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Portovenere (sometimes, in English, **Porto Venere**) is a town and *comune* (municipality) located on the Ligurian coast of Italy in the province of La Spezia. It comprises the three villages of Fezzano, Le Grazie

and Portovenere, and the three islands of Palmaria, Tino and Tinetto. In 1997 Portovenere and the villages of Cinque Terre were designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

History

The ancient *Portus Veneris* is believed to date back to at least the middle of the first century BCE. It has been said that the name refers to a temple to the goddess Venus which was sited on the promontory where the church of Peter the Apostle now stands. The name has also been linked to that of the hermit Saint Venerius. In Roman times the city was essentially a fishing community.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, Portovenere became the base of the Byzantine fleet in the northern Tyrrhenian Sea, but was destroyed by the Lombards in 643 CE. Later, it was a frequent target of Saracen raids. First indications of the existence of a castle date from 1113, and in 1161 the walls were erected. Portovenere became a fiefdom of a family from Vezzano before passing to Genoa in the early twelfth century. In 1494, it suffered a devastating bombardment from the Aragonese fleet during their war with Genoa: subsequently the old part of the town declined in importance, giving way to the development of the *Borgo Nuovo* ("New District"), which had existed from 1139 and is centred on the church of St. Peter.

Main sights

- The Gothic church of St. Peter, consecrated in 1198. It was built over a pre-existing fifth century Palaeo-Christian church, which had rectangular plan and semicircular apse. The new part, from the thirteenth century, is marked externally by white and black stripes.
- The Romanesque church of St. Lawrence, erected in 1098 by the Genoese. It probably occupies the site of ancient temple dedicated to Jupiter. The church was damaged by a fire in 1340 and by the Aragonese attack in 1494, and was further restored in 1582.
- The Doria Castle.
- The *Grotta dell'Arpaia* (now collapsed), known as Byron's Grotto, from which the English poet Byron swam across the gulf of La Spezia to San Terenzo to visit Shelley in Lerici, in 1822.

The medieval nucleus of Le Grazie is set around the 14th-century Church of Our Lady of the Graces; nearby is a medieval convent, which once belonged to the Olivetans, and the remains of the first century BCE Roman villa of Varignano. Finds from recent excavations at the villa are held in the *Antiquarium della Villa Romana del Varignano* in Portovenere.

In Fezzano the medieval alleyways are noteworthy, along with the church of St. John the Baptist (1740) and the recently restored *Villa Cattaneo*.

SOURCE: Wikipedia

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