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Sandra Shevey, street market historian, walking guide and campaigner is blogging for Travelbite.co.uk about street markets in the UK and across Europe.

Her latest blog is on the traditional markets on the Italian Riviera:

What originally prompted my visit to the Riviera markets is the proximity of France to Italy and that, based in Menton Garavan, you can virtually walk into Ventimiglia - the first market town on the Italian side of the frontier.

It was exciting to stay at Menton Garavan (the same precinct which Queen Victoria visited during her own stay) as the road in the run up to the frontier has not been enlarged and the cars which approach do so at a perilous pace.

This is the road which Mussolini traversed in consequence of or at the start of some big World War II summit and locals of a certain age still can remember the cortege of cars and the ceremony of that very visit.

Physically only minutes away from the Italian border, the journey, culturally-speaking, takes light years. The French and the Italian Rivas are separated by a looming time gap.

Menton panders to tourism. It is a posh retirement city, becoming less posh every year with more yachts and more residential apartments crowding the place. The market, scaled down, is expensive and the restaurants, whilst probably still family affairs, generally have a resident chef and/or general manager.

Liguria in northern Italy, which forms the other half of the Riviera is a working province. Ventimiglia is a working town with a harbour dominated largely by fishing boats. This is about to change with consent having been given for a yacht basin but this, hopefully, will not change the town too dramatically.

Ventimiglia hosts a massive general market on Friday, there is also a market on Thursday in Bordighera and on Saturday in San Remo (where they have the famous music festival)

The general market on Friday merely supplements the daily food market which runs within the remit of the old Mediterranean market hall daily (8am-1pm). Similarity of architecture with food halls in Menton, Cannes and Nice confirms the Italian legacy via the Dukes of Genoa.

Ventimiglia's market commenced as an open market selling flowers in 1900. Fruit and vegetables were added in 1920. The market was enclosed in 1951.

I enjoyed possibly the best latte I have ever tasted at Bar Canada at the Ventimiglia market. Locals engage in chat about the Pompeo Mariani Museum garden and olive tree and/or the bridge at Dolceaqua which was painted by Monet; about the unchanged hill villages and old towns of Ventimiglia and Bordighera.

There's supposed to be an unsurpassingly good pizza restaurant just over the hill in Ventimiglia old town. Unfortunately my trip was too brief ... but next time...

That said, the old market is located in the new town which is funny when you consider what they mean by new dates back to 1900.

Italians love their food, perhaps even more than the French and thus everything sold, including the fish, is local and probably caught and/or picked the same day. What fun it is to wander around Ventimiglia's old fish market. On display are huge swordfish, with swords ejecting from heads. There are large shrimp and sardines; fresh squid and octopus. Clams are so fresh they were crawling along the beach that morning. One kilo costs 8 Euros.

It is hard to get your head around it, but produce at this market is so fresh it remains ridden with dirt or sand or nettles or grass.

This is the first market where I have actually seen green olives which are sold unpickled. I am offered one to try. The taste is flat but succulent. There is fresh Genovese pesto (Liguria is where it originates because basil took root in Liguria) and many local cheeses. The smells stimulate the senses. Cured meats and fresh butter are purveyed.

Fresh chestnuts, walnuts (just picked from the forest), guava, and black olives (loose, unpickled) are stuffed into sacks or barrels in a manner reminiscent of the way many of us remember shopping from times past. The days have all but disappeared when you can pinch a pickle from a barrel and walk around the Petticoat Lane market munching it.

As a matter of fact the London Gherkin building if anything is but a symbol of the death of London's old street markets - street markets which have been incorporated into something else - something much grander? (foodie markets!).

I swear it ... I have never seen such beautiful produce anywhere in the world. Stall after stall showcases tires of fresh farmhouse cheeses; cured meats - Mortadella ... slices so large they'd fill for a week...and Testa Cassetta (natural cut ham seasoned with salt, pepper, herbs, spices, pine nuts and wine). "The best cut," they tell me.

Porcini (piglet and the ruling class of delicate fungi) mushrooms (with nettles) abound; so too white peaches, coil courgettes (as large as marrows and a specialty of the region) and huge avocados.

OK. A lunch stop at the pizza counter. In Liguria you have to say "white" or "red". "Red" means pizza without cheese, anchovies or garlic and just with tomato sauce.

There are twenty types of pasta all fresh daily: fusilli, ravioli, orecchiette, tortellini, gnocchi and others. Sauces include olive, mushroom, tomato, Belgian, Bolognese, pesto, picante and black sauce.

There's a wonderful table which flaunts EU health and safety regulations and where mushrooms are displayed loose. Ooooooooooooooh! The smell - the wonderful deep rich aroma of fields and

pine needles and herbs and nettles. I plump for some huge Porcini mushrooms which I'll cook up later that night with some pasta. The mushrooms, like much fruit and veg on sale, is cut open so you can see firsthand freshness and firmness.

Small farmers dump their produce in the centre aisle of the hall directly onto the tables. Some of it is not even in boxes and/or crates.

The delicacy of produce is remarkable. There are types and hybrids you never knew existed. Baby broccoli abounds as do baby peppers (a specialty of Liguria) which you eat raw but are best when grilled. Here too are peas in a pod (rare yellow pods).

There is a table laden with fresh tomato sauce which a lady farmer makes herself. Only a few jars are left (she only does 4/5 jars daily). Still available at 11am are jars of olive oil, pickled olives and pickled mushrooms.

Another market gardener sells fresh apples just picked ... warm and rosy and still with leaves. Yum!

So it is with great, great reluctance that I depart this town of culinary delights and make for Bordighera and the general market which swamps the town every Thursday. It's only a short distance to Bordighera but I'd advise arriving by train to take advantage of the railway bar where you can buy a glass of house wine for 80p and knock it back whilst tucking into pro bono tapas (Parmesan cheese, ham, crisps and bread)

Bordighera is a real time warp. It remains within the 1920s orbit and surprising little engagement with the modern world. The general market which dates back to 1930 runs along the boardwalk and the sea. There is no yacht marina. The market boasts about 200 stalls. The general market starts at 7am and concludes at 1:30pm (sharp).

There is some imitation stuff from China ... a few Asian traders selling Asian goods ... but most of it is Italian ... silk, cashmere, and leather. Great stuff at knockdown prices. Buyers arrive from all over the world. I chatted to a Danish woman buying two hand-finished reversible leather

handbags - brown on one side, grey on the other. Cost: 25 Euros. In London's Bond Street shops these handbags would be priced at £300.

What a treat to walk along the boardwalk smelling the brine ... basking in the sun ... browsing ... chatting ... what a day!

Cashmere scarves single ply were selling for 30 Euros. Double ply for 55 Euros. Double ply sweaters retailed for 45 Euros. Voluminous wool shawls - Italian and all colours - were priced at 20 Euros.

100 percent pure silk head scarves priced at 10 Euros were quickly disappearing whilst cashmere/wool Italian shawls also went quickly.

The day ended with tea at a caf   - one of those for which Bordighera is famed - an interior which dates back to the Twenties, maybe centuries earlier. Who knows? I feasted on baciolis Bordighera (chocolate biscuits filled with chocolate cream). "Baci" means "kiss" in Italian.

My sojourn around the French and Italian Riviera convinces of one thing: if nothing else there remains in this world places whilst on the map are so remote, so unaffected, so unworldly you feel when there in a sort of dream or fantasy ... a dream from which you really do not want to awaken.

TS Eliot used to visit friends at Menton Garavan ... friends who lived in a villa on the site of the accommodation where I was staying. Was this what prompted him to write about human voices awakening us and we drown? Perhaps!

By Sandra Shevey

Sandra Shevey runs market walks around French and Italian Riviera street markets. Contact: sandra_shevey@yahoo.com

Sandra's trip to the French Riviera courtesy of Sci Villa Sud Pre.

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