

# Port Livorno – A Charming Seaside City

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## Port Livorno – Part II

### Unexpected treasures in an undervalued port

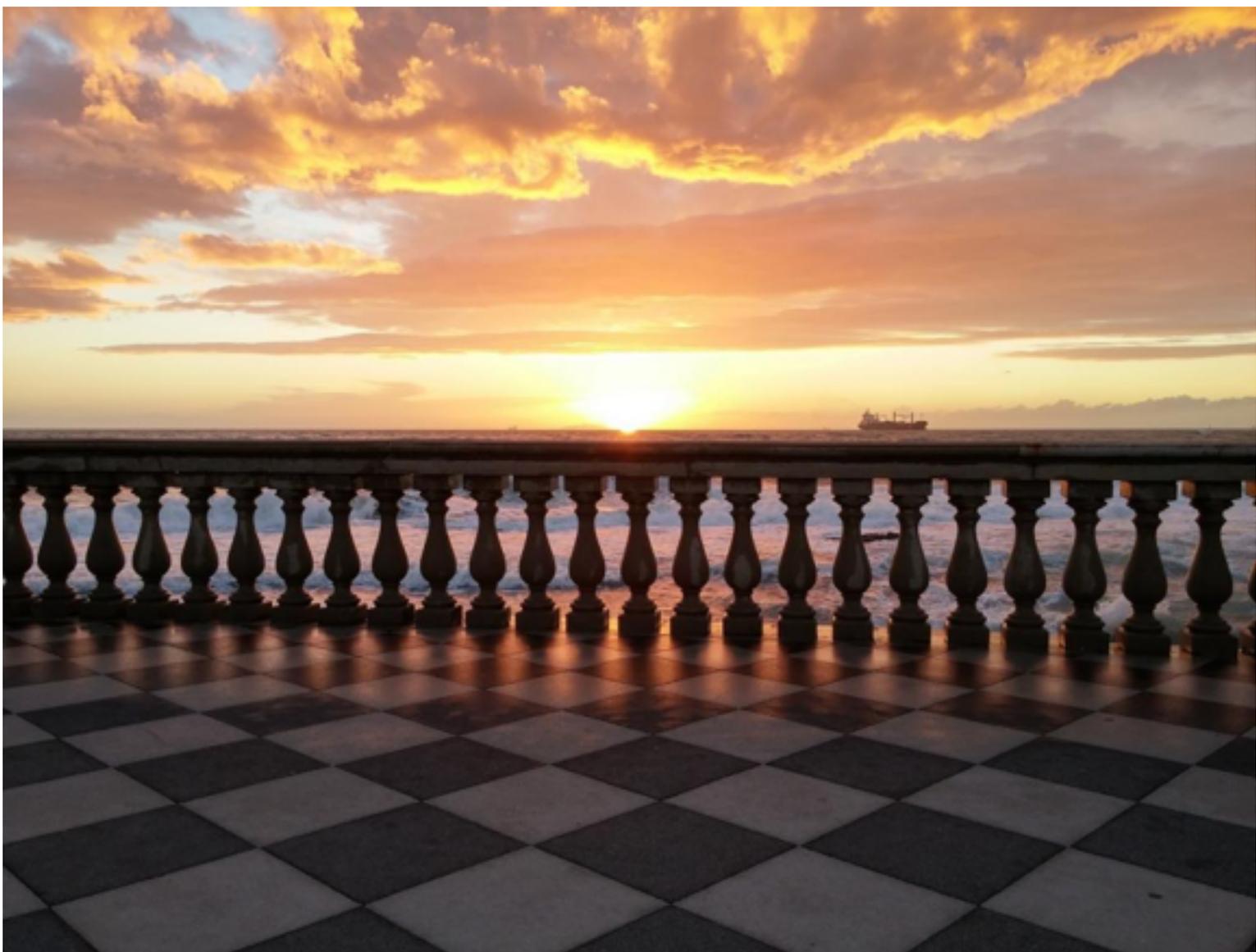
Ask an Italian about [Livorno](#) and the reply may include the words “port city” or “industrial area” – evoking dirty streets, smoke-billowing factories, ugly grey buildings. [Read part I of our Livorno mini-series here.](#)

Go to Port Livorno and you will find an elegant town of 160,000 with wide clean streets ribboned by green parks, a 19<sup>th</sup> century shipyard that has been transformed into a multi-use residential and commercial complex, a unique museum housed in an art déco villa, and an entire neighborhood called *Venezia Nuova* for reasons obvious at first glance.

