ITALIANO PARADISO

Few places evoke la dolce vita as perfectly as Capri and Ischia, just off the Amalfi Coast. Yet the two neighbouring islands couldn't be more different in their expressions of it, as a sea voyage to each of them reveals

BY **MARIANNA CERINI**

IMAGES: Marianna Cerini and Aretur-Campania Turismo



Capri's coastline is dotted with landmarks like the Casa Malaparte (left) and the Punta Carena Lighthouse (right)



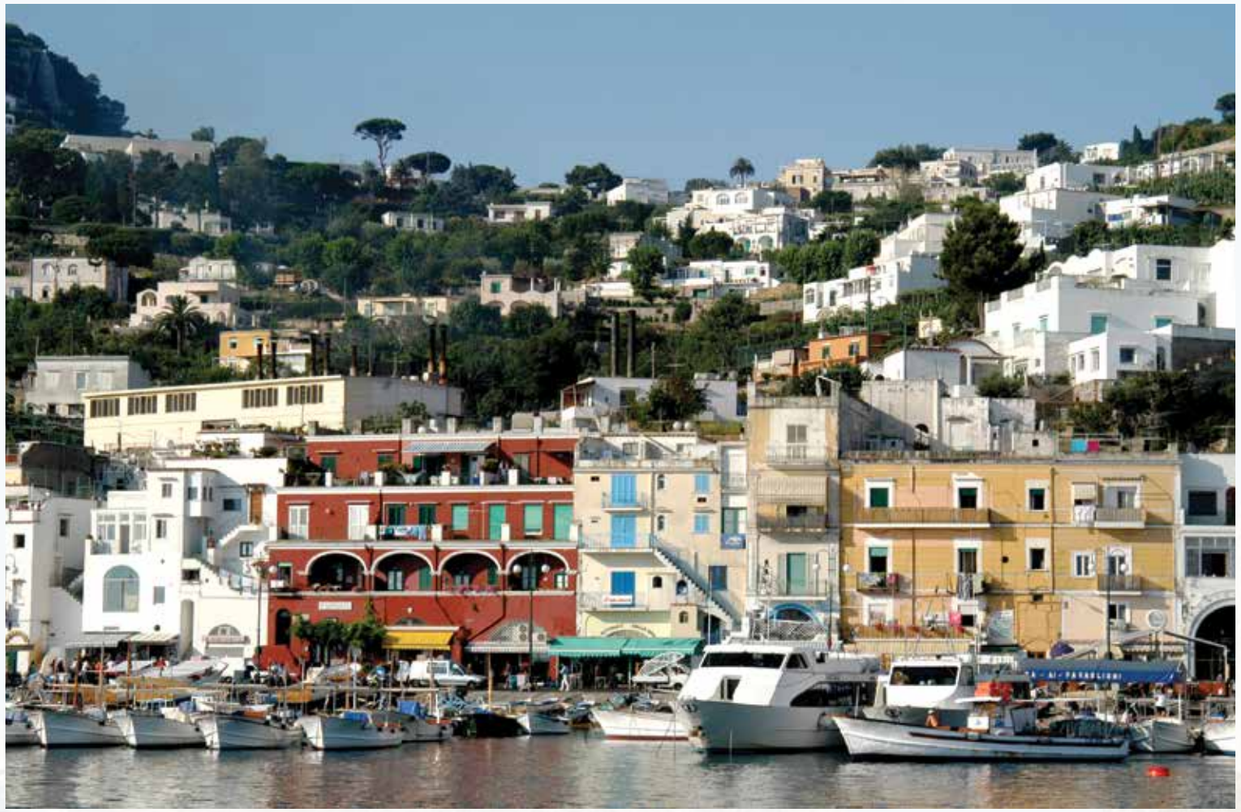
Scattered like colourful gems on the blue expanse of the Gulf of Naples, the islands of Capri and Ischia beckon me from the distance. It's a clear day in early summer and, from Molo Beverello – the Neapolitan harbour where I am waiting to embark on the first hydrofoil of my journey – I can make out their alluring outlines against the glistening sun.

Some forty minutes later, I'm in Capri, the starting point of my week-long trip. "Welcome to Italy's paradise," says Davide, the porter who takes my bags at the dock of Marina Grande, home to the port. "There's no place like it." As I am soon to find out, he is right.

