

TRAVEL

Andrew Sanger joined a host of celebrity holiday-makers

and enjoyed the high-life by the coast in Italy's stylish Portofino

PHOTOS: KYLIE, STEWARTS: GETTY



Strolling: Kylie Minogue is a regular visitor. Right: Rod Stewart and Penny Lancaster tied the knot there

Paradise in pastels



LINED UP on the quayside are shops you don't normally see in fishing villages — Dior, Gucci, Hermès, Louis Vuitton and the like. But this particular fishing village has something of a jet-set reputation. A gorgeously cute, movie-set of a

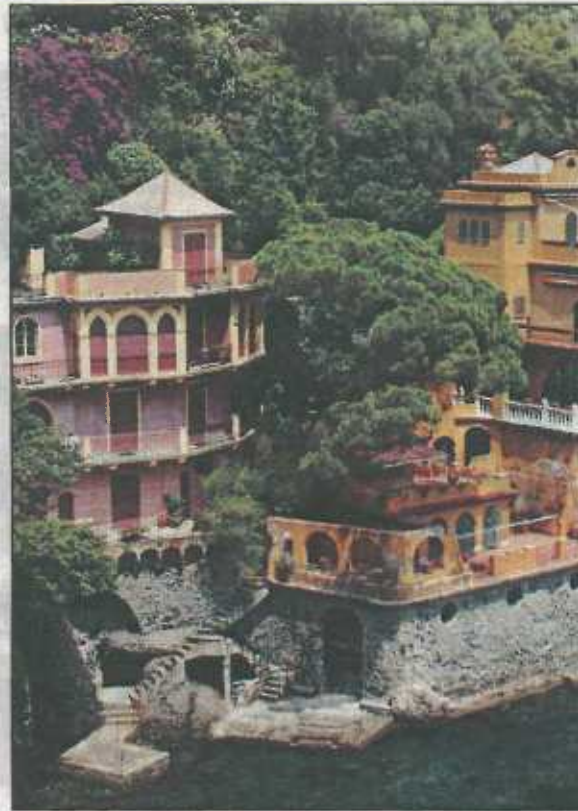
place, it's long been a favourite hideaway of stars and celebrities,

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PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



On view: Sir Elton John and David Furnish shopping Sea view: the iconic colourful waterside villas

Even the jet set sail in

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tycoons and princes. The likes of Paris Hilton and Elton John are often spotted enjoying some retail therapy, Rhianna likes to frolic along its coastal waters and Rod Stewart and Penny Lancaster chose the island to tie the knot.

But "jet set" isn't right. People don't come here by jet. They arrive quietly, on the water. A few turn up in luxury yachts, or tenders from cruises ships moored offshore. Most, though, arrive on the small ferry which plies quickly from port to port along this dazzlingly beautiful rocky shoreline.

Our own journey here, skimming through the waves, only takes 15 minutes. Yet after 14 minutes, I still can't see our destination.

Portofino is so well hidden in a narrow inlet that you can practically hear the clinking of wine glasses before the place comes into view.

And suddenly it does appear: an exquisitely pretty array of bright, russet-coloured houses along the edges of a beautifully curved harbour. White boats jostle in the clear blue water and green wooded hills rise steeply behind.

Flowerly gardens decorate the lower slopes, and along the quay hundreds of restaurant tables are laid for lunch. It's heavenly.

On shore, there's not much sightseeing, apart from the slog up to a lovely old church on a precipitous cliff – and higher still, if you like, to the castello, part of a string of forts that once protected this coast. The village itself is tiny. We'd been all over it in a few minutes and kept our eyes peeled for celebrities.

'AN EXQUISITE ARRAY OF RUSSET-COLOURED HOUSES AND A BEAUTIFUL HARBOUR'

Spying a tempting waterside table in the shade, we sat down. It's a lucky choice. The restaurant is called *O Magazin* – and what a delight. Caprese salad sprinkled with the restaurant's very own olive oil is followed by freshly made papardelle (wide strips of pasta) served with 'Portofino' sauce – tomatoes, pesto and cream.

Service is friendly and helpful, the world strolls past on the quayside, and the wine is a nicely chilled Riviera Ligure de Ponente pigato. The dessert of panacotta with freshly made strawberry sauce is one of the best I'd ever had.

In the evening, Portofino comes into its own. As dusk falls, candles flicker on

the outdoor tables, making the whole harbour magical.

After the last ferries and buses have left, the crowd on the quays are people with villas on the hillside, or staying in the village, or at least, like us, willing to fork out for a taxi 5km back to Santa Margherita Ligure, the Italian Riviera's main resort.

Say "Riviera" nowadays and it brings France to mind. But throughout the 19th century, when Europe's aristocrats talked about the Riviera – an Italian word, of course – they meant Italy.

That's why a hundred years ago, Santa Margherita Ligure was one of the most glamorous resorts in the world.

