



ITS GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION AT THE BOTTOM OF THE VALLEY HAS FAVOURED THE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

## TOIRANO AND ITS GROTTOS

The medieval Toirano, one of the most ancient towns in Italy, has indeed captivated the visitors of the areas of western Riviera. It lies in the province of Savona, at the centre of the Val Varatella, one of the most delightful Ligurian inland valleys, sloping down to the sea plentiful with fields, olive groves and vineyards of Pigato and Vermentino grapes. The limestone complex dominating the area, more than 1280 metres of underground grottos created by water erosion, attracts more than 150,000 visitors every year.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Toirano and its grottos form a historical-archaeological environmental complex of the utmost importance. At the confluence of the river Varatella and the river Brescione, the town of Toirano, whose origin goes back to ancient times, developed thanks to the fortification that protected the valley in the Byzantine-Longobard period (6th cen-

ture). In times of Charlemagne the centre belonged to the Benedictine Monastery of San Pietro in Varatella; in the 12th century it was a property of the Bishop of Albenga, who increased the town's relevance by developing a rural economy mainly based on fruit growing and vineyards. As property of the Marquise Del Carretto, the town was involved in the vicissitudes of the Republic of Genoa from 1385 to 1797, the year of the French troops' invasion during the first Napoleonic campaign.

From the end the Middle Ages a few important activities flourished, such as paper-manufacturing, evidenced by three old buildings still used as paper mills, and wine and oil production witnessed by oil presses, some of which go back to the 13th century. Even today, the economical situation of the town maintains the same rural characteristic that has featured the valley's activities over the times. Since June 2006 the Commune of Toirano has been awarded the Orange flag by the Italian Touring Club, that selects and certifies small towns of hills and valleys preserving a historical and cultural heritage, in accordance with high tourist and environmental qualities. Toirano is a welcoming and well organized resort also for sport lovers. Both the relatively low altitude and the mild climate have made the Valle Varatella become the home of climbing even in Wintertime: 225 various climbing trails, suited to the needs of novices up to seasoned climbers, have been established by the Commune of Toirano. The surroundings are very interesting as well: the valley joins the hinterland of Borghetto Santo Spirito, towards the warm and living coast of the Riviera delle Palme that can boast crystal-clear water, sandy beaches, ancient marine hamlets and modern accommodation facilities.

### THE MEDIEVAL HAMLET

Toirano maintains the untouched aspect and charm of its ancient medieval hamlet, the Quartiere Torracco, still wholly preserved with the moat, defensive walls, towering-houses, and the "carruggi"- narrow lanes running among the buildings rich in archways and porticos. You will be enchanted by authentic monuments such as the Parish Church of San Martino, erected in the 17th century on the site of a previous medieval church of which it has maintained the original stone colonnade; the 14th century bell tower that was part of the defensive walls; the elegant medieval bridge with three arches stepping over the river towards the vegetable gardens. Among the palaces you can admire the ancient Town Hall, now hosting the Public Library, the Palace of the Bishop with a three arched portico and a slate portal sculpted in bas-relief; the former Palazzo d'Aste, later Palazzo del Carretto, home to the Museo Etnografico della Val Varatella.

The ancient centre of Braida, once outside the city walls, can boast some interesting monuments as well, among which the Dominican Church of the Madonna del Rosario built in 1481. The monumental remains of the ancient Certosa dating back to 1495, residence of the monks of the Abbazia di San Pietro, was recently donated to the Commune and will probably undergo important preservative restoration works.

### THE ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM

The Ethnographic Museum of the Val Varatella deserves to be visited. There you can soak up the atmosphere of the medieval village, over the centuries linked to the land, agriculture, vineyard and olive growing. Even if some traditions have been lost in today's daily life, you can distinguish their traces in the culture of this area. Established in 1997, inside the 16th century stables of the Palazzo del Carretto, the Ethnographic Museum of the Val Varatella is home to various collections of old tools used in agricultural and handcrafting activities and housework: about 1400 pieces dating back from the beginning of the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th century, displayed in nine settings and related to the different stages of people's ancient works. Very interesting is the section dedicated to oil presses, that used to be called "gunbi"; it also has mills and presses for squeezing the "sansa" (olive residue). In fact the Feast of the Gunbi still takes place in the cellars and in the oil mills of the hamlet at the first week-end of August, to celebrate the oil produce, indispensable ingredient of the Mediterranean cuisine. To complete the ethnographic representation, at Christmas time, on the occasion of the celebration of the Presepe, the Palazzo del Carretto hosts the exhibition called "Immagini ed Oggetti sulla Tradizione del Natale", already in its 11th edition, where many epochal treasures, locally handcrafted products and popular objects, coming from Toiranese public and private collections, are on display.

Opening times: 10.00-13.00/15.00-18.00

Information: 0182/989968

### THE GROTTOS

Opposite the village of Toirano, there lie the spurs of the dolomitic massif of Mount San Pietro (891 m), whose deep valleys feature impressive karstic phenomena - a process very active millions years ago - marked by various natural caves.

