

Wild Koi

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The coastal mountains around here are famous for their vast network of hiking trails.

The trails around the Cinque Terre are the most famous, but there are hundreds of others, including a bunch right near our home in Rapallo. Most of these trails are the old pathways that people used for transportation back in the old days.

The steep trail closest to our home leads up and over the mountain to the interior valley known locally as the "entroterra," which just means inland.

Up until a generation or two ago, this trail was the main highway between the coast and the interior valleys, and the farmers who lived in the entroterra would haul their products up and over the mountain to get to the market in Rapallo.

These days the climb takes about three or four hours for a one-way trip. I've heard stories of entroterra families who would send their children into town to sell a dozen eggs. By my calculations, that's about an eight hour round trip. Boy are we spoiled these days.

One of our favorite hiking trails is the one that goes up to the top of the promontory above the super-chic town of Portofino. The views are great, the forests are marvelous, and there are a number of surprises to discover among the dense growth, including a whole bunch of old water wheels and stone buildings that used to be water powered mills.

People used boats to get here and then climbed up the mountain to one of the mills in order to grind their grain into flour. At one time there were something like fifty mills on this little mountain, because there are a lot of fast moving little creeks here.

One of the surprises hidden in the brush is a little concrete dam that someone built years ago on one of the little creeks. The dam is solid and still holds water, so there is a good sized pond behind the dam.

The first time we discovered the dam the water was full of brightly colored fish. A closer inspection revealed that they were all young koi, maybe three hundred in all! Unfortunately, I didn't have my camera.

Later that summer, we returned and saw that seagulls and herons had eaten almost all of the little fish, but we also noticed the two large koi that must be the parents. Over the years we've returned a number of times, and some springs there have been a few young koi again, but never anything like that first amazing scene.

Photographing the big koi is difficult, because it's impossible to get down to the water except by going through a muddy overgrown mess to get down there. The two big koi, almost three feet long, are also fairly shy, and disappear whenever I do crawl down there.

Nonetheless, the pond is still a magical place, and we enjoy taking friends up there to show them the wild koi. It's a long hike to get up there, but nowhere near as daunting as the prospect of hiking up and over the mountain and back just to sell a dozen eggs.

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