



Sunbathers and fishermen soak up the rays on the beach between Marina dei Pisa and Tirrenia, Italy. Camp Darby Morale Welfare and Recreation operates an American beach which features boats, chairs and umbrellas for rent, snack stands and showers.



Sightseers stop for a cold beverage along the cliffside trail that connects the towns of Riomaggiore and Monterosso (pictured in the background). Farmers originally carved out the trail between the five villages of Cinque Terre.



Camp Darby's Sea Pines Recreational Facilities feature a large campgrounds, cabins and rooms for rent, a nearby car rental agency, Outdoor Recreation checkout center and various other conveniences for travelers wanting to explore Tuscany and the Italian coastline.



Tourists and townspeople mingle around the marina in the Cinque Terre village of Riomaggiore. Photo left: pedestrians stroll past a pizzeria in Pisa. Photo far left: a view of the Torre Pendente (the leaning tower) on the Campo Miracoli in Pisa.

A traveler's oasis in Italy

Camp Darby provides ideal home base for exploring Tuscany, enjoying beach vacation

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The locals call it one of Italy's best-kept secrets, but judging by the number of people who find their way to the U.S. Army base near Pisa, word continues to spread through the travelers' grapevine.

That "secret" is Camp Darby, an ideal home base for exploring Tuscany, relaxing on a sandy beach on the Tyrrhenian Sea and sleeping under tall pine trees. Located a few miles down the road from Galileo Gallilei Airport, Camp Darby offers a wide range of services for travelers on a budget including rooms, cabins and a campground; a car rental agency; Army and Air Force Exchange Service facilities (selling gas coupons for Italy) and a commissary; and an Outdoor Recreation featuring a wealth of trips to such places as Siena, Florence, the island of Elba and Cinque Terre.

Buses stop just outside the gate connecting travelers without wheels to train stations in Pisa and Livorno.

Camp Darby is just a few miles from extensive beaches in the resort town of Tirrenia and features its own guarded beach facility complete with a decent-sized parking lot, lifeguards, beach chairs and umbrellas, boats for rent, a Greek snack stand, hot showers and more. Patrons who stay at the Sea Pines Lodge facilities on Camp Darby pay \$3 per carload to use the facilities and safely tuck their vehicle into the guarded lot at the American beach.

A short walk up the beach takes one to various Italian beachfront eateries for those who want to unwind over a long lunch on the sea. During our recent visit, a Camp Darby regular recommended we try the La Perla Restaurant, about a 10-minute walk down the beach, for a decently priced family-style eatery featuring typical cuisine of the region, and we weren't disappointed.

The daily specials at the large patio cafeteria include everything from fresh fish baked in basil and a white wine/lemon sauce to homemade lasagna, "fritto misto" (mixed fried fish including prawns and octopus) to your basic pasta dishes. Washed down with a plateful of vegetables, an Italian salad and bread, a carafe of chilled local house wine, followed by some tiramisu and strong cups of espresso and we felt like we really were on vacation — despite having left soggy German skies the night before.

Not having a lot of time or the desire to make the long drive down to Camp Darby, we checked the Internet for the possibility of inexpensive flights and were rewarded to discover Ryanair offering flights on certain days for as low as €29.90 per person (one way). Of course by the time we made our plans the price had jumped to €219.90 per flight. With taxes and other fees thrown in the total per round-trip flight amounted to about 272 per person. That still was a lot cheaper than taking the train and managed to get us from the Frankfurt-Hahn Airport to Pisa in less than an hour and a half.

Accommodations at the Sea Pines Recre-

ational Facilities on Camp Darby range from about \$16 per night for a simple campsite during high season (June to August) to \$70 for a four-person room. In between are cabins and recreational vehicle sites.

Even though July and August are the peak tourist seasons in the towns and cities of Tuscany, one can still visit the sights comfortably. The locals advise getting into town early before the heat of the day or wandering through in the evening. This works well if you have children and want to spend the day at the beach before strolling through nearby Pisa in the evening. Italians, like most southern Europeans, tend to come alive after the sun sets, and Pisa is a lively town full of local students and citizens even after the tourists have faded for the night.

