The History

The origins

are lost in legend: in the myth of Ulysses, who – so Homer narrates – spent more than a year here, seduced by the sorceress Circe; but also in the myth of Aeneas, who, according to Virgil, buried his beloved wet-nurse Caieta here (the town is in fact supposed to be named after her). What is certain is that in **Roman times** Gaeta became an important harbor and a prestigious holiday destination for emperors, patricians, consuls and senators. Here they built sumptuous villas with gardens, nymphaea, temples and mausoleums; many of their imposing ruins remain to this day. Located on a rugged peninsula, Gaeta is a natural stronghold; easily defended. At the beginning of the Middle Ages it offered sanctuary from pirates. In the middle of the 10th century, freed from the Saracens, the town became an **autonomous duchy**, with its own army, statutes and even its own currency (the *follaro*). These factors allowed Gaeta to develop extensive trade links across the Mediterranean, and be regarded as the fifth Maritime Republic. In 1140 Gaeta was conquered by Roger II of Sicily and became part of a unitary kingdom, remaining so for the following seven centuries. Placed in a strategic position between the Papal States and the **Kingdom of Naples**, Gaeta reinforced its fortification through the centuries. The castle, towers, bastions and walls were reinforced to withstand siege after siege. At the same time, new religious and civic buildings were constructed, together with new churches as well as aristocratic and royal palaces that hosted Ladislaus Anjou-Durazzo, Joan II of Naples and Alfonso V of Aragon. After the Spanish conquest of the Kingdom of Naples, in 1504, Gaeta was further reinforced with fortifications and an impressive military contingent. It was from the port of Gaeta, in fact, that the Papal fleet that in 1571 defeated the Ottoman Empire at Lepanto, Greece, first set sail (the standard of that epic battle, given to the town by the Captain Marcantonio Colonna, is now in the Diocesan Museum).

Above, the 1861 siege of Gaeta. To the left, Francis II of Borbone, last sovereign to reign over the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

"One more immortal name thy death bequeathed / Nurse of Aeneas, to Italian shores, Caieta"
(Aeneid, VII,1-4)

1734: Gaeta is conquered by Charles III of Spain, founder of the Neapolitan line of the Bourbon dynasty *(I Borbone)*. In 1848 Pope Pius IX sought refuge from the Roman Republic in Gaeta. Then there was Garibaldi's Expedition of the Thousands, the fall of the **Kingdom of the Two Sicilies**, the retreat of Francis II Borbone to Gaeta with his wife Maria Sophie, sister of the Empress of Austria "Sissi"....and, in 1860-61, the siege of the town by the Piedmont army. The dramatic and devastating siege came to an end, after 102 days, with the surrender of the King. The 13th February 1861, under the walls of Gaeta, the Borbone dynasty came to an end and the unification of Italy was complete.

Aeneas in a Roman statue from the 2nd century B.C.

A painting from 1850 by F. Vervolet, today at the Royal Palace of Caserta: Gaeta, Pius IX blesses the members of the royal family, the people and the troops.

The Town

Gaeta

with a population of 22,000, is a town in the Province of Latina, on the Lazio coast. It offers a key location amongst the most prestigious sites of Italy, being close to Rome, Naples, Pompeii, Herculaneum, the Palace of Caserta, the Abbey of Montecassino, Capri and Ponza. Gaeta is a town full of economic and social opportunities, due to its unquestionable tourist appeal, cultural liveliness, quality of life and its longstanding vocation as a "window" for products and ideas. Gaeta is also a town of many delights: a year-long mild and temperate climate; delicious food; glorious walks in a 53 hectare (141 acres) park in the heart of the town; and old neighborhoods, churches and palaces, which make Gaeta an open air museum. First and foremost, the majestic **Castle**, which was already some centuries old when the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II expanded it in 1227. Further expansions occurred with the Anjou and Aragon rulers. The castle is in fact named after them *(Castello Angioino-Aragonese)*. Walking on, you find yourself in the medieval quarter, a maze of alleys offering extraordinary views, with clusters of old houses, kitchen gardens, Roman columns and aristocratic palaces (John Cabot, Pope Gelasius II, Thomas Cajetan and Sebastiano Conca were born here).

