



Travel Dispatches

from

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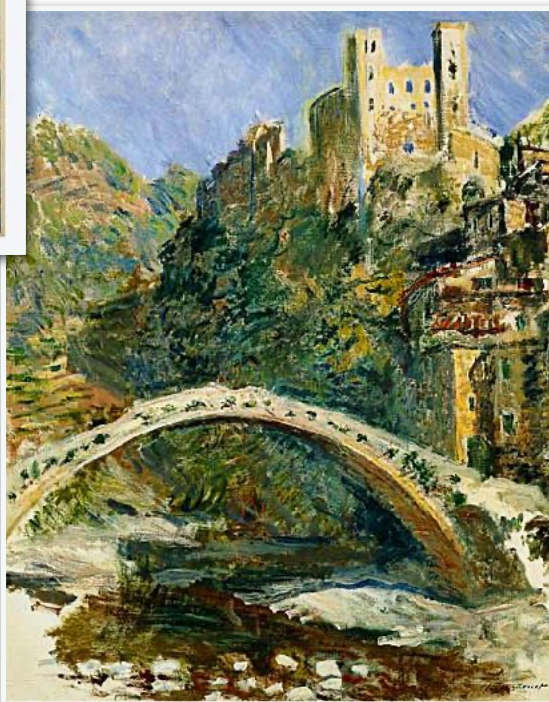
Dolceacqua-Monaco

September 14-19, 2024

After a rewarding month we left sweet Lucca behind and headed onward. The simple tasks of finding a good loaf of bread for the table, along with some fine cheese and olives and a good wine, are just more rewarding when you're surrounded by the ancient beauty of a small town like Lucca. But now we're heading toward a smaller place with the enticing name of Dolceacqua (Sweet Water). We really have no idea what to expect, but we can imagine that such a place might well be wonderful.

I had actually suggested we visit San Remo, based on a very charming old travel poster that probably depicts an ad agent's dreamscape. And of course, we found nothing that was nice and affordable to rent in San Remo.

So Carolyn looked inland, away from the ever-popular Italian



Riviera, and found tiny Dolceacqua – a little town where Monet had even painted the ancient arching bridge. So we booked it and hoped for the best.

We left Viarregio on a Frecciarossa train and watched the Italian landscape pass by our window. We're heading north along the rugged coastline of the



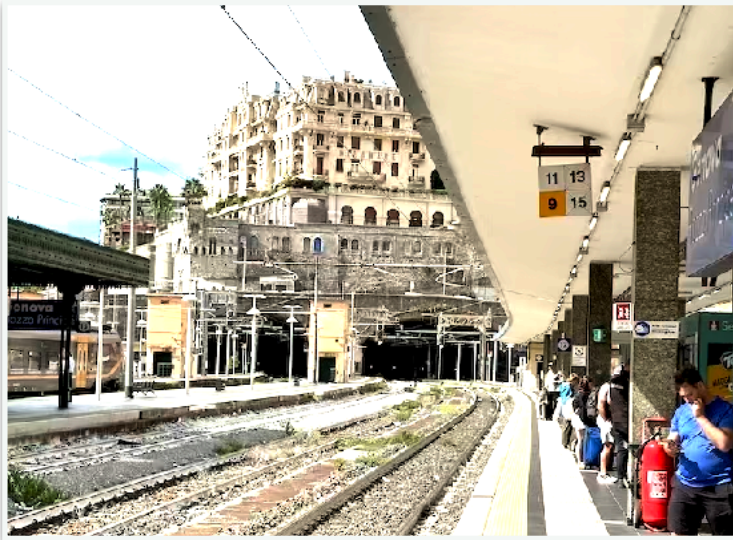
Ligurian Sea, past houses with ample grapevines for making their own home



vintage, or maybe a winter's stash of grappa. We pass La Spezia and Portofino, and the hidden coastal villages of the famous Cinque Terre where a very good set of knees is

essential for those long hilly trails. The train passes through a long series of tunnels carved into the mountainous coastline, occasionally peeking out into the daylight at stations along the way.

There's a train change in Genoa, where we dive under another massive hillside encrusted with ancient buildings as we leave the station.



We continue onward through coastal tourist villages festooned with that iconic Italian view of laundry waving from clotheslines and balconies.



