the Doria family. The abbey fell into decay with the decline of the religious community,

and in the 19th century it was divided into small living quarters by local fishermen.

In 1954 a bronze **statue** of Christ was lowered 15m to the sea bed, offshore from the abbey, to bless the waters. Dive to see it or view it from a boat if the waters are calm – the Cooperativa Battellieri del Golfo Paradiso, p195, can provide details. Replicas were lowered in St George's harbour, Grenada, in 1961, and off Key Largo in Florida in 1966.

San Fruttuoso is only accessible on foot from Camogli or Portofino – a steep 5km-long cliffside walk that takes up to 2½ hours one way from either town – or by boat from Camogli or Punta Chiappa (one way/return €5/6.50).

Portofino

pop 550

The best way to arrive in Portofino is by sea – not only because of the postcard-perfect views of the pink and yellow houses huddled around its little harbour, but because the wiggly road along the promontory to the village is death-defyingly narrow. (The bus is only slightly less scary than driving, but at least bus drivers are well-practised at navigating around it – and the oncoming Ferraris.)

Perhaps its tricky access is why Liguria's most exclusive seaside resort has long been a hideaway for writers, including Guy de Maupassant and Truman Capote, and Hollywood luminaries, especially in its 1950s and '60s heydays. These days Portofino is almost wholly given over to designer boutiques and ritzy café terraces, but there are some beautiful walks fanning out into the protected green surrounds, Parco Naturale Regionale di Portofino (p198).

Portofino's **tourist office** (☎ 0185 26 90 24; www.apptigullio.liguria.it; Via Roma 35; ☎ 10am–1pm & 1.30–4.30pm Tue–Sun) has free trail maps for the park, and information on mountain-bike rental, as well as seasonal sail and motorboat rental.

SIGHTS

At the port, a flight of stairs signposted 'Salita San Giorgio' leads past the **Chiesa di San Giorgio to Castello Brown** (☎ 0185 26 71 01; www.portofinoevents.com; Via alla Penisola 13a; adult/child €3.50/free; ☎ hours vary), a 10-minute walk altogether (confirm the opening times with the tourist office prior to setting out, as the castle often hosts private events). The Genoese-built castle

saw action against the Venetians, Savoyards, Sardinians and Austrians and later fell to Napoleon. In 1867 it was transformed by the British diplomat Montague Yeats Brown into a private mansion. The fabulous tiled staircase is one of the showpieces of the neo-Gothic interior, while there are great views from the garden. For a better outlook continue for another 300m or so along the same track to the **lighthouse**.

Heading 2km north along the coastal road is the **Abbazia della Cervara** (Abbazia di San Girolamo; ☎ 800 65 21 10; www.cervara.it; Lungomare Rossetti, Via Cervara 10; ☎ guided tours by reservation), built in 1361 and surrounded by formal gardens. Over the centuries, the abbey has hosted Benedictine monks, three popes and a saint (Catherine of Siena), and the French king, François I, who spent a less convivial time here as a prisoner after the 1525 Battle of Pavia. Tours take in the gardens, 15th-century chapterhouse, 16th-century cloister and the Saracen Tower.

SLEEPING & EATING

Portofino is pricey and then some. The least expensive accommodation options include **Eden** (☎ 0185 26 90 91; www.hoteledenportofino.com; Vico Dritto 18; d €140–270; (P) ☎), on a quiet cobbled side street not far from the harbour front; and **Piccolo Hotel** (☎ 0185 26 90 15; www.dominapico.it; Via Duca degli Abuzzi 31; d from €140; (P) ☎) in a palm-flanked villa with a tiny beach. If you're living it *way* up, do as Bogie, Bacall and their ilk have done and check into **Hotel Splendido** (www.splendido.orient-express.com; Salita Baratta 16). If you have to ask the price, forget it.

Fashionable eateries overlook the port; **Magazin** (☎ 0185 26 91 78; Calata Marconi 34; mains €15–25; ☎ Fri–Wed), decked out like the cabin of a boat, is a tad more authentic than most, serving local Ligurian cuisine. Look for the handful of tables romantically perched away from it all at the far end of the port.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Regular buses run between Portofino and Santa Margherita (see p198 for details).

From April to October, Servizio Marittimo del Tigullio (p198) runs daily ferries from Portofino to/from San Fruttuoso (€6.50/9.50), Rapallo (€6/9.50) and Santa Margherita (€4.50/7.50).

Motorists must park at the village entrance with obligatory parking fees starting from €4.50 per hour (cash only).

Santa Margherita

pop 10,600

Elegant hotels with Liberty façades, palms and moored million-dollar yachts line this fishing-village-turned-retirement-spot-of-choice for wealthy Milanese.

Santa Margherita's idyllic position in a sheltered bay on the turquoise Golfo di Tigullio makes it a good base for **sailing**, **water-skiing** and **scuba diving**. The **tourist office** (☎ 0185 28 74 85; www.apptigullio.liguria.it; Via XXV Aprile 2b; ☹ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Sat) has a raft of information about water sports along the gulf. Those feeling less active can simply stretch out on its popular **beach**.

Pop into the headquarters of the **Parco Naturale Regionale di Portofino** (☎ 0185 28 94 79; www.parks.it/parco.portofino, www.parcoportofino.it; Viale Rainusso 1) to pick up **walking** maps and information. Alternatively, you can take an aromatic stroll among lemon trees, hydrangea and camellia hedges, and other flora typical of Santa Margherita's hot climate, in the lavish gardens surrounding the 17th-century **Villa Durazzo** (☎ 0185 29 31 35; entrances at Piazzale San Giacomo 3, Via San Francesco d'Assisi 3 & Via Principe Centurione; admission free; ☹ 9.30am-6.30pm Mar-Oct, 9.40am-4.30pm Nov-Feb). The villa itself is slowly being restored and is closed to visitors.

SLEEPING & EATING

Fasce (☎ 0185 28 64 35; www.hotelfasce.it; Via Luigi Bozzo 3; s/d €98/108; (P) ☹ (♿)) This is one of Santa Margherita's cheaper options, with a rooftop sun deck, 16 decent-size rooms (though bathrooms are teeny) and a limited breakfast. Parking costs an extra €18.

Lido Palace Hotel (☎ 0185 28 58 21; www.lidopalacehotel.com; Via Doria 3; s €105-187, d €130-210; (P) ☹ (♿)) Right on the waterfront in the centre of town, this Liberty-style grande dame offers the quintessential Santa Margherita experience. Rooms are generously proportioned, the breakfast buffet is bountiful, and the restaurant has an outdoor terrace with elevated views and half- and full-board options.

Trattoria dei Pescatori (☎ 0185 28 67 47; Via Bottaro 43-44; mains around €25; ☹ Wed-Mon Sep-Jun, daily Jul & Aug) *Moscardini affogati* (spicy stewed baby octopus) is the summertime speciality of Santa Margherita's first-ever restaurant, opened in 1910. Autumn brings wild mushrooms to the table, while year-round Pescatori serves a delicious regional fish soup, oven-baked fish with olives and pine nuts, and handmade pastas in all shapes and sizes.

DRINKING

Bar Colombo (☎ 0185 28 70 58; Via Pescino 13; ☹) until late Tue-Sun) Stop for a drink at Santa Margherita's splendid Art Nouveau bar, the former hang-out of silver-screen stars such as Burton and Taylor.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

ATP Tigullio Trasporti (☎ 0185 28 88 34; www.tigulliotrasporti.it in Italian) runs buses to/from Portofino (every 20 minutes) and Camogli (every 30 minutes).

By train, there are hourly services to/from Genoa (€2.10, 35 minutes) and La Spezia (€3.95, 1½ hours).

Servizio Marittimo del Tigullio (☎ 0185 28 46 70; www.traghettiportofino.it; Via Palestro 8/1b) runs seasonal ferries to/from Cinque Terre (one way/return €15/22), Porto Venere (€18/28.50), San Fruttuoso (€8/13.50), Portofino (€4.50/7.50) and Rapallo (€3/4).

Rapallo

pop 30,300

The bright-blue changing cabins lining Rapallo's palm-fringed beach and its little 16th-century castle by the sea (hosting temporary art exhibitions) give the town a nostalgic air, but it is also a lively, friendly place. Rapallo's size gives it a less elite atmosphere than its jet-set neighbours. It's at its busiest on Thursdays when colourful market stalls fill central Piazza Cile.

Since 1934 a **cable car** (☎ 0185 5 23 41; Piazzale Solari 2; one way/return €5.50/7.75; ☹ 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm daily) has threaded its way up to **Santuario Basilica di Montalegre** (612m), a sanctuary built on the spot where, on 2 July 1557, the Virgin Mary was reportedly sighted. Walkers and mountain bikers can follow an old mule track (5km, 1½ hours) to the hilltop site. The **tourist office** (☎ 0185 23 03 46; www.apptigullio.liguria.it; Lungo Vittorio Veneto 7; ☹ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Sat) has details of other walks in the area and stocks walking maps.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Miro (☎ 0185 23 41 00; www.hotelmiro.net; Lungomare Vittorio Veneto 32; s €70-115, d €80-155; (P) ☹ (♿)) Right on the seafront, this charming boutique hotel is ensconced in a 19th-century town house, and has retained much of its historical character, with canopied beds and floral-print wallpaper. Ask about horse-riding lessons and boat rental, which can be booked through the hotel.

Hotel L'Approdo (☎ 0185 23 45 45; www.approdohotel.it; Via San Michele di Pagana 160; d €86-170; (P) ♿) Set on the hillside, L'Approdo has some great sea views, but if you're willing to forego them and look out onto the garden instead you can negotiate a lower rate. Rooms are shiny and modern, and some are wheelchair accessible. Parking (€10 per day) needs to be booked ahead.

Behind rows of parked scooters, the waterfront has plenty of places to eat, drink and snack.

Handmade pastas at **Antica Cucina Genovese** (☎ 0185 20 60 36; Via Santa Maria del Campo 133; mains €8-20; ☎ Tue-Sun; ♿) include a huge variety of designated vegetarian options such as chestnut ravioli with pesto, as well as vegan fare such as potato and mushroom stew. The open kitchen also prepares meat and fish dishes, and there's a great range of Ligurian wines.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

ATP Tigullio Trasporti (☎ 800 01 48 08, 0185 23 11 08; www.tigulliotrasporti.it in Italian; Piazza delle Nazioni) runs regular buses to/from Santa Margherita and Camogli.

Servizio Marittimo del Tigullio (opposite) runs boats to/from Santa Margherita (one way/return €3/4), Portofino (€6/9.50), San Fruttuoso (€8.50/14.50), Genoa (€11.50/16.50), the Cinque Terre (€15/22) and Porto Venere (€18/28.50). Not all operate daily, and many are seasonal – the website posts updated schedules.

Chiavari to Levante

The stretch of coast between the Portofino promontory and the Cinque Terre has some of the Riviera di Levante's best beaches, but the area's rash of resorts gets jam-packed in summer.

Inland from Chiavari (which is located 12km east of Santa Margherita) you can lose the crowds and breathe fresh mountain air in the **Parco Naturale Regionale dell'Aveto** (☎ Park office 0185 34 03 11; www.parks.it/parco.aveto; Via Marrè 75a, Borzonasca; ☎ 2.30-5.30pm Thu & Fri, 8.30am-12.30pm Sat & Sun), a nature reserve at the northern end of the **Val d'Aveto**. The tranquil valley starts 12km north of the coast in **Borzonasca**.

Heading north, **Santo Stefano d'Aveto** (population 1280) is a small cross-country skiing centre and the main village in the valley. Between the two is **Lago delle Lame**, a glacial lake whose shallow waters have preserved fir-tree stumps from 2500 years ago.

Cinque Terre

Strung along 18km of serrated cliffs between Levanto and La Spezia, the Cinque Terre is one of Italy's treasures. These five higgledy-piggledy villages – Monterosso, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore – are cut off by mountains choked with olive groves and dry-stone-walled vineyards, where farmers have eked out a living over the centuries.

The Cinque Terre became a Unesco World Heritage site in 1997, which includes a protected marine area, and became a national park (Parco Nazionale delle Cinque Terre) in 1999. Wine growers still use monorail mechanisms to ferry themselves up and the grapes down these unique lands, and in some cases have to harvest by boat. If the terraced hillsides are not worked, they will quite literally slide into the sea.

National park status has spared the area from a propagation of T-shirt shops and tacky souvenir stands, and saved it from environmental destruction. Cars and motorbikes are not allowed in the villages, which are connected by train (each about five minutes apart, mostly through tunnels). In the villages, electric buses scale the sheer streets. Park authorities close walking paths when numbers become too great, so it's best to arrive in the cool and relative calm of the early morning.

The creation of the national park has also protected the Cinque Terre's villagers' well-being, providing them with free health screenings, natural medicine, subsidised child care and a free shopping service for the elderly. A co-op has been set up for farmers to profitably grow basil, garlic and pine nuts to produce local pesto. You can taste it in village restaurants, along with the area's white wines, freshly caught fish and sweet local lemons.

Numerous villagers have rooms to rent: look for signs reading *camere* (rooms) or *affittacamere* (rooms for rent). Accommodation booking offices in Riomaggiore can help you organise a room ahead of time. The Cinque Terre's restaurants and its few hotels tend to close from around November to March or April, although restaurateurs in the villages arrange it so that at least one restaurant in each village is open on any given day year-round.

INFORMATION

Online information is available at www.cinqueterre.it and www.cinqueterre.com.

Parco Nazionale offices Riomaggiore (☎ 0187 92 06 33; www.parcnazionale5terre.it in Italian; Piazza Rio

Finale 26; internet access per 10 min €0.80; ☎ 6.30am-8pm Oct-May, to 10pm Jun-Sep); Corniglia (☎ 0187 81 25 23; ☎ 7am-8pm); La Spezia (☎ 0187 74 35 00; internet access per 10 min €0.80; ☎ 7am-8pm); Manarola (☎ 0187 76 05 11; ☎ 7am-8pm); Monterosso (☎ 0187 81 70 59; ☎ 7am-8pm); Vernazza (☎ 0187 81 25 33; ☎ 7am-8pm) The Riomaggiore office is the main office for the park, located outside Riomaggiore train station.

MONTEROSSO

pop 1580

Enormous statues embedded into the rocks overlook one of the area's only sandy **beaches** at the village of Monterosso. The westernmost of the five villages, Monterosso is the most accessible by car to the village edge.

Footsteps from the sea, **Carla** (☎ 0187 82 90 39; Via IV Novembre 75; d €60-70) has charming *affittacamere* rooms for rent. Monterosso also has a handful of hotels, including good value-for-money at the four-star **Hotel Palme** (☎ 0187 82 90 13; www.hotelpalme.it; Via 4 Novembre 18; d from €155; ☎ Apr-Oct; P ☎), where you can laze in the palm-filled gardens.

Along the seafront, restaurants dish up local anchovies straight out of the sea, served fried, raw with lemon juice, pickled in brine or in a *tian* (oven-baked with potatoes and tomatoes). To wash them down, stop in at one of several fine wine bars throughout the village.

To pack an authentic Ligurian beach picnic, head to **Focacceria Enoteca Antonia** (☎ 0187 82 90 39; Via Fegina 124; focaccias per slice around €2.20; ☎ 9am-8pm Fri-Wed Mar-Oct) where Paola and her husband Giuseppe make 15 kinds of piping-hot focaccia from scratch and also stock well-priced local wines.

VERNAZZA

pop 1100

Below steep rows of vineyards and weathered lemon groves, Vernazza is the quaintest of the five villages. Its tiny harbour is framed by the 1318-built **Chiesa di Santa Margherita**, while the ruins of an 11th-century castle look out to sea.

Lined with little cafés, Vernazza's main cobble street, Via Roma, links seaside Piazza Marconi with the train station.

To spend a romantic night here, try **L'Eremo sul Mare** (☎ 339 268 56 17; Via Gerai; d €90; ☎ mid-Mar-mid-Oct; ☎), a charming cliffside villa with just three rooms and a lovely sun terrace.

Traditional Cinque Terre seafood is served up at **Trattoria Gianni Franzì** (☎ 0187 82 10 03; Piazza

CINQUE TERRE CARD

Easily the best way to get around the Cinque Terre is with a **Cinque Terre card**.

Two versions of the card are available: either with or without train travel. Both include unlimited use of walking paths (which otherwise cost €5) and electric village buses, as well as the elevator in Riomaggiore and cultural exhibitions. Without train travel, a basic one-/two-/three-/seven-day card for everyone over the age of four costs €5/8/10/20. A card that also includes unlimited train trips between the towns costs €8/12.50/16/32.

Both versions of the card are sold at all Cinque Terre park information offices.

Matteotti 5; mains €12-20; ☎ mid-Mar-early Jan); and in the cosy stone-and-wood dining rooms of **Trattoria da Sandro** (☎ 0187 81 22 23; Via Roma 69; mains €10), whose specialities include baked stuffed mussels, and swordfish with tomatoes, capers, olives and pine nuts.

CORNIGLIA

pop 600

Corniglia's colourfully painted four-storey houses cling to a ridge above the sea. Panoramas unfold from **La Torre**, a medieval lookout reached by narrow lanes and stairways. From Corniglia's central square, Via Fieschi leads through the village heart to **Belvedere Santa Maria**, another lookout with sweeping sea views.

If you're stopping for the night, **Dai Fera'** (☎ 0187 81 23 23; Via alla Marina 39; d from €60) offers clean and simple rooms close to the seafront.

As elsewhere in the Cinque Terre, fish is the mainstay of Corniglia's restaurants – you can't go wrong by asking for whatever's fresh.

MANAROLA

pop 850

Bursting with more grape-laden vines than any other Cinque Terre village, Manarola is also awash with medieval relics. At the northern end of Via Discovolo, you'll come upon **Piazzale Papa Innocenzo IV**, dominated by a bell tower used as a defensive lookout. Opposite, the **Chiesa di San Lorenzo** dates from 1338 and houses a 15th-century polyptych. If you're geared up for a steep walk, from

nearby Via Rollandi you can follow a path that leads through vineyards to the top of the mountain.

The Cinque Terre's only hostel, **Ostello 5 Terre** (☎ 0187 92 02 15; www.cinqueterre.net/ostello; Via Riccobaldi 21; dm €17-22, d €55-65; 🕒 reception 7am-1pm & 4pm or 5pm-midnight or 1am, hostel open Mar-Dec; 📺), rents out mountain bikes, kayaks, Nordic Walking sticks and snorkelling gear. Its single-sex, six-bed dorms come with their own bathrooms, and there's English-language satellite TV, Playstation and a book exchange. Lockout times are 10am to 4pm or 5pm.

A shoal of fish dishes and the house speciality *zuppa di datteri* (date soup) are served up at **Marina Piccola** (☎ 0187 92 01 03; www.hotelmarinapiccola.com; Via Lo Scalo 16; s/d from €87/115, mains €12-20) along with sea views. If you want to stay, the 'little marina' has good deals for half and full board.

RIOMAGGIORE

pop 1800

The Cinque Terre's easternmost village, Riomaggiore, is the largest of the five, and home to the main park office. Its pastel-shaded buildings, with faded paint flaking in the sun, tumble down a steep ravine that forms the main street.

Outside the train station near the water's edge, **murals** depict the backbreaking work of Cinque Terre farmers who, over the centuries, built the Cinque Terre with their bare hands.

Bird life and local flora can be seen from the **Torre Guardiola** (☎ 0187 76 00 52; admission free; 🕒 9am-1pm Aug, 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Feb-Jul, Sep & Oct), a nature observation and bird-watching centre located on **Fossola Beach**, immediately south-east of Riomaggiore marina. From the centre a botanical walking trail leads along the coast. To dive or snorkel in the translucent waters, contact **Cooperative Sub 5 Terre** (☎ 0187 92 05 96; Via San Giacomo; 🕒 seasonal hours vary), which also rents canoes and kayaks.

B&Bs and a handful of hotels are situated in the village, as well as room and apartment rental agencies such as **Edi** (☎ 0187 92 03 25; Via Colombo 111) and **La Dolce Vita** (☎ 0187 76 00 44; Via Colombo 120). For cheap, cosy rooms try **La Casa di Venere** (☎ 349 075 31 40; www.lacasadivenere.com; Via Sant'Antonio 114; s without bathroom €30-50, d without bathroom €40-60, d with bathroom €50-70), just off the upper stretch of the main street.

Places to eat and drink line the main street, but Riomaggiore's two gems are hidden down by its little **marina** where fishing boats bob in the water or rest stacked upturned on its shore.

CINQUE TERRE WALKS

The paved coastal promenade **Lovers' Lane** (Via dell'Amore) takes in some of the coast's most alluring views. Linking Manarola with Riomaggiore, the 1km-long lane is dotted with picnic areas and stone benches where you can gaze out to sea. This stretch of path is suited to walkers of all abilities, and at either end lifts from each town's train station should allow wheelchair and pram access by the time you're reading this. Like all walking routes in the Cinque Terre, you'll need to flash your trail pass or Cinque Terre card at checkpoints along the way.

Lovers' lane is part of the much more challenging, 12km-long **blue trail** (trail No 2) that runs the length of the coast between Monterosso and Riomaggiore. The first stretch between Monterosso and Vernazza (4km) is particularly difficult – lots of ups and downs – and is the least scenic. Further east, secluded coves with crystal-clear water delight on the Corniglia to Manarola route (3km).

Away from the coast, the 40km-long **red trail** (trail No 1), also known as the 'high road', traces the park's northern ridge all the way between Levanto and Porto Venere. It's best followed west to east as the ascent from Levanto is smoother. Experienced walkers can tackle it in one day (about 10 hours), but if you're not a regular hiker, overnight stops are possible – check with the park offices for an update of places open en route before setting out.

Sign-spotters will whip out their cameras when they see the yellow-and-black warning signs posted around Cinque Terre showing a picture of a stiletto struck through with a forbidding cross. But the signs are completely serious: the paths are rugged and, apart from Lovers' Lane, you'll need proper hiking boots, as well as plenty of water and a good level of fitness.

The park offices sell maps and have extensive information on walking and cycling in the area.

La Lanterna (☎ 0187 92 05 89; Via San Giacomo, Loc Marina; mains €17-21) has a light-filled nautical dining room and charming terrace. Fish caught daily are chalked on its blackboard, alongside seafood pastas and desserts including *babà al limoncello* (brioche drenched in limoncello). Across the laneway, you can drink Cinque Terre wines by the glass at **Dau Cila** (☎ 0187 76 00 32; Via San Giacomo, Loc Marina; wines €3-3.50, bruscetta €6-8, cold plates €7-12; ☎ 8am-2am Mar-Oct), accompanied by cold plates such as smoked tuna with apples and lemon or lemon-marinated anchovies with pears and parmesan. To reach the marina, follow the flight of steps leading down from the station (on the left-hand side as you're facing the water).

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Boat

In summer Cooperativa Battellieri del Golfo Paradiso (p195) runs boats to the Cinque Terre from Genoa.

Seasonal boat services to/from Santa Margherita (one way/return €14/21) are handled by Servizio Marittimo del Tigullio (p198).

From late March to October, La Spezia-based Consorzio Marittimo Turistico Cinque Terre Golfo dei Poeti (p204) runs daily shuttle boats between all of the Cinque Terre villages, except Corniglia, costing €16 one way including all stops, €21 return on weekdays and €23 on weekends.

Car & Motorcycle

Private vehicles are not allowed beyond village entrances. If you're arriving by car or motorcycle, you'll need to pay to park in designated car parks (€2.30 per hour or €19 per 24 hours). Getting from the car parks to the villages involves a steep hike of 1km or more, although in some villages, minibus shuttles depart from the car parks (one way/return €1.50/2.50) – park offices have seasonal schedules.

Train

Between 6.30am and 10pm, one to three trains an hour trundle along the coast between Genoa and La Spezia, stopping at each of the Cinque Terre's villages. Unlimited 2nd-class rail travel between Levante and La Spezia is covered by the Cinque Terre Card (see boxed text, p200). Otherwise, a train ticket between the two costs €1.10 on weekdays and €1.20 on weekends, and is valid for six hours in one direction.

La Spezia

pop 94,200

The big, bustling working city of La Spezia is a complete contrast to the surrounding coastal villages and rural hinterland. Situated 100km southeast of Genoa, the city sits at the head of the Gulf of La Spezia – also referred to as the Gulf of Poets after Byron, Dante, DH Lawrence, Shelley, George Sand and others who sought inspiration along the gulf's shores.

In the mid-19th century, the construction of Italy's largest naval base here introduced the large street grid and venerable public buildings that define the city today, as well as a still-significant naval presence. As the provincial capital, La Spezia has a spate of museums, including a renowned fine arts museum.

La Spezia's bustle peaks on 19 March, the **feast day** of the city's patron saint, San Giuseppe (St Joseph). Celebrations see a giant market fill the port and surrounding streets, and the naval base (off limits the rest of the year) opens to the public for the day.

INFORMATION

Cinque Terre Park Office (☎ 0187 74 35 00; internet access per 10 min €0.80; ☎ 7am-8pm) Inside La Spezia's train station. See p199 for other park offices.

Police station (☎ 0187 56 71; Viale Italia 497) East of the centre.