An alley in the medieval quarter

The Castle

The Cathedral's bell tower

Descending toward the sea, you pass by the charming 15th century **Church of San Domenico**, until you reach the **Diocesan Museum**, which hosts the famous Standard of Lepanto, paintings dating from the 13th to the 19th century as well as many other priceless exhibits. Next to the Museum, there is the **Cathedral of Sant'Erasmo**, Patron Saint of Gaeta, with its splendid bell tower, 57 meters (187 ft) tall, in Arab-Norman style from the 12th century. Amongst the Cathedral's many works of art, two are especially worthy of mention: the renowned candelabrum of the Paschal candle, with 48 bas-relief representations of the lives of Christ and Saint Erasmus; and the 17th century **crypt**. The crypt is lined with stucco decorations, reliefs and multicolored marble intarsia; and closed by a bronze gate (1692) similar to the one found at the Chapel of San Gennaro in Naples Cathedral. Going uphill from the Cathedral you pass by the public contemporary art gallery (**Pinacoteca Comunale**) "Giovanni da Gaeta", which hosts a large art collection; until you reach the magnificent **Church of San Francesco**, overlooking a long flight of steps. It was originally built as a small church with a convent, by Francis of Assisi, living here around 1222. Later on, it was rebuilt by Ferdinand II to commemorate Pius IX's stay in Gaeta. From the Castle, walking downhill toward the **small harbour (porticciolo) of Santa Maria**, there is the austere and charming **Church of San Giovanni a Mare**. Built in the 11th century, the Church has an Arab-style dome; the façade includes a gothic portal and a small bell-gable, while the floor is slightly inclined. From here, walking along the promenade, you reach Piazza Traniello, with the **Gran Guardia**, a cloistered neoclassical building dating from 1786. Facing the Gran Guardia, is the old Town Hall (1475), which was restored in the 19th century by Ferdinand II Borbone. Walking along the promenade you then reach the splendid **Church of the Santissima Annunziata**.

The Church of San Francesco

L'oeuvre ultime *by Hans Hartung at the Caserma Cosenz*

THE GOLDEN CHAPEL

The *Santissima Annunziata's* jewel: a Renaissance chapel lined with a boiserie gilded in fine gold and 19 panels by Criscuolo representing the young Jesus Christ. This is a clear reference to the fact that in the 14th century the chapel belonged to a children's charitable organization. Above the altar is the *Immacolata* by Scipione Pulzone: it was while praying here that Pius IX was inspired to proclaim the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

Via Indipendenza

The Gate of Charles III

On the left side of the building there is a gothic portal dating back to the Church's initial construction (1321). The exquisite baroque façade by Andrea Lazzari dates from the 17th century, when the Church was completely rebuilt. The bell-gable with the majolica-tiled clock, from the early 18th century, has the effect of elongating the façade. Inside the elegant single nave, you can admire the fine paintings by Luca Giordano and Sebastiano Conca; the impressive wood choir stalls; and, behind the altar, the large 16th century polyptych by Giovan Filippo Criscuolo. The Church is an integral part of an old charitable organization created by the people of Gaeta in 1320-21.

The Church of San Giovanni a Mare

Through a small door you enter the vestry, which leads on to the beautiful **"Golden Chapel"**. In the same street you can also find the **Public Library** "Salvatore Mignano" with the Historical Archive; and the **Museum of the Center of Historical and Cultural Studies "Gaeta"**. Together, they contain one of the largest collections of books and historical documents in the Latina Province, as well as an archaeological section with several findings from the Roman era; and a gallery with several Medieval, Late Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque paintings. Continuing along the promenade, you reach the **Gate of Charles V**, built in the 16th century, and shortly after, is the **Gate of Charles III**, which was part of the fortifications the king built in the 13th century. And so you arrive to the vibrant heart of the town, around Piazza della Libertà and the picturesque **via Indipendenza**: almost 2 kilometers (1.24 miles) of pedestrian street and colorful alleys, with small houses in pastel tones, flowery windows, cast iron balconies and hanging laundry, as well as stalls, artisan shops and boutiques.

The haven is **Gaeta**!

The Traditions

The borgo

(old neighborhood) still preserves its rural and maritime history and traditions; like that of the shipbuilding industry, still valued today. Amongst the most interesting sites to visit, there is the **Church degli Scalzi** (literally: of the barefooted), dating back to the 15th century. It is dedicated to the *Madonna di Porto Salvo*, celebrated on the second Sunday of August with a procession of dozens of boats across the sea. Also of interest is the **old quarter "Castello"**, Gaeta's first settlement of peasants and fishermen, dating back to the Dark Ages. Another ancient tradition is **"glie Sciusce"**: local carolers, playing traditional instruments, sing season's greetings in the street and door to door on New Year's Eve.