There, after the last glaciation, cave bears used to shelter and prehistoric Ligurian people lived and prayed. The complex of the Grottos, opened since 1953 and run by the Ente Grotte di Toirano, hosts more than 150,000 visitors every year, who are guided along a subterranean itinerary about 1,300 m long, at a constant temperature of 16°C and a medium humidity of 98%.

The Grotta della Bàsura is among the most famous ones, thanks to its wealth of fauna relics and natural calcareous concretions. Since 1967 it has been connected to the grotto of Santa Lucia Inferiore, that offers visitors a tri-



umph of the hypogean nature, most of all rich in stalagmites and stalactites often ornamented with flowers of aragonite, pieces of fine crystal of various colours.

There you can experience a fantastic world, especially where the reddish concretions produced by iron hydroxide meet the pure white calcium carbonate formations, inside the lateral tunnels.

The marvellous route along the Grotta della Bàsura, with almost unreal alabaster flows, reveals some carbon traces of the wooden torches used by the men of the Palaeolithic Superior period to light the grottos, as well as their footprints and handprints and remaining signs of their rituals not yet completely deciphered.

In the Bear Cemetery, the Bàsura preserves various bone relics of the *Ursus Spaeleus*: this bear was one third bigger than the existing brown one; it used to spend its long hibernation in the most internal hollows of the grotto where the temperature was milder and constant, and left its prints on the ground and claw scratches on the walls along the whole cave. Amongst the most charming concretions of the Bàsura, we would like to mention the "Torre di Pisa", the attractive borders of the crystal-clear little lake and the various small ponds, the amazing screens of almost unreal columns similar to polychromatic flows of organ pipes, the exceptional mamillated concretions with velvety surfaces. The Grotta del Colombo, of great prehistoric interest, and the Grotta di S. Lucia Superiore, home to a sanctuary of the 15th century excavated from the rock with a miraculous font, today are not open to the public. Visits to the sanctuary can be arranged by calling the Parish Church of S. Martino - Tel. 0182 98.058.

In the near future, further walls of rock and important structures will be broken down and new surprising cavities will be brought to light. It is like a never ending story, in the hope that both the present and future generations will respect and preserve this magical place.

## THE BENEDICTINE MONASTERY OF S. PIETRO AI MONTI IN VARATELLA

The Benedictine monastery of San Pietro ai Monti in Varatella, rising at an altitude of 890 metres and surrounded by a silent panorama, in the Middle Ages, for about 600 years, carried out a fundamental role in the economy of the area. According to legend, the apostle Pietro stopped there on his journey to Rome; historically it was founded in the 9th century under Charlemagne's dominion. The Benedictine monks, then substituted by the Carthusians in 1313, were the powerful owners of lands and estates between Albenga and Le Langhe; they improved the agricultural and industrial development of the area and built mills and presses for wine and oil production.

Every five years, on 1st May, a procession moves on from Toirano towards the Benedictine Abbey, one of the richest historical buildings of the valley that can also boast a splendid panorama. The current structure consists of a massive stone building, whose only external decoration is a sundial visible near the portico of the stable. Nearby you can distinguish a well with a wall sculpted into a single block of stone.

The interior, divided into various rooms, used to host the pilgrims on journey towards Santiago de Compostela. The Church, included in the structure itself, has a big nave and a vault supported by Romanesque lowered arches. Behind the altar, built in 1937, there is a 15th-century fresco that depicts St. Peter wearing pontifical robes.

## Cuisine

To experience the Val Varatella also means following the paths of the rural civilization and its cuisine. In fact the Ligurian culture includes the value of its land's genuine produce, wisely used by cooks, the unforgettable taste of simple but healthy food of ancient origins, flavoured with the oil, wine, fruit and vegetables grown in the local orchards. An excellent fragrance accompanies the selection of wines, obtained from grapes grown on stony ground with a the gentle climate, such as Pigato, a white wine with a mossy aroma versatile enough to suit all kinds of food, and Vermentino, a dry white wine best with fish and vegetables.

The DOP extra-virgin oil squeezed in stone oil presses (in 1800 there still were 25 of them) has a slightly bitter aroma and a hint of pine nut aftertaste.

Amongst the typical products from Toirano, we would like to mention the "focaccia di San Pietro", the soft "torrone" and the wine fermented with orange peels.

## Getting to Toirano

**By car:** A10 Autostrada dei Fiori, exit Borghetto S.Spirito. Then turn onto the provincial road towards Toirano (3 km).

**By train:** Genova-Imperia FS railway, Loano station. Then by bus from Loano and Borghetto S.Spirito.

**By plane:** Genova - Cristoforo Colombo Airport.

### GROTTE DI TOIRANO

Piazzale Grotte

Tel. 0182-98062 - fax 0182-921903

e-mail: [info@toiranogrotte.it](mailto:info@toiranogrotte.it)  
[www.toiranogrotte.it](http://www.toiranogrotte.it)

**COMUNE DI TOIRANO**

Tel. 0182-92101  
Fax 0182-989644  
e-mail: [municipio@comuneditoirano.it](mailto:municipio@comuneditoirano.it)

**MUSEO ETNOGRAFICO  
DELLA VAL VARATELLA**

Via G. Polla, Toirano  
Tel. 0182-989968  
Fax 0182-922721