
The Grand Tour in Calabria

From the 18th century onwards, intrepid and usually privileged travellers set off from England, and later America, on the Grand Tour. Their aim was to discover Europe, and Italy in particular, and by doing so to educate themselves – through language, archaeology, painting, music and literature – in the art of knowing, of being cosmopolitan.

Most travellers stopped at Naples, with only the more adventurous continuing by sea as far afield as Sicily, skipping Calabria on account of its poor road network and roving bandits. English writer Norman Douglas (1868–1952), however, was one of the brave travellers who spent a considerable amount of time in Calabria, journeying the length and breadth of the region in 1907, 1911 and again in 1937, observing and interviewing, and reflecting as he went, and maintaining scrupulously detailed travel diaries.

Calabria, after all, was a perfect destination for Grand Tourists. The region once belonged to the mighty Magna Graecia civilisation and had a long association with the ancient Greeks and Romans, it was rich in archaeological treasures and dotted

with exquisite Byzantine churches, Carthusian monasteries, abbeys and cathedrals, which hid a wealth of vibrant frescoes, illuminated manuscripts and important paintings.

In addition, Calabria boasted an array of landscapes of the kind the Grand Tourists, romantics at heart, found so alluring, from craggy coves and creamy beaches to wooden forests and dramatic valleys, along with mysterious mountain-top villages, home to mystical religions and secret societies, which the Tourists' insatiable curiosity propelled them to explore.

A typical Grand Tourist, Douglas fell in love with the untamed nature of Calabria, its complex layers of history, its unspoilt natural beauty, its proud people and their intriguing customs. He wrote: 'It was exhilarating to traverse these middle heights with their aerial views over the Ionian and down olive-covered hill-sides towards the wide valley of the Crati and the lofty Pollino range, now swimming in the midsummer haze.'

Douglas's book *Old Calabria* (1915) is probably the most comprehensive narrative ever written about the region. Other travellers who explored



Torre Camigliati, an 18th-century hunting lodge in Camigliatello Silano

the area include Henry Swinburne, Alexandre Dumas, Edward Lear and George Gissing.

Parco Old Calabria at Torre Camigliati

As part of a larger project to revive 'Grand Tour' tourism in Calabria and other parts of southern Italy, 17 wild parks, gardens and other places have been dedicated as Parchi Letterari (Literary Parks). These are atmospheric locations encountered by great authors and poets, from Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa to Luigi Pirandello, who were so inspired by them that they created literary works that immortalised the places.

The leafy parkland of Torre Camigliati, the grand ancestral home of the noble Barracco family, is one such Parco Letterario. What does this

actually mean? It means that you can wander the beautiful grounds to your heart's content, inhale the aromatic air, and stop to smell the wild flowers, preferably with a sketchbook, a book of poetry or a copy of Norman Douglas's *Old Calabria*, available for sale at the gift shop in the cultural centre at the former baronial residence. There's also a library, multimedia centre and a photo exhibition inside illustrating the Calabrian Grand Tour. To take full advantage of the delightful idea, check in to Torre Camigliati for a couple of nights, then grab a copy of their *Calabrian Grand Tour Itinerary* and set off on your own adventure (see p169). *Parco Old Calabria, Torre Camigliati, Camigliatello Silano. Tel: (0984) 815 782 00. www.oldcalabria.it. Call ahead. Free admission.*