

# Genoa

Birthplace of Christopher Columbus and Paganini, and still home to Paganini's violin 'Il Cannone', Genoa is where Verdi wrote *Simon Boccanegra* and Marco Polo wrote his travelogue. **Marian McGuinness** explores the beautiful, unspoiled Italian city that Wagner believed outshone Paris and London.

“Thank you for the Falstaff. Superb... much better than mine...” wrote Verdi on tasting the brioche laced with hazelnut cream named in his honour at the Klainguti Bakery that is still tucked away in a medieval laneway in Genoa.

Wedged between the Apennine Mountains and the Ligurian Sea, Genoa sits like a mythological Janus; one face towards the Italian Riviera and the other, the French Riviera. Dubbed 'la Superba' by the 14th-century poet, Petrarch, Genoa is indeed the Proud One with its impressive landmarks and glorious past as a Mediterranean superpower.

I take the Hop-On Hop-Off bus around this ancient city. Through my headset I'm brought up to speed with Genoa's maritime history; a commentary interspersed with Paganini's playlist, as Genoa is the birthplace of the so-called Devil's Violinist.

Pub trivia: blue canvas denim was invented for Genoese sailors. Jeans derives from Genes, the French name for Genoa. As the fabric was made in Nîmes, de Nîmes became denim.

With my city circumnavigation complete, I explore my first area of interest, Porto Antico, Genoa's working waterfront since 500 BC. Once flexing as much commercial muscle as Venice, I imagine the Phoenicians landing their merchant vessels bound for the overland trade routes of Central Europe.

The harbour is still guarded by The Lantern, the third-oldest lighthouse in the world. Originally fuelled by olive oil and juniper twigs, it was once under the charge of lighthouse keeper, Antonio Colombo, uncle of another famous Genoese son, Christopher Columbus.

The waterfront was recently revamped by world-acclaimed local architect, Renzo Piano, of Paris' Pompidou Centre and London's Shard fame. With the backdrop of James Bond boats, Piano rejuvenated the port's storehouses creating Europe's largest aquarium. Using his trademark glasswork motifs, he designed the giant, floating, la Biosfera (housing a botanical garden) and Il Bigo, the shipyard crane-styled sightseeing lift.

Docked further along with its rigs looming over the waterfront is The Neptune, the Spanish galleon built for Roman Polanski's film, *Pirates*. Metres away is the high-tech Galata Museum of the Sea. I tried out the 'mount and fall' rowing technique hauling on a nine-metre, 100-kilogram oar used on an 18th-century Genoese Galley.

One cannot visit Genoa without being aware of the 2018 tragedy when the Morandi Bridge collapsed during a storm that lashed up the vortex of the Ligurian Sea. In a healing act of architecture, Renzo Piano designed the new bridge like the keel of a boat floating in air. It is his gift to the city.

Palazzo del Principe is one of the impressive waterfront palaces. To display his wealth, the prince threw his banquet plates into the sea, but surreptitiously had them retrieved by fishing nets for his next function. Another grand residence is Palazzo San Giorgio where an imprisoned Marco Polo wrote *The Travels of Marco Polo*. In the 1400s it became the world's first bank, where Christopher Columbus held an account.

Wandering around, you feel like you are barely scratching the surface. A brass plaque



Skyscape of Genoa and the Ligurian Sea

outside Hotel Croce di Malta reveals its past residents: Henry James, Mary Shelley, Mark Twain, Albert Einstein and Giuseppe Verdi. James later wrote of Genoa, "The most winding and incoherent of cities, the most entangled topographical ravel in the world", while Wagner insisted that Paris and London "pale by comparison".

While exploring the caruggi, the tangle of medieval alleyways that Mark Twain quipped were "as crooked as a corkscrew", I seek out the Rolli Palaces in via Garibaldi. During the Republic of Genoa, 42 Renaissance and Baroque palaces were listed on the

**TRAVEL INFO****Average Temperatures:**

Winter: 8°C – Summer: 24°C

**Currency:** Euro (AUD \$1 = 0.6EUR)**Best time to visit:** Winters are mild, but try summer's three festivals**TOURIST INFORMATION**

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hospitality roll; each noble family vying to host visiting dignitaries. Palazzo Reale (Royal Palace), renowned for its Versailles-modelled Hall of Mirrors, is one not to miss. Neither are Palazzo Rosso, Palazzo Bianco and Palazzo Tursi, chock-full of paintings by Caravaggio, Titian, Tintoretto and van Dyck. The latter is also home to the holy grail of instruments, Niccolò Paganini's violin.