Simply strolling through Pisa's many squares such as the Piazza dei Cavalieri, walking along the Arno River or marveling at the famed structures on the Campo dei Miracoli (Field of Miracles) including the Torre Pendente (leaning tower) and Duomo (cathedral) as lights cast long shadows on the medieval stone houses fills one with a sense of the wonder at humankind's accomplishments.

Pisa, once a mighty naval power on the Mediterranean Sea, before the Arno River became clogged with sand distancing the town from the sea and Genoa displaced Pisa as the major force in the area in the 13th century, still laid claim to many achievements in the years since maritime dominance. With an esteemed university, founded in the 14th century, native son Galileo and noted physicist Enrico Fermi, Pisa remains a vital Italian landmark.

The city was meticulously rebuilt after massive bombing raids in World War II.

Pisa may be the nearest tourist attraction, but there are numerous other sights beckoning within short drives or train rides.

About 80 kilometers north of Camp Darby lies the famed Cinque Terre region. After climbing the winding coastal roads past La

Spezia by car or traveling by train through a variety of cliff-hugging tunnels, one comes to the village of Riomaggiore, the first of five towns which pour precariously down the rocky mountainsides straight into the greenish-blue waters of the Ligurian Sea. Parking is at a premium along the coastal roads leading down to Cinque Terre, so arriving early, by bus or train is recommended.

Once in the first village, though, all thought of the breathtaking drive down is swept away by the first glimpse of Riomaggiore's dazzling town. Apricot, strawberry and apple colored houses lean against one another at an almost 45-degree angle to the slope as the town spills down the hillside. At the bottom one discovers a sparkling marina and stony beach where the locals and tourists cool off after hiking the streets of the town.

Stunning views

Besides the stunning views in each of the five towns — Riomaggiore, Monterosso, Corniglia, Manarola and Vernazza — the allure for tourists is the fact that one must navigate between them on foot via dramatic paths hewn out of the rocky cliffs, by train or boat. Walks range from about 20 minutes between the first two towns to five hours to make the full distance. There is a small charge to walk on the cliffside paths which were originally carved out by local farmers to join the remote villages.

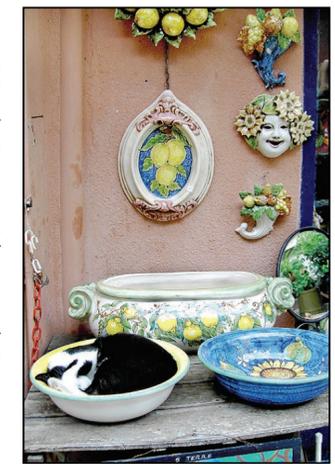
Added to the incomparable views, one is very likely to be treated to traditional observances such as a parade for Santa Maria through the stacked graves on the cliffside above Riomaggiore or a rewarding conversation with a friendly fisherman or shop owner.

If you are on a tight budget and want to order a restaurant meal, consider picking up a couple of pieces of focaccia (cut from large pans of pizza with everything from potatoes and rosemary on them to eggplant and pesto sauce) from a local rosticceria and munch on them while wandering the Cinque Terre walkways.

There are so many other sights located nearby Camp Darby that one will most likely only whet the appetite for future visits. Florence, Siena, the island of Elba, Pinocchio's birthplace in Collodi (also the penname of Pinocchio's inventor Carlo Lorenzini), the walled city of Lucca, the Cave of the Winds, marble quarries in Carrara, the beach resort town of Viareggio and famed painter and sculptor Amedeo Modigliani's hometown of Livorno are all within a short distance.

For more information about Ryanair flights visit www.ryanair.com. To make reservations at the Sea Pines Recreational Facilities on Camp Darby call mil 633-7225 or civ (0039) 050-547 225. Information about accommodations, the American beach in Tirrenia and more is also available online at <https://www.livorno.army.mil/mwr>.

Visiting your local library before setting out on a trip to the region is also recommended. Of particular use to this author were the books, "Italy With Kids" by Barbara Pape and Michael Calabrese, and Fodor's "Florence, Tuscany and Umbria."



A potter's wares provide a resting place for a sun-drenched feline in Cinque Terre.