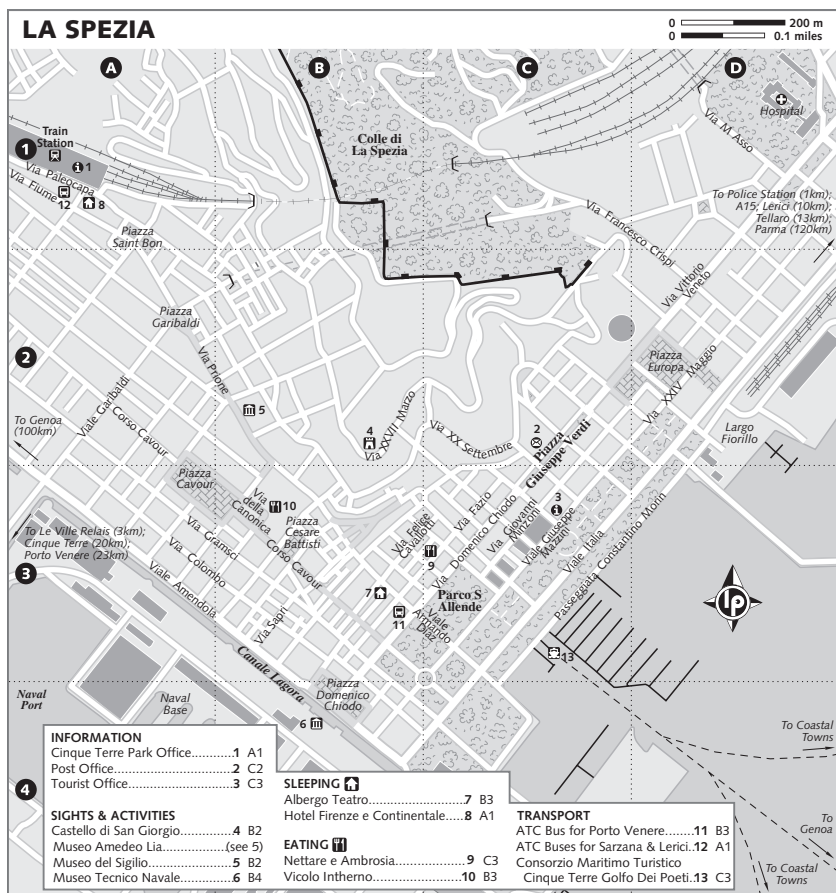
Post office (☎ 0187 79 61; Piazza Giuseppe Verdi; ☎ 8am-6.30pm Mon-Sat)

Tourist office (☎ 0187 25 43 11; www.aptcinqueterre.sp.it; Viale Giuseppe Mazzini 47; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

La Spezia's star attraction is the **Museo Amedeo Lia** (☎ 0187 73 11 00; www.castagna.it/mal; Via Prione 234; adult/child €6/3; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), a fine-arts museum in a restored 17th-century friary. The collection covers the 13th to 18th centuries and includes paintings by masters such as Tintoretto, Montagna, Titian and Pietro Lorenzetti. Also on show are Roman bronzes and ecclesiastical treasures such as Limoges crucifixes and illuminated musical manuscripts. Next door, pop into the **Museo del Sigillo** (☎ 0187 77 85 44; Via Prione 236; admission €3; ☎ 4-7pm Tue, 10am-noon & 4-7pm Wed-Sun) to see some 1500 seals dating from the 4th millennium BC to the present day.

Other highlights on La Spezia's museum circuit include an assortment of local archaeological artefacts from prehistoric to medieval



times at the **Castello di San Giorgio** (☎ 0187 75 11 42; www.castagna.it/sangiorgio; Via XXVII Marzo; adult/child €5/4; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Wed-Mon May & Sep-Oct, 9.30am-12.30pm & 5-8pm Wed-Mon Jun-Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Nov-Apr); and model ships and *polene* (statuettes that graced the prows of vessels) at the 1870-founded naval museum, **Museo Tecnico Navale** (Naval Museum; ☎ 0187 78 30 16; Viale Amendola 1; admission €1.55; ☎ 8am-6.45pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun).

Contact La Spezia-based dive organisation **CNA** (☎ 347 490 90 66; www.consorzioliguriadiving.it in Italian) for a list of dive operators in the gulf.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are a number of cheap hotels around the train station, but many tend to be scruffy.

The waterfront has plenty of relaxed places to wine and dine.

Albergo Teatro (☎ 0187 73 13 74; www.albergoteatro.it; Via Carpenino 31; s without bathroom €25-30, d without bathroom €38-50, d with bathroom €45-65) Adjacent to the theatre, this spartan but perfectly adequate place is in a handy location in the historic centre, a couple of blocks' stroll from the port.






Hotel Firenze e Continentale (☎ 0187 71 32 00; www.hotelfirenzecontinentale.it; Via Paleocapa 7; s €50-94, d €68-134; 🚽) Retaining some of its early 1900s atmosphere, with high ceilings, heavy drapes and wall-mounted lamps in many rooms, the three-star Florence is one of the best options near the train station.

Le Ville Relais (☎ 0187 73 52 99; www.levillerelais.it; Salita al Piano 18/19; s €80-100, d €100-120;

LIGURIA'S TOP FIVE DIVE SITES

Protected marine reserves, wrecks and underwater caves and crevices offer scuba divers of all levels of experience fascinating underwater explorations. Dive operators are listed in the Activities sections of this chapter; tourist offices along the coast also have diving information.

- **BR-20** This Italian Fiat BR-20 fighter bomber crashed in 1940 near Ventimiglia, but wasn't damaged on impact and remains structurally intact. Difficult.
- **Secca Isuela** In a protected conservation area, this rocky peak rising from the seabed near Camogli sees a frenzy of fish feeding on a blizzard of anchovies. Average level.
- **Parete** On the western side of the tiny island of Tino, near Porto Venere, the fissured Parete rock face shelters scorpion fish and conger eels. Easy.
- **Punta Portofino** Boulders big enough to hide groupers lie just off Portofino, but currents here can be treacherous. Difficult.
- **Bettolina** A 10-minute boat ride from Sestri Levante, this upright WWII German barge has rare jewel anemones on its stern ladder. Average level.

     In a rarefied hillside location 3km from the city centre, this chic new villa has sublime views over the Gulf of Poets, with eye-level views from the swimming pool. Light, airy rooms have sophisticated beachy furnishings and free broadband. In addition to the homemade cakes served at breakfast, a new on-site restaurant is due to open by the time you're reading this.

Vicolo Intherno (☎ 0187 2 39 98; Via della Canonica 22; mains around €10; 🗓 Tue-Sat) Take a seat around chunky wooden tables beneath beamed ceilings at this Slow Fish-affiliated restaurant and wash down the *torte di verdure* (Ligurian vegetable pie) or stockfish with local vintages.

Nettare e Ambrosia (☎ 0187 73 72 52; Via Fazio 85 & 86; mains €10-15; 🗓 Mon-Sat) Simple and authentic, Nettare & Ambrosia is the place to sample great wines with seafood-based specialities such as *zuppa di calamari* (calamari soup).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses run by **Azienda Trasporti Consortile** (ATC; ☎ 800 32 23 22; www.atdaspezia.it in Italian) are the only way to reach nearby towns including Porto Venere (€1.45, approximately every 30 minutes from Via Domenico Chiodo), Lerici (€1.45, approximately every 15 minutes from the train station) and Sarzana (€1.50, two or three daily from the train station). Fewer buses operate on Sunday.

La Spezia is on the Genoa-Rome railway line and is also connected to Milan (€21, three hours, four daily), Turin (€24, three hours, several daily) and Pisa (€4.80, 50 minutes, almost hourly). The Cinque Terre and other

coastal towns are easily accessible by train – see p202.

Consorzio Maritimo Turistico Cinque Terre Golfo dei Poeti (☎ 0187 96 76 76; www.navigazionegolfodeipoeti.it; Passeggiata Constantino Morin) runs boat services to Genoa and Lerici, as well as coastal towns including all Cinque Terre towns except Camogli.

Porto Venere
pop 4000

Perched on the Gulf of Poets' western promontory, Porto Venere (frequently spelt Porto venere) has a riddle of little lanes and staircases, a petite harbour and no small amount of history. The Romans built *Portus Veneris* as a base en route from Gaul to Spain, and in later years, Byzantines, Lombards, the Genovese and Napoleon all passed through here.

The **tourist office** (☎ 0187 79 06 91; www.porto-venere.it; Piazza Bastrieri 7; 🗓 10am-noon & 3-6pm Thu-Tue Sep-May, 10am-noon & 3-8pm daily Jun-Aug) sells a couple of useful maps and walking guides in English. Outside the hectic summer season, Porto Venere is something of a ghost town.

From the waterfront, narrow steps and cobbled paths lead uphill to the **Chiesa di San Lorenzo**, built in 1130. In the church's shadow is the 16th-century **Castello Doria** (adult/child €2.20/1.20; 🗓 10.30am-1.30pm & 2.30-6pm daily Apr-Aug, 10.30am-1.30pm & 2.30-6pm Sat & Sun Sep-Mar), a formidable example of the Genoese military architecture offering magnificent views from its ornate terraced gardens.

At the end of the quay a Cinque Terre panorama unfolds from the rocky terraces of **Grotta**

Arpaia, a former haunt of Byron, who once swam across the gulf from Porto Venere to Lerici. Traces of a pagan temple have been uncovered on the quay, inside the black-and-white-marble **Chiesa di San Pietro**, which was built in 1277. Just off the promontory lie the tiny islands of **Palmaria**, **Tino** and **Tinetto**.

SLEEPING & EATING

Albergo Genio (☎ 0187 79 06 11; www.hotelgenioporporto-venere.com; Piazza Bastreri 8; s €75-90, d €95-120; ☹ mid-Feb–mid-Jan; (P)) From Piazza Bastreri, scale the spiral stairs in the round tower to reach this charming seven-room hotel. In summer breakfast is served alfresco beneath the vines, and some rooms are equipped with air-conditioning.

La Lanterna (☎ 0187 79 22 91; www.lalanterna-porto-venere.it; Via Capellini 109; d €75-85; ☹) Down by Porto Venere's picturesque harbourfront, this little guesthouse has just two airy rooms (there's also an option of a four-person apartment on request). Breakfast isn't included, but can be arranged; otherwise stroll to a nearby café.

Locanda Lorena (☎ 0187 79 23 70; Via Cavour 4) Situated on the island of Palmaria, this place has a delightful restaurant and rooms – call for more information – and for them to send their boat over.

A half-dozen or so restaurants line Calata Doria, by the sea. A block inland, Porto Venere's main old-town street, Via Cappellini, has several tasty choices.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Porto Venere is served by daily buses from La Spezia – see opposite.

From late March to October, La Spezia-based Consorzio Marittimo Turistico Cinque Terre Golfo dei Poeti (opposite) sails from Porto Venere to/from the Cinque Terre (one way with all stops €15, return €20 to €22) and runs boat excursions to the islands of Palmaria, Tino and Tinetto (€9), as well as services to La Spezia and Lerici (call for seasonal information).

Lerici & Around

pop 11,200

Magnolia, yew and cedar trees grow in the 1930s public gardens at Lerici, an exclusive retreat of pool-equipped villas clinging to the cliffs along its beach.

For outstanding views make your way on foot or by public lift to the 12th-century **Cas-**

tello di Lerici (Piazza San Giorgio 1). Lerici's **tourist office** (☎ 0187 96 73 46; info@aptcinqueterre.sp.it; Via Biaggini 6; ☹ 9am-1pm & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) can advise on walking and cycling in the area, as well as accommodation.

From Lerici a scenic 3km coastal stroll leads north to **San Terenzo**, a seaside village with a sandy beach and Genoese castle. The Shelleys stayed at the waterfront Villa Magni (closed to visitors) in the early 1820s and Percy drowned here when his boat sank off the coast in 1822 on a return trip from Livorno.

Another coastal stroll, 4km south, takes you past magnificent little bays to **Tellaro**, a fishing hamlet with pink-and-orange houses cluttered about narrow lanes and tiny squares. Sit on the rocks at the **Chiesa San Giorgio** and imagine an octopus ringing the church bells – which, according to legend, it did to warn the villagers of a Saracen attack. Tellaro is home to the gourmards' hideaway, **Locanda Miranda** (☎ 0187 96 40 12; www.locandamiranda.com; Via Fiascherina 92; d €120, d with half-board €180, set menus €40-60, mains €20; (P)), an exquisite seven-room inn with art- and antique-decorated rooms, and a Michelin-starred restaurant specialising exclusively in seafood (not for vegetarians or carnivores!).

Val di Magra

On the Tuscan border, the Magra Valley's main town, **Sarzana** (population 20,120), was an important outpost of the Genoese republic. In its **cathedral** you can see the world's oldest crucifix painted on wood. Before embarking on nature walks in this pretty region's protected park, the **Parco di Montemarcello-Magra**, pop into its **information centre** (☎ 0187 69 10 71; www.parcomagra.it in Italian; Via Paci 2) in Sarzana.

The centre also has information on the Val di Magra's archaeological sites including **Luni** (☎ 0187 6 68 11; adult/child €2/free; ☹ 8.30am-7.30pm Tue-Sun), 6km southeast of Sarzana. Established as a Roman colony in 177 BC, it thrived as a wealthy trading centre until the Middle Ages, when the port began to silt up, making it a breeding ground for malaria. The town was abandoned in 1204. Today you can see remains of an amphitheatre, forum, temples and houses, along with some remarkable mosaic floors and frescoes.

RIVIERA DI PONENTE

Curving west from Genoa to the French border, this stretch of the Ligurian coast has a

more down-to-earth atmosphere than the Riviera di Levante. While it still harbours high-profile resorts such as lively San Remo, it also shelters some lesser-known gems, particularly along the stretch of coast from Noli to Finale Ligure.

The coast's chalky cliffs draw free climbers from Italy and beyond; above the cliffs, the mountains hide a warren of hilltop villages.

Savona

pop 62,000

Behind Savona's sprawling port facilities lies the city's unexpectedly graceful medieval centre, which is well worth a stroll. Among the old town treasures to survive destruction by Genoese forces in the 16th century are the baroque **Cattedrale di Nostra Signora Assunta** (Piazza Cattedrale) and the lumbering **Fortezza del Priamar** (Piazza Priamar). This imposing fortress guards a couple of sculpture museums and the **Civico Museo Storico Archeologico** (☎ 019 82 27 08; Piazza Priamar; adult/child €2.50/1.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-5pm Tue-Sat, 3-5pm Sun Jun-Sep, 9.30am-12.30pm & 3-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 3-5pm Sat, 3-5pm Sun Oct-May), which displays archaeological finds.

Art aficionados won't want to miss the **Pi-nacoteca Civica Savona** (☎ 019 81 15 20; Piazza Chabrol 1/2; adult/child €4/2; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon, Tue & Thu, 2-9pm Wed & Fri, 8.30am-1pm & 8-11pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug, 8.30am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon, Tue & Thu, 2-9pm Wed & Fri, 8.30am-1pm & 3.30-6.30pm Sep-Jun), which has an important collection of religious paintings, including a Madonna and child by Taddeo di Bartolo, dating from the 14th to 15th centuries; and two Picassos.

The **tourist office** (☎ 019 840 23 21; iatsavona@infocomm.it; Corso Italia 157r; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-12.30pm Sun Apr-Sep, 9am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Tue-Sat Jan-Mar, Oct & Nov) is a short stroll from Savona's sandy beach.

Whale-watching expeditions (see boxed text, p192) depart from Savona in spring.

SLEEPING & EATING

The tourist office can help book accommodation, both in the city and the coastal towns to the west. Savona also has one of Liguria's few hostels, **Villa de' Franceschini** (☎ 019 26 32 22; www.ostellionline.org; Via alla Strà 'Conca Verde' 29; dm/d €12/30; ☎ mid-Mar-Oct; P ☎), situated 3km from the train station in a sprawling park.

Restaurants and cafés line Via Paleocapa; while at the portside area, known locally as Darsena, a cluster of new alfresco cafés and

restaurants have great views over the boat masts to the fortress. Tucked away on a cobbled street in the historic centre, the very local **Vino e Farinata** (Via Pia 15; mains €7-8; ☎ Tue-Sat) is true to its name, serving *farinata* along with a limited menu of other typical regional dishes and some excellent wines.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

SAR (☎ 0182 2 15 44) and **ACTS** (☎ 019 220 11) buses, departing from Piazza del Popolo and the train station, are the best options for reaching points inland. Bus 2 links the train station and the fortress. On foot, Via Collodi and Via Don Minzoni lead from the station across the Letimbro river towards Piazza del Popolo, from where Via Paleocapa runs to the marina.

Trains run along the coast to Genoa's Stazione Brignole (€3, 45 minutes, almost hourly) and San Remo (€5.40, 1¼ hours, eight daily).

Corsica Ferries (☎ 019 21 55 11; www.corsicaferries.com) runs up to three boats daily between Savona's Porto Vado and Corsica.

Noli

pop 3000

West of Savona, Noli is one of the Ligurian coast's jewels that has not yet been unearthed by tourist crowds. From its historic centre, an astonishingly intact medieval battlement zigzags up **Monte Ursino** (120m); it is topped by a ruined 11th-century castle. Following the wall to the castle gives you a spectacular panorama of the village's eight remaining **Genoese towers**.

The existing Romanesque form of Noli's most historic church, **San Paragorio**, was built in AD 1000, and the original structure has long been thought to date back to AD 800. However, in late 2006 new archaeological finds suggested that the church may in fact be much older – watch this space.

Fishing boats sell their unloaded catches to villagers each morning on Noli's pretty **beach**, from where views extend to Tuscany.

Noli's little **tourist office** (☎ 019 749 90 03; Corso Italia 8; ☎ 9am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun Apr-mid-Sep, 9am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Sat mid-Sep-Mar) has information about sleeping and eating options, as well as water sports including **windsurfing**.

SAR (☎ 0182 2 15 44) buses travel every 30 minutes along the coast to/from Savona (€2,

30 minutes), continuing to Finale Ligure and Finalborgo (€1.25, 20 minutes).

Finale Ligure

pop 12,300

Set amid lush Mediterranean vegetation, this township actually comprises several districts.

Finale Ligure has a wide, fine-sand beach; the walled medieval centre, known as **Finalborgo**, is a knot of twisting alleys set 1km back from the coast on the Pora river. **Finale Marina** sits on the waterfront, while the more residential **Finale Pia** runs along the Sciusa river in the direction of Genoa.

Each year in March, Finalborgo's cloisters are home to the **Salone dell'Agroalimentare Ligure**, where local farmers and artisan producers display delicacies and vintages.

ourpick Hotel Florenz (☎ 019 69 56 67; www.florenzhotel.it; Via Celestia 1; s €52-75, d €74-120; ☎ closed Nov & Feb; (P) (Q) (R)), a rambling 18th-century former convent just outside Finalborgo's village walls (800m from the sea), is the most atmospheric spot to sleep. Half-board is possible at this cyclist-friendly spot, and the intrepid owners can give you information about local free-climbing expeditions. Accommodation prices are for a minimum four-night stay, shorter stays are by arrangement.

Delicious Ligurian cuisine is cooked up at the rustic **Osteria ai Cuattru Canti** (☎ 019 68 05 40; set menus €20; ☎ Tue-Sun) in Finalborgo's historic centre.

From the train station on Piazza Vittorio Veneto, at Finale Marina's western end, walk down Via Saccone to the sea and the **tourist office** (☎ 019 68 10 19; finaleligure@inforiviera.it; Via San Pietro 14; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Mon-Sat, plus 9am-noon Sun Jul & Aug). The promenade along Via San Pietro and Via Concezione is crammed with eateries.

SAR (☎ 0182 2 15 44) buses yo-yo every 30 minutes to/from Finale Ligure and Savona (€2, 50 minutes), stopping en route in Finalborgo (€1, five minutes) and Noli (€1.25, 20 minutes).

Albenga to Imperia

Some of Liguria's only flat land stretches out along this section of coastline, making it ripe for growing fruit, vegetables and garden plants. The area is served by trains and SAR buses.

Albenga (population 22,760) is the most interesting stop. Settled as far back as the 5th

century BC, Albenga grew from its Roman roots to become an independent maritime republic during the Middle Ages, and retains a preserved medieval centre today. Albenga's **tourist office** (☎ 0182 55 84 44; albenga@inforiviera.it; Lungocenta Croce Bianca 12; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Tue-Sat) has plenty of useful information on the town's sights. Highlights include the **Museo Diocesano di Arte Sacra** (Via Episcopio 5; adult/child €3/1; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-6pm Tue-Sun), featuring a painting by Caravaggio. It is located near a 5th-century **baptistry** and Romanesque **cathedral**. A collection of 1st-century amphorae, recovered in 1950 from the wreck of a Roman cargo vessel 4km offshore, is at the **Museo Navale Romano** (Roman Naval Museum; ☎ 0182 5 12 15; Piazza San Michele 12; adult/child €3/1; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jun).

More touristy (and more expensive) is **Alasio** (population 11,365). The town's 3km of white, sandy beaches have made it a long-time favourite with visiting luminaries such as Hemingway, who have left their mark on its autograph-engraved **Muretto di Alasio**. This wall of fame runs between the sea and the Art Nouveau train station. While in town, be sure to try Alasio's version of *bacci* – two biscuit whirls sandwiched together with chocolate cream.

Busy **Imperia** (population 39,518) was created in 1923 by Mussolini when he bridged the Impero river and unified the towns of Oneglia (east) and Porto Maurizio (west). The latter is dominated by a large neoclassical cathedral and merits an afternoon stroll.

Savona's tourist office (opposite) can provide information about the area.

San Remo

pop 50,900

Basking on the Riviera dei Fiori – so named for the area's flower-growing industry – San Remo is known as the 'City of Flowers'. Hot-houses surround the city, exporting carnations, roses, buttercups and other blooms across Europe and beyond.

San Remo (locally spelt Sanremo – see boxed text, p209) flourished in the 19th century as a resort for Europe's high society, particularly from Russia. Tsarina Maria Alexandrovna (mother of the last tsar, Nicholas II) once held court here, and the remarkable onion-dome church remains as a reminder of San Remo's halcyon days.

A short stroll east of town, elegant villas include the Moorish **Villa Nobel** (Corso Felice Cavallotti 112; admission free; ☎ 11am-12.30pm Tue-Fri), housing a museum dedicated to Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel, who established the Nobel Prize while living here; and the peaceful Japanese gardens of **Villa Ormond** (☎ 0184 50 57 62; Corso Felice Cavallotti 51; admission free; ☎ gardens 8am-7pm).

You can watch the frenetic bidding at Italy's principal **flower market** (Via Frantoi Canaii; ☎ 6-8am Oct-Jun), 6km east of town.

About 10km northeast of San Remo is the intriguing artist colony, **Bussana Vecchia**. On Ash Wednesday 1887, an earthquake destroyed the village, and survivors were eventually forced to abandon it. It remained a ghost town until the 1960s, when artists moved in and began rebuilding the ruins using the original stones from the rubble. After successfully standing up to authorities who wanted to remove them, a thriving community of international artists remains in residence today. It's possible to stay overnight here – contact artist **Colin Wilmot** (☎ 0184 51 01 14; wilmot@dmw.it) for more information.

San Remo Navigazione (☎ 0184 50 50 55; Corso Nazario Sauro), at the old port, runs twice-daily 1½-hour boat trips to Bordighera (adult/child €12/6, March to September).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Kicking off the town's annual festivities is the colourful **Corso Fiorito** (Flower Parade), held over the last weekend in January. The **Festival di San Remo** (www.festivaldisanremo.com in Italian), celebrating Italian music, has been going since 1951, and attracts top Italian and international talent each March.

San Remo's famous car rallies (www.sanremorally.it) rev up with the **Rally Storico** in April, for cars made between 1931 and 1981.

The **Rally Classic** follows in May, while the big **Rally e San Remo**, first held in 1926, is run every September.

SLEEPING

San Remo has no shortage of hotels, although summer and festival times can be busy and a few places shut from September until just before Christmas.

Albergo Ambrosiano (☎ 0184 57 71 89; www.hotelambrosiano.it; Via Roma 36; d €45-120; ☎) This friendly hotel has eight immaculate rooms with plenty of space to stretch out, although those with lots of luggage may find the miniature lift a challenge.

Hotel Sole Mare (☎ 0184 57 71 05; www.solemarehotel.com; Via Carli 23; s €38-55, d €50-88; ☎) Handy for the beach, town centre and train station, Sole Mare is a light and airy two-star place. Rooms are painted in bright, sunshiny colours, and most have balconies.

Hotel Graziella (☎ 0184 57 10 31; fax 0184 57 00 43; Rondò Garibaldi 2; s €55-60, d €65-75) San Remo has a handful of inexpensive villa hotels set in flowering gardens, including this spot, situated footsteps from the train station and a couple of blocks back from the waterfront.

Hotel Marinella (☎ 0184 50 59 00; www.hotelmarinella.it in Italian; Via Ruffini 21; s €55-72, d €70-105, restaurant mains around €15; ☎) Across the road from the waterfront, most of Marinella's sun-splashed, tiled rooms have balconies, and all are spotless and spacious. The hotel's attached glass restaurant is a bit like dining in a goldfish bowl, but the sea views are worth it.

EATING & DRINKING

Cheap trattoria fill the old-town alleys around Piazza Eroi Sanremesi and open-air snack bars stud the length of Corso Nazario Sauro, the promenade overlooking the old port.

SAINT 'HOOD

Here's an anomaly: when you see signs to, in and around San Remo, you'll notice they read Sanremo, without a space. The reason? There never was a San Remo. The town *is* named after a saint, but the saint in question is San Romolo. His name was transmuted over the years in the local dialect, eventually evolving into San Remo.

The town council was unhappy about interloper 'Remo' receiving saintly privileges, and on 30 August 1940, it formally changed its name to the closed-up Sanremo, which remains the town's official name today. However, the amended spelling hasn't caught on across the rest of Italy; if, for example, you search on the national railway website for Sanremo, it doesn't exist. Hence, we've used San Remo in this guide. But if you're looking up local info online, you're best off keying in Sanremo, as this is what appears on street addresses.

Cantine Sanremesi (☎ 0184 57 20 63; Via Palazzo 7; mains €7-12; ☹ Tue-Sun) Local cuisine at this time-worn tavern includes a delicious *stoccafisso alla sanremasa* (stockfish with tomato and potatoes).

Cuvea (☎ 0184 50 34 98; Corso Giuseppe Garibaldi 110; set menus €15-20, mains €8-9; ☹ lunch Mon-Sat & dinner daily Jul & Aug, lunch daily & dinner Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) This cosy, brightly lit place lined with wine bottles overflows with locals tucking into its homemade traditional dishes such as pesto-doused pasta.

Victory Morgana Bay (☎ 0184 59 16 20; Corso Trento e Trieste 16; mains €8-16; ☹ 11am-3pm Tue, 11am-2am Wed-Mon) Situated right on the waterfront as if it's about to set sail, this sophisticated yachting café/restaurant serves up a varied menu of salads, fish and grilled meats, with occasional live music.

Ristorante La Volta Buona (☎ 0184 50 19 03; Piazza Brescia 24; lunch menus €25, dinner menus €40; ☹ Tue-Sat) You'll need to reserve ahead for a table at this brother-and-sister-run restaurant, as its regional fare is sourced and cooked only to order. Dine outdoors on a bamboo-covered terrace overlooking a pretty orange tree-filled square.

Solentiname (☎ 0184 66 44 77; Lungomare Vittorio Emanuele 9; ☹ 7pm-late Tue-Sun) DJ sets and live music draw crowds to this fun pizzeria/pub; you can also have lunch here in July and August.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Riviera Trasporti (☎ 0184 59 27 06; Piazza Colombo 42) buses leave regularly from the bus station for the French border, east along the coast and inland destinations.