The island needs little introduction. A tiny block of limestone soaring from the Tyrrhenian Sea – it covers an area of just 10 square kilometres – Capri has long attracted the wealthy, famous and powerful for its dreamy mix of rugged landscapes, impossibly blue waters, and relaxed, easy-going lifestyle.

Emperor Tiberius was the first of its illustrious guests, building 12 villas here, including his main residence, the cliff-top Villa Jovis (which you can visit), some 2,000 years ago. Then came the writers, artists and intellectuals in the mid-19th to early-20th century – Maxim Gorky, Pablo Neruda, Compton Mackenzie – followed by the glitterati, who began claiming the island as their summer playground from the 1950s onwards.

Among them were icons like Elizabeth Taylor, Frank Sinatra and Bing Cosby, all of whom nurtured a lasting affection towards this little speck of sun-kissed heaven. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, too, was a repeat visitor, and would often be photographed strolling Capri's narrow lanes in ankle-skimming Capri pants, huge sunglasses, and the handmade sandals by local cobbler Amedeo Canfora she loved so much (the artisan's son still makes them today). More recently, anyone from





This page: The port and public beach at Marina Grande

Beyoncé to Leonardo DiCaprio, Kylie Jenner to Jennifer Lopez has popped by.

That heady, jet-setting imprint has become part of the island's persona, and made Capri a seductive destination of fairy-tale beauty and over-the-top fun, extreme luxury and private beach clubs – a concentration of exclusive Mediterranean elegance that's impossible to replicate.

While other holiday spots in Italy might have a thoroughfare with a few shops and a couple of ice cream parlours, Capri has Via Camerelle, where a Balenciaga store sits next to Missoni, and a sharp Saint Laurent boutique faces Louis Vuitton. Elsewhere you'd spend the day at a public beach, here the places to sunbathe are its chic beach clubs (reservations are essential, often months before the summer season begins) like La Fontelina, which has been in operation since 1949 and faces the Faraglioni – three jagged limestone stacks that soar from the sea off the south-eastern tip of the island, and are considered its

IMAGES: Aretur–Campania Turismo and Capri Tiberio Palace





symbols – and Il Riccio, whose lounge chairs and umbrellas are kitted out by Dior.

Simply put: the glam life is part of the island's soul, and embracing it is key to experiencing it to the fullest. Which is why my stay is at Capri Tiberio Palace, a secluded five-star, 54-room property in Capri town that fits right in with the surroundings, thanks to beautiful interiors that combine 1960s flourishes with retro travel memorabilia (the hotel is part of Capri's lofty history, too: F Scott Fitzgerald stayed here in 1925). My junior suite is a *la dolce vita* dream, with retro-modern furnishings and bold pops of colour, hand-painted tiles, and a view of the island that's practically breathtaking. It's here that I put down roots for a few days as I branch out to explore the rest Capri has to offer.

There's a lot. Beyond the high-end shops and trendy cafes, the island is still a wild wonder at heart, dotted by tiny beaches and even tinier coves – the most famous being the Blue Grotto, an underwater cave discovered in 1826 by the German poet August Kopisch – lush woodlands and rocky cliffs looming over azure waters. A network of winding footpaths can help you reach most of them (there are also open-topped taxis that can take you around the island or, alternatively, buses), although to get a real sense of the place, a boat trip is best, and can be arranged by your hotel.

It's from the sea that the ineffable charm of Capri reveals itself in full. A slow ride around the coast shows hidden villas and rock formations, sea caves and secluded spots where one can bask in the sun undisturbed, surrounded only by the gentle sound of waves.

You'll find those – plus a few more sun seekers – at Marina Piccola, too, a charming little beach hangout reachable via





This page: Piazza Umberto I and the Capri Tiberio Palace







Scenes of Ischia, including the the Forio and Sant'Angelo villages (opposite page)

Krupp (named after a German industrialist) that is popular for a swim and a lunch alfresco. Meanwhile, Faro di Punta Carena, home to Capri's lighthouse, is the place to catch the sunset, Limoncello Spritz (a local take on the libation) in hand.

Further inland, things are equally sublime. You can glide up craggy Monte Solaro, Capri's highest point, on a chairlift; stroll the quiet lanes of white-washed Anacapri – a nearby village that's like Capri's younger, less fashionable sibling – or get away from it all at Gelsomina, a family-run restaurant set among terraces planted with vines and rows of vegetables, many of which are used in the dishes they serve. Closer to the main action of Capri town, even a simple *passeggiata* along quiet via Tragara to the Belvedere di Tragara and the Arco Naturale bestows magical moments, with full-on views of the Faraglioni.