And soon enough we're at Ventimiglia, right on the French border. We'd find a local bus going our way, but it's getting later in the afternoon and we don't know the local bus schedules, so we hail a cab for a ride up the valley to Dolceacqua.



The moon rises over one of Dolceacqua's churches as we relax over a good dinner and begin to acquaint ourselves with this charming small town.



After dinner we wander down the charming old back alley where our rental is located for a good night's sleep in a very comfortable bed.



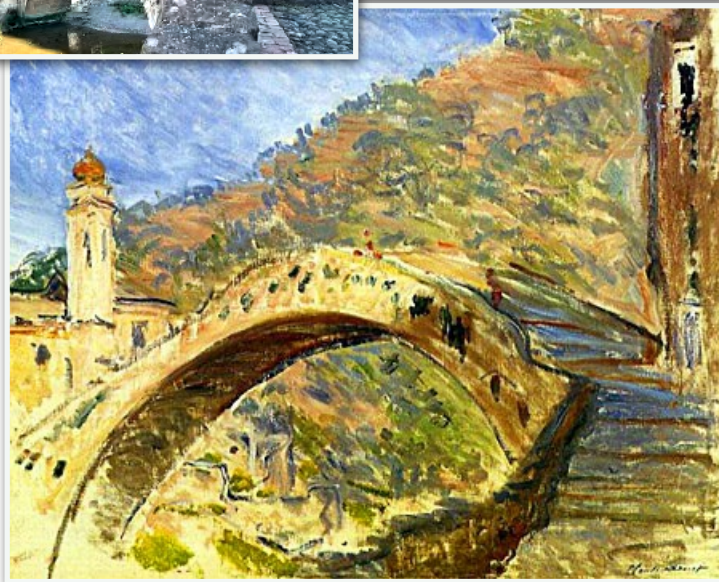
We've scored a good small rental, clean and with a decent sunny view into the trees in the piazza below. There's a good kitchenette and a cosy bedroom facing away from the street and into the quiet alley. It's all we need.



We're in a nice small town and there are some nice little coffee shops around to help us begin our day.

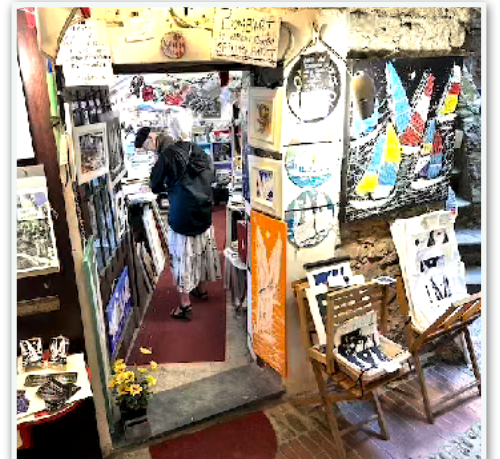


It's a good day to cross the river over the old bridge that was painted a few times by Monet, and then explore that old castle up there on the hill. A doorway leads us into a labyrinth beneath the castle that reminds us of scenes from Kafka – and that was often the intent of castle builders, to confuse and intimidate invaders.



The trail up to the castle looks like it's inhabited by trolls, and we find the workshop of a curious fellow named Albert Bomba. This is where he produces enthusiastic paintings he calls 'Bombart.'

We really have no room in our luggage to carry any large paintings, but we like art that features sailing boats and we get something small as a remembrance.



The further we get into the warren of slippery stone pathways the more my twisting knee reminds me to slow down – then I just stop before I break something serious and end up hobbling for the rest of the trip. Or worse. It's a new experience for me as my twice-repaired right knee reminds me often that I'm not as sprightly as I once was. And so we avoid the twisting upward pathway to the castle and take a side exit – over more slippery stones – back down to ground level. Bummer.



At ground level we find a piazza, and a motorcycle group with a very sweet Moto Guzzi 850, and other fine views of Dolceacqua.