Scooters can be hired at **Bianchi Emilio** (☎ 0184 54 13 17; Corso Felice Cavallotti 39; 50cc scooter per day/3 days €38/130).

From San Remo's underground train station there are trains to/from Genoa (€7.70, three hours, hourly), Ventimiglia (€1.60, 15 minutes, hourly) and stations in between.

Valle Argentina

Heading inland, the Silver Valley stretches from medieval **Taggia** (population 13,622; not to be confused with the entirely separate Arma di Taggia) into thickly wooded mountains. Charming villages adorn the hilltops in this area as if they were cake decorations.

Buses from San Remo head as far as **Triora** (population 425; elevation 776m), which is

33km north of San Remo. This haunting medieval village, the scene of celebrated witch trials and executions in the 16th century, dominates the surrounding valleys and the trip is worth the effort. Gruesome tales of witches being burned alive are portrayed in its **Museo Etnografico e della Stregoneria** (Museum of Ethnography & Witchcraft; Corso Italia 1; adult/child €2/1; ☹ 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-noon & 2.30-6pm Sat & Sun Oct-May, 3-7pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-noon & 3-7pm Sat & Sun Jun, Jul & Sep, 10.30am-noon & 3-7pm Aug).

Information on the valley is available from San Remo's tourist office (p208).

Valle Nervia

From Triora, a stunning 25km-long series of hairpin bends brings you to **Pigna** (population 989; elevation 280m) in the upper Valle Nervia. Riddled with alleys and narrow streets, the medieval village is a delight to get lost in. Its fortified neighbour and traditional rival, **Castel Vittorio** (population 395; elevation 420m), 5km to the southeast, retains an equally palpable medieval ambience.

Isolabona (population 690; elevation 106m), a former stronghold of the Doria family 10km south of Castel Vittorio, is dominated by a half-ruined 15th-century castle where concerts are held in summer. From here you can pick up the scenic drive from Ventimiglia to San Remo on the coast.

Monet painted the web of medieval squares in **Dolceacqua** (population 1943; elevation 51m) several times. Surrounded by black olive groves, the Doria's family castle tops off the old upper part of the village on the left bank of the Nervia river. Theatre performances are held here in July and August.

Buses (three to six daily) link Ventimiglia with Pigna, Castel Vittorio, the quaint village of Apricale, Isolabona and Dolceacqua; Ventimiglia's tourist office has updated schedules (see opposite) and info on the valley.

Bordighera

pop 10,490

Palm trees fan out around Bordighera, which has a centuries-old monopoly on the Holy Week palm business. The Vatican selects its branches exclusively from the palms along the promenade Lungomare Argentina. On the seafront at the eastern edge of town, the little **chapel** is dedicated to San Ampelio, who first brought palm seeds from the Middle East to Bordighera in AD 411.

Bordighera's other claim to fame is Italy's first-ever tennis club, founded in 1878 – a legacy of the British visitors of the era. Today the town retains an Anglican cemetery, as well as some grand old hotels from the period; the **tourist office** (☎ 0184 26 23 22; Via Vittorio Emanuele 172; ☎ 9am–12.30pm & 3.30–7pm Mon–Sat Jul & Aug, 9am–12.30pm & 3–6.30pm Mon–Sat Sep–Jun) can provide information.

Ventimiglia

pop 26,800

Just a handful of kilometres east of France, Ventimiglia is best known on both sides of the border for its huge Friday **market** (☎ 8am–3pm or 4pm), when hundreds of stalls sell food, clothes, homewares, baskets and everything else under the sun. The market concentrates around Piazza della Liberta, near the river, but rest assured if you're here on market day, you can't miss it.

Corso Genova is the main eastern exit from the city, while its continuation to the west, Via Cavour, runs past the **tourist office** (☎ 0184 35 11 83; Via Cavour 61; ☎ 9am–12.30pm & 3.30–7pm Mon–Sat Jul & Aug, 9am–12.30pm & 3–6.30pm Mon–Sat Sep–Jun) and into France.

Sandwiched between the road and the railway line on the eastern edge of town, Ventimiglia's **Area Archeologica** (Roman ruins; admission free; ☎ 3–5.30pm Sat & Sun) includes an amphitheatre and baths dating from the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, when the town was known as Albintimulium.

On a hill on the western bank of the Roia river, Ventimiglia's medieval town is crowned with a 12th-century **cathedral** (Via del Capo). The town itself is largely residential.

Flora from five continents flourishes at the **Giardini Botanici Hanbury** (☎ 0184 22 95 07; Corso Montecarlo 43, La Mortola; adult/child €7.50/4; ☎ 9.30am–6pm mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 9.30am–5pm mid-Sep–mid-Oct & Mar–mid-Jun, 9.30am–4pm mid-Oct–Feb). Established in 1867 by English businessman Sir Thomas Hanbury, the 18-hectare Villa Hanbury estate is planted with 5800 botanical species, including cacti, palm groves and citrus orchards. Today it's a protected area, under the care of the University of Genoa. Take bus 1a from Via Cavour in Ventimiglia; the bus continues on to the Ponte San Lodovico frontier post, from where you can walk down to the Balzi Rossi on the French border.

A 10-minute stroll along the seafront from Ventimiglia's town centre, the family-run

Hotel Seagull (☎ 0184 35 17 26; www.seagullhotel.it; Passeggiata Marconi 24; s/d from €60/75; P ♿) has simple but appealing sky-blue-and-white rooms, a fragrant garden and a breezy terrace. Both half- and full-board options are available.

Cheap, cheerful eateries congregate around Via Cavour.

From the **train station** (Via della Stazione), Corso della Repubblica leads to the beach. Trains connect Ventimiglia with Genoa (€8.80, two to 3½ hours, hourly), Nice (50 minutes, hourly) and other destinations in France.

PIEDMONT

Sometimes referred to as 'Tuscany without the tourists', Piedmont's undulating hills striped with vineyards bear more than a passing resemblance to its famous southern counterpart. But, inexplicably, many visitors to Italy bypass this picturesque region. The first trickle of tourism, stemming mostly from Switzerland and Germany, only began in Piedmont (Piemonte) a decade ago. Today it remains a haven of tranquillity where you can meander among the vines and sip wine in castle cellars.

In-the-know foodies seek out Piedmont's white truffles, hazelnuts, chocolates, and vintages such as Barberesco, Barolo and sparkling Asti. Its abundance of fresh produce and artisan traditions inspired the Slow Food Movement here, which is based around savouring the simple pleasures in life – an art which the Piedmontese have perfected.

The 2006 Winter Olympics, hosted by Piedmont's capital Turin, and the nearby pistes of the Via Lattea ('Milky Way') also brought Piedmont to international attention. In the process, Turin shed its industrial image, reinventing itself as a chic, sophisticated world city. Even so, Piedmont will leave you wondering when the crowds will finally catch on – and being thankful that they haven't, yet.

Activities

Piedmont is a jumping-off point for Italy's largest wilderness area, the **Parco Nazionale della Val Grande** (www.parcovogrande.it).

Serious walkers can tackle the two-week **Grande Traversata delle Alpi** (GTA), starting



in southern Piedmont and following a network of Alpine *rifugi* (mountain huts) north through the alpine province of Cuneo, the Valle di Susa and the Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso. It continues across the north of the region before ending on the banks of Lago Maggiore at Cannobio, covering over 200km in all. Tourist offices have maps, itin-

eraries, and lists of *rifugi* (generally open from late June to mid-September).

Horse riding is plentiful in summer; contact **Agriturismo Piemonte** (☎ 011 53 49 18; www.agriturismopiemonte.it in Italian; Via Lagrange 2) in Turin for a list of farms that offer a range of activities including riding, as well as accommodation and dining.

Some of Europe's most fashionable **skiing** pistes are within easy striking distance of Turin.

TURIN

pop 901,000 / elev 240m

Turin (Torino) is magical. It's Italy's fourth-largest city and has an illustrious past, resulting in elegant squares, world-class museums and historic cafés, flanked by some 18km of colonnaded walkways.

History hasn't stood still here, however: Turin has pioneered a host of innovations, from Fiat cars to the first-ever Slow Food supermarket (housed in an old Fiat factory). Funky new bars spill onto the cobblestone streets of the Quadrilatero Romano during *aperitivi*, and contemporary art installations grace its baroque buildings and the odd Roman ruin.

Turin's charms aren't only manmade: to the city's east, low-lying hills rise above the Po river, while to its west are the mountains that hosted the 2006 Winter Olympics.

Depending on what you believe, Turin's charms aren't only tangible, either. Allegedly, Turin forms a 'white magic triangle' of mystical energies along with Lyon and Prague, as well as a 'black magic triangle' with London and San Francisco. Turin also sits at the confluence of two mighty rivers, the Po and the Dora, believed to represent the male and female powers of the sun and the moon. And the city's cathedral is home to the enigmatic Holy Shroud, which attracts thousands of Catholic pilgrims during its rare public unveilings.

But the real magic of Turin is that it's relatively inexpensive, green, easy to get around and refreshingly free of crowds, making it a great alternative to the well-known tourist centres as a place to experience Italian culture.

History

Whether the ancient city of Taurisia began as a Celtic or Ligurian settlement is unknown: it was destroyed by Hannibal in 218 BC. The Roman colony of Augusta Taurinorum was established here almost two centuries later. In succeeding years, Goths, Lombards and Franks tramped through the city. In 1563 the Savoyes abandoned their old capital of Chambéry (now in France) to set up court in Turin, which shared the dynasty's fortunes thereafter. The Savoyes annexed Sardinia in 1720, but

Napoleon virtually put an end to their power when he occupied Turin in 1798. Turin was occupied by Austria and Russia before Vittorio Emanuele I restored the House of Savoy and re-entered Turin in 1814. Nevertheless, Austria remained the true power throughout northern Italy until the Risorgimento (literally 'the Resurgence', referring to Italian unification) in 1861, when Turin became the nation's inaugural capital. Its capital status lasted only until 1864, and the parliament had already moved to Florence by the time full-size chambers were completed.

Turin adapted quickly to its loss of political significance, becoming a centre for industrial production during the early 20th century. Giants such as Fiat lured hundreds of thousands of impoverished southern Italians to Turin and housed them in vast company-built and -owned suburbs. Fiat's owners, the Agnelli family (who also happen to own the champion Juventus football club, Turin's local newspaper and a large chunk of the national daily *Corriere della Sera*), remain one of Italy's most powerful establishment forces. Fiat's fortunes declined later in the 20th century, however, and only revived around a decade ago.

The highly successful 2006 Winter Olympics were a turning point for the city. The Olympics not only ushered in a building boom, including a brand-new metro system, but transformed Turin from a staid industrial centre into a vibrant metropolis. Turin was scheduled to again step into the spotlight in 2008, as the European Capital of Design, hosting conferences and exhibitions. Preparations are now under way for 2011, when it will be the focus of the nation while hosting the 150th anniversary of the Risorgimento.

Orientation

Via Roma, Turin's main shopping thoroughfare since 1615, runs northeast from Stazione Porta Nuova to the central square, Piazza Castello. Stazione Porta Nuova is currently the main point of arrival, although the revamped Stazione Porta Susa will ultimately become the city's main station, and an increasing number of trains will use it in the coming years.

Busy Corso Vittorio Emanuele II is the main tram and bus route, running southeast to northwest. Piazza Carlo Felice, the square in front of Stazione Porta Nuova, and Via Nizza, which continues southwest past the station, are the main axes of Turin's seedier side.

PIEDMONT'S TOP 10 INNOVATIONS

Testament to the industriousness of Turin and its surrounds, the following all originated in the region:

- Fiat cars (an acronym for Fabbrica Italiana di Automobili Torino – or, so the jokes used to go before the company's recent revival, for Fix It Again, Tony!)
- Solid chocolate
- Lavazza coffee
- Cinzano
- Martini
- Nutella
- Tic Tacs
- *Grissini* (bread sticks)
- Slow Food
- The Italian parliament (before it moved from Turin to Florence and ultimately Rome)

The Mole Antonelliana's metallic spire dominates the horizon to the east, beyond which lies the Po and much of the city's nightlife. Just to the west of Piazza Castello, bars and bookshops fill the Quadrilatero Romano (Turin's 'Latin Quarter').

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Libreria Luxemburg (☎ 011 561 38 96; Via Battisti 7) Anglo-American bookshop.

Touring Club Italiano (☎ 011 562 72 07; Via San Francesco d'Assisi 3) Excellent range of maps.

EMERGENCY

Police station (☎ 011 5 58 81; Corso Vinzaglio 10)

INTERNET ACCESS

1PC4YOU (☎ 011 83 59 08; Via Giuseppe Verdi 20g; per hr €6; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat, noon-10pm Sun)

LAUNDRY

Lav@sciuga (www.lavasciuga.torino.it; ☎ 8am-10pm) Branches at Piazza della Repubblica 5, Via Sant'Anselmo 9 and Via Vanchiglia 10 provide free internet access for customers.

LEFT LUGGAGE

Stazione Porta Nuova (opposite platform No 16; 1st 12hr/next 12hr €3/2; ☎ 6am-midnight)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Farmacia Boniscontro (☎ 011 53 82 71; Corso Vittorio Emanuele II 66; ☎ 3pm-12.30am) Night pharmacy.

Ospedale Mauriziano Umberto I (☎ 011 5 08 01; Largo Turati 62) Hospital.

Pharmacy (☎ 011 518 64 67; Stazione Porta Nuova; ☎ 7am-7.30pm)

MONEY

A bank, ATM and exchange booth can all be found within Stazione Porta Nuova; others are dotted throughout the city. A 24-hour automatic banknote change machine can be found outside **Unicredit Banca** (Piazza CLN).

POST

Post office (Via Alfieri 10; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

The tourist board's **call centre** (☎ 011 53 51 81; www.turismotorino.org; ☎ 9.30am-9.30pm) can provide updated information and assistance for visitors.

Circolo Culturale Maurice (☎ 011 521 11 16; www.mauriceglbt.org) (In Italian; Via della Basilica 3-5) Gay and lesbian information.

Tourist office (☎ 011 53 51 81; ☎ 9.30am-7pm)

At Stazione Porta Nuova; offers free accommodation and restaurant booking service.

Tourist office (☎ 011 53 51 81; ☎ 8am-11pm) At the airport.

Sights

Turin's boulevards and beautiful piazzas are lined with some outstanding museums.

PIAZZA CASTELLO

Turin's central square shelters a wealth of museums, theatres and cafés. Essentially baroque, the grand piazza was laid out on the site of the 14th century to serve as the seat of dynastic power for the House of Savoy.

The piazza is dominated by **Palazzo Madama**, a part-medieval, part-baroque castle built in the 13th century on the site of the old Roman gate. It was named after Madama Reale Maria Cristina, the widow of Vittorio Amedeo I, who lived here in the 17th century. Today, part of the palace houses the **Museo Civico d'Arte Antica** (☎ 011 443 35 01; Piazza Castello; adult/child €7.50/6; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Fri & Sun, to 8pm Sat), containing a sumptuous collection of works that document the city's artistic movements post-Italian unification.

In the northwestern corner of the square is the baroque **Chiesa di San Lorenzo**, designed by Guarino Guarini. The church's richly complex interior compensates for the spare façade.

Statues of the mythical twins Castor and Pollux guard the entrance to the **Palazzo Reale** (☎ 011 436 14 55; Piazza Castello; adult/child €6.50/3.25; 🕒 8.30am-7.30pm Tue-Sun), and according to local legend, also watch over the border between the sacred ('white magic') and diabolical ('black magic') halves of the city. Built for Carlo Emanuele II around 1646, its lavishly decorated rooms house an assortment of furnishings, porcelain and other knick-knacks. The surrounding **Giardino Reale** (Royal Garden; admission free; 🕒 9am to 1hr before sunset), east of the palace, was designed in 1697 by André le Nôtre, who also created the gardens at Versailles.

The entrance to the Savoy **Armeria Reale** (Royal Armoury; ☎ 011 54 38 89; www.artito.arti.beniculturali.it; Piazza Castello; adult/child €4/free; 🕒 9am-2pm Tue-Fri, 1-7pm Sat & Sun) is under the porticoes just right of the palace gates and safeguards one of Europe's best collection of arms.

DUOMO DI SAN GIOVANNI

Turin's **cathedral** (Piazza San Giovanni), built between 1491 and 1498 on the site of three 14th-century basilicas, is the home of the famous Shroud of Turin (see boxed text, p218). A copy of the cloth is on permanent display in front of the cathedral altar.

The Romanesque **bell tower**, which stands alone to the left of the cathedral, was designed by Juvarra and built in 1723. Just to the north lie the remains of a 1st-century **Roman amphitheatre**, while a little further to the northwest lies **Porta Palatina**, the red-brick remains of a Roman-era gate.

TORINO + PIEMONTE CARD

Serious sightseers will save a bundle with a **Torino + Piemonte Card** (2/3/5/7 days €18/20/30/35). It covers admission to most of Turin's monuments and museums, a ride up the Mole Antonelliana panoramic lift, a return trip on the Sassi-Superga cable car, and all public transport costs including GTT boats on the Po river and the Turismo Bus Torino (see p220). It also offers discounts for some guided tours and theatres. You can buy the card at the tourist office.

Across the road is the **Museo d'Antichità** (Museum of Antiquity; ☎ 011 521 11 06; Via XX Settembre 88c; adult/child €4/2; 🕒 8.30am-7.30pm Tue-Sun), displaying antiquities amassed by the Savoy dynasty, including Etruscan urns, Roman bronzes and Greek vases, alongside assorted locally excavated archaeological finds.

MUSEO NAZIONALE DEL RISORGIMENTO ITALIANO

Baroque **Palazzo Carignano** was the birthplace of Carlo Alberto and Vittorio Emanuele II, and the seat of united Italy's first parliament from 1861 to 1864. You can normally see the parliament as part of the **Museo Nazionale del Risorgimento Italiano** (☎ 011 562 11 47; Via Accademia delle Scienze 5), though the museum was closed for renovations at time of writing, and was due to reopen at the end of 2008.

PALAZZO DELL'ACCADEMIA DELLE SCIENZE

The immense **Palazzo dell'Accademia delle Scienze** (Via Accademia delle Scienze 6) houses two outstanding museums: the 18th-century-established **Museo Egizio** (Egyptian Museum; ☎ 011 561 77 76; adult/child €6.50/free; 🕒 8.30am-7.30pm Tue-Sun), with some of Europe's most important ancient Egyptian treasures; and the **Galleria Sabauda** (☎ 011 54 74 40; adult/child €4/free; 🕒 8.30am-2pm Tue, Fri, Sat & Sun, 2-7.30pm Wed, 10am-7.30pm Thu), containing the Savoy family's incredible collection of art, which includes works by Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Poussin, Tintoretto and Jan Brueghel. A combination ticket for both museums costs €8 for adults (free for children).

MUSEO REGIONALE DI SCIENZE NATURALI

Your average menagerie of stuffed animals (brown bears and so on) is on show at the **Museo Regionale di Scienze Naturali** (Natural Science Museum; ☎ 011 432 63 65; Via Giovanni Giolitti 36; adult/child €5/free; 🕒 10am-7pm Wed-Mon), but what sets this natural science museum apart is its setting: a monumental 17th-century hospital with four inner courtyards and a chapel.

MODERN & CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUMS

Turin is famed for its ground-breaking contemporary art. Its origins, according to Valentina Marocco, of the Museum for Contemporary Art, Castello di Rivoli (p218), come from Turin's role as 'the hometown of the Arte Povera, a revolutionary art movement

TURIN

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TO EATALY; LE MERIDIEN LINGOTTO & LE MERIDIEN ART + TECH; LINGOTTO FIERE; PINACOTECA GIOVANNI E MARELLA AGNELLI (3km)

SHROUDED IN MYSTERY

The Sindone (Holy Shroud) is Catholicism's greatest icon of faith, drawing millions of pilgrims to Turin when it is publicly displayed every so often. Only the pope and the bishop of Turin can decide when the sacred cloth will next be hauled out. Its last public appearance was in 2000, and its next isn't slated until 2025.

For centuries experts and fanatics have argued over the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin, said to be the burial cloth in which Jesus' body was wrapped. Tests in 1981 uncovered traces of human blood (type AB) and pollen from plants known to exist around Jerusalem. Cynics claim the shroud is a medieval fake. Carbon dating carried out in 1988 seemed to confirm this, tying it to the 13th century. However, the white cloth – 4.37m long and 1.1m wide – is generally believed to have been woven in the Middle East.

How the image of a crucified human body – including thorn wounds on the forehead and nail wounds on both wrists and feet – formed on the cloth remains the biggest mystery. Some have suggested that the shroud was in fact the first-ever attempt at photography (using a camera obscura), undertaken by Leonardo da Vinci.

The first mention of a Holy Shroud comes from AD 944, when such an object was kept in Constantinople. This, apparently, was looted during the sacking of that city by Crusaders in 1204, and by 1453 it was in the hands of Duke Louis of Savoy in Chambéry (now part of France). The tie dye–style brown patterns visible on it today were caused by a fire in 1532. Safeguarded in Turin since 1578, the shroud is now laid out flat in a vacuum-sealed box, which in turn is stored in a controlled atmosphere. Since the death of former King Umberto II in 1983, the shroud has officially been the property of the Vatican. Researchers were scandalised in 2002 when the shroud underwent 'restoration', destroying crucial forensic evidence of its origins.

Though it doesn't unravel the mystery, the **Museo della Sindone** (☎ 011 436 58 32; Via San Domenico 28; adult/child €5.50/2.50; ☎ 9am–noon & 3–7pm) has informative displays and artefacts such as the first camera used to photograph the cloth in 1898. Guided tours are in Italian only; ask for a free English-language audioguide.

Drawing on the mysteries of the rarely seen shroud, Irish writer John Banville's suspenseful novel, *Shroud* (2002), is an evocative portrait of pre-Olympics Turin.

that developed at the end of the 1960s. The movement had an enormous impact on an international level with artists like Mario Merz, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Gilberto Zorio, Giuseppe Penone'. Valentina says this inspired 'a visionary generation of art collectors, critics and gallerists'.

The **Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea** (GAM; ☎ 011 562 99 11; www.gamtorino.it; Via Magenta 31; adult/child €7.50/4; ☎ 9am–7pm Tue–Sun) is dedicated to 19th- and 20th-century artists, including De Chirico, Otto Dix and Klee.

Temporary exhibitions are held in **Palazzo Bricherasio** (☎ 011 517 18 11; www.palazzobricherasio.it in Italian; Via Lagrange 20; adult/child €6.50/free, audioguide 1/2 people €3.50/5; ☎ 2–8pm Mon, 9am–8pm Tue & Wed, 9am–11pm Thu–Sun). The gallery, in a 17th-century palace, has hosted surrealist Dali and been 'wrapped' by Christo and Jeanne-Claude in its time.

At Lingotto, the Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli (opposite) has a world-class collection of masters.

A worthwhile trip further afield, the star of Turin's contemporary art scene is the 17th-century **Castello di Rivoli** (☎ 011 956 52 22; www.castellodirivoli.org; Piazza Mafalda di Savoia, Rivoli; adult/child €6.50/4.50; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Thu, to 9pm Fri–Sun, free guided tours 3.30pm & 6pm Sat, 11am, 3pm & 6pm Sun). It's a striking contrast to the contemporary art housed inside at the **Museo d'Arte Contemporanea**. Works by Franz Ackermann, Gilbert and George, and Frank Gehry would have been beyond the wildest imagination of the Savoy family, who resided at this site from the 14th century onwards. The castle is outside central Turin in the town of Rivoli (not to be confused with the city's metro station named Rivoli). Take GTT bus 36 from Piazza Statuto to Rivoli bus station, then bus 36n or any 36 marked 'Castello' up the hill. Journey time is about one hour. Otherwise, take the metro to the Fermi stop, from where there's a free daily shuttle – the museum has shuttle schedules.

For an artistic stroll around the city centre, pick up the free brochure *L'Arte Contemporanea*.

ranea from the tourist office, which maps out Turin's striking public art installations.

VIA PO & AROUND

Trendy cafés are strung out along and around Via Po, which connects Piazza Castello with the river by way of Piazza Vittorio Veneto.

Walking southwest along the Po river brings you to Castello del Valentino (closed to the public), a mock chateau built in the 17th century. The 550,000-sq-m French-style **Parco Valentino** (admission free; ☎ 24hr) surrounding the chateau opened in 1856 and is filled with joggers, promenaders and cafés night and day (though take care on your own here late at night).

A little further southwest is **Borgo Medievale**, which includes the *faux*-medieval **Rocca** (Castle; ☎ 011 443 17 01; Viale Virgilio 107; adult/child €5/4; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sat, to 6pm Sun Apr-Sep, to 4pm Tue-Sat, to 5pm Oct-Mar) and **village** (Borgo; admission free; ☎ 9am-8pm Apr-Sep, 9am-7pm Oct-Mar). They were built for the Italian General Exhibition in 1884.

Southeast of the Piazza Vittorio Veneto, across the Po, is the **Chiesa di Gran Madre di Dio** (closed to the public), built from 1818 to 1831 to commemorate the return of Vittorio Emanuele I from exile. Some claim it's yet another secret repository for the Holy Grail.

Mole Antonelliana

The symbol of Turin is the **Mole Antonelliana** (Via Montebello 20). This 167m tower, with its distinctive aluminium spire, appears on the Italian two-cent coin. It was originally intended as a synagogue when construction began in 1862, but was never used as a place of worship.

In 2000, the tower became home to the multifloored **Museo Nazionale del Cinema** (☎ 011 813 85 60; www.museonazionalecinema.org; adult/child €5.20/free; ☎ 9am-8pm Tue-Fri & Sun, to 11pm Sat), which takes you on a fantastic tour through cinematic history – from the earliest magic lanterns, stereoscopes and other optical toys to the present day. Movie memorabilia on display includes Marilyn Monroe's black lace bustier, Peter O'Toole's robe from *Lawrence of Arabia* and the coffin used by Bela Lugosi's *Dracula*. At the heart of the museum, the vast Temple Hall is surrounded by 10 interactive 'chapels' devoted to various film genres.

The Mole's glass **Panoramic Lift** (adult/child €4/3, lift & museum ticket €6.80/2.60) whisks you 85m up through the centre of the museum to the Mole's roof terrace in 59 seconds. Fair warn-

ing if you're even slightly prone to vertigo: it's suspended only by cables, so when you look out it's as if you're free-floating in space. The 360-degree views from the outdoor viewing deck are dazzling by day or night.