GETTING THERE

PACKAGE:

Kirker Holidays offer a choice of hotels on the Italian Riviera. Three nights at the four-star deluxe Grand Hotel Miramare (double room, breakfasts, all flights and transfers) in Santa Margherita Ligure costs from £698 per person.

www.kirkerholidays.com

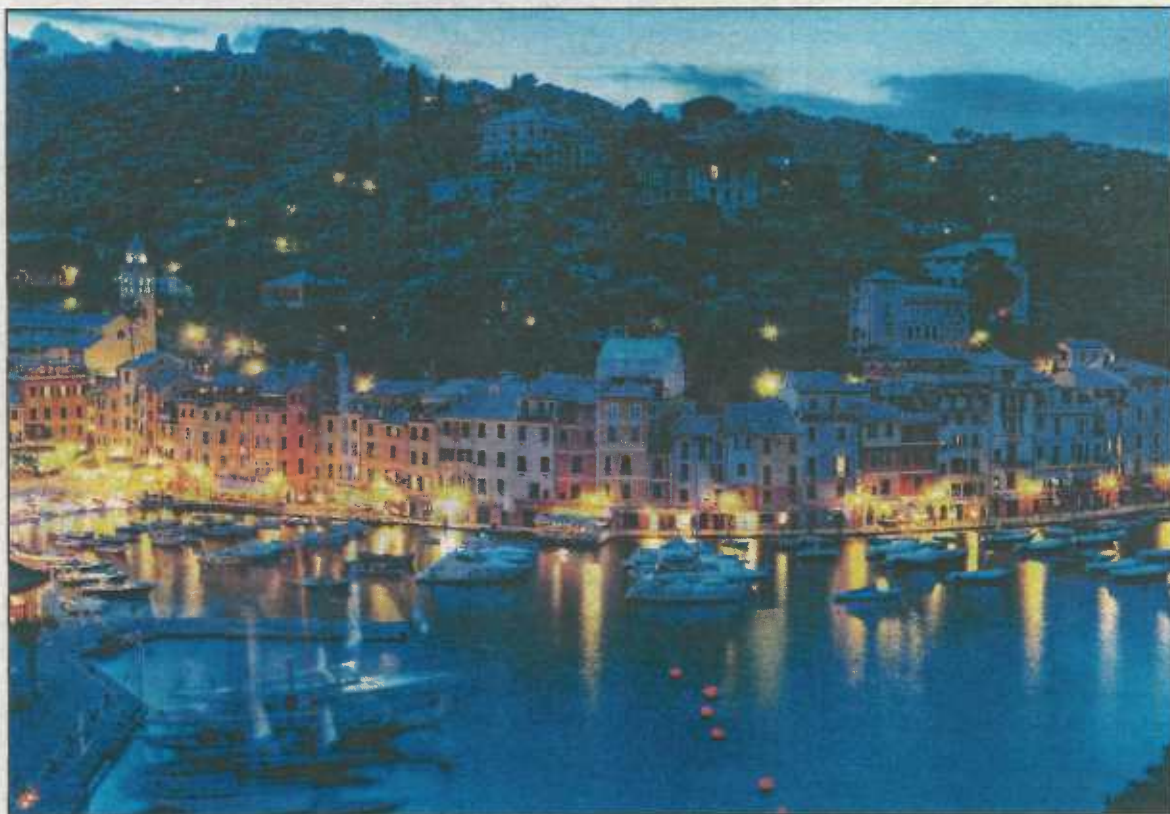
FLY For independent travellers, the nearest international airports are Milan and Genoa, served by a wide choice of airlines including BA and easyJet.

RAIL Frequent fast trains run direct to Santa Margherita

Ligure from Milan, Genoa and La Spezia. Fares from Milan start at £17 standard class one way.

To book, contact Rail Europe: 0844 848 4070 or www.raileurope.co.uk.

INFO [www.comune.santa-margherita-ligure.ge.it/Turismo\(2\)](http://www.comune.santa-margherita-ligure.ge.it/Turismo(2))



Night view: Portofino harbour, at the tip of a peninsular, seen from the hill of San Giorgio church

quietly and discreetly

Today — and often known simply as Santa — it's more down to earth, yet still somehow with a touch of class.

It's a yachting town, with an attractive and rather grand old centre, a long bustling waterfront, excellent shops and dozens of good restaurants.

And it still has one of the Riviera's best seafront resort hotels, the palatial white Grand Hotel Miramare, where we stayed.

I'll admit we took it pretty easy. After a sumptuous breakfast on the terrace, we had choices: a swim in the pool, a stroll in the grounds or an easy-going trip to explore the world outside. In town, it's worth stopping off at the

famous Baroque churches with their fantastically exuberant, richly gilded interiors.

Here, too, is another medieval castello — but this one has been turned into an art gallery.

From the quayside, a succession of ferries and tours set off throughout the day to other resorts and harbours near and far.

It's under an hour to Sestre Levante, while even the Cinque Terre coast is close enough for a visit.

But at that moment, we're not tempted. After all, Portofino is the most precious jewel on this coast, it's only 15 minutes away — and lunch beckoned.



Shimmering: The views out to sea can be breathtaking