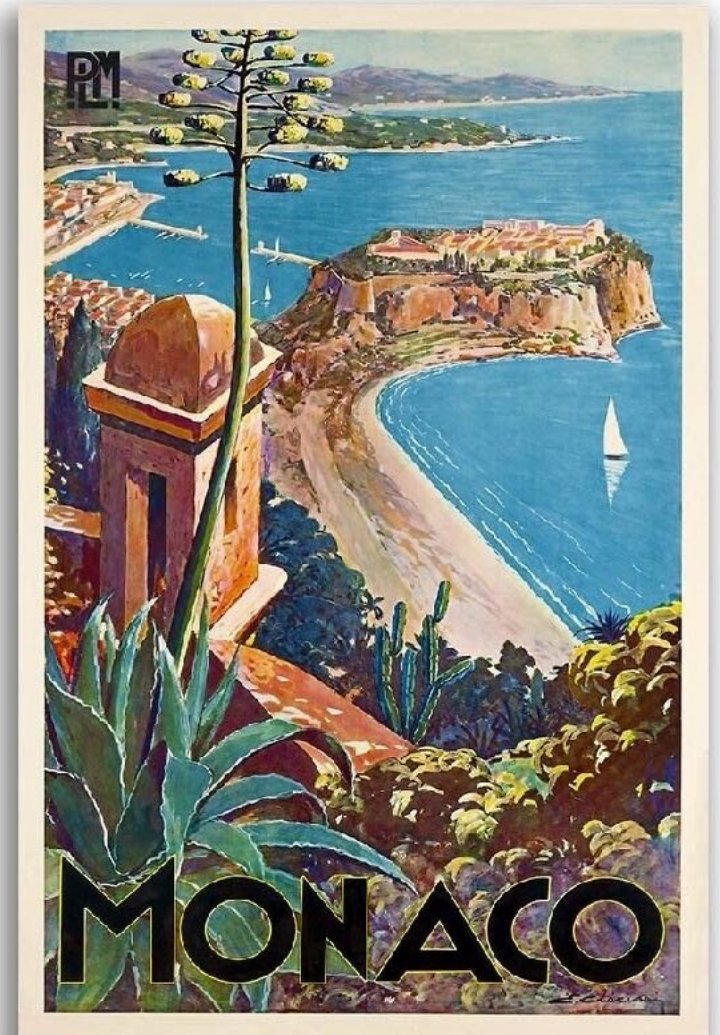




And of course, we'll top off the day with more of that well-lit castle hillside, and another excellent platter of fine pasta. In the morning we'll be taking a side trip, to Monaco.

Monaco

The fabled principality of Monaco is only a short train ride away, and that's another reason we're spending 6 nights in little Dolceacqua. We've actually passed under Monaco a few times over the years because the train tracks, and the station, are buried under the hill on which the city is perched. But this time we'll stop to stick our heads above ground for a look around.



We hop aboard a local bus heading to Ventimiglia and get our tickets to Monaco.





The impressive underground Gare de Monaco is so glaringly well lit that it almost appears crystalline, and even chandelier-like. And the very concept of trash appears to have been long banished from the premises.

There's a diagrammatic guide that you're welcome to dissect if you wish, or you can just look for helpful signs directing you to the surface. We're attracted to a pristine nearby escalator that shows promise and we find a very long corridor that helps out with our daily



steps count. Plus we get a short lesson in the WWII history of Monaco.



Eventually we're into the open air. And we're hungry for a bite of the special cuisine that surely awaits us in this famous place.



Yet as we emerge into the streets of Monaco the only eatery we see – oh gees, I hate to admit it – is a “Steak n Shake.” May the culinary gods forgive us! But we soon succumb to hunger, and Carolyn is rewarded with fond memories of her high school Steak n Shake days back in Pekin, Illinois.



We split a quick burger, and then we swallow the rest of our pride to hop aboard a big red tour bus. For lack of other rational options we're now on an affordable spin about the city, through car-crowded streets lined with classical balconied residences boasting gorgeous views.