LINGOTTO

Around 3km south of the city centre is the **Lingotto Fiere** (☎ 011 664 41 11; www.lingottofiere.it; Via Nizza 294), Turin's former Fiat factory, which was redesigned by architect Renzo Piano into a congress and exhibition centre. In addition to two striking Le Meridien hotels (see p221), it houses the precariously perched 'treasure chest' rooftop gallery **Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli** (☎ 011 006 27 13; Via Nizza 230; adult/child €4/2.50; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun), with masterpieces by Canaletto, Renoir, Manet, Matisse and Picasso, among others.

Adjacent to the congress centre is the Slow Food Movement's 'supermarket', **Eataly** (☎ 011 195 06 811; www.eatalytorino.it; Via Nizza 230; ☎ 10am-8pm Tue-Sun). This vast converted factory now houses a staggering array of Slow Food-affiliated food and beverages, with a separate area for each, including cheeses, breads, meats, fish, pasta, chocolate and much more. The best time to visit is around 12.30pm to 2.30pm, when each area has its own little restaurant serving lunch. There's also a high-end restaurant here, for which you'll need to book ahead.

Some trains stop in Lingotto, but the easiest way to get here from the city centre is to take bus 1 or 35 from Stazione Porto Nuova.

BASILICA DI SUPERGA

In 1706 Vittorio Amedeo II promised to build a basilica to honour the Virgin Mary if Turin was saved from besieging French and Spanish armies. The city was indeed saved, and architect Filippo Juvarra built the church on a hill across the Po river. **Basilica di Superga** (☎ 011 899 74 56; www.basilicadisuperiga.com; Strada della Basilica di Superga 73) became the final resting place of the Savoys, whose lavish tombs make for interesting viewing, as does the dome here. In 1949 a plane carrying the entire Turin football team crashed into the basilica in thick fog. Their tomb rests at the rear of the church.

To get here take tram 15 from Piazza Vittorio Veneto to the Sassi-Superga stop on Corso Casale, then walk 20m to **Stazione Sassi** (☎ 011 576 47 33; Strada Comunale di Superga 4), from where an original 1934 **tram** (one-way adult/child €3.10/1.55,

return €4.13/2.58; 🚗 from Sassi 9am-noon & 2-8pm Mon, Wed, Thu & Fri, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-8.30pm Sat & Sun, 30 min later from Superga, closed Tue) rattles the 3.1km up the hillside in 18 minutes.

Tours

Guided walking tours (€6.50-8) following changing themes, such as Literary Turin, Tasty Turin and so on, depart on Saturday at 6pm. General city tours leave at 10am on Saturdays. Tours generally last around 1½ hours. Contact the tourist board call centre (p214) to confirm departure points, and to ask about various factory tours that are also available.

Turismo Bus Torino (1-day ticket adult/child €5/3; 🚗 10am-6pm Sat & Sun Jan-Jun & mid-Sep-mid-Dec, 10am-6pm daily Jul-mid-Sep & holiday/festival periods) is a hop-on, hop-off bus service with an on-board staff member providing information, and serves over a dozen different points around central Turin. Tickets are sold onboard; information is available from Gruppo Torinese Trasporti (p225).

GTT also operates **Navigazione sul Po** (adult return €3.10) boat trips on the Po. Boats to the Borgo Medievale in Parco Valentino and on to Moncalieri depart from **Imbarco Murazzi** (Murazzi del Po 65) four times a day Tuesday to Saturday and seven times a day on Sundays from May to September, with fewer departures at other times of the year.

Turin's 'black and white magic' is illuminated on quirky walking tours with **Somewhere** (☎ 011 668 05 80; www.somewhere.it). The company also runs other tours on lesser-known aspects of the city, such as 'Underground Turin'. Tours cost around €25; confirm departure points when booking.

Festivals & Events

Turin's famous chocolate is the focus of celebrations during CioccolaTO each March – see boxed text, p224.

Every October in even-numbered years, foodies roll into town for the **Salone Internazionale del Gusto**, organised by Slow Food, with traditional producers from around the world showcasing their wares in a huge market at Lingotto Fiere. A day's entry costs €20, after which tastings cost between €1 and €5.

The **Turin Film Festival**, headed up by Palme d'Or winner Nanni Moretti, takes place in November. **Festival Internazionale di Film con Tematiche Omosessuali** (www.turiningfilmfestival.com), held in April, is a five-day international gay and lesbian film festival.

Turin's **book fair**, held every May, is one of the most important in Europe.

The tourist office has details of these and other events.

Sleeping

Lonely Planet's online accommodation booking service (lonelyplanet.com/hotels) reviews properties in all price ranges that can be booked online.

If you're here over the weekend, you can get some good discounted rates at various three- to five-star hotels with a 'Torino Weekend' package (www.turismotorino.org), which includes a free two-day *Torino + Piemonte card* (see boxed text, p215), and an added freebie, such as a bottle of wine. It's available year-round except during special events.

BUDGET

Villa Rey (☎/fax 011 819 01 17; Strada Val San Martino Superiore 27; person/tent/car from €5/4/1.10; 🚗 Mar-Oct) East of the Po river, this very basic camping ground is nothing to write home about, but it's your only chance to pitch within striking distance of the city. Take bus 61 from Piazza Stazione Porta Nuova to the end of the line, then bus 54 from the corner of Corso Casale and Corso Gabetti.

Ostello Torino (☎ 011 660 29 39; ostellotorino.it; Via Alby 1; dm/s/tw without bathroom €14.50/20/38; 🚗 mid-Jan-mid-Dec; 🚻 🚺) Turin's 76-bed HI hostel, 1.8km from the train station, can be reached by bus 52 (bus 64 on Sunday) from Stazione Porta Nuova. Facilities are good (including online computers, wi-fi, and dinner Monday to Saturday for €9.50) and breakfast's included, but there's an afternoon lock-out.

Hotel Campidoglio (☎ 011 776 16 05; campidoglio@sinet.it; Via Corio 11; s/d without bathroom for €35/48, with bathroom from €45/53; 🚻) This little two-star hotel in the western part of the city is a great deal, with free wi-fi and a lift. Less than a five-minute walk away, a large local street market sets up every weekday morning and all day Saturday. Staff are friendly, rooms (including a couple with wheelchair access) are clean and comfortable, and it's an easy 15-minute tram ride from here to the centre.

Hotel Bologna (☎ 011 562 01 93; www.hotelbologna srl.it in Italian; Corso Vittorio Emanuele II 60; s/d €75/95) Right across from Stazione Porta Nuova and just off Via Roma, this handily located two-star hotel is a good bet. Rooms come with extra-big showers, although those overlooking the neighbouring restaurant can be noisy.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Monteverchio (☎ 011 562 00 23; www.hotelmonteverchio.com; Via Monteverchio 13; s €40-85, d €60-100; ☑) In a quiet residential area yet just 300m from Stazione Porta Nuova, this two-star hotel has colourful, stencilled rooms in sunset shades, an above-average buffet breakfast and a handy guest laundry.

Ai Savoia (☎ 339 125 77 11; www.aisavoia.it; Via del Gazmine 1b; s €75, d €85-115; (P)) Occupying an 18th-century town house, this little treasure overlooks pretty Piazza Savoia. The classical décor of each of its three rooms is ornate without being overwrought, and staff are friendly and obliging.

Hotel Roma e Rocca Cavour (☎ 011 561 27 72; www.romarocca.it; Piazza Carlo Felice 60; s €62.50-95.50, d €91-124; (P) ☑) If you've stayed in too many cramped hotel rooms, you'll love this 1854-established hotel opposite the Porta Nuova train station. Hallways are wide, ceilings are high and antique-furnished rooms are sumptuously proportioned, especially the flowing 'comfort' rooms.

Hotel Dogana Vecchia (☎ 011 436 67 52; www.hotel.doganavecchia.com; Via Corte d'Appello 4; s/d €90/110; (P)) Mozart, Verdi and Napoleon are among those who have stayed at this historic three-star inn. Recent renovations have fortunately preserved its old-world charm, and its location in the Quadrilatero Romano is hard to beat.

Hotel Chelsea (☎ 011 436 01 00; www.hotelchelsea.it; Via XX Settembre 79e; s €85-120, d €110-150; (P) ☑) A stone's throw from Turin's main square, Piazza Castello, the Chelsea has modern, softly lit rooms with coordinated bedspreads and drapes. Parents can use a baby monitor while dining at its romantic downstairs restaurant, La Campana, which serves Pugilese cuisine (restaurant menus €20).

Victoria Hotel (☎ 011 561 19 09; www.hotelvictoria-torino.com; Via Nino Costo 4; s €135-170, d €190-220; (P) ☑ ☑) Floral wall coverings, tapestries and lots of wood panelling add to the charm of this English country-style hotel on a quiet pedestrian lane. Mod cons include wi-fi, there's a bountiful buffet breakfast, and you can smother yourself in chocolate at the hotel's spa – see boxed text, p224. Prices teeter on top end, but the value is first rate.

TOP END

Art Hotel Boston (☎ 011 50 03 59; www.hotelboston.torino.it; Via Massena 70; s €105-180, d €150-260; (P) ☑ ☑) The Boston's austere classical façade gives no

inkling of the explosion of modern art inside. Public areas are filled with original works by artists including Warhol, Lichtenstein and Aldo Mondino, along with goldfish bowls in the shape of giant wine glasses and other outlandish installations. Individually decorated rooms come with their own works of art and big, round bathtubs. The equally eye-catching bar is open from 5pm until late daily.

Le Meridien Lingotto & Le Meridien Art + Tech (☎ 011 664 20 00; www.lemeridienlingotto.it; Via Nizza 262; Le Meridien Lingotto d €270-300, Le Meridien Art + Tech d €390-410; (P) ☑) These twin hotels are both situated within the historic Fiat car factory, which was built in the 1920s and renovated by Renzo Piano in the late 1980s. The factory's original full-length windows have been retained, allowing light to flood the large, luxurious four-star rooms of Le Meridien Lingotto and those of its five-star annexe, Le Meridien Art + Tech. Guests can jog around the former car-testing circuit on the roof, which was featured in the classic 1969 film *The Italian Job*.

Eating

In Turin in particular, there's no defining line between what constitutes a café, a gelateria, a bar or a restaurant, as virtually all serve coffee, gelati, alcohol and light meals (sometimes full menus). Listings under Drinking (p222) also double as dining options.

Turin's cuisine has been influenced by the French, and by the migration of southern Italians to the city. Specialities include *risotto alla Piemontese* (risotto with butter and cheese), *finanziere* (sweetbreads, mushrooms and chicken livers in a creamy sauce) and *panna cotta* (like an Italian crème caramel).

The San Salvario neighbourhood, in the southeastern part of the city, has a host of multicultural eateries, particularly around Piazza Madama Cristina, as well as some of the city's best pizzerias and pubs.

Kuoki (☎ 011 839 78 65; Via Gaudenzio Ferrari 2h; set menus €9-25, mains €6-10; ☎ 11am-3pm & 6.30-11pm Mon-Sat; ☑) Head around the corner from the Mole Antonelliana to this intriguing spot run by Giorgio Armani's former personal chef, Toni Vitiello. At high communal tables, you can dine on Italian blackboard specials, or sushi bar twists such as a Kuoki roll (salmon or tuna with ricotta, olive oil and basil). Toni's other fusion creations include chicken in Coca-Cola with orange peel.

8¼ (Ottoetre Quarti; ☎ 011 517 63 67; Piazza Solferino 8c; pizzas €3.80-10, mains €8-18; ☎ Mon-Fri; ☎) The twin dining rooms at 8¼ have French-washed blue and pink walls, striped tablecloths, and bread served in white paper bags. Try *bistecca di vitello alla grissinopoli* (steak or veal crumbed with crunchy breadsticks), huge salads and excellent Piedmontese wines by the bottle.

Pizzeria Stars & Roses (☎ 011 516 20 52; Piazza Paleocapa 2; pizzas €7-9; ☎ Tue-Sat) The list of pizzas on offer at this stylish place is lengthy and adventurous, with toppings including salmon and whisky or caviar and vodka. Each of its rooms is themed according to colour (red, white, silver, pink, blue and black), so you can choose to suit the occasion.

Sfashion (☎ 011 516 00 85; Via Cesare Battisti 13; set menu €21, mains €7.50-14.50; ☎) Turinese comic TV presenter Piero Chiamretti's latest culinary offering is this funky postmodern set-up with retro toys adorning its outlandish interior, and dishes such as mussels in tomato sauce or *penne* with zucchini.

Mare Nostrum (☎ 011 839 45 43; Via Matteo Pescatore 16; set menus from €40; ☎ dinner; ☎) Seafood is at its freshest and finest at Mare Nostrum. Set menus are pricey, but the atmosphere is elegant and the flavoursome creations are exceptional, particularly the elaborate mixed grill.

Restaurant del Cambio (☎ 011 54 66 90; Piazza Carignano 2; set menus from €60; ☎ Mon-Sat; ☎) Crimson velvet, glittering chandeliers, baroque mirrors and a timeless air greet you at this grand dame of the Turin dining scene, regularly patronised by Count Cavour in his day. It first opened its doors in 1757, and classic Piedmont cuisine still dominates the menu. Bookings and smart dress are advised.

Combal.Zero (set menus €70-80, tasting menus €140; ☎ Wed-Sun; ☎) Combine the trip out to Castello di Rivoli (p218) with a meal at its outstanding Michelin-starred restaurant, which features innovative creations such as a 'cyberegg' (caviar, vodka, egg yolk, shallots and pepper wrapped in cellophane) and Piedmontese classics such as truffle risotto. Bookings essential.

SELF-CATERING

Porta Palazzo (Piazza della Repubblica; ☎ 8.30am-1.30pm Mon-Fri, to 6.30pm Sat) Europe's largest open-air food market has literally hundreds of food stalls.

Grom (www.grom.it; Piazza Paleocapa 1d; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Thu, to 1am Fri & Sat, 11am-11pm Sun) The

first-ever outlet of this Slow Food-affiliated ice cream, renowned for organic flavours such as green tea, was started here in Turin. There's another branch at Via Accademia delle Scienze 4, which keeps the same hours.

Drinking

Aperitivi is a Turinese institution. As in Milan (see boxed text, p264), if you're on a budget, you can fill up on a generous buffet of bar snacks for the cost of a drink.

The main drinking spots are the riverside area around Piazza Vittoria Veneto and the Quadrilatero Romano district.

Pastis (☎ 011 521 10 85; Piazza Emanuele Filiberto 9; ☎ 9am-3.30pm & 6pm-2am) This boldly painted café/bar prides itself on 'food design', but its leafy terrace is also a *primo* spot for a cocktail.

Mood (☎ 011 566 08 09; Via Battisti 3e; ☎) café 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, bookshop 10am-9pm Mon-Sat) Flick through design and art books while sipping a cappuccino in the hip polished concrete and laminate interior of this contemporary bookshop-café. *Aperitivi* here costs €7, and includes a drink as well as snacks brought to your table.

our pick | I Tre Galli (☎ 011 521 60 27; Via Sant'Agostino 25; ☎ noon-midnight) Spacious and rustic, this is a fabulous spot for a drink any time, but most people come for the gourmet *aperitivi* snacks served on a buzzing pavement terrace. Meals cost about €15.

La Drogheria (☎ 011 812 24 14; Piazza Vittorio Veneto 18; ☎ 11am-2am) La Drogheria's sofas are covered by a fun, unpretentious studenty crowd enjoying cheap drinks and *aperitivi* fare.

Labelix (☎ 011 436 72 06; Via Corte d'Appello 15f; ☎ 7pm-3am Mon-Sat) Beneath the trees on Piazza Savoia, the terrace here is a favourite place for an *aperitivo* – its buffet banquet is one of Turin's most extravagant.

Taberna Libraria (☎ 011 83 65 05; Via Bogino 5; ☎ 10am-9pm) A stylish new *enolibreria* (wine bookshop), Taberna Libraria has an excellent array of wines that you can taste on the premises.

HISTORIC CAFÉS

No trip to Turin would be complete without visiting at least one of its ornate historical cafés. In addition to liquid and solid chocolate (see boxed text, p224), Turinese treats include little boxes of *pastiglie* (lozenges) with flavours that include orange blossom

and absinthe, made by 1857-established confectioner, Leone. Most cafés have a selection on the counter.

Caffè San Carlo (☎ 011 53 25 86; Piazza San Carlo 156; ☎ 8am-1am) Sumptuous café dating from 1822.

Caffè Mulassano (☎ 011 54 79 90; Piazza Castello 15; ☎ 7.30am-10.30pm) Art Nouveau jewel, with a marble floor, mirrored walls, a coffered ceiling – and just four tables.

Platti (☎ 011 506 90 56; Corso Vittorio Emanuele II 72; ☎ 7.30am-9pm) Sweet-laden coffee, cake and liquor shop with gilded 1870 interior.

Caffè Torino (☎ 011 54 51 18; Piazza San Carlo 204; ☎ 7.30am-1am) Chandelier-lit showpiece opened in 1903. A brass plaque of the city's emblem, a bull (Torino in Italian means 'little bull'), is embedded in the pavement out front; rub your shoe across it for good luck.

Caffè Elena (☎ 011 812 33 41; Piazza Vittorio Veneto 5; ☎ 8.30am-midnight Mon, Tue, Thu & Sun, to 1am Fri & Sat) Wood-paneled café once patronised by Nietzsche, these days with Starck-designed chairs.

San Tommaso 10 (☎ 011 53 42 01; Via San Tommaso 10; ☎ 8am-midnight Mon-Sat) The Lavazza family started roasting coffee here in 1900. Now modernised, the café offers a staggering variety of flavours as well as an excellent restaurant; you can also buy espresso machines here.

Fiorio (☎ 011 817 32 25; Via Po 8; ☎ 8.30am-1am Tue-Sun) Wonderfully formal 1780 café with creaking wooden floors and faded crimson wall coverings, best known for its creamy, classic ice creams.

Entertainment

Entertainment listings are included in 'Torino Sette', the Friday insert of the newspaper **La Stampa** (www.lastampa.it in Italian). Cinema, theatre and exhibition listings are also included in its daily 'Spettacoli Cronaca' section. Also worth picking up at the tourist office and in many bars around town is the free 80-page **News Spettacolo** (www.newspettacolo.com in Italian), a weekly booklet listing several hundred entertainment venues. **Extra Torino** (www.extrat torino.it) contains comprehensive, up-to-date listings in English.

Tickets for rock concerts are sold at **FNAC** (☎ 011 551 67 11; Via Roma 56). For other events, the tourist office has information and sells tickets.

NIGHTCLUBS & LIVE MUSIC

Most clubs open from 9pm to late and cover charges vary depending on the night. Turin's clubbing district centres on Murazzi del Po (also called Lungo Po Murazzi), the arcaded

riverside area stretching between Pontes Vittorio Emanuele I and Umberto I – follow the crowds (and the music).

Away from the city centre, head to **Docks Home** (☎ 011 28 02 51; Via Valprato 68), set in a converted 1912 warehouse, for house music and exhibitions, and shake your booty at legendary dance club **Hiroshima Mon Amour** (HMA; ☎ 011 317 66 36; Via Bossoli 83; admission free-€15), playing everything from folk and punk to tango and techno.

CINEMAS

Cinema Massimo (☎ 011 812 56 58; Via Giuseppe Verdi 18; admission €7) Near the Mole Antonelliana, the cinema offers an eclectic mix of films, mainly in English or with subtitles. One of its three screens only shows classic films.

THEATRE

Teatro Regio Torino (☎ 011 881 52 41; www.teatroregio.torino.it in Italian; Piazza Castello 215; ☎ ticket office 10.30am-6pm Tue-Fri, to 4pm Sat & 1hr before performances) Sold-out performances can sometimes be watched for free on live TV in the adjoining Teatro Piccolo Regio (☎ 011 881 52 41), where Puccini premiered *La Bohème* in 1896.

SPORT

Turin has two football teams, **Torino Football Club** (www.torinofc.it in Italian), and the wildly popular **Juventus** (www.juventus.it). Both play at the **Stadio delle Alpi** (☎ 011 73 29 47; Strade di Altesiano) on the western edge of town, served by buses on match days. Tickets are hard to come by; check the websites for info, or ask at the tourist office.

Shopping

Via Roma's arcaded walkways shelter the city's most expensive fashion boutiques, while those along Via Garibaldi are more affordable. Via Po has some great second-hand record shops and vintage and alternative clothes.

Peek through the open doorway of 1872-established **Pastificio Defilippis** (☎ 011 54 21 37; Via Lagrange 39; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 4-7.30pm Mon-Sat) to watch the family making dozens of varieties of pasta; you can buy it here fresh or dried.

Excellent wine shops are splashed around the city. Turin's famous chocolates (see boxed text, p224) make sweet souvenirs.

A giant **antiques market** (Gran Balòn; www.balon.it; Piazza Borgo Dora; ☎ 8.30am-6pm) takes place on

LA DOLCE VITA: TURINESE CHOCOLATE

Chocoholics the world over can thank Madama Reale (Madame Royale), queen of the Savoy State, for the introduction of chocolate to the masses. Previously only available for nobility, in 1678 Reale granted the first licence to Turinese chocolate maker Giò Antonio Ari – and solid chocolate was born.

Chocolate production quickly became big business in Turin and remained so until Napoleon arrived, when trade restrictions were placed on cocoa bean imports. But chocolate-makers Isidore Caffarel and Michele Prochet came up with a novel solution, using naturally sweet hazelnuts from Piedmont's groves to stretch the beans further. In 1865, they launched their chocolate made from hazelnuts and cocoa (at that time without milk – the Swiss learnt chocolate-making in Turin and later became the first to add it). Caffarel and Prochet christened their new chocolate Gianduiotto, after the Carnival mask character, Gianduja. In a savvy marketing move, Gianduja handed out samples to delighted Turinese carnival-goers. These elongated triangular chocolates were the first ever to be wrapped in paper.

A century on, the chocolate/hazelnut Gianduiotto flavour inspired the creation of Nutella, which is manufactured by Piedmontese company Ferrero Rocher in Alba.

Turin celebrates all things cocoa-related for two weeks every March during **CiocolaTÒ** (www.ciocola-to.com), with tastings, chocolate-making demonstrations, sculptures and dozens of creators selling their chocolates at stalls. The festival's exact location changes each year.

Year-round, you can pick up a ChocoPass from Turin's tourist office. The pass includes 10 tastings at specified stores and cafés over 24 hours (€10), or 15 tastings over 48 hours (€15).

The city's most famous chocolate house is **Peyrano** (☎ 011 53 87 65; www.peyrano.com; Corso Vittorio Emanuele II 76), creator of *Dolci Momenti a Torino* (Sweet Moments in Turin) and *grappini* (chocolates filled with grappa). Other famed chocolate-makers include **Gerla** (Corso Vittorio Emanuele II 88) and **Giordano** (Piazza Carlo Felice 69).

Among the historic cafés where you can taste chocolate in all its guises are **Baratti & Milano** (☎ 011 561 30 60; Piazza Castello 27; mains about €10-15; ☎ 8am-9pm Tue-Sun), with a stunning interior dating back to 1858; and **Pepino** (☎ 011 54 20 09; Piazza Carignano 8; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Sun-Thu, to midnight Fri & Sat, longer hours in summer), which invented ice cream dipped in chocolate on a stick here in 1937. The 1763-established **Al Bicerin** (☎ 011 436 93 25; Piazza della Consolata 5; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 8.30am-1pm & 3.30-7.30pm Sat & Sun), beneath a 14th-century bell tower, takes its name from *bicerin*, a caffeine-charged hot drink of chocolate, coffee and cream. It also serves snacks such as chocolate on toast. See p222 for more historic cafés.

To immerse yourself – literally – in chocolate, the spa at Turin's Victoria Hotel (p221) offers the sweetest beauty therapies around, including a 'choco caress' **dark chocolate regenerating body treatment** (€80) and a 'choco energy' **anti-ageing chocolate facial treatment** (€50). It is closed on Mondays.

the second Sunday of every month, while a smaller version (Balón) is held every Saturday in the same location.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Turin airport (TRN; ☎ 011 567 63 61; www.turin-airport.com), 16km northwest of the city centre in Caselle, has connections to European and national destinations. Several budget airlines fly here, including Easyjet and Ryanair.

BUS

Most international, national and regional buses terminate at the **bus station** (☎ 011 433 25

25; Corso Castelfidardo). You can also get to Milan's Malpensa airport from here.

TRAIN

Regular daily trains connect Turin's **Stazione Porta Nuova** (Piazza Carlo Felice) with Milan (€15.50, 1¼ hours), Aosta (€7.10, two hours), Venice (€33, five hours), Genoa (€15, 1¼ hours) and Rome (€46.50, seven hours). Most also stop at **Stazione Porta Susa** (Corso Inghilterra), which will gradually take over as the main station in the next few years. Some trains also stop at **Stazione Torino Lingotto** (Via Pannunzio 1), though it's generally more convenient to travel between the city centre and Lingotto by bus.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Sadem (☎ 011 300 01 66; www.sadem.it in Italian) runs buses to the airport from Piazza Carlo Felice (40 minutes), also stopping at Stazione Porta Susa (30 minutes). Buses depart every 30 minutes between 5.15am and 10.30pm (6.30am and 11.30pm from the airport). Single tickets cost €5 from **Confetteria Avvignano** (Piazza Carlo Felice 50) right behind the bus stop, or €5.50 if bought on the bus.

A taxi between the airport and the city centre will cost around €35 to €40.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Major car-rental agencies have offices at Stazione Porta Nuova and the airport.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

The city boasts a dense network of buses, trams and a cable car run by **Gruppo Torinese Trasporti** (GTT; ☎ 800 01 91 52; www.gtt.to.it in Italian), which has an **information office** (🕒 7am-9pm) at Stazione Porta Nuova. Buses and trams run from 6am to midnight and tickets cost €0.90 (€12.50 for a 15-ticket carnet, €3 for a one-day pass).

Turin's single-line metro runs from suburban Collegno to Stazione Porta Susa, meaning most tourists are unlikely to find it useful, but work is under way to extend it to Stazione Porta Nuova and Lingotto. Ultimately, the line will extend west to the outlying town of Rivoli. See www.metrotorino.it for progress reports.

TAXI

Centrale Radio (☎ 011 57 37)

Radio Taxi (☎ 011 57 30)

THE MILKY WAY

Snow-laden slopes draw a steady stream of skiers to the Milky Way (Via Lattea), two parallel valleys just west of Turin. The more northern of the two, **Valle di Susa**, meanders past a moody abbey, the old Celtic town of Susa and pretty mountain villages. Its southern counterpart, the **Valle di Chisone**, is pure ski resort territory. The valleys hosted many events at the 2006 Winter Olympics – including alpine skiing, freestyle skiing and bobsleigh – and facilities and infrastructure are state-of-the-art.