FLAVOURS OF THE SEA

Gaeta's history, nature and climate created the conditions for an exceptional culinary tradition: it should suffice to say that the first written document where the word "pizza" appears is the *Codex Diplomaticus Caietanus*, 997 A.D. One of Gaeta's many specialties is the **Tiella**, an old recipe that in days gone by provided a complete meal for peasants and fishermen: two sheets of pastry filled with Mediterranean vegetables or fish, like octopus, anchovies, onions or endive. The **Spagnoletta** is a tomato typical of this area, with a distinctive segmented shape and a unique Mediterranean flavor. Gaeta's **olives in brine** are famous all around the world: you can find them in any supermarket, from New York to Hong Kong! Other specialties include salt anchovies, mussels and other sea food, as well as a large variety of Christmas's sweets.

The Sea

Sandy beaches

and rugged cliffs make this one of the most stunning coastlines of the Tyrrhenian Sea. Gaeta has **seven fantastic beaches**: finest sand, crystal clear water, small coves and hidden caves that can be explored either on foot, or by snorkeling or scuba-diving. Some of the cliffs rise vertically from the sea, offering an extraordinary setting for free-climbing. The locations are sensational and the names evocative. **Sant'Agostino**, the longest beach, is sheltered by the red buttress of the Mount Moneta, which is favored by rock-climbers. **San Vito** is accessible either by sea or via exclusive hotels: a quaint little beach

Serapo beach

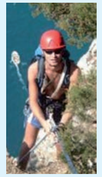
foto di Sebastiano e Paolo Manzi

Ariana beach

Arenauta beach

surrounded by rocks full of caves and gorges. The **Arenauta**, a naturist's haven, is wild and secluded. The **Ariana**, whose name comes from the union of the two words *"aria sana"* (salubrious air), is a beach surrounded by the typical Mediterranean flora *(macchia)*, and is characterized by the "rock of the three dogs". The small and secluded **Beach Quaranta Remi** (literally: 40 oars), only accessible by swimming or by boat, gets its name from an old shipwreck. The **Pozzo del Diavolo** (Devil's well) lies nearby: it is a large hole in the rock which descends 50 meters (164 ft) to the sea and is accessible from above or by sea. **Fontania** draws its name from the Roman consul Gneo Fonteo, who discovered this natural paradise where he built his summer villa, the remains of which are still visible today. Opposing the beach is a small islet coveted by divers for its waters teeming with multicolored fish. Last, but not least, there is **Serapo**, a long-time favorite with the people of Gaeta. Serapo is in the heart of the town and boasts 1.5 km (1 mile) of sand and clear blue sea. It is a spectacular crescent beach close to the medieval quarter, surrounded by the marine reserve "Oasi blu" and sheltered by the Natural Park of Monte Orlando with its signature *Montagna Spaccata* (literally: split mountain), and the Sanctuary of the *Santissima Trinità* (Holy Trinity).

MADE FOR SPORT



Gaeta is an ideal location for **sport and recreational boating**. As well as having a number of sport facilities, Gaeta is perfect for **sailing**, thanks to the strong Gulf's breezes; and for **swimming and snorkeling** around the many islet and marine caves. The large natural park in the heart of the town is great for **mountain biking**. But Gaeta also offers the exclusive chance to engage in exciting **sport-climbing** on Monte Moneta or on the sheer cliff face of Monte Orlando.

The Nature

A path in the Park of Monte Orlando

Woodlands

of Holm Oak, Cork Oak, Aleppo Pine, the rare Mediterranean Fan Palm and a shrubland of the fragrant Mediterranean *macchia*. In the heart of town, the 53 hectares of **Monte Orlando** form a stunning natural park with dramatic cliffs which drop sharply into the sea. The park has many hidden treasures, such as the majestic **Mausoleum** of the Roman consul Lucius Munatius Plancus, built around 20 B.C. and amongst the best-preserved of the antiquity; or the powder magazines of the Borbone era, now transformed into museums. Amongst breathtaking scenery lies the split mountain: according to legend its three deep clefts were caused by an earthquake brought about by the death of Christ. Near the entrance is the so-called "Turk's hand". This is an impression of a hand left by a sailor who refused to believe the story of the mountain; on touching the rock it became soft as wax, therefore forever leaving his handprint in the rock. These miraculous events were commemorated by the building of the **Sanctuary of the Santissima Trinità**, its Way of the Cross and a chapel where Saint Francis, Saint Bernardino of Siena, Saint Filippo Neri and numerous popes have come to pray. Next to the Sanctuary, a steep flight of stairs leads down to the **Grotta del Turco** (Turk's Grotto).

Turk's Grotto

The Sanctuary of the Santissima Trinità

www.**typoetcetera**.com/ita/it

Traduzione di Federica Rainaldi

MUNICIPALITY OF GAETA

What if Gaeta were the haven?

THE HISTORY • THE TOWN • THE TRADITIONS
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