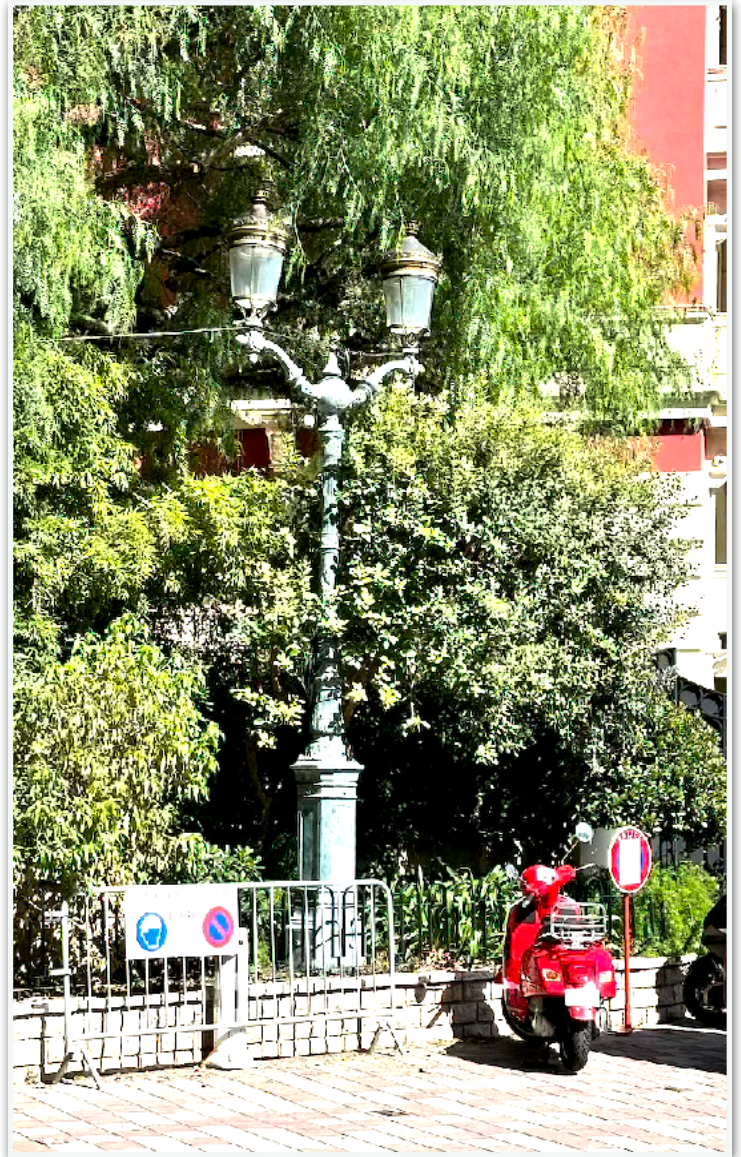
We're soon at a hilltop viewpoint, which is crowded with plenty of other 'tourists on the cheap' and we're all getting our pics of the landscape, with those massive pleasure boats clustered in the harbor below. And there just happens to be a handy shopping and restaurant/bar area thoughtfully provided by the city, where a model-perfect young lady is getting her best white-teeth-and-shades influencer shots, and another one is doing her one-legged high-heel balance bit.



The big bus collects the passengers and races down the hill past the local MacLaren dealer, where a bright orange monster awaits a new owner with astoundingly deep pockets. A shiny yellow Harley is parked by the Ferrari dealer, and the endless condos of Monaco loom on the hillside beyond.



As we wheel along further through the city there are endless retail fashionista places willing to relieve us of our meager assets and there are even a few spots of greenery to soothe the eyes. But we're soon done with the excesses of Monaco, and when the bus returns to our boarding location we're heading for the train station.



Back in Dolceacqua

We're ready to return to the simple joys of Dolceacqua, where a local election is underway and a couple of guys are enjoying some quiet catch-and-release fly fishing in the river. Later

on, we'll have a hearty dinner and enjoy a bit of fútbol on the telly as the sun paints the skies over this quiet corner of coastline Italy, where the Maritime Alps meet the Mediterranean.



Our last day is a rainy day, but well fit for another bit of wander. And we find a tidy Irish Pub to tuck into for a pair of hearty drafts. (“Close the door, there’s a draft in here! And a damn fine one it is, too!”) The lass behind the bar comes from the Green Isles and gives us a big Irish smile, although we’re not even Irish.



We'll wrap up the day at a place just across the street with platters of polenta and something rich for desert. And we'll toast a very fine stay in Dolceacqua with glasses of the local tasty grappa.



In the morning we'll board the bus again for the train station in Ventimiglia, on our way to Montpellier, an old university town on the French Mediterranean coast. Be sure to come along for that one. — *PRW*