Information

Larger tourist offices in the valleys include the following; hours may be shorter outside peak season:

Avigliana (☎ 011 936 60 37; avigliana@montagnedoc.it; Corso Torino 6d; 🕒 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri)

Bardonecchia (☎ 0122 9 90 32; www.montagnedoc.it; Piazza de Gasperi 1; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm)

Cesana Torinese (☎ 0122 8 92 02; cesana@montagnedoc.it; Piazza Vittorio Amedeo 3; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm)

Sestriere (☎ 0122 75 54 44; www.sestriere.it; Via Lousset; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm)

Susa (☎ 0122 62 24 47; Corso Inghilterra 39; 🕒 9am-noon & 3-6pm)

Sights

Brooding above the road 14km from Turin is the **Sacra di San Michele** (☎ 011 93 91 30; adult/child €3.50/2; 🕒 9.30am-12.30pm & 3-5pm Tue-Fri, 9.30am-noon & 2.40-5pm Sat & Sun mid-Oct-mid-Mar, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Tue-Fri, 9.30am-noon & 2.30-6.30pm Sat & Sun mid-Mar-mid-Oct), a Gothic-Romanesque abbey which has kept sentry atop Monte Pirchiriano (962m) since the 10th century. Look out for the whimsical 'Zodiac Door', a 12th-century doorway sculpted with *putti* (cherubs) pulling each other's hair. Concerts are held on Saturday evenings in summer; ask for details at the tourist office in **Avigliana** (population 10,500), the abbey's closest town, 12km west.

A Druid well remains as testimony to the Celtic origins of **Susa** (population 6580; elevation 503m) before it fell under the Roman Empire's sway. Susa's Roman ruins make for an interesting stop on the way to the western ski resorts. In addition to the remains of a Roman **aqueduct**, a still-used **amphitheatre** and the triumphal **Arco d'Augusto**, dating from 9 BC, you can visit the town's early-11th-century **cathedral**.

Also worth a brief stop is the forbidding **Forte di Exilles** (☎ 0122 5 82 70; adult/child €5/1.50; 🕒 10am-7pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, to 2pm Oct-Mar), overlooking the quiet village of Exilles, 15km west of Susa. Its military role only ended in 1943. Opening hours can vary so check with local tourist offices.

Activities

The prestigious Milky Way ski domain embraces 400km of pistes and five interlinked ski resorts: Sestriere (2035m), Sauze d'Oulx (1509m), Sansicario (1700m), Cesana Torinese (1350m) and Claviere (1760m) in Italy; and Montgenèvre (1850m) in neighbouring France. Its enormous range of slopes and generally reliable snow conditions provide for skiers and boarders of all abilities. A single

daily ski pass costing €39 covers the entire Milky Way, including the French slopes of Montgenèvre. More information is available online at www.vialattea.it.

Built in the 1930s by the Agnelli clan of Fiat, **Sestriere** (population 885) ranks among Europe's most glamorous ski resorts due to its enviable location in the eastern realms of the vast Milky Way ski domain.

The tourist offices have mountains of information on every conceivable summer and winter sport, including **heli-skiing**, **bobsledding**, **golfing** on Europe's highest golf course, **walking**, **free climbing** and **mountain biking**.

Cross-country skiing in the area is centred on **Bardonecchia** (population 3084; elevation 1312m), the last stop in Italy before the Fréjus Tunnel.

Avigliana's tourist office also has route maps and information on summertime walking and mountain biking, including the protected lakes and marshlands in the **Parco Naturale dei Laghi di Avigliana**, located on the town's western fringe. From Avigliana, experienced walkers can tackle a strenuous climb or take a 30km circular bike trail to the Sacra di San Michele abbey.

Rafting and kayaking trips from Cesana Torinese are organised through **OK Adventure** (☎ 335 628 27 28; www.okadventure.it; 3hr trips €40-50).

Sleeping & Eating

Many hotels shut outside winter and summer. Exact closing dates can vary from year to year, depending on snowfalls and conditions. The area's tourist offices can make hotel reservations.

Casa Cesana (☎ 0122 8 94 62; fax 0122 89 71 26; Viale Bouvier, Cesana Torinese; s/d from €35/50; P ☒ ☑ ☒) Right across from Cesana's ski lift, this timber chalet was built for the 2006 Olympics. Its rooms are light-filled and spotless, there's a well-patronised restaurant open to nonguests (set menus around €18), and its bar is one of the area's liveliest.

Residence Chalet della Guida (☎ 0122 99 96 70; www.chaletdellaguida.it; Rochemolles 56, Bardonecchia; d from €80; P) Breakfast isn't included at this Alpine residence but you won't need it because its spacious apartments have self-catering facilities. Otherwise, ask about breakfast and/or half-board options at its restaurant (set menus €24 to €30; closed Tuesday). Some excellent weekly deals are available.

Grand Hotel Principi di Piemonte (☎ 0122 79 41; www.gh-principipiemonte.it; Via Sauze 3, Sestriere; d from €180; P ☒ ☑ ☒ ☑) Built in 1932 for the Agnelli family and frequented by famous faces over the years, this iconic curved building topped by turrets and spires has sleek rooms, gastronomic dining (with half-board deals available) and a decadent spa.

Sestriere's central square, Piazza Fraiteve, is loaded with places to eat and drink, including the perennially popular pizzeria **Pinky** (☎ 0122 7 64 41; Piazza Fraiteve 5n; pizzas €4-6) and the trendier **Napapijri** (☎ 0122 7 71 06; Piazza Agnelli 1; mains €7-8).

Getting There & Away

The main Italy-France motorway and railway line roar along the Valle di Susa, making the area easily accessible by both public transport and car (though motorists should keep change on hand for the motorists tolls).

Sapav buses (☎ 800 80 19 01, 0122 62 20 15; www.sapav.it in Italian) link Susa with Avigliana (35 minutes), Oulx (45 minutes), Turin (1¼ hours) and the Milky Way resorts. From Sestriere, buses serve Cesana (25 minutes), Oulx (45 minutes) and Turin (two to three hours) up to five times daily.

SOUTHERN & EASTERN PIEDMONT

The bucolic hills, valleys and townships of southern and eastern Piedmont are a gourmand's dream. Bursting with some of Italy's finest fresh produce, including unusually sweet hazelnuts, rare white truffles, and grapes crushed and fermented into world-class wines, the area is blessed with rich regional culinary traditions. As such, it's the headquarters of a number of seminal institutions – the Slow Food Movement, the University of Gastronomic Sciences and the International Culinary School for Foreigners (training chefs to work at Italian restaurants around the world) are all based here. Even the tiniest of hamlets boasts outstanding restaurants and wine cellars.

Autumn is the area's 'high season', due to its numerous food and wine festivals, fairs and harvest celebrations which draw crowds from the surrounding area, though as elsewhere in Piedmont, tourists are few.

A car is the ideal way to cover the area, but to compensate for gastronomic overload, there's excellent walking and cycling, as well as skiing.

Cuneo & Around

pop 54,700 / elev 543m

Arriving from the flat orchards and fields surrounding Cuneo's east onto its immense 24,000-sq-metre main square, **Piazza Galimberti**, gives you the slightly surreal impression you've arrived in a large city. The outside square was completed over 50 years, finishing in 1884. To the south of the square is the equally large-scale Corso Nizza, lined with grand buildings, while to the north is Cuneo's attractive old town (which, like the rest of Cuneo, is on a regular scale).

The city's history is interpreted at the **Museo Civico di Cuneo** (☎ 0171 63 41 75; adult/child €1.55/2.60; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 2.30-5.30pm Tue & Sat, 8.30am-1pm & 2.30-5pm Wed-Fri, 10am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Sun), set around the cloisters of the deconsecrated San Francesco convent and church.

From Cuneo you can head out into the valleys radiating towards the southern French Alps. When snowfalls are good, you can **ski** and **snowboard** here.

Cuneo's **tourist office** (☎ 0171 69 32 58; www.cuneo.comune.cuneo.it; Via Roma 28; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Mon-Sat) has information on the town. Region-wide information is provided by **Azienda Turistica Locale del Cuneese** (ATL; ☎ 0171 69 02 17; www.cuneoholiday.com; Via Vittorio Amedeo II 8a; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri), which also stocks two excellent free booklets with maps: *Hiking along the alpine paths of the province of Cuneo* and *Cuneo's bicycle touring district* (both in English).

SLEEPING

The ATL can advise on accommodation options in the surrounding valleys.

Hotel Ligure (☎ 0171 63 45 45; www.ligurehotel.com; Via Savigliano 11; s €50-65, d €70-80, apt s/d €45/55; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) In the heart of the old town, this two-star hotel has a handful of apartments with their own kitchens (minimum seven-night stay; no breakfast). If you're just passing through, its freshly spruced-up hotel rooms (with breakfast) are simple but spotless. Call ahead to reserve a parking space.

Hotel Royal Superga (☎ 0171 69 32 23; www.hotelroyalsuperga.com; Via Pascal 3; s €55-70, d €75-95; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Right by Piazza Galimberti, this appealing, old-fashioned hotel has mod cons including a free internet point (still all too rare in Italy), and free DVDs to watch in your room. If you turn up between 5pm and 9pm you'll be greeted with a free aperitif. Breakfast

is made from organic produce, and bicycles are free for guests.

Castello Rosso (☎ 0175 23 00 30; www.castellorosso.com; Via Ammiraglio Reynaudi 5; s €105-140, d €132-165; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Prince and princess fantasies can be lived out at this 15th-century castle set in gazebo-dotted parklands. Take time out from the regal restaurant and the wellness centre to check out the original frescoes on the 2nd floor. The castle is 10km north of Cuneo; pick-up can be arranged.

EATING & DRINKING

Typically for Piedmont, Cuneo has some stand out places to wine and dine.

Al Vecchio Zuavo (☎ 0171 630 08 98; set menus €19; ☎ lunch Fri-Tue, dinner Fri-Wed) Photographs of actors and singers who have dined here line the walls of this spirited Piedmontese restaurant, while its dining rooms are scattered with accordions, guitars, a banjo and piano, which all often get a workout.

our pick Locanda da Peiu (☎ 0171 41 21 74; www.locandapeiu.com; set menus €35; ☎ Tue-Sun; ☎ ☎) Only the best and freshest local ingredients are used at Locanda da Peiu, located 3km from the town centre, but within an easy five-minute bus ride (ask for schedules when you book). The €35 set menus are outstanding value, including antipasti, first and second plates, dessert and wine. Quality dishes include gnocchi with Castelmagno cheese, served in a hard-baked bread basket.

Osteria della Chiocciola (☎ 0171 662 77; Via Fossano 1; lunch menus €17.20, dinner menus €28-33; ☎ Mon-Sat; ☎ ☎) You can stop by for a glass of wine (from €6) with cheese and salami on the ground floor of this acclaimed Slow Food restaurant. Upstairs, in a buttercup dining room, choose from the handwritten menu's alchemy of flavours.

Antiche Contrade (☎ 0171 48 04 88; www.antichecontrade.it; Via Savigliano 11; set menus €75; ☎ lunch Sun, dinner Tue-Sun; ☎ ☎) From the main dining room, you can see through a glass window into the kitchen of Marc Lanteri at this Michelin-starred establishment specialising in fish. For an even closer view, reserve the 'chef's table' (from €175 per person with paired wines), which is set in an intimate room inside the kitchen area.

Historic chocolatiers include the 1864-established **Bruno** (☎ 0171 68 19 50; www.localistorici.it; Via Roma 28) and the 1920s **Arione** (☎ 0171 69 25 39; www.arione-cuneo.com; Piazza Galimberti 14; ☎ 8am-8pm

Tue-Sat, 8am-1pm & 3.30-8pm Sun), which invented the *Cuneesi al Rhum* – a large, rum-laced praline wrapped in cellophane. The chocolates came to the attention of Hemingway, who made a detour from Milan en route to Nice in 1954 to try them – there's a photograph of his visit in the window.

Bar Corso (☎ 0171 60 20 14; Corso Nizza 16; ☎ 7am-1am Thu-Tue) makes Cuneo's best gelati, and is a popular spot for a drink.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Regular trains run from Cuneo's central train station, at Piazzale Libertà, to Saluzzo (€2.45, 35 minutes, up to six daily), Turin (€4.70, 1¼ hours, up to eight daily), San Remo (€6, 2¼ hours, three daily) and Ventimiglia (€4.80, two hours, around four daily), as well as Nice (2¾ hours, at least six daily) in France. A second train station for the Cuneo-Gesso line serves the small town of Mondovì, from where there are connections to Savona and Genoa.

Saluzzo

pop 16,500 / elev 395m

Visiting the charming town of Saluzzo, 32km north of Cuneo, feels like stepping back in time. Every day from 6.30am on Piazzetta Santa Maria, old women sell fruit, vegetables and flowers from their gardens at what is known as the *mercato d'le fumne* (women's market). If it's raining they're huddled here under heavy overcoats and umbrellas.

Saluzzo is divided into its little-touched old town, bordered in parts by the remains of its 1201-built town walls, and its 'modern' town (itself several centuries old). The sections are a short walk apart. Once a medieval stronghold, the town maintained its independence until the Savoy won it in a 1601 treaty with France. One of its better-known sons was the Italian writer Silvio Pellico (1788–1854). Imprisoned for his patriotism against the Austrian occupation, he wrote parts of his novel *Le Mie Prigioni* (My Prisons) by cutting himself and using his blood as ink. A second well-known local is General Carlo dalla Chiesa (1920–82), whose implacable pursuit of the Mafia led to his assassination.

The burnt-red-tiled rooftops of Saluzzo's old town make a timeless picture from the loggia beneath the 15th-century belfry of the **Torre Civica** (☎ 0175 4 14 55; Via San Giovanni; admission €1.30, incl Museo Civico di Casa Cavassa €5; ☎ 9.30am-

12.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm Thu-Sun Mar-Sep, same hours Sat & Sun Oct-Feb), reached by a steep flight of steps. Saluzzo's medieval rulers meted out justice from **La Castiglia** (Piazza Castello), the 13th-century castle atop Saluzzo. At time of writing it was scheduled to reopen shortly to the public – ask the **tourist office** (☎ 0175 4 67 10; www.comune.saluzzo.it; Piazza Risorgimento; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon & 3-7pm Sun Apr-Sep, 9am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Sun Oct-Mar) for updates.

The **Museo Civico di Casa Cavassa** (☎ 0175 4 14 55; Via San Giovanni 5; adult/child €4/2, incl Torre Civica €5; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Thu-Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue & Wed Oct-Mar) is a fine example of a 16th-century noble residence, and contains a valuable 1499 gold-leafed painting, *Nostra Signora dell Grazie* (Our Lady of Mercy) by Hans Klemer.

Steps lead from cobbled Via San Giovanni to the beautiful 14th-century **San Giovanni** church, one of many churches in town.

A few kilometres south of Saluzzo, the creaking medieval **castle** (☎ 0175 8 78 22; www.findoambiente.it; Viale Coni Zugna 5, Manta; adult/child incl audioguide €5/2.50; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-mid-Dec, to 6pm Tue-Sun Feb-Sep, closed mid-Dec-Jan) in the village of Manta is one of the finest examples of its kind, and carefully guards Europe's most important cycle of late-Gothic secular frescoes. Its large park remains open throughout the day.

SLEEPING & EATING

Albergo Ristorante Periso (☎ 0175 4 12 13; www.albergoperiso.net; Vicolo Mercati 10; s/d €45/70; P ☎ ☎) This comfy hotel is tucked just off Piazza Cavour in Saluzzo's new town. Discounted half-board options are available at the restaurant (closed Monday), which has regional menus ranging from €15 to €25 for nonguests. Free wi-fi is available in the lobby.

Perpoin (☎ 0175 4 23 83; www.hotelsaluzzo.com; Via Spielberg 19-27; s €40-70, d €70-100, set menus €12-25; P) Enjoy hearty home cooking (and fresh-from-the-oven Nutella-filled croissants at breakfast) at this family-run hotel/restaurant in the new town's centre. There is no hotel reception (the building is a maze of corridors); call ahead to confirm your arrival.

pick L'Ostu dij Baloss (☎ 0175 24 86 18; www.ostudijbaloss.it; Via Gualtieri 38; bistro menus €16, restaurant menus €34-40; ☎ lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Mon-Sat; ☎) Spring lamb cooked three ways (grilled, in red wine, and baked) and homemade *tajarin*

pasta are among the local specialties served at Baloss' damask-clothed upstairs restaurant in Saluzzo's old town. At street level, its casual bistro with funky contemporary décor serves lighter seasonal dishes.

Catch live music every Friday night at Saluzzo's lively cocktail/wine bar, **De Gustibus** (☎ 348 040 21 97; Via Vacca 1; ☎ 8.30pm-2am Mon, Wed & Thu, 6.30pm-3am Fri & Sat). To stock up on local wines, grappas, vinegar, jam and cookies, drop by **La Botte Gaia** (☎ 0175 4 18 79; Via Cuneo 12; ☎ closed Mon).

Just 3km south of Saluzzo in the village of Manta are two spots worth seeking out. **Il Giardino dei Semplici** (☎ 0175 8 57 44; www.val-bb.it/ilgiardinodeisemplici.asp; Via San Giacomo 12, Manta; s/d €50/60, ☎ Mar-Dec; 📍), situated just 500m from Manta's castle, is a homey B&B surrounded by cultivated roses grown by its friendly owners. For a standout meal in Manta, head to **Piola del Barbon** (☎ 0175 8 80 88; Via Garibaldi 190; set menus €28-30; ☎ Mon-Sat), which serves Piedmontese cuisine.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are **buses** (☎ 0175 4 37 44) from Saluzzo to/from Turin (€3.50, 1½ hours, hourly). Otherwise, take a train to Savigliano (€2.45, 30 minutes, up to six daily), from where there are connections for Turin.

Alba

pop 32,000 / elev 172m

With its Ferrero Rocher factory churning out the world's best-selling chocolates, including Mon Cheri cherry pralines, Kinder Surprises and Nutella, Alba is a treat. The chocolate factory itself is harder to get inside to tour than Willy Wonka's domain (your best bet is to try asking in person at the factory – impossible to miss at the base of the town). But Alba doesn't disappoint foodies, who keep the town's truffle fair (see boxed text, p231) and *vendemia* (grape harvest) inked in their diaries. Year-round Alba's restaurant scene is second to none.

Radiating from the town, hazelnut groves and vineyards stretch across the surrounding Langhe hills. With so many wine cellars to visit, cycling and walking in the area is a true pleasure.

Alba's prosperous heydays were in the 15th and 16th centuries and it came under Savoy control in 1628. At its peak it was home to more than 100 towers, and many of the red-

brick structures still rise above Alba's medieval core, centred on its imposing 12th-century **Cattedrale di San Lorenzo** (Piazza Duomo). Today its cobbled streets are lined with chic boutiques, bars and restaurants.

In the town's historic centre, Alba's **tourist office** (☎ 0173 3 58 33; www.langheroero.it; Piazza Risorgimento 2; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, from 10am Sat & Sun mid-Nov-Mar, 9am-1pm & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm Sat & Sun Apr-mid-Sep, 9am-1pm & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat, 9am-7pm Sun mid-Sep-mid-Nov) sells walking maps and has internet access.

ACTIVITIES & TOURS

In addition to **guided walking tours** (2hr tours €8.50) interpreting Alba's history, the tourist office organises a smorgasbord of outings, including **winery tours** (3½hr tours €29) in an air-conditioned minibus, **cooking courses** (half-/full-day €70/100), **nature guide-led treks** (2½-3hr tours from €15), **horse-and-carriage excursions** (6hr trips €60), morning and afternoon **guided mountain bike rides** (€15) and **ultralight flights** (30 min flights from €60).

For the ultimate view of the vineyards, you can also book a **hot-air balloon flight** (€180-210). Sunrise balloon flights last one hour, but you'll need to allow four hours in total, including getting to the take-off point, inflating the balloon etc. The price includes transfers to and from the launch pad, as well as wine and breakfast prepared from local produce.

Most activities and tours need to be booked at least two days ahead (tours may be cancelled if there aren't sufficient numbers).

SLEEPING

The Langhe hills shelter some serene sleeping and eating options – see the Around Alba section (p230), or contact the tourist office's **accommodation-booking service** (Conorzio Turistico Langhe Monferrato Roero; ☎ 0173 36 25 62; www.turismodoc.it), through which you can also make restaurant reservations.

Albergo Leon d'Oro (☎ /fax 0173 44 05 36; Piazza Marconi 2; s/d €30/45, with bathroom €45/62) A good choice for budget travellers, the Golden Lion is one of Alba's most affordable options to spend the night. Overlooking the fresh food market, white wooden shutters hide a flower-filled interior terrace and spotlessly clean, if old-fashioned, rooms.

Hotel San Lorenzo (☎ 0173 36 24 06; www.albergo-sanlorenzo.it; Piazza Rossetti 6; s €60-70, d €85-90; ☎ closed 2 weeks Jan & 2 weeks Aug; 📍 ☎) Footsteps from

the cathedral and tourist office, this boutique hotel has fresh, breezy rooms (many with balconies), a lift and free parking. Breakfast is a generous spread, and some rooms have air-conditioning.

EATING & DRINKING

Vincafé (☎ 0173 36 46 03; Via Vittorio Emanuele II 12; set menus €10-25) This contemporary wine bar is easily Alba's hippest spot to hang out of an evening. Downstairs, in a cool vaulted stone cellar, its restaurant serves up huge healthy salads and pastas. The wine list stretches beyond the 350 mark.

La Libera (☎ 0173 29 31 55; Via Pertinace 24a; set menus €30-35; 🍷 lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Mon-Sat, closed 3 weeks Feb & 1 week mid-Jul; 🍷) In sleek stone and timber surrounds, this busy restaurant cooks up excellent fare such as freshly made *tajarin* pasta, and has an extensive selection of cheeses.

our pick **Dulcis Vitis** (☎ 0173 36 46 33; Via Rattazzi 7; gourmet menus €60, mains around €25; 🍷 lunch Thu-Mon, dinner Wed-Mon Jan-Aug, lunch & dinner daily Sep-Dec) It's virtually impossible to have a bad meal in Alba, but dining doesn't come finer than chef Bruno Cingolani's temple to the culinary arts, set around a courtyard in a little laneway in town. Starters (such as asparagus in puff pastry with goats' milk *fonduta* cheese and black truffle) and mains (such as medallions of rabbit in Barolo or roast baby goat with herbs and potatoes) are accompanied by the pick of the Langhe's wines and flawless, attentive service.

Via Vittorio Emanuele II, Alba's main pedestrian street, is lined with cafés and delicatessens selling fresh truffles in season, and *crutina al tartufo* (hard cheese with flecks of black truffle). Market stalls in the town centre sell fresh produce and local delicacies every Saturday morning.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

From the **bus station** (☎ 800 01 91 52; Corso Matteotti 10) there are frequent buses to/from Turin (€3.70, 1½ hours, up to 10 daily) and sporadic buses to/from Barolo (€1.60, 25 minutes, two daily) and other surrounding villages.

From Alba's **train station** (Piazza Trento e Trieste) there are regular trains to/from Turin (€4/5.30 via Bra/Asti, 50 minutes, hourly). From the station walk left along Corso Bandiera and its continuation, Corso Matteotti, to reach the tourist office.

The tourist office can organise bicycle hire (per day €14) as well as car rental (per day from €23), and can also hook you up with a driver (prices vary) if you'd rather imbibe than drive.

Around Alba

The castle-crowned Langhe hills produce some of Italy's best reds. Bus services in the area are limited; check schedules at Alba's tourist office.

CHERASCO

pop 7200 / elev 288m

Located 23km west of Alba, within the Langhe's lush wine country, Cherasco is actually best known for *lumache* (snails). The town is home to the **Istituto Internazionale di Elicoltura** (International Institute for Heliciculture; ☎ 0172 48 92 18; www.lumache-elici.com; Via Vittorio Emanuele 55), which provides technical advice for snail breeders (heliciculture is edible-snail breeding). Snails in this neck of the woods are dished up *nudo* (shell-less). They can be panfried, roasted, dressed in an artichoke sauce or minced inside ravioli. Piedmont dishes made with snails include *lumache al barbera* (snails simmered in Barbera red wine and ground nuts) and *lumache alla Piemontese* (snails stewed with onions, nuts, anchovies and parsley in a tomato sauce).

Traditional trattorias serving such dishes include **La Lumaca** (☎ 0172 48 94 21; cnr Via San Pietro & Via Cavour; set menus €30; 🍷 noon or 12.30-2pm & 8-9.30pm Wed-Sun) and **Osteria della Rosa Rossa** (☎ 0172 48 81 33; Via San Pietro 31; set menus €30-35; 🍷 12.30-2pm & 8-9pm Fri-Tue). Advance reservations are essential at both.

Wine is not forgotten in Cherasco, though. The **Scuola di Degustazione Enoteca Patrito** (☎ 0172 48 96 75; www.enotecapatrito.it; Via Vittorio Emanuele 78) runs detailed wine-tasting courses in several languages. Two-hour courses cost €80 for two people; full-day courses cost €210 for two people (both are cheaper for larger groups, as pricey bottles are opened especially for participants).

Typically for Piedmont, chocolate is not forgotten, either. The beautiful confectioner **Pasticceria Barbero** (☎ 0172 48 83 73; www.pasticceria-barbero.com; Via Vittorio Emanuele 74; 🍷 Thu-Tue) is a heritage-listed monument of wood, white marble and brass. Since opening in 1881 it has handmade *Baci di Cherasco* ('Cherasco's kisses', made with 60% chocolate and toasted

local hazelnuts), along with other treats such as grappa-filled sweets, chocolate truffles and, of course, snails (made from chocolate, honey and hazelnut paste).

Al Cardinal Mazzarino (☎ 0172 48 83 64; www.cardinalmazzarino.com; Via Pietro 48; s €150-200, d €180-220;

Ⓟ) is one of Cherasco's most atmospheric sleeping options. This former cardinal's residence, situated in the town centre, has just three antique-filled rooms, as well as a brand-new regional restaurant (also open to nonguests).

TRUFFLE TIME

Buried beneath Piedmont's forests are treasure troves of *tartufi* (truffles). These mysterious fungi cannot be cultivated, hence the vast sums and cloak-and-dagger secrecy surrounding the truffle trade.

Also known as *Tuber magnatum*, truffles are formed by an exchange of amino acids between the roots of certain trees (including poplar, willow, oak and lime) and specific soil types. Humidity forms mould and ultimately the truffle mushroom. The truffles' growth depends on factors such as soil type and quality, as well as rainfall. Truffle hunters use specially trained dogs to ferret them out. Even this dog-training is an art – the castle at Roddi, near Alba, is home to the Università dei Cani da Tartufo (Truffle Dog University), established in 1880 and run today by the founder's great-grandson.

Piedmont harbours both black and white truffles, which are only available fresh shortly after they've been unearthed, as they decay rapidly. Black truffles, which come in 'summer' and more potent 'winter' varieties, are precious, commanding up to €700 to €800 per kilogram in 2007. But it is the white truffle (*Tuber magnatum pico*) – which grows between September and January and ranges from white with pink veins to brownish-grey, with an aroma of honey and garlic – that is the most prized of all. Prices for white truffles in 2007 reached €2500 to €3000 per kilogram.

Fortunately at these prices, the truffles' pungency means a little goes a long way. Their flavour is best brought out by plain, very simple food such as eggs or pasta. Black truffles are hardy enough to be cooked in dishes such as omelettes, but white truffles are only eaten raw, such as shaved over risotto.

White truffles are celebrated in Alba each year with the **Fiera del Tartufo Bianco d'Alba** (Alba White Truffle Fair), held every Saturday and Sunday for four weeks from early October to early November in Coro della Maddalena (just follow your nose). Entry costs €5 including a complimentary glass of wine and lets you visit the 'business end' of the market, where hushed discussions take place between sellers and buyers. (Tricks used by unscrupulous sellers include plugging holes in the truffles with soil, or dusting them with yellow corn flour to improve their colour.) If actual truffles are beyond your budget, the fair's market stalls also sell everything from truffle-infused olive oil to truffle-infused polenta. The market also has an on-site restaurant (expect to shell out around €25 for a plate of fried eggs with white truffles).

The truffle fair ends with a worldwide white truffle auction at **Castello Grinzane Cavour** (☎ 0173 26 21 59; Piazza Castello 5; admission €4; 🚗 tours 9.30-11.30am & 2.30-5.30pm Wed-Mon), 8km south of Alba. Italian statesman Camillo Cavour, one of the key players in Italy's unification, lived in the castle in the 1850s. The auction itself is closed to the public, although it's simulcast for bidders in New York and Hong Kong. But year-long, you can visit the castle's truffle exhibits, including a hand-held camera film shown on a 360-degree tent-style screen that makes you feel like you're there in the forest. While at the castle, you can also taste prestigious wine in its wine cellar.

To experience a real, live truffle hunt, you can head out with brothers Giorgio and Natale, who come from five generations of truffle hunters, and who operate **La Casa del Trifulau** (☎ 347 299 18 32, 0141 96 65 68; www.lacasadetrifulau.it; Frazione Burio 1, Costigliole d'Asti) from their family's longtime home. Giorgio and Natale have set up a display of truffle-hunting paraphernalia used by their family over the years, and can take you truffle hunting in their private woods with their dogs, finishing up with a tasting on their enclosed verandah overlooking the vineyards. Truffle hunting costs €120 for up to five people during black truffle season and €160 for up to five people during white truffle season. It provides a rare personal insight into the enigmatic truffle world.

Both Alba's and Asti's tourist offices have truffle information.

BAROLO & LA MORRA

Made from Nebbiolo grapes, and aged in oak barrels for three to four years, the robust reds produced around Barolo (population 680), 20km southwest of Alba, are revered by critics, who describe them as 'velvety', 'truffle-scented with orange reflections' and the 'king of wine'.

At the heart of these esteemed vineyards, the diminutive village of Barolo is lorded over by its castle, the **Castello di Barolo** (☎ 0173 5 62 77; www.baroloworld.it; ☞ 10am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Fri-Wed), which can be toured during a visit to its **Enoteca Regionale del Barolo**. Right inside the castle, the *enoteca* (wine bar) has three Barolo wines available for tasting each day, costing €2 each or €5 for all three.

If you want to visit some of the Barolo vineyards (and taste-test some of their produce), contact **L'Insieme** (☎ 0173 50 92 12; www.linsieme.org; Cascina Nuova 51, La Morra) in La Morra (population 2670). L'Insieme is an association of nine small independent winemakers who have banded together to create premium wines, ploughing back some of the profits into international charities. Members such as **Mauro Veglio** (☎ 3336 72 49 68; www.mauroveglio.com; Frazione Annunziata, Cascina Nuova 50, La Morra) will be happy to give you a tour and free tasting. More economical bottles of Nebbiolo (using the same grapes as Barolo but aged in oak for just one year before they're ready to drink) are also for sale. Phone ahead for reservations and directions.

Sleeping & Eating

Fior di Farine (☎ 0173 5 01 18; www.fiordifarine.com in Italian; Via Roma 108, La Morra; s/d €55/65; (P) ☒) Five airy guest rooms are housed in this small corn-coloured working flour mill, where you can watch the family make flour, and taste it in homemade cakes and breads at breakfast (€7.50).

ourpick Villa Carita B&B (☎ 0173 50 96 33; www.villacarita.it; Via Roma 105, La Morra; s/d/ste €90/120/150; (P) ☒) When you dream of Italy, chances are somewhere in that dream is a room with a view across sun-dappled vineyards. This B&B not only has blink-to-be-sure-you're-not-still-dreaming daytime views from every room (and panoramic terrace), but romantic night-time views of La Morra's village lights. Tucked below the main building, one room and one suite are hidden in the hillside with their own private terraces.

Belvedere (☎ 0173 5 01 90; Piazza Castello 5, La Morra; set menus €42; ☞ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat Mar-Dec, closed last week in Jul) 'Beautiful view' is no arbitrary name – it's adjacent to La Morra's lookout point. But Gian Bovio's *risotto al Barolo*, Barbera-cooked steak and triple-pyramid of chocolate all do their best to distract you from the vistas; as does the bewildering decision of choosing among more than 1000 wines.

SERRALUNGA D'ALBA**pop 500**

On the highest point of Serralunga d'Alba, 15km south of Alba, the **Castello di Serralunga d'Alba** (☎ 0173 61 33 58; admission free; ☞ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun winter, to 6pm Tue-Sun summer) is the Langhe's most absorbing castle, due to its intact but completely unrenovated, shell-like interior. Wandering around its echoing rooms, you'd swear you can hear the footsteps of the armoured sentry who once guarded it. The former fortress was built in the 11th century, but most of what you see today was reconstructed in the 14th century, including a then-state-of-the-art defence system (you can still see the remains of the drawbridge). If no one's around during opening hours, knock on the castle-keeper's door to be let in.

Beneath the castle, this untouched little village has a handful of simple restaurants, including **Ristorante di Anselma** (☎ 0173 61 31 24; Piazza Cappellano 3a; mains around €10; ☞ Tue-Sun). Opening to a leafy, umbrella-filled courtyard, you can stop by for a plateful of Langhe cuisine or just a glass of local wine.

BARBARESCO & NEIVE

Heading 12km east of Alba brings you to Barbaresco (population 660), the home of the renowned wine of the same name. While Barolo is said to be the 'king' of wine, this softer, more delicate red is known as the 'queen of wine'. You can worship Barbaresco wines at the intimate **Enoteca Regionale del Barbaresco** (☎ 0173 63 52 51; Piazza del Municipio 7, Barbaresco; ☞ 9.20am-6.30pm Mon, Tue & Thu-Sat, 9.30am-1pm & 2.30-6pm Sun), housed inside a deconsecrated church, with wines lined up where the altar once stood. It costs €1.50 per individual tasting; six Barbaresco wines are available to try each day.

ourpick Ristorante Rabayà (☎ 0173 63 52 23; Via Rabayà 9, Barbaresco; set menus €28-40; ☞ Fri-Wed, closed mid-Feb-early Mar), on the fringe of town, is one of Barbaresco's first-rate restaurants. It has the ambience of dining at a private home. Its

antique-furnished dining room has a roaring fire, but when the sun's shining, there's no better spot than its terrace set high above the vineyards. Try Rabayà's signature rabbit in Barbaresco, followed by a platter of local cheese.

If you haven't had your fill of wine yet, head a further 4km east to the pin-drop quiet village of Neive (population 2930), where you'll find the **Bottega dei Quattro Vini** (☎ 0173 67 70 14; Piazza Italia 2, Neive; ☎ hours vary). This two-room shop was set up by the local community to showcase the so-titled four DOC wines (Dolcetto d'Alba, Barbaresco, Moscato and Barbera d'Alba) produced on Neive's hills. (Neive was the first village in Italy to lay claim to four DOCs.) Inside, you can sample wines by the glass (€1.80 to €4.50), accompanied by cold local specialities (€3.50 to €10) such as anchovies in green sauce, Langhe cheese served with *cugnà* (jam made from pressed grape residue) and *torta di nocciole* (flourless hazelnut cake, best paired with late-harvest Passito wine). The shop is a showroom for just 34 local producers, and sells bottles at cellar-door prices.

Bra & Pollenzo

pop 28,300

Until the late 1980s, Bra, around 15km west of Alba, was a little-known provincial market town. That changed when Italian journalists were inspired to write a manifesto (see boxed text, p234) railing against the fast-food juggernaut. Following its publication, the Slow Food Movement was born in Bra. Today the town remains home to the **Slow Food headquarters** (☎ 0172 41 96 11; www.slowfood.it; Via della MendicITÀ Istruita 14), though there's not a lot to see apart from an office (dispensing leaflets) and a small bookshop; plus an affiliated restaurant, Osteria del Boccondivino (right).

Foodie associations aside, Bra's historic centre contains some stately architecture. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the town underwent something of a baroque building boom, the best example of which is the **Chiesa di San Andrea** (Piazza Caduti), designed by Bernini. The **Santuario della Madonna dei Fiori** (Viale Madonna dei Fiori) is an impressive baroque/neoclassical chapel complex devoted to the Madonna, who supposedly appeared here in 1336.

Eclectic displays at Bra's **Museo Civico Artistico-Storico** (☎ 0172 42 38 80; Palazzo Traversa, Via Parpera 4; admission free; ☎ 3-6pm Tue-Thu, 10am-noon & 3-6pm

Sat & Sun 2nd week of month) range from Roman artefacts, 18th-century paintings and medieval weaponry; while the **Museo Civico di Storia Naturale** (☎ 0172 41 20 10; Via Craveri 15; admission free; ☎ 3-6pm Tue-Sun) features fossils, minerals and stuffed birds.

Around 4km southeast of Bra is the Roman village of Pollenzo, once an important Roman settlement and today home to the **Università di Scienze Gastronomiche** (University of Gastronomic Sciences; ☎ 0172 45 84 19; www.unisg.it; Piazza Vittorio Emanuele 9). The campus occupies a former royal palace, and offers three-year courses in gastronomy and food management. The complex has an acclaimed **restaurant** (Guido Ristorante; ☎ 0172 45 84 22; www.guidoristorante.it; set menus €75; ☎ Tue-Sat, closed Jan & Aug) flanked by soaring brick arches, a hotel (Albergo Dell'Agenzia; below), and the **Banca del Vino** (☎ 0172 45 84 18; www.bancadelvino.it in Italian), and a wine cellar/'library' of Italian wines. Free guided tastings are available by reservation. The university also has a campus in Colorno, in the province of Parma.

Bra's **tourist office** (☎ 0172 43 01 84; www.comune.bra.cn.it in Italian; Via Moffa di Lisio 14; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun Mar-Nov) has information on both towns and the region.

SLEEPING & EATING

Our pick **Albergo Cantine Ascheri** (☎ 0172 43 03 12; www.ascherihotel.it; Via Piumati 25; s/d €80/120; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Built around the Ascheri family's 1880-established winery, wood, steel mesh and glass have all been incorporated into this ultraccontemporary hotel, which includes a mezzanine library, 27 sun-drenched rooms, and a vine-lined terrace overlooking the rooftops. From the lobby you can see straight down to the vats in the cellar (guests get a free tour). It's just one block south of Bra's train station.

Albergo Dell'Agenzia (☎ 0172 45 86 00; www.albergoagenzia.it; Via Fossano 21, Pollenzo-Bra; s€155, d€195-240; ☎ ☎) Prince Charles, among others, has stayed at the unique Albergo Dell'Agenzia, part of the same complex that houses the Università di Scienze Gastronomiche in Pollenzo. The rooms are spacious and elegantly furnished with huge beds, walk-in wardrobes and sparkling clean bathrooms. With a restaurant run by people who really know their business, a well-stocked wine cellar and a park, what more could you ask for?

Osteria del Boccondivino (☎ 0172 42 56 74; www.boccondivinoslow.it in Italian; Via MendicITÀ Istruita 14;

THE BIG FORK MANIFESTO *Alison Bing*

Remember lunch? Not the stuff you bolt down at your desk one-handed as you type, text or telephone, but a proper Italian *pranzo* – the kind that makes you wait and salivate with fork in hand, knowing your day is about to take a turn for the better. Can't recall? Neither could a handful of dejected Italian journalists in the small town of Bra, Piedmont back in 1987. McDonald's had just begun expansion into Italy, and lunch outside the bun seemed to be fading into fond memory. But rather than wallow in Proustian melancholy, Carlo Petrini and his fellow *neoforchetoni* ('big forks', or foodies) decided to do something about it. In a manifesto published in the like-minded culinary magazine *Gambero Rosso*, they declared that a meal should be judged not by its speed, but by its pure pleasure. The organisation they founded would soon become known worldwide as **Slow Food** (www.slowfood.com), and its mission to reconnect artisanal producers with enthusiastic, educated consumers has taken root with more than 80,000 members in 50 countries – not to mention Slow Food *agriturismi*, restaurants, farms, wineries, cheesemakers and revitalised farmers' markets across Italy.

Far more than a pack of picky eaters, Slow Food is a political dynamo, promoting biodiversity, sustainability and shared food resources worldwide. A former Fiat factory in Turin becomes a vast salon with the world's best finger food at the biennial **Salone del Gusto and Terre Madre**, the global Slow Food symposia featuring Slow Food producers, chefs, activists, restaurateurs, farmers, scholars, environmentalists and epicureans from 131 countries. These Olympian foodie events are held in even numbered years; odd years feature speciality events such as **Slow Fish** (www.slowfish.it) in Genoa and **Cheese** (www.cheese.slowfood.com) and **Slow Food on Film** (www.slowfoodonfilm.it) in Bra. Paradoxically, Slow Food is now growing faster than McDonald's in Piedmont: there may be 28 outlets of the American fast-food chain in the region, but there are twice as many acclaimed Slow Food restaurants. At this slow but steady rate, perhaps future generations will remember how to use a fork, and wield it wisely.

Alison Bing has been a Slow Food San Francisco member since 2004.

set menus €26-28; ☎ Tue-Sat) Up on the 1st floor of the recessed courtyard of the Slow Food Movement's headquarters, this homey little eatery lined with wine bottles was the first to be opened by the emerging organisation back in the 1980s. The food is predictably fresh and excellent, and the local Langhe menu changes daily.

Osteria Murivecchi (☎ 0172 43 10 08; Via Piumati 19; set menus excl wine €28, with wine €34; ☎ lunch Tue-Fri, dinner Tue-Sun; ♻) Spread over six rustic candlelit dining rooms furnished with old viticulture tools, Osteria Murivecchi is housed in the historic cellars of the Ascheri family. You can sample these wines, along with local specialities chalked daily on each room's blackboard, such as raw Bra veal sausage. The cooking is accomplished, and the ambience is classy yet relaxed.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From the train station on Piazza Roma trains link Bra with Turin (€3.50, one hour), via Carmagnola, while buses connect Bra with Pollenzo (€0.83, 15 minutes, Monday to Saturday morning).

Asti

pop 73,400 / elev 123m

Historically, Asti and Alba, both feisty independent strongholds, have been fierce rivals. That rivalry is recalled by the **Palio d'Asti**, a bare-back horse race on the third Sunday of September commemorating a victorious battle against Alba during the Middle Ages, which today draws over a quarter of a million spectators from villages around. (Alba answers with its own donkey race on the first Sunday in October.) Four-legged races aside, these days the two towns have buried the hatchet and are united by their fine viticultural and culinary activities. At just 30km apart, it's easy to visit them both while exploring the area.

Since the 1850s the grapes grown on the plains around Asti have produced Italy's top sparkling wine, Asti Spumante (often just referred to as Asti to avoid being lumped in with poorer-quality spumante). Made from white Muscat grapes, this sweet, pale-gold wine is best drunk young at a chilled 6°C to 8°C, like its less-fizzy cousin Moscato d'Asti. There are numerous places to sample the two, either in

Asti's 9120 hectares of vineyards tended by 6800 wine growers, or in town.

Asti's largely pedestrianised centre makes for a pleasant stroll. The town became a Roman colony in 89 BC, and after existing as an independent city-state in the 13th and 14th centuries, it was passed around between Spain, Austria, France and finally the Savoy, prior to unification. During the late 13th century the region became one of Italy's wealthiest, with 150-odd towers springing up in Asti alone. Of the 12 that remain today, one, the 38m-tall **Torre Troyana o Dell'Orologio** (☎ 0141 39 94 60; Piazza Medici; admission free; ☞ 10am-1pm & 4-7pm Apr-Sep, 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Sat & Sun Oct), can be climbed. Also rising above Asti's historic core is the enormous belfry of the 13th-century Romanesque-Gothic **Cattedrale di Santa Maria Assunta** (Piazza Cattedrale). Its grandly painted interior merits a peek.

The town's two **tourist offices** (☎ 0141 53 03 57; www.astiturismo.it; Piazza Alfieri 29 ☞ 9am-1pm & 2.30-6.30pm; Corso Alfieri 328 ☞ 10am-1pm & 3-6pm) have details of September's flurry of wine festivals. The 10-day **Douja d'Or** (a *douja* being a terracotta wine jug unique to Asti) is followed by the **Delle Sagre** food festival on the second Sunday of September.

Like Alba, the countryside around Asti contains precious black and white truffles. Asti's **truffle fair** is in November.

SLEEPING & EATING

Outside the town centre, there are some lovely spots to sleep in the nearby Monferrato vineyards – see right or ask Asti's tourist offices for a list of properties, including *agriturismi*.

Hotel Cavour (☎ 0141 53 02 22; www.hotelcavour-asti.com in Italian; Piazza Marconi; s €45-50, d €65-73; (P) ☞) Asti's budget option is this small family-run place, in a stone building handily situated right opposite the train station. The rooms are simple but clean, with tiled floors and checked curtains, and the welcome is friendly. Has disabled access.

Hotel Lis (☎ 0141 59 50 51; www.hotellis.it; Via Rosselli 10; s €62-72, d €97-110; (P) ☞) Opposite a tree-filled park in Asti's town centre, this large mid-20th-century hotel is run by a courteous family who can help make restaurant reservations, and lay on a big buffet breakfast. Rooms (some with balconies) are clean, comfortable and wi-fi'd, and come with a free bottle of wine waiting for you to uncork.

Pompa Magna (☎ 0141 32 44 02; Via Aliberti 65; set menus €20-30; ☞ Tue-Sun; ☞) This split-level

brasserie-style restaurant is a great spot for a bruschetta and glass of very good wine (the Pompa Magna also owns an *enoteca* in town at Corso Alfieri 332; closed Mondays). But it's worth coming hungry for its chef-prepared menus and especially its *bûnnet* (an elaborate chocolate pudding) for dessert.

Aldo di Castiglione (☎ 0141 35 49 05; Via Gioberto 8; set menus €25; ☞ Fri-Wed; ☞) A vaulted 18th-century exposed-brick interior, with white-clothed tables set with sparkling crystal and silverware, forms the backdrop for some of Asti's finest cooking. Ask owners Aldo and Franca to help you choose from the seasonal Piedmontese menu.

Fresh food, along with clothes and all sorts of household paraphernalia, is sold at Asti's Wednesday and Saturday morning markets on Piazza Alfieri and Piazza Campo del Palio.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Asti is on the Turin-Genoa railway line and is served by hourly trains in both directions. Journey time is 30 to 55 minutes to/from Turin (€3.50); and 1¼ hours to/from Genoa (€6), stopping at Alba (€2.45, 40 minutes).

Around Asti

Vineyards fan out around Asti, interspersed with castles and celebrated restaurants. Buses run from Asti to many of the villages; Asti's tourist offices can provide schedules.

MONFERRATO

Synonymous with its intense red Barbera del Monferrato wines, the Monferrato area takes in a glorious rural stretch of vineyards and wine-producing villages between Asti and **Casale Monferrato** (population 38,500), 20km to the northeast.

The tiny hamlet of **Moncalvo** (population 3320), 15km north of Asti along the S457, makes a perfect photo stop, with a lookout above its **castle**, where you'll also find an **information office** (Piazza Antico Castello; ☞ Sat & Sun, specific hours vary) and wine tasting.

Many producers, such as Tenuta Castello di Razzano (p236) conduct cellar tours; the **Consorzio Operatori Turistici Asti e Monferrato** (☎ 0141 59 46 98; www.terredasti.it; Piazza Alfieri 29) in Asti has a detailed list of tours and can provide directions.

Dating from 1550, **Tenuta del Barone** (☎ 0141 91 01 61; www.tenutadelbarone.com; Via Barone 18, Penango; s €40-50, d €60-75, dinner ind wine €25; (P) ☞) is a family

farm that has been converted into a cheery B&B. Sleep in the old stables and feast on huge amounts of homemade food. Medieval cooking courses and wine tasting are often available. Penango, 2km from Moncalvo, is signposted from Moncalvo's southern end.

our pick **Tenuta Castello di Razzano** (☎ 0141 92 21 24; www.castellodirazzano.it; Frazione Casarello 2, Alfi-

ano Natta; d/ste €110/200; 📍 📞 📧) is a rambling castle, which is possible to visit just to tour its working winery, and take part in a personal, seated wine tasting (from €6 for five wines, an aromatic wine and Barbera grappa plus local raw and cooked salami, bread, focaccia and pizzas; up to €15 for eight wines and a veritable feast of snacks). But to soak up

DAYS OF WINE & RECIPES

For some, visiting Italy means a mad dash around the major cities, while for others it entails an extended stint studying Italian cooking and wine in a castle amid the vineyards. The latter was the experience of Sandro 'Gonzo' Doimo, who attended the **International Culinary School for Foreigners** (ICIF; www.icif.com) in the village of Costigliole d'Asti, 14km south of Asti. Gonzo sliced, stirred and sipped his way through one of the school's six-month professional programs, but shorter courses, including wine-, cheese-, and olive oil-tasting courses, are also available; the school's website has programme prices and dates.

At the time of research, ICIF was in the process of opening its own restaurant in the castle, which will be open to the public, with students cooking, serving and selecting wines – check the school's website for updates.

What was a typical 'school day' like?

We were put into groups and rostered to do certain tasks each day. Those rostered on bread-making duties would be at the school by 7am. Classes started at 8am with about an hour of food- and wine-oriented Italian lessons. The morning could be any combination of lectures, practical (cooking) or maybe wine tasting. The group on cooking duties would leave classes early to start preparing lunch, including table setting, serving up the plates and cleaning the kitchen. After lunch, we'd again have a combination of lectures, practical but mostly wine-tasting classes. Then the group scheduled to make the evening meals would be in the kitchen, while the group on *mis-en-place* duties prepared and measured the ingredients for the next day's lessons. Those rostered for bread-making the next day prepared the dough to proof overnight. Afterwards, we'd all drink at the local bar. So the days were pretty full-on.

Were the lessons in Italian?

Yes, as were the notes, hence the daily Italian classes. But each language group had its own translator who translated for us.

Highlight of the course?

Touring farms and factories that aren't normally open to the public, like the Lavazza factory, where they taught us how to make a proper coffee then let us loose for an hour to make our own; a Grana Padano producer; the Barila Pasta factory; a Piedmontese rice producer; and a Barolo winery.

Was your particular course only for people working in the food and wine industry?

Mostly, yes, but that shouldn't stop anyone. Although it was, honestly, a lot of hard work.

Most memorable experience?

Shaving hundreds of euros worth of white truffle over fried eggs one day in class. And tasting real balsamic vinegar for the first time.

Favourite wine?

The thing about Italian wines is that most regions produce a wine, be it white or red, that suits the food of the region; like the local Moscato d'Asti, a sweet, lightly fizzy dessert wine that I got addicted to during the course.

Top food preparation tip?

Always use the best and freshest ingredients. Italian cooking is not about lots of flavours but simple combinations that work really well together, for example pumpkin ravioli with sage butter sauce, with a Pinot Grigio; or a pizza with thin-sliced potatoes and onion, with a Peroni beer.

the antique-filled castle's atmosphere, you'll want to stay in one of its rooms the size of small apartments (some the size of large apartments) and roam its historic halls or curl up in its book-lined reading room. Alfiano Natta is 6km west of Moncalvo.

For Piedmontese pampering, head to **Locanda del Sant'Uffizio** (☎ 0141 91 62 92; santuffizio@thi.it; Strada Sant'Uffizio 1, Cioccaro di Penango; s €128-175, d €171-240; 📞 📺 📺 📺), a restored 17th-century convent (and sleek new wing and wellness centre) set in 4 hectares of vineyards. Many of the convent's rooms – some with original frescoes – reflect the colour of the flowers after which they are named. Bike rental is free, and a pick-up service from Asti can be arranged. Sant'Uffizio has a small, elegant **restaurant** (lunch/dinner menus €23/55), which is open to non-guests, though you'll need to book ahead.

NORTHERN PIEDMONT

The land around **Vercelli** (population 480,010), on the west bank of the Sesia river, is so flat and soggy that some 100 varieties of rice are grown here.

Following the river north past Varallo to Monte Rosa, straddling the Valle d'Aosta, Alpine slopes climb sharply. Skiing, walking, biking and white-water rafting are among the possibilities for exploring this mountainous terrain.

In Piedmont's northeast are the captivating lakes of Lago d'Orta, and the western shore (and Borromean Islands) of Lago Maggiore; both are covered in the Lombardy & the Lakes chapter (p250).

Ivrea (population 25,100) is worth a quick stop. Going quietly about its business most of the year, the town, 55km northeast of Turin en route to the Valle d'Aosta, explodes during its carnival's chaotic **Battaglia delle Arance**. Starting on the Sunday before Shrove Tuesday, this three-day 'battle of the oranges' sees more than 3500 people pound each other with 400,000kg of oranges, in a re-enactment of the townspeople's 12th-century uprising against the aristocracy. (Napoleon demanded oranges replace the stones originally used.)