## **Clean Beaches & Vibrant Buildings**

Yes, there is an operational port in Livorno, but the waters in the southern part of the city have earned the *bandiera blu* (blue flag), a national recognition of beaches meeting cleanliness and eco-sustainability standards. Yes, there is industry, such as Benetti, builder of some of the world's most luxurious super-yachts. Yes, there may have been bleak buildings a century ago, but up to 80 percent of Porto Livorno was bombed in World War II, and reconstruction has tended to vibrant red and ochre, as well as brick and marble. The Liberty-style villas along Viale d'Italia make a statement as strong as the similarly-dated hotels of Miami's South Beach.

### **Promenade Walking Tour with Wine Tasting**



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## **Port Livorno – A New City with Old Roots**

Because Livorno is a “new” city, developed by the Medici in the 1500s, it

doesn't have as *many* layers of history as some other Tuscan towns. But it has plenty of historic references.

### **Port Livorno – Old Fort**

The *Fortezza Vecchia* (Old Fort) was built by the Medici on the ruins of an old Roman military installation that in turn had become a fortress in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (constructed by a medieval woman warrior, Matilde di Canossa). It was completed around 1534 and has three bastions and two main gates, with thick walls and an asymmetric design to withstand cannon fire.

### **Port Livorno – New Fort**



The *Fortezza Nuova* (New Fort) was projected around 1576 by architect Bernardo Buontalenti. His design called for a massive pentagonal building with five bastions, surrounded by moats. Its purpose was to protect the new city Buontalenti was developing for the Medici, but eventually, the demands of urban development took precedence over the defense. By the end of the 1600s, two-thirds of the fort had been dismantled to make way for more construction in what was to become New Venice.

You can wander through both forts on your own or with a pre-arranged guide. In either case, you won't be fighting crowds: there aren't any, so you can actually see the buildings, read the signage, and imagine the past life of these imposing structures.

## **New Venice**

New Venice doesn't have crowds either (except during the neighborhood's popular summer festival called "*Effetto Venezia*"). Its 24 man-made islands —unlike "old" Venice — were created from scratch by workmen starting around 1620. The Medici, to please the merchants they were eager to attract to Livorno, ordered the construction of a residential area connected by canals. Since merchants stored goods in their cantinas, they reasoned, transportation would be easy by boat if waterways connected buildings to each other and to the sea. The name "New Venice" came from the number of Venetians who were hired to build these canals and homes.

## **[Book a Private Walking Tour in Livorno](#)**

### **New Venice Boat Tour**

Visitors today can tour this area by boat. The *battello* takes about an hour to navigate the *fossati* (canals), while a guide explains the historic significance of the homes, buildings, and commercial structures we pass. The neighborhood is the most original, most characteristic, and most creative area of the city, with the best restaurants and liveliest night spots.



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## **Fattori Civic Museum**

Merchants also lived elsewhere in the city. One merchant's home has become the setting for the Museo Civico Giovanni Fattori (Fattori Civic Museum). Giovanni Fattori was an Italian artist born in Livorno in 1825, one of the leaders of the group known as the Macchiaioli, a faction of Impressionism.

Since 1994, the museum has been housed in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century villa located a few blocks east of Terrazza Mascagni. The building was commissioned by Francesco Mimbelli, a Livornese arms dealer and grain merchant.

Architect Vincenzo Micheli designed a family home for Mimbelli between 1865 and 1875 that flaunts bourgeois excess – parquet floors, carved ceilings, elaborate glass banisters. It is the backdrop to the most important collection of Fattori in Italy, plus other artists from the Macchiaioli School.

The interiors are so over the top that a visitor may be torn between what is hanging on the walls and the walls themselves.

## **Port Livorno – Mercato Central**

No such dilemma exists at the Mercato Centrale (Central Market), arguably Livorno's best attraction. It is the largest enclosed food market in Europe, or so the locals claim ([Barcelona](#) is number two). You can even do a [Food and Market Tour](#) around the Mercato Central.



The architectural style of this huge building is representative of the late 1880s-early 1900s, an eclectic mixture of art nouveau/art déco, iron and glass, and neoclassic touches. The main façade is more than 310 feet long and up to 115 feet high, crowded with stands of edibles of every coloration—not surprising since the market is also called Il Mercato delle Vettovaglie (the victuals market).

Aside from the main building, with its 230 counters and 34 shops, are two smaller halls with shops and stores, and 92 separate cellars with access by street or by canal. There are sections for meat, fish, poultry, eggs, cheese, fruits, vegetables, wines, teas, coffees, spices . . . whatever your gustatory preference.

As with the other attractions of Port Livorno, you won't be fighting tourist crowds here, only locals doing their regular shopping. You can also arrange for a tasting tour or meal here; more about that in Livorno, part three. And if you haven't already, also take a look at [Part I of this mini-series about Livorno](#).

## [Where to Stay in Port Livorno](#)

*Port Livorno – Unexpected treasures in an undervalued port* was written and photographed by [Claudia Flisi](#). Her trip organized and partially sponsored by the [Tourism Board of Livorno](#).

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