Passing Paganini-inspired buskers I sweep up the staircases in Palazzo Tursi to find Room 28. Cocooned within are Paganini's letters and portraits, but no violin. I push on a heavy door concealed within a wall. I hold

“PALAZZO TURSI IS HOME TO THE HOLY GRAIL OF INSTRUMENTS, PAGANINI'S VIOLIN”

my breath and enter the sacred space where a violin hangs suspended in a glass casket. I examine 'Il Cannone', Paganini's affectionate name for his sonorous virtuosic partner. Its varnish is original; the tailpiece bears the

sign of wear as he played without a chin rest. On exhibit are other intriguing memorabilia: his gold-embossed violin case, manuscripts, medals and fob watch, his music stand with attached candle holder and travelling chess set. While on the Paganini trail, take the 12-point-of-interest walk, each site detailed with a brass plaque sealed with his signature.

Whipping up to Dante's Square beyond Porta Soprana in the original weavers' district, I fossick out the house of Christopher Columbus; now a small museum. We have much to thank Columbus for, including bringing coffee to Italy.

My third area of discovery is in the heart of Genoa, Piazza de Ferrari. With a monumental bronze fountain at its centre, it is framed by elaborate palazzi, including Palazzo Ducale (the Doge's Palace), where Paganini was imprisoned and where Verdi, during his near-40 Genoese winters, wrote *Simon Boccanegra*, inspired by the first Doge of Genoa.

The other imposing building facing the piazza is Genoa's opera house, Teatro Carlo Felice. Retaining its neo-classical

### Musical Festival Trio

In the tradition of Verona's Colosseum and Rome's Baths of Caracalla summer festivals, Genoa's **Porto Antico Summer Festival** runs from mid-June to late August in the Arena of the Sea featuring opera, symphony, pop, rock, dance and jazz. The **Paganini International Music Festival**, to be held October 2 – 28, celebrates Paganini's birthday. Local and international musicians perform Paganini's vivacious works at his memorial sites across Genoa. Workshops, guided tours and themed dinners are also on offer. Paganini's birthday on October 27 is celebrated with the liberation of 'Il Cannone' from its glass casket. Under heavy guard, the famous violin is presented to the soloist on stage to perform a chosen concerto with the Teatro Carlo Felice orchestra. The next **Paganini International Violin Competition** is due to be held in 2021.



Il Cannone: Paganini's violin in Palazzo Tursi



Palazzo Reale's Hall of Mirrors



The Neptune docked in the port



Piazza de Ferrari



Christopher Columbus' house



Niccolò Paganini

façade after World War II bombing, it was rebuilt and reopened in 1991. Its rebirth consists of a 13-storey fly tower, along with three underground floors housing stage machinery and opera sets.

The auditorium is designed like a Genoese piazza. The ceiling lights represent the stars; the walls engineered to oscillate the sound in waves. Hydraulics interchange four stages; one in the front, one behind and two beneath, creating one of the largest and most innovative performance spaces in Europe. The theatre boasts its own roof lighthouse also called The Lantern. It glows from the internal lights of the opera house signifying, much like Shakespeare's raised pennant, that a cultural event is taking place. While attending the big-hearted opera *La Traviata*, I am delighted to see so many children and teenagers. Many are dressed in suits.

“UNLIKE OTHER ITALIAN CITIES, GENOA HAS NOT BEEN BURNT OUT BY [TOO MANY] TOURISTS”

It seems an ingrained tradition and so heartening to share.

Unlike other Italian cities, Genoa has not been burnt out by the onslaught of tourists. It is a city of authenticity. I leave the finale to Richard Wagner, who wrote in 1853, “I have never seen anything like this Genoa! It is something indescribably beautiful, grandiose, characteristic... I really would not know how to start explaining the impression that all this has had and is continuing to have on me...” ●