Ivrea's **tourist office** (☎ 0125 61 81 31; www.cana.veve.vallilanzo.it in Italian; Corso Vercelli 1; 🕒 9.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 3-6pm Sat) has information on visiting the old town's medieval **castle** and 11th-century **cathedral**.

Typewriter manufacturer Olivetti was founded in Ivrea by local entrepreneur Camillo

Olivetti (1868–1943) in 1896. Today its Bauhaus-inspired factory and giant glass office façades form part of **MAAM** (Museo a Cielo Aperto dell'Architettura Moderna; ☎ 0125 64 18 15; Via Jervis 26; admission free; 🕒 museum 24hr, info centre 9am-1pm Tue-Sat), an open-air museum of modern architecture. Seven numbered information panels in English lead visitors on a tour of the Olivetti buildings' exterior (all are still in use).

From Ivrea's train station on the corner of Corso Jervis and Corso Nigra in the new town, there are direct trains to/from Aosta (€3.50, one hour, hourly) and Turin (€3.90, one hour, up to eight daily). Both the historic centre and MAAM are an easy walk from here.

Northern Piedmont is also home to the Valsesia valley, which together with the Valle d'Aosta's Valle d'Ayas and Val di Gressoney forms the Monte Rosa ski area (see p248).

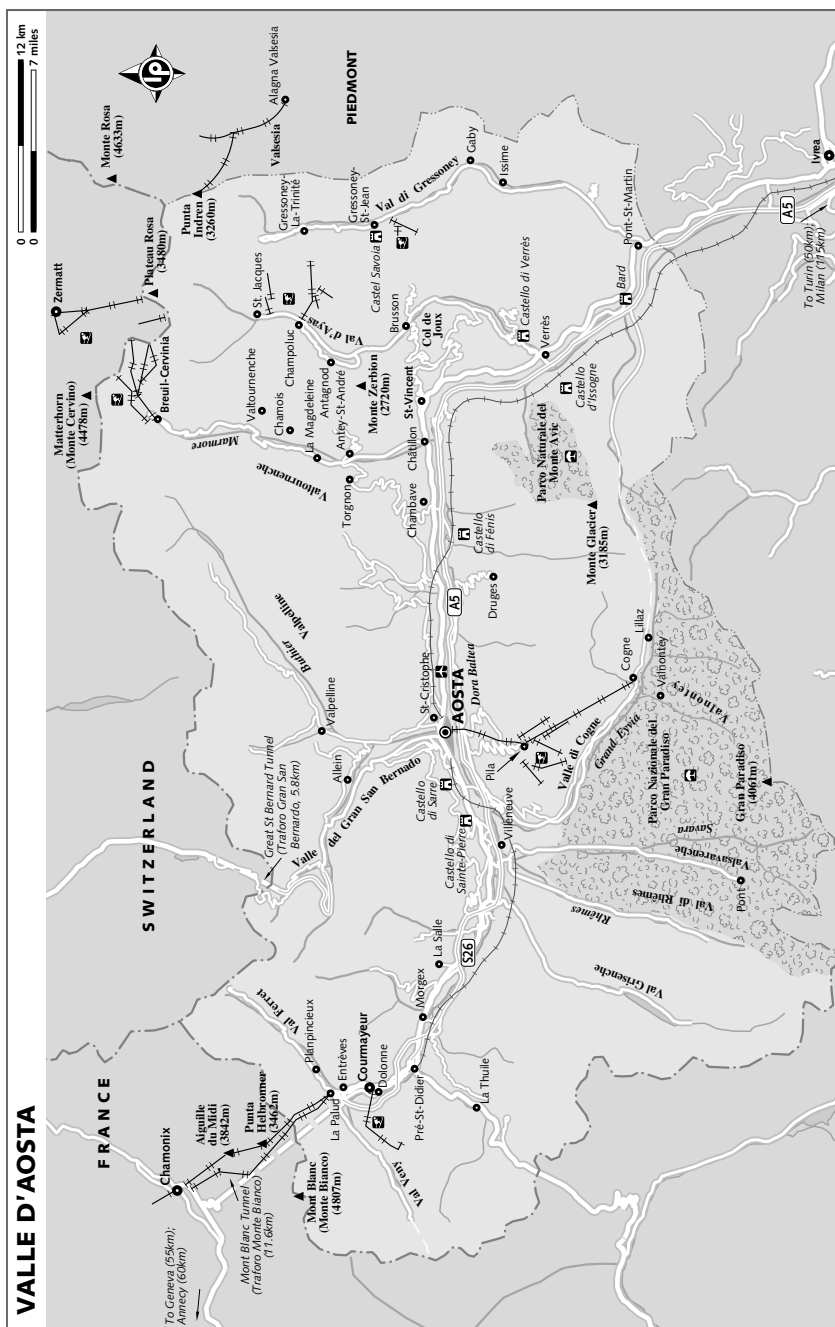
VALLE D'AOSTA

pop 120,600

The Valle d'Aosta's dizzying peaks dominate the Alps range. Three of Europe's four highest mountains are here, including the highest, Mont Blanc (Monte Bianco; 4807m), which it shares with France; the Matterhorn (Monte Cervino; 4478m), shared with Switzerland; and the Monte Rosa massif, shared with both Switzerland and Piedmont, with no fewer than 12 peaks above 4000m.

History has carved its way through the valley through the ages. Turreted castles serve as a reminder of its importance as an Alpine passageway, as do relics from the Neolithic period, the early Bronze Age and early Roman sites, especially in its capital, Aosta. Off the main valley, numerous side valleys shelter ancient villages.

Spanning less than 100km east to west, the Valle d'Aosta is the smallest of Italy's regions. Self-governed, like a handful of other Italian regions, it is officially bilingual, with everything from school classes to road signs in Italian and French. All Valdostan residents are required to be proficient in both languages to work in public service roles. But in reality, French is not used, and Italian is far and away the Valle d'Aosta's primary language. Among close friends and family, locals also speak Franco-Provençal patois. A small number of Walser villagers in the east speak the German dialect, Tich.



For a century the valley was part of the French kingdom of Bourgogne, and later fell under the sway of Napoleon. The region was incorporated into the new Kingdom of Italy in 1861. Under Mussolini's regime, massive immigration from other parts of Italy was encouraged in an attempt to bury the region's separate identity. The economic and political aftermath of WWII led many Valdostans to consider ceding to rejoin France. Ultimately, the high degree of autonomy the Valdostans wanted to retain for their province was unacceptable to the centralised French government.

The region became physically closer to France – in terms of travel time – with the opening of the Mont Blanc Tunnel, connecting Courmayeur with Chamonix. Once blasted through in 1965, the tunnel transformed the quiet rural valley into a major road-freight thoroughfare and cemented its age-old status as the crossroads of Europe.

Activities

SNOW SPORTS

Thundering off-piste opportunities abound in the Valle d'Aosta's mountains, which also offer groomed runs for **downhill skiing**. Courmayeur (adjacent to Mont Blanc) and Breuil-Cervinia (from where you can ski to Zermatt, Switzerland) are the best-known resorts, but smaller spots such as Pila (immediately south of Aosta) and the Monte Rosa ski areas also have scenic skiing for all levels. The Valle di Cogne, in Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso, and the Val di Gressoney, at the southern foot of Monte Rosa, are leading **cross-country skiing** centres.

Information on ski schools, mountain guides and ski-lift passes for individual resorts are detailed under Activities in the respective resort sections. A three-/six-day lift pass covering the entire Valle d'Aosta, Alagna Valsesia (Piedmont) and Zermatt (Switzerland) costs €104/195. A six-day Mont Blanc Snow Safari pass (€231) is valid in the Four Valleys skiing area (Switzerland), Chamonix (France) and Valle d'Aosta. Various other passes are available; see www.skivallee.it.

WALKING & BIKING

Expert mountaineers set off across the ice to tackle Mont Blanc from Courmayeur, but walkers of all abilities can undertake one of dozens of half- and full-day walks and rambles at lower altitudes.

Many trails in the valley are suitable for mountain biking and there are some particularly interesting nature trails in the Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso (p246). Details on walks, huts and mountain guides are listed under Activities in the respective resort sections. The website www.regione.vda.it is also a good source of information.

AOSTA

pop 34,200 / elev 565m

They came, they saw, and they left behind some immense monuments, including a dramatic arch and theatre.

Named Augusta Praetoria by the Romans when they captured it from Celtic-Ligurians in 25 BC, Aosta is the Valle d'Aosta's only city. Its refined streets, lined with elegant shops, reflect its status as the capital of Italy's wealthiest region, where the majority of taxes stay in the region.

Ringed by mountains that stay snow-capped all year, Aosta has a couple of fascinating churches in addition to its Roman legacies. A cable car glides directly from Aosta up to the Pila ski domain. Good transport links make it a natural jumping-off point to the region's valleys.

Information

Banks abound on and around the Piazza Chanoux.

Aosta tourist office (☎ 0165 23 66 27; www.regione.vda.it/turismo; Piazza Chanoux 2; ☹ 9am-1pm & 3-8pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-1pm & 3-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun Oct-May) Region-wide information including accommodation lists.

Farmacia Centrale (☎ 0165 26 22 05; Piazza Chanoux 35) Pharmacy.

Hospital (☎ 0165 30 41; Viale Ginevra 3)

Police station (☎ 0165 26 21 69; Corso Battaglione Aosta 169) West of the town centre.

Post office (Piazza Narbonne; ☹ 8.15am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat)

Sights

ROMAN RUINS

Aosta's Roman sights can be covered in a half-hour stroll. The grand triumphal arch, **Arco di Augusto** (Piazza Arco di Augusto) has been struck with a crucifix in its centre since medieval times. From the arch, head east across the Buthier river bridge to view the cobbled **Roman bridge** – still in use since the 1st century. Afterwards, backtracking west 300m along Via

Sant'Anselmo brings you to **Porta Praetoria**, the main gate to the Roman city.

Continuing north along Via di Bailliage and down a dust track brings you to Aosta's **Roman theatre** (Via Porta Praetoria; admission free; ☎ 9am-7pm Sep-Jun, to 8pm Jul & Aug). Part of its 22m-high façade is still intact. In summer, performances are held in the better-preserved lower section. All that remains of the **Roman forum**, another couple of blocks west, beneath Piazza Giovanni XXIII, is a colonnaded walkway known as **Criptoportico**. The foreboding **Torre dei Balivi**, a former prison, marks one corner of the Roman wall and peers down on the smaller **Torre dei Fromage** (☎ hours vary depending on exhibition) – named after a family rather than a cheese. It's closed to the public except during temporary art exhibitions – the tourist office has a programme.

CATTEDRALE SANTA MARIA ASSUNTA

The neoclassical façade of Aosta's **cathedral** (Piazza Giovanni XXIII; ☎ 6.30am-noon & 3-7pm) belies the impressive Gothic interior. Inside, the carved 15th-century walnut-wood choir stalls are particularly beautiful. Two mosaics on the floor, dating from the 12th to the 13th centuries, are also worth studying, as are the religious art treasures displayed in the **Museo del Tesoro** (☎ 0165 4 04 13; adult/child €2.10/0.75; ☎ 9-11.30am & 3-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.30-10am & 10.45-11.30am Sun Apr-Sep, 8.30-10am, 10.45-11.30am & 3-5.30pm Sun Oct-Feb).

CHIESA DI SANT'ORSO

Aosta's most intriguing sight is this **church** (Via Sant'Orso; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Sun Oct-Feb, 9am-7pm Mar-Jun & Sep, 9am-8pm Jul & Aug), which is part of a still-operating monastery. The church dates back to the 10th century but was altered on several occasions, notably in the 15th century when Giorgio di Challant of the ruling family ordered the original **frescoes** painted over and a new, lower roof installed. All was not lost: the renovations left the upper levels of the frescoes intact above the new roofline. You can ask the warden to unlock the door, letting you clamber up a narrow flight of wooden steps into the cavity between the original and 15th-century ceilings to view the well-preserved remnants.

The interior and the magnificently carved choir stalls are Gothic, but excavations have unearthed the remains of an earlier church. Beneath the altar, protected by glass, is a 12th-

VALLE D'AOSTA'S TOP FIVE SNOWBOUND PURSUITS

- **Cross between countries** (p244) Ski from Courmayeur to Chamonix in France down the legendary Vallée Blanche.
- **Ski during summer** (p247) Ski any time of year at Plateau Rosa, on the Swiss side of the Monte Rosa massif; accessible from Breuil-Cervinia.
- **Find freedom on the slopes** (p248) Freeride far from the crowds on fresh Valsesia powder.
- **Carve it up** (below) Get airborne on a 120m halfpipe, in one of the Alps' biggest and baddest snow parks, at Pila, to a thumping music soundtrack.
- **Take to the skies** (p248) Head up and away on a heli-skiing expedition, near Champoluc.

century mosaic, which was only discovered in 1999 when the church's heating system underwent maintenance.

The monastery's beautiful Romanesque **cloister**, with ornately carved capitals representing biblical scenes, is to the right of the church.

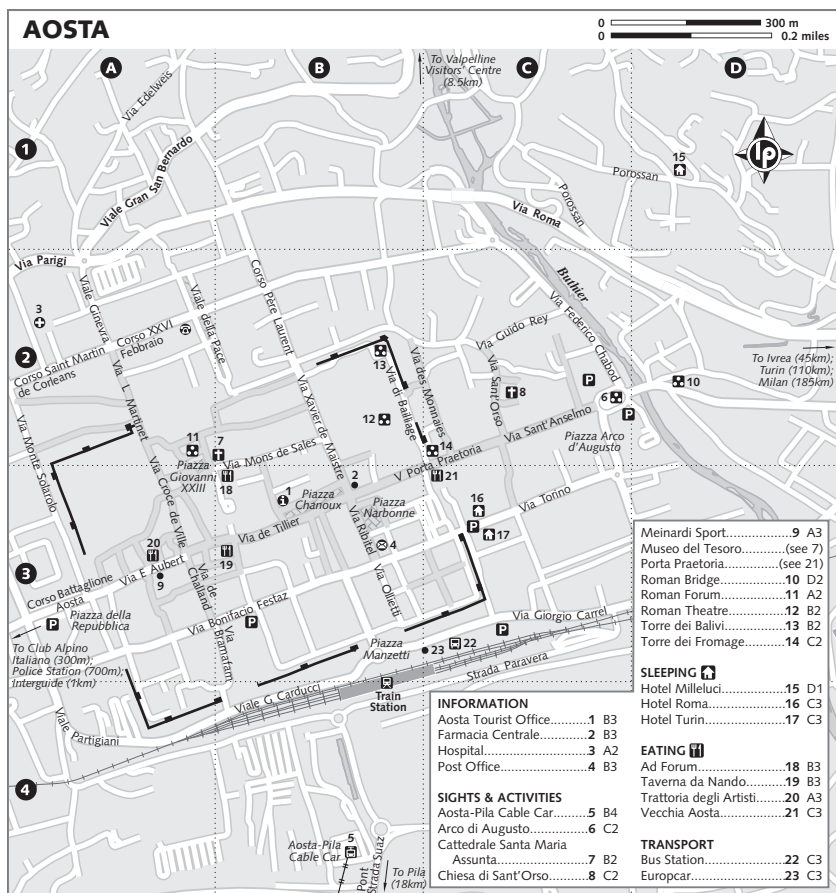
Activities

SKIING

The 1800m-high resort of **Pila** (☎ 0165 36 36 15; www.pila.it; half-/full-day pass €21.50/30; ☎ mid-Dec-mid-Apr), accessible by the Aosta-Pila cable car from Aosta or an 18km drive south, is quick and easy to reach from the town. Its 70km of runs, served by 13 lifts, form one of the valley's largest ski areas. Its highest slope, in the shadow of Gran Paradiso, reaches 2700m and sports an ace snow park with a halfpipe, jump and slide and freestyle area for boarders and freestyle skiers. The ski station is a village of sorts, but services such as the tourist office, police and medical services are handled from Aosta. For details on ski passes covering here and other resorts in the Valle d'Aosta, see p239.

WALKING & MOUNTAIN BIKING

The lower slopes leading down from Pila into the Dora Baltea valley provide picturesque walks and rides. Mountain bikes can be trans-



ported for free on the **Aosta-Pila cable car** (adult one way/return €2.60/4.20; ☎ 8am-12.15pm & 2-5pm or 6pm Jun-Aug) and mountain bikers can buy a one-day pass (transport only; €13), allowing unlimited use of the cable car and chairlifts. The tourist office gives advice on mountain-biking itineraries and walking trails and has lists of Alpine guides and mountain accommodation.

Recommended walking clubs that organise treks and provide guides include the following:

Club Alpino Italiano (CAI; ☎ 0165 4 01 94; www.caivda.it in Italian; Corso Battaglione Aosta 81; ☎ 6.30-8pm Tue, 8-10pm Fri) West of the city centre.

Interguide (☎ 0165 4 09 39; www.interguide.it in Italian; Via Monte Emilius 13; ☎ 6.30-8pm Tue, 8-10pm Fri) West of the city centre.

Meinardi Sport (☎ 0165 4 06 78; Via E Aubert; ☎ 3-7.30pm Mon, 9am-12.30pm & 3-7.30pm Tue-Sat) A well-stocked sports shop with walking supplies and maps.

SCENIC FLIGHTS

For a bird's-eye view of the peaks, panoramic flights over Mont Blanc, Monte Rosa and the Matterhorn cost €100 for 30 minutes and €170 for one hour, with a maximum of three passengers per flight. Contact Aosta's **Aerodub** (☎ 0165 26 24 42).

WINE & CHEESE TASTING

The Valle d'Aosta is home to vineyards producing sought-after wines that are rarely available outside the region, including those from Europe's highest vineyard, **Morgex et La**

Salle (www.caveduvinbland.com), named for the two villages strung together by its vines. Aosta's tourist office has a free, comprehensive booklet in English with information on cellars you can tour and taste.

Local cheeses can be tasted at the Valpelline Visitors' Centre – see boxed text, below. You'll need your own wheels for both.

Festivals & Events

For over 1000 years, the **Fiera di Sant'Orso**, the annual wood fair, has been held on 30 and 31 January around Porta Praetoria, in honour of the town's patron saint who made wooden shoes for the poor (hence you'll see many wooden shoes in craft shops around town). Woodcarvers from all over the valley gather to display their works and present an item to the saint at the Chiesa di Sant'Orso.

Sleeping

Because of its role as the regional capital, many of Aosta's limited number of hotels cater to business travellers. Cheaper (and often more charming) lodgings lie in nearby valleys, such as Cogne, 24km south of Aosta on the northern fringe of the Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso; see p246.

Hotel Turin (☎ 0165 4 45 93; www.hotelTurin.it; Via Torino 14; s €34-60, d €58-84; (P) (A)) A modern, boxy glass-and-steel affair, the three-star Turin is a handy suitcase drag from the train station and a short distance to carry your skis or snowboard to ride the cable car up to Pila.

Hotel Roma (☎ 0165 4 08 21; hroma@libero.it; Via Torino 7; s €36-54, d €60-76; (P)) Appropriately named for this Roman city, the Roma is a friendly, reasonably priced option just outside the old Roman walls, and wheelchair access is possible. Breakfast costs an extra €6.

ourpick Hotel Milleluci (☎ 0165 4 42 74; www.hotelmilleluci.com; Loc Porossan Roppoz 15; s €100-120, d €120-220; (P) (X) (♿) (A) (A)) Old wooden skis, traditionally carved wooden shoes, clawfoot baths, indoor and outdoor pools, a jacuzzi, sauna and gym, and sumptuous skiers' breakfast make this large, family-run converted farmhouse worth seeking out on the city's northern hillside. Many rooms have timber balconies, from where you can look out to the so-titled 'thousand lights' twinkling from Aosta below, and the family welcomes weary travellers with kindness.

Eating & Drinking

Traditional dishes include *seupa valpellinentze* (thick soup of cabbage, bread, beef broth and *fontina*) and *carbonada con polenta* (soup traditionally made with chamois, though these days usually beef).

Open-air café terraces spring up on Piazza Chanoux in summer.

Trattoria degli Artisti (☎ 0165 4 09 60; Via Maillet 5-7; mains €7.50-18; (X) Tue-Sat) Fabulous Valdostan cuisine is dished up at this dark, cosy little trattoria, tucked down an alleyway off Via Aubert. *Antipasti* such as puff pastry filled with Valdostan fondue, cured ham and regional salami are followed by dishes such as roe venison with polenta, and beef braised in Morgex et La Salle white wine.

Taverna da Nando (☎ 0165 4 44 55; Via de Tillier 41; set menus €14-28, mains €9-17; (X) Tue-Sun) Polenta and veal dominate the menu at this relaxed courtyard eatery.

Ad Forum (☎ 0165 4 00 11; Via Mons de Sales 11; mains €12-19; (X) Tue-Sun; (♿)) No, it's not a convention of advertising execs – this stylish garden restaurant is built on part of the remains of the Roman forum. Conceptual dishes such as

VALDOSTAN CHEESE

Something like a cross between Gouda and Brie, *fontina* is preserved under its own DOP (designation of protected origin). It must be made from the full-cream, unpasteurised milk of Valdostan cows that have grazed on pastures up to 2700m above sea level. During a period of three months it matures in underground rock tunnels, and is turned daily and brushed and salted on alternate days. Learn more about these and other local cheese-making traditions at the **Valpelline Visitors' Centre** (☎ 0165 7 33 09; www.fontinacoop.it; Frissonière; admission free; (X) 8.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 3-6pm Sat & Sun mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 9am-noon & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri mid-Sep-mid-Jun). You'll need wheels to get to the centre from Aosta. Follow the SR28 for 7km north to Valpelline, turn east towards Ollomont and after 1.5km turn west along a mountain road to Frissonière.

In Aosta, shops stock local cheeses including Stravecchio di Montagna, an extremely strong, salty and potent hard cheese – eat it *before* asking how it is made.

risotto with strawberries and spumante, or with cheese and apple, come in gargantuan portions, and the attached *enoteca* has an excellent line-up of wines.

Vecchia Aosta (☎ 0165 36 11 86; Piazza Porte Pretoriana 4; set menus €27; 🍷 lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat; 🍷) Spanning several floors of the Roman Porta Praetoria tower, this award-winning restaurant serves superb seasonally changing regional cuisine.

Shopping

Craft shops in town sell traditional Valdostan objects made by certified local artisans. Unique items to look out for include a *grolla* – a large wooden goblet whose name is derived from the word 'grail' in reference to the Holy Grail, which is said to have passed through the village and been copied by local craftsmen. Another Valdostan tradition is the *coppa dell'amicizia* (friendship cup) – a wooden bowl filled with coffee laced with citrus rind and strong grappa and set alight. The 'cup' has anything from two to 15 mouth-pieces, out of which friends take turns drinking as it's passed around.

Getting There & Away

Buses operated by **Savda** (www.savda.it) run to Milan (1½ to 3½ hours, two daily), Turin (two hours, up to 10 daily) and Courmayeur (one hour, up to eight daily), as well as French destinations including Chamonix. Services leave from Aosta's **bus station** (☎ 0165 26 20 27; Via Giorgio Carrel), virtually opposite the train station. To get to Breuil-Cervinia, take a Turin-bound bus to Châtillon (30 minutes, eight daily), then a connecting bus (one hour, seven daily) to the resort.

Aosta's train station, on Piazza Manzetti, is served by trains from most parts of Italy via Turin (€7.10, two to 2½ hours, more than 10 daily).

Aosta is on the A5, which connects Turin with the Mont Blanc Tunnel and France. Another exit road north of the city leads to the Great St Bernard Tunnel and on to Switzerland.

Getting Around

Aosta's walled centre is closed to private cars. Shuttle buses run through town from the train station. Book a **taxi** (☎ 0165 3 18 31) or hire your own wheels from **Europcar** (☎ 0165 4 14 32) at the train station.

AOSTA VALLEY CASTLES

Gothic castles loom above the Valle d'Aosta. Each castle is within view of the next, and messages used to be transferred along the valley by flag signals. If you're driving, you can take in several on a single trip, although note that closing days differ in some cases. From Aosta follow the scenic S26, which runs parallel to the busy A5. The castles are all clearly signposted (and in any case, they're impossible to miss).

East from Aosta is the magnificently restored **Castello di Fénis** (☎ 0165 76 42 63; adult/child €5/free; 🕒 9am-6.30pm Mar-Jun & Sep, 9am-7.30pm Jul & Aug, 10-11.30am & 2-4.30pm Wed-Sat & Mon, 10-11.30am & 2-5.30pm Sun Oct-Feb). Formerly owned by the Challant family, it features rich frescoes. It was never really used as a defensive post but served as a plush residence.

Past St-Vincent is the sober **Castello di Verrès** (☎ 0125 92 90 67; admission €3; 🕒 9am-6.30pm Mar-Jun & Sep, 9am-7.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Fri, Sat & Mon-Wed, 10am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Sun Oct-Feb). More like the real thing, this castle does sentinel duty high on its rocky perch.

Around 1km southwest of the Dora Baltea river, below the town of Verrès, is the 15th-century **Castello d'Issogne** (☎ 0125 92 93 73; adult/child €5/free; 🕒 9am-6.30pm daily Mar-Jun & Sep, 9am-7.30pm daily Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Thu-Sat & Mon & Tue, 10am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Sun Oct-Feb). This building was a castle, although you would hardly know it – it looks more like a stately home.

Further down the valley still, towards Pont-St-Martin, the hulking fortress of **Bard** (☎ 0125 83 38 11; adult/child €8/4; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, to 7pm Sat & Sun Sep-Jul, to 8pm daily Aug) was a no-nonsense military outpost given short shrift by Napoleon on his first campaign into Italy. Today it contains a museum and mounts archaeological and science-oriented exhibitions, which cost an additional €4 for adults and €2 for children. From Pont-St-Martin, you could strike north to Castel Savoia in Gressoney-St-Jean; see p248.

Heading west from Aosta towards Mont Blanc, you'll quickly come across **Castello di Sarre** (☎ 0165 25 75 39; adult/child €5/free; 🕒 9am-6.30pm Mar-Jun & Sep, 9am-7.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Sun Oct-Feb). Built in 1710 on the remains of a 13th-century fort, it was then bought by King Vittorio Emanuele II in 1869 to use as a hunting residence. The Savoyes sold the castle in 1972

and it now serves as a museum of the royal presence in the region.

Continuing west, **Castello di Saint-Pierre** (☎ 0165 90 34 85; adult/child €3/free; 🕒 10am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 10am-noon & 1.30-6.30pm Sun Mar-Sep, 10am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 10am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Sun Oct-Feb) is home to a natural history museum with changing exhibitions.

COURMAYEUR

pop 3000 / elev 1224m

Set against the backdrop of Mont Blanc, Courmayeur could be a scene from a Christmas card, with soft street lamps illuminating the snow falling on the pedestrianised stone village. The resort has more than 140km of downhill and cross-country ski runs. Courmayeur's old Roman centre comes alive during après ski hours, which are the liveliest in the valley. When the snow melts, walking or biking opportunities are limitless, including 280km of blazed walking trails through the mountains.

Thanks to the A5 motorway, Courmayeur is one of the most easily reached resorts in the Valle d'Aosta, and gets busy with Turinese and Milanese skiers, especially on Sundays in high season.

Information

Ambulance (☎ 0165 84 46 84)

Centro Traumatologico (☎ 0165 84 46 84; Strada dell Volpi 3) Medical clinic; open business hours. The nearest hospital is in Aosta.

Tourist office (☎ 0165 84 20 60; www.courmayeur.it) .net in Italian; Piazzale Monte Bianco 13; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm

Activities

The **Società delle Guide Alpine di Courmayeur** (☎ 0165 84 20 64; www.guidecourmayeur.com; Strada del Villair), founded in 1859, is Italy's oldest guiding association. In winter its guides lead adventure seekers off-piste, up frozen waterfalls and on heli-skiing expeditions. In summer, rock climbing, canyoning, canoeing, kayaking and hiking are among its many outdoor activities. The association's dramatic history unfolds in the **Museo Alpino Duca degli Abruzzi** (☎ 0165 84 20 64; Piazza Henry 2; admission free; 🕒 hours vary).

For lower-altitude walks with a nature guide, contact **Sidar** (☎ 347 26 32 466; www.sidar-montagne.com in Italian).

SKIING

Courmayeur's network of cable cars, gondolas and numerous drag lifts are run by **Funiive Courmayeur Mont Blanc** (☎ 0165 84 66 58; www.courmayeur-montblanc.com; Strada Regionale 47).

Skiing lessons starting at around €30 an hour are available from the **Scuola di Sci Monte Bianco** (☎ 0165 84 24 77; www.scuolascimontebianco.com in Italian; Strada Regionale 51), founded in 1922; and the **Courmayeur Ski & Snowboard School** (☎ 0165 84 82 54; www.scuolascicourmayeur.it; Piazzale Monte Bianco 15).

The **Vallee Blanche** offers an exhilarating off-piste descent from Punta Helbronner (see below) across the Mer de Glace glacier into Chamonix, France. The route itself is not difficult (anyone of intermediate ability can do it), but an experienced guide is essential to steer you safely around the hidden crevasses. All up, the 24km Vallee Blanche takes around four to five hours, allowing time to stop and take in the view. Highly experienced hardcore skiers can tackle the **Toula Glacier** descent, which also takes off from Punta Helbronner and drops for six sheer kilometres to La Palud. Again, a guide is essential. In both cases it's usually easy to join in with a guide-led group.

WALKING & MOUNTAIN BIKING

In July and August the Courmayeur and Val Veny **cable cars** (☎ 0165 84 66 58; one way/return €6/10) and the Maison Vieille **chairlift** (☎ 0165 84 66 58; one way/return €4/5) whisk walkers and mountain bikers up into the mountains; transporting a bike is free. All three run from around 9.15am to 1pm and 2.15pm to 5.15pm from June to August.

The vertigo-inducing **La Palud–Punta Helbronner cable car** (☎ 0165 8 99 25; www.montebianco.com in Italian; return trip €32; 🕒 8.30am-12.40pm & 2-4.30pm) departs every 20 minutes in each direction. At the 2173m-high midstation **Pavillon du Mt Fréty** (return €13), you can take a summertime stroll through the flower-filled Alpine garden, **Giardino Alpino Saussurea** (☎ 0165 8 99 25; adult/child €2/1.50; 🕒 9.30am-6pm Jul-Sep), which is blanketed by snow in winter. Walking trails around here are numerous and many fall within the **Pavillon du Mt Fréty Nature Oasis**, a protected zone of 1200 hectares tucked between glaciers, where you have a good chance of spotting ibexes, marmots and deer.

Even in midsummer, temperatures plummet as low as -10°C at **Punta Helbronner** (3462m). Take heavy winter clothes and sunglasses for the blinding snow, and head

up early in the morning to avoid the heavy weather that often descends here in the early afternoon. At Punta Helbronner a small, free **museum** displays crystals found in the mountains. From Punta Helbronner another cable car (from late May to late September, depending on the weather conditions) takes you on a breathtaking 5km transglacial ride across the Italian border to the Aiguille du Midi (3842m) in France (from where the world's highest cable car transports you into Chamonix, France; prices to Aiguille du Midi/Chamonix are €18/34). More information is available at www.chamonix.net.

For many walkers (some 30,000 each summer), the trophy hike is the **Tour du Mont Blanc** (TMB). This 169km trek crosses across Italy, France and Switzerland, stopping at nine villages en route. Snow makes it impassable for much of the year. The average duration is anything from one week to 12 days; smaller sections are also possible. It's possible to undertake the hike without a guide, but if you're unfamiliar with the area, hooking up with a local guide is a good idea as the route traverses glacial landscapes.

Mountain beds can be hired for around €10 per day at **Noleggio Courmayeur** (☎ 0165 84 22 55), in front of the Courmayeur chairlift.

THERMAL SPA

Bubbling a natural 37°C from the mountains' depths, the thermal water at Pré-St-Didier has long been a source of therapeutic treatments. A beautiful 1920s building is the newly renovated location for this soothing **spa** (☎ Terme di Pré-St-Didier; ☎ 0165 86 72 72; www.termedipre.it; Allée des Thermes; daily admission Mon-Fri €32, Sat & Sun €35; ☎ 10am-9pm Sun-Fri, to 11pm Sat). Admission includes use of a bathrobe, towel and slippers, plus fresh-squeezed juices, fruit and herbal teas. In addition to saunas, whirlpools and toning waterfalls there's an indoor-outdoor thermal pool. It's lit by candles and torches on Saturday nights, when it is spectacular amid the snow and stars.

Before leaving the spa, head 50-odd metres beyond the car park in the opposite direction to the village, where a little **Roman bridge** arcs over the trout-filled river.

Sleeping & Eating

Ask the tourist office for a list of *rifugi*; usually open from late June to mid-September. Quality food shops and restaurants line Via Roma.

Camping Arc en Ciel (☎ 0165 80 92 57; www.campingarcenciel.it; Strada Feysouilles 20, Morgex; person/tent & car €5.20/7; ☎ year-round) This peaceful leafy camping ground sprawls over 1020 sq metres, with shady, well-spaced sites and its own bar/restaurant. It is 9km east of Courmayeur.

Dente del Gigante (☎ 0165 8 91 45; www.dentedelgigante.com; Strada La Pulud, Courmayeur; d €60-144; ☎ hotel & restaurant closed Jun & Nov; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎) This spotless chalet-style hotel is less than two minutes' walk from the La Palud-Punta Helbronner cable car, 3km from Courmayeur's centre (with two bus stops nearby). Guests and non-guests can replenish at the hotel's restaurant (set menus €16; open for lunch and dinner Tuesday to Sunday), which serves up hearty, healthy cuisine such as polenta ravioli with red wine beef stew, hazelnut-encrusted trout with pine nuts and raisins, and an ice-cold orange mousse with Grand Marnier sauce.

Hotel Bouton d'Or (☎ 0165 84 67 29; www.hotelboutondor.com; Strada Statale 26/10, Courmayeur; s €68-90, d €90-140; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎) You can take full advantage of Courmayeur's chic boutiques and après ski scene at this large, light-filled hotel situated right in the centre of Courmayeur. Most of the spacious rooms have balconies, and there's a small sauna as well as a shuttle to the cable car.

Mont Blanc Hotel Village (☎ 0165 86 41 11; www.hotelmontblanc.it; La Croisette 36; s €105-190, d €190-260; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) On the hillside of La Salle, 10km east of Courmayeur, this haven of luxury has beautiful stone-and-wood rooms, many with enormous balconies with views across the valley. A series of cave-like nooks conceal spa treatment rooms and steaming saunas. Half-board is available at the hotel's standard restaurant. To truly dine in style, guests and non-guests can head to the hotel's second, gastronomic restaurant (following).

our pick La Cassolette (set menus €55-65) Also at Mont Blanc Hotel Village, this restaurant serves spectacularly presented fare such as scallops with passion fruit, crayfish risotto with red beer and apples, and a pyramid of white chocolate with Cogne cream.

Rifugio Pavillon (☎ 0165 84 40 90; Pavillon du Mt Fréty; mains €15.50-18; ☎ 10am-5pm Dec-Oct) Perched at the first midstation on the Punta Helbronner cable car at a heady height of 2173m, with a deckchair-lined sun terrace, this bar/café/restaurant cooks up mountain feasts including Savoy cabbage rolls with chestnuts, and wheat pasta in deer sauce.

Getting There & Away

Three trains a day from Aosta terminate at Pré-St-Didier, with bus connections (20 to 30 minutes, eight to 10 daily) to **Courmayeur bus station** (☎ 0166 84 13 97; Piazzale Monte Bianco) outside the tourist office. There are up to eight direct Aosta–Courmayeur buses daily (€3, one hour) and long-haul buses serve Milan (€15.50, 4½ hours, three to five daily) and Turin (€9, 3½ to 4½ hours, two to four daily).

Immediately north of Courmayeur, the 11.6km-long Mont Blanc Tunnel leads to Chamonix (France). At the Italian entrance, a plaque commemorates Pierlucio Tinazzi, a security employee who died while saving at least a dozen lives during the 1999 disaster when a freight truck caught fire in the tunnel.

PARCO NAZIONALE DEL GRAN PARADISO

The valleys making up Gran Paradiso are paradise found for travellers seeking unspoilt nature.

Gran Paradiso became Italy's first national park in 1922 after Vittorio Emanuele II gave his hunting reserve to the state. By 1945 the ibex had been almost hunted to extinction and there were only 419 left in the park. Today, as the result of a conservation policy, almost 4000 live here.

The park incorporates the valleys around the Gran Paradiso (4061m), three of which are in the Valle d'Aosta: the Valsavarenche, Val di Rhêmes and the beautiful Valle di Cogne. On the Piedmont side of the mountain, the park includes the valleys of Soana and Orco.

The main stepping stone into the park is **Cogne** (population 1474; elevation 1534m). This former iron-ore mining village can thank the narrow, winding road between here and Aosta, 24km away, for its tranquillity. Cogne is also known for its lace-making; you can buy its lace at the charming craft and antique shop, **Le Marché Aux Puces** (☎ 0165 74 96 66; Rue Grand Paradis 4; ☒ closed Wed).

Information

Cogne's **tourist office** (☎ 0165 7 40 40; www.cogne.org; Piazza Chanoux 36; ☒ 9am–12.30pm & 2.30–5.30pm Mon–Sat) has stacks of information on the park and a list of emergency contact numbers. The **Consorzio Gran Paradiso Natura** (☎ 0165 92 06 09; www.granparadisonatura.it; Loc Trépoint 91, Villeneuve) also has tourist information.

Activities

Fill your lungs with pure mountain air during any number of winter and summer activities.

Excellent **cross-country skiing trails** (admission per day €4) line the Valle di Cogne, one of the Valle d'Aosta's most picturesque, unspoilt valleys. There are 80km of well-marked cross-country trails in Cogne, also the starting point for 9km of downhill slopes. A one-/two-day ski pass covering the use of Cogne's single cable car, chairlift and drag lift costs €20/35. Skiing lessons are offered by the **Scuola Italian Sci Gran Paradiso ski** (☎ 0165 7 43 00; Piazza Chanoux 38, Cogne). It also leads **ice climbing** expeditions.

Butterflies and Alpine flora can be seen in summer at the fascinating **Giardino Alpino Paradisia** (☎ 0165 7 41 47; adult/child €2.50/1.50; ☒ 9.30am–12.30pm & 2.30–6.30pm Jun–mid-Sep), an Alpine botanical garden in the tiny hamlet of Valnontey (1700m), 3km south of Cogne. Guided nature walks from July to September are organised by the **Associazione Guide della Nature** (☎ 0165 7 42 82; Piazza Chanoux 36, Cogne; ☒ 9am–noon Mon, Wed & Sat).

From Cogne an easy walking trail (3km) leads southeast through forest to the Lillaz waterfall. **Swimming** is popular here, but take care as the water can be dangerously cold, even in high summer. Another path (2.8km) meanders through Cogne's wildflower-filled meadows south to Valnontey. From the top of the **Cogne–Montzeuc cable car** (☎ 0165 7 40 08; one way/return €4/6; ☒ 9am–noon & 2–5.30pm Jul–mid-Sep) there's a nature trail (4km), with information panels and 15 observation posts. The main point of departure for the Gran Paradiso peak is Pont in the Valsavarenche. For guides, contact the **Società Guide Alpine di Cogne** (☎ 0165 7 42 82; geoabel@libero.it; Piazza Chanoux 40, Cogne).

Horse riding (per hr €25) and horse and 45-minute **horse-and-carriage rides** (per carriage of up to 4 people €40) through the mountain meadows are run by **Pianta Cavalli** (☎ 3333 14 72 48) in Valnontey.

Sleeping & Eating

Wilderness camping is forbidden in the park, but there are 11 *rifugi*; the tourist office has a list.

Camping Lo Stambecco (☎ 0165 7 41 52; www.campinglostambecco.com; Valnontey; person/tent/car €7/3/6; ☒ May–Sep; **P**) Pitch up under the pine trees in the heart of the park at this well-run and friendly site. Its sister hotel, La Barme, rents bikes to explore the mountains.

La Barme (☎ 0165 74 91 77; www.hotellabarme.com; Valnontey; d half-board €94-126; ☞ spring & autumn closures vary; P ☒) This former dairy dating from the 1830s has been transformed into a cosy 15-room hotel with wooden furnishings and a roaring winter fire. In addition to bikes, the hotel rents cross-country skis in winter. The minimum stay is three nights.

Hotel Ristorante Petit Dahu (☎ 0165 7 41 46; www.hotelpetitdahu.com; Valnontey; s half-board €40-50, d half-board €110-130, restaurant menus €35; ☞ closed May & Oct; P ☒) Straddling two traditional stone-and-wood buildings, this friendly, family-run spot has a wonderful restaurant (also open to nonguests; advance bookings essential) cooking up rustic mountain cooking using wild Alpine herbs.

ourpick Hotel Bellevue (☎ 0165 7 48 25; www.hotelbellevue.it; Rue Grand Paradis 22, Cogne; s €140-240, d €160-330, 2-person chalet €270-380; ☞ mid-Dec–mid-Oct; P ☒) Overlooking the meadows, this green-shuttered mountain hideaway evokes its 1920s origins with romantic canopied timber ‘cabin beds’, weighty cow bells strung from old beams and clawfoot baths. There are open fireplaces (stacked with a woodpile of logs) in some rooms. Afternoon tea is included in the price as well as use of the health spa, and you can also rent mountain bikes and snow shoes. Its four restaurants include a Michelin-starred gourmet affair, a cheese restaurant (closed Tuesday) with cheese from the family’s own cellar, a lunchtime terrace restaurant and a brasserie (closed Monday) on the village’s main square a few moments’ stroll away.

Getting There & Around

There are up to seven buses daily to/from Cogne and Aosta (50 minutes). Cogne can also be reached by cable car from Pila.

Valley buses (up to 10 daily) link Cogne with Valnontey (€0.90, five minutes) and Lillaz (€0.90, five minutes).

VALTOURNENCHE

Some of Europe’s highest-altitude skiing is possible year-round in this valley dominated by the 4478m Matterhorn, described by English poet Byron as ‘Europe’s noble rock’. From Valtournenche’s prestigious ski resort, **Breuil-Cervinia** (2050m), you can ski into Zermatt (Switzerland). Smaller skiing areas include **Antey-St-André** (1080m), **La Magdeleine** (1644m) and **Valtournenche** (1524m), 9km south of Breuil-Cervinia.

The valley’s tourist offices can help with accommodation:

Antey-St-André (☎ 0166 54 82 66; antey@montecervino.it; Piazza A Rolando 1; ☞ 9am-noon & 3-6.30pm)

Breuil-Cervinia (☎ 0166 94 91 36; www.cervinia.it; Via Carrel 29; ☞ 9am-noon & 3-6.30pm)

Valtournenche (☎ 0166 9 20 29; valtournenche@montecervino.it; Via Roma 45; ☞ 9am-noon & 3-6.30pm)

Activities

Plateau Rosa (3480m) and the Little Matterhorn (3883m) in the Breuil-Cervinia ski area offer some of Europe’s highest skiing, while the Campetto area has introduced the Valle d’Aosta to night skiing. A couple of dozen cable cars, four of which originate in Breuil-Cervinia, serve the 200km of downhill pistes. A one-day ski pass covering Breuil-Cervinia and Valtournenche costs €34. Numerous rates and add-ons are listed at www.cervinia.it.

Contact Breuil-Cervinia’s **Scuola di Sci del Breuil Cervinia** (☎ 0166 94 09 60; www.scuolascibreuil.com) or **Scuola Sci del Cervino** (☎ 0166 94 87 44; www.scuolacervino.com) for skiing and snowboarding lessons, and its mountain guide association **Società Guide del Cervino** (☎ 0166 94 81 69; www.guidedelcervino.com; Via J Antoine Carrel 20) to make the most of the Matterhorn’s wild off-piste opportunities.

Between July and September several cableways and lifts to **Plateau Rosa** continue to operate, allowing year-round skiing on the Swiss side of the mountain. In October cableways only run on the weekend. A one-day international ski pass costs €45.

Basic walking maps are available at the information offices, but if you want to tackle the Matterhorn you need to be properly dressed and equipped; and accompanied by a guide if you’re unfamiliar with the terrain.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Punta Maquignaz (☎ 0166 94 91 45; www.puntamaquignaz.com; Breuil-Cervinia; d half-board €144-270; ☞ spring & autumn closures vary) With stacked logs in the hallway, cow bells and bear skins, this timber chalet has a consistent reputation for excellent food as part of its half-board deals.

Rifugio Guide del Cervino (☎ 0166 9 21 01; giorgio.carrel@galactica.it; ☞ Dec–mid-May & late Jun–mid-Sep) Ride the Plateau Rosa cable car to this mountain hut, breathtakingly nestled at the height of 3480m on Plateau Rosa. At full moon it hosts dinners, followed by a torch-lit ski descent down into Breuil-Cervinia.

Getting There & Away

Savda (☎ 0165 36 12 44) operates buses from Breuil-Cervinia to Châtillon (one hour, seven daily), from where there are connecting buses to/from Aosta and trains to other destinations in Italy. Longer-haul seasonal bus services from Breuil-Cervinia include to/from Turin, Milan and Genoa.

VALLE D'AYAS, VAL DI GRESSONEY & VALSESIA

Forming the Monte Rosa Ski domain, these three valleys snake north to the feet of majestic **Monte Rosa** (4633m). Despite its name, Monte Rosa does not refer to the colour *rosa* (pink). Instead, it derives from the patois word *roja*, meaning glacier. It was across the mountain's glacial terrain to these southern valleys that the German-descended Walsers migrated from Switzerland's Valais region in the 13th century. Today, much of this area retains a strong Walser community and traditions. German (and Tich dialect) remains the mother tongue of many in these rural climes, where centuries-old wood-slatted Walser houses on short stilts dot the hillsides.

Varallo (population 7795; elevation 451m) marks the start of the Valsesia. The Passion of Christ dramatically unfolds at Varallo's **Sacro Monte di Varallo** (☎ 0163 5 39 38; www.parks.it/riserva.sacro.monte.varallo; admission free), a series of 50 chapels dating back to the 16th century, accessed via a walking path from Piazza Ferrari in town. The big-dipper-style Valsesia helter-skelters from the ski resort of **Alagna Valsesia** (1191m) in the north to urban Vercelli, 50km west of Milan.

At the head of the Valle d'Ayas is its main ski resort, **Champoluc** (population 500; elevation 1560). This storybook spot is saved from tourism overload by the difficult road twisting from the A5 exit at Verrès around some tortuous hairpin bends.

The main villages in the Val di Gressoney are pretty lakeside **Gressoney-St-Jean** (population 816; elevation 1385m), and **Gressoney-La-Trinité** (population 306; elevation 1637m), a few kilometres to its north. Queen Margherita picked Gressoney-St-Jean as the location for **Castel Savoia** (☎ 0125 35 53 96; adult/child €5/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon & 1.30-6.30pm Sun Mar-Sep, 10am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Sun Oct-Feb) in 1894, a fairy-tale mansion enjoyed by the Italian royals well into the 1900s.

Information

Tourist offices in the valleys include the following:

Alagna Valsesia (☎ 0163 92 29 88; www.alagna.it; Piazza Grober 1) The Valsesia's main information source for mountain activities.

Champoluc (☎ 0125 30 71 13; www.ariatmonterosa.com; Via Varasc 16; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 4-7pm Jan-Apr, 9am-12.30pm & 3-6pm May-Dec)

Gressoney-La-Trinité (☎ 0125 36 61 43; infogressoneylatrinite@libero.it; Piazza Tache; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 4-7pm Jan-Apr, 9am-12.30pm & 3-6pm May-Dec)

Gressoney-St-Jean (☎ 0125 35 51 85; www.ariatmonterosawalser.it; Villa Deslex; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Sun)

Varallo (☎ 0163 56 44 04; www.turismovalsesiavercelli.it; Corso Roma 38; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1pm & 2.30-7pm Sat)

Activities

Monterosa Ski (www.monterosa-ski.com) sports 180km of downhill runs (best suited to intermediate skiers) and 38 ski lifts. From **Alagna Valsesia** a cable car climbs to Punta Indren (3260m). Its 25km-long Gressoney-St-Jean piste takes skiers past Castel Savoia and dozens of traditional Walser houses.

White-water rafting, canoeing and kayaking take place in the Sesia's wild rapids from May to September; contact Varallo's **Accadueo Scuola di Sport Fluviali** (☎ 347 583 68 88; www.acca-duo-sesia.it in Italian; Crevola Varallo).

From Champoluc, **Società Guide Champoluc Ayas** (☎ 3462 44 12 19; www.guidetchampoluc.com) organises a smorgasbord of activities including mountaineering, free climbing, canyoning, heli-skiing, freeriding, snowshoeing and ice climbing.

Remote mountain villages inaccessible by car can be visited on customised **jeep tours** (☎ 0125 30 79 97).

The valleys have a wealth of **walking** opportunities in summer; one option is to ride a cable car from Gressoney-La-Trinité to Lago Gabiet, an Alpine lake (elevation 2357m), from where numerous trails can be picked up. From the hamlet of Antagnod, near Champoluc, a 3km-long signed trail leads up to Monte Zerbion (2727m), which is topped by a statue of the Madonna. For an alternative spiritual journey, trekking yoga, combining walking with breathing and yoga positions in tune with the surroundings, is run by local nature guide/yoga teacher, **Marzia Mosca** (☎ 3407 74 28 19). Prices depend on the

number of participants. The tourist offices have more details, as well as lists of local Alpine and lower-altitude guides.

Sleeping & Eating

Rifugio Gabiet (☎ 0125 36 62 58; www.rifugiogabiet.it; Lago Gabiet; d half-board €80; ☞ mid-Dec–mid-Apr & mid-Jun–mid-Sep) Peering down on Lago Gabiet from a height of 2880m, this heady spot has 25 rooms with Walser furniture, a cosy lounge room with a toasty open fire, and a sundeck. It can be reached by cable car from Gressoney-La-Trinité.

Residence Lo Peyo (☎ 0125 30 40 23; www.residencepeyo.it; Antagnod; d per week €420-770, prices per day available on request; P ☒ ☞ ☞) Meticulous attention to detail has gone into building this new self-catering spot adjacent to the ski lifts in the hamlet of Antagnod, near Champoluc. Rooms are beautifully equipped with traditional solid timber and kitchens including dishwashers, and there's a kids' playroom, a guest laundry, a sauna, and a gym with a view of the valley.

Hotel Petit Prince (☎ 0125 30 66 62; www.hotelpetitprince.com; Route Tchavagnod 1, Antagnod; d half-board €128-180; P ☞) Close to Antagnod's ski lifts, all of the modernised rooms in this former hayloft have balconies, and the attached restaurant, *L'Etoile* (The Star), serves top local cuisine with innovative twists such as blue-cheese ice cream.

ourpick Hotel Breithorn (☎ 0125 30 87 34; www.breithornhotel.com; Route Ramey 27, Champoluc; d €65-350, restaurant mains €15-20; P ☒ ☞) Built early last century, this dreamy hotel in Champoluc's village centre has timber-panelled rooms dressed in crisp white cotton, an excellent on-site restaurant and its own mountain guide

organising a weekly programme of free excursions for guests. For the ultimate mountain retreat, ask about the hotel's remote chalet (double half-board from €230; mains €20), which can only be reached by jeep in summer or Skidoo in winter. You can dine at the chalet before returning to Champoluc, or snuggle up here for the night.

Other drinking and dining recommendations:

La Grange (☎ 0125 30 78 35; St-Jacques; mains €7-16; ☞ noon-2am Thu-Tue) Fab music bar at the base of St-Jacques' ski lift serving Alpine classics such as stewed sausages with polenta, roast wild pig and potatoes, and of course, fondue.

Atelier Gourmand (☎ 0125 30 78 88; Rte Ramey 69, Champoluc; lunch menus €15-21, mains €6.50-€17) Romantic village restaurant with a candlelit stone dining room warmed by an open fire, a mountain-inspired menu and over 300 wines.

Le Vieux Lyskamm (☎ 0125 30 40 26; Rue Pasquier 22, Antagnod; summer lunch menus €15, mains €18-25; ☞ closed 1st 15 days Jun & 1st 15 days Sep) Gastronomic find for Scottish- and Irish-sourced beef, Canadian bison and local venison. Bookings essential.

Getting There & Away

Trains running through Aosta stop in St-Vincent and Verrès, from where you can catch a bus to the Ayas or Gressoney Valleys. **Valdosana Impresa Trasporti Automobilistici** (☎ 0125 96 65 46) operates buses from Verrès train station to St-Jacques (€3.20) via Champoluc (€3, one hour, up to nine daily).

Autoservizi Novarese (☎ 011 903 10 03) operates buses from Varallo to Turin (2¼ hours, two daily). For information on buses to/from Alagna Valsesia (one hour, up to five daily) contact **ATAP** (☎ 0158 40 81 17).

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