Regardless of the activity, the glitz and glamour are always only a short distance away, and always, *always* rotate around the Piazzetta, Capri's elegant open-air square filled with tables from four competing bars that serve espressos and aperitivo on repeat. This is the prime location from which to observe the designer-clad jet-set coming through (literally anyone who comes to Capri crosses the Piazzetta at one point or another), and start, or end, your day or, why not, sojourn – writer Norman Douglas called it the "small theatre of the world" after all.

It is there that I spend my last evening, before moving onto the second leg of the trip: Ischia. Getting there takes around 50 minutes via hydrofoil (there is usually only one service per day to and from the two islands) and arriving at Ischia Porto, where the harbour is, couldn't be more different than Capri.

Where the hedonistic Capri island is quaint and small, Ischia is large – the largest and most developed of the islands in the Gulf of Naples in fact – requiring a car or a scooter to get around. The feeling is disorientating at first, but as I reach my abode – Mezzatorre Hotel & Thermal Spa, a stylish, hidden luxury hotel housed in a former 17th century watchtower where every detail strikes the right note of dreamy upscale travel – I immediately catch an equal, if fundamentally different, dose of paradisiacal charm. Over the following three days, I get further proof of it.

Sprawling and eclectic, Ischia is a mosaic of volcanic thermal waters, blessed with fertile soil, chestnut forests, vineyards, manicured gardens like the stunning La Mortella, and picturesque villages that deliver character and authenticity aplenty (the most famous being Forio, Lacco Ameno and Casamicciola Terme, though my personal favourite is Sant'Angelo, a tiny cluster of white houses closed off to cars).

Inhabited since the 8th century BCE, the island also boasts a rich archaeological past, some of which is on display at Pithecusa Archaeological Museum, home to a small collection of Roman and Greek artefacts including amphorae, ceramics, and jewels.

IMAGES: Marianna Cerini, @gjphotography and @enrico_costantini





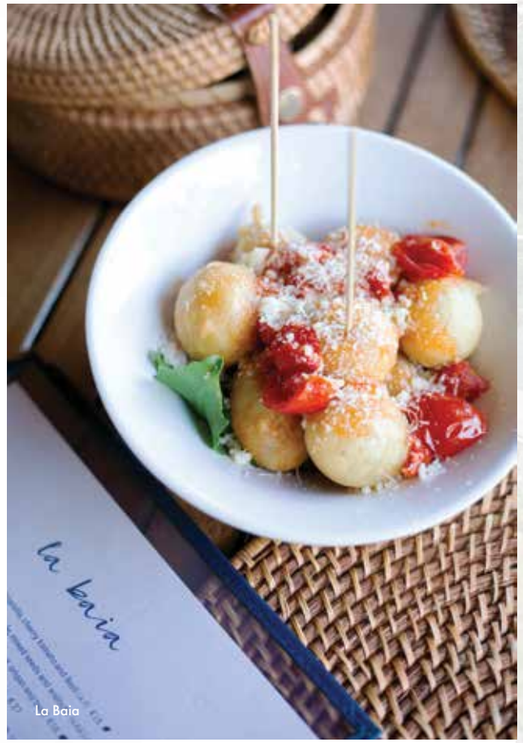
Mezzatorre Hotel & Thermal Spa

There are trekking and hiking paths to be taken, the toughest ones up to Mount Epomeo, Ischia's highest mountain; historic sites to be explored – the mediaeval Aragonese Castle, which sits on its own volcanic rock formation accessed by footbridge, being an absolute must – beautiful churches to stop by, like the hilltop church of the Madonna del Soccorso in Forio, which flaunts incredible sunset views; healing thermal pools to while away an entire day, including the spa at Nitrodi Nymph Park, which claims to be the oldest in the world.

And then, of course, a striking rocky coastline flecked by hidden beaches and a smattering of cool spots like La Scannella Beach Club, with three swimming pools and beach access from sun lounger decks that are literally suspended off the rock edge. Like Capri, this maritime side is best explored on a dinghy – though some beaches, like San Montano, Maronti Beach and Sorgeto, an inlet with pebbles and natural thermal springs, can also be reached on foot.



Bar La Torre



La Baia





Pool and interiors at the Mezzatorre Hotel & Thermal Spