

History of Livorno

By Meagan Wilson

Situated on the Western shore of Tuscany, Livorno's significance as a port has brought the city both prosperity and grief. While the city flourished under Medici rule, its strategic relevance caused Napoleon Bonaparte to occupy it three times in four years, and the city suffered heavy bombing during World War II. Livorno does not possess the tourist attractions of Rome, Florence or Milan, though it does have a "New Venice" district. What Livorno does offer is a relaxing seaside getaway in the charming region of Tuscany.

In the days of the Roman Empire, a natural cove gave rise to the small port of Liburna. An 891 document mentions a cathedral in the town, and a 1017 document references a castle called Livorna. The real story of Livorno does not really begin until the Renaissance, however. Pisa controlled Livorno for much of the Middle Ages, then, in 1421, Genoa sold the town to Florence. The port was in need of renovation, which the Medici family set to with a will. Ferdinando I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, commissioned the architect Buontalenti to build Livorno into the "ideal town". Construction began in 1577, and in 1606 Livorno was officially granted status as a city and presented by Ferdinando with a constitution.

To encourage Livorno's growth and increase trade, Ferdinando declared Livorno a duty-free port, also devoid of religious and racial discrimination. As a result of Ferdinando's progressive laws, many foreigners took up residence in Livorno, including English, Dutch, Armenian, Greek and Jewish merchants. Livorno's Jews were especially privileged, compared to most of the other European communities at the time. They did not have to live in ghettos or wear any type of identifying patch or arm band, were allowed to worship freely, and could even employ Christian servants, something that was forbidden in many other countries.

Under the Medici, Livorno prospered, becoming a very important Mediterranean port. A canal connects Livorno to Pisa, and in 1629 Ferdinando II ordered the building of bridges to connect Livorno's 23 islands to one another. The result was a district known as *Venezia Nuova*, still a beautiful part of the city. After English and French ships attacked Dutch troops in the port, Ferdinando II declared Livorno a neutral city. This treaty lasted until 1796, when Napoleon Bonaparte invaded and created an "international blockade," causing a great deal of damage to Livorno's trade-based economy.

Between the golden age of Medici rule and the invasion of Napoleon, Livorno was controlled by the Grand Dukes of Lorraine, who were connected to the Austrian Hapsburg dynasty. After Napoleon was vanquished, the Lorraines resumed power, until the Tuscan revolution of 1848-49. The Tuscan Republic was short-lived, and the Grand Duke returned to Tuscany. Livorno was assimilated into the Kingdom of Italy in 1860, and lost its status as a free port.

Recovering from the physical and economic damage of WWII, Livorno has developed into a center of industry rather than commerce, manufacturing ships, steel, machinery, vehicles and other products locally. Livorno is also a common stopping off place for tourists, as Pisa, Lucca, Siena and Florence lie within easy travel distance.