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DAY OUT

Fregene: Where Rome Goes for La Dolce Vita and a Sea Change



Fregene has been a refuge from city life for Romans, including Federico Fellini.

By **Brian Wingfield**

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IN the 1960's and 70's, when he was at the height of his influence, Federico Fellini often retreated to his vacation villa in Fregene, a sun-swept town on the Tyrrhenian coast, to escape the bustle and commotion of Rome. Others came as well: his wife, the actress Giulietta Masina, of course; the filmmaker and writer Pier Paolo Pasolini; the novelist Alberto Moravia; and a dashing actor named Marcello Mastroianni, to name a few. In this golden age, Fregene, once a simple fishing village, became an oasis for Italian intellectuals and Rome's fashionable Via Veneto crowd.

Fellini, Pasolini and Mastroianni are all gone, and the glamour associated with Fregene faded over the years. But now a new group of celebrities and glamorous young people have rediscovered the town for the same reasons it drew sun seekers 40 years ago: it is a quick getaway from Rome and an upscale alternative to the congested beaches of nearby Ostia. Throughout the summer, actors, soccer stars and the Roman gentry come here to feast in waterfront restaurants, to dance until the wee hours and, most of all, to tan themselves on the beaches.

"Before, it was a place of artists," said Claudia Campagnola, a 29-year-old actress from Rome whose family has a villa in Fregene. "Now, it's something of an in place."

History's heavy weight doesn't hang over Fregene as it does over Rome, but ~~it~~ what makes this small town so inviting. In fact, the most significant vestige of history here is a pine forest, planted at the direction of Pope Clement IX in the 1660's as a way to protect the coastland and soak up the brackish muck near the mouth of the Tiber River. Mussolini had the surrounding swampland drained, and by the 1950's, beach clubs began sprouting up along the coast.

Fregene is by no means a big town, but it is best explored with a bicycle, which can be rented for 11 euros (or \$14, at \$1.28 to the euro) a day from Motociclo Batella (Viale Nettuno, 171; 39-06-665-64-281), just a few blocks southwest of the city center. It's easy to spot: several rugged-looking men are usually repairing bikes under the shop's awning. From here, the beaches — there are dozens, most pleasantly populated but not overcrowded — are yours for the taking.

Most beaches in Fregene are part of privately run clubs called stabilimenti balneari, complete with restaurants, pools, outdoor bars and cabins for changing and showering. Some charge a daily rate, usually 6 to 8 euros, which includes a lounge chair. Others allow you to enter free, but charge extra for a chair and umbrella. Nearly all say that Fellini was once a frequent guest.

For a taste of Mediterranean luxury, try the Capri Club (Lungomare di Levante, 288; 39-06-665-61-139), one of Fregene's more upscale spots, just off Lungomare di Levante, the southernmost beach road. If there is a place where well-groomed soccer stars and their gorgeous girlfriends are likely to be found, it is here.

More athletic types should try Sogno del Mare (Lungomare di Ponente, 25; 39-06-665-62-812) on Fregene's northern beach road. This club exudes a welcoming, American West Coast aura, complete with beach volleyball and windsurfing rentals.

Because each beach club has a dining room, restaurants abound in Fregene. Head for Saint Tropez (Via Cesenatico at Lungomare di Levante, 39-06-665-64-493), where linguine with prawns, tomatoes and zucchini is the specialty of the house. The owner, Silvana Sari, a 70-year-old native of the area, described by her family as "one of the great personalities of Fregene," can tell you all you need to know about the town's star-studded past. Dinner for two, with wine, is about 80 euros.

In the Villaggio dei Pescatori, the old fishing village on the north side of town, try Gina (Via Silvi Marina, 36; 39-06-665-60-005). "Everything here is made from scratch," said Stefano Lentini, whose grandmother has been the cook since she opened the restaurant in 1963. Seafood is, unsurprisingly, the specialty, but go for the delicious, homemade potato chips. Dinner for two, with wine, is about 70 euros.

Midday in Fregene is an excellent time to explore the village by bicycle. Most of the locals have settled down for lunch, and the streets are relatively empty, except for the tiny lizards that crawl out onto the beach road to take in the sun.

To enjoy the solitude, ride through the shady trails of the pine forest park, just north of the city center. The wood spills over into a warren of quaint streets, and at this time of day, the only sounds you're likely to hear are the clinking of glasses and china as families enjoy a leisurely meal on the porticos of their grand villas.

Some old-timers, like Ms. Sari, say Fregene has lost some of its family-friendliness at the expense of the younger set who come in just for the day. "Everywhere there are kiosks," she said, in reference to the trendy beach bars that serve expensive cocktails and blast hip music across the sand.

OTHERS, like 21-year-old Fabio DeLuca, a political science student whose family has a house in Fregene, have a different perspective. "Little bars have come here," he said, "but the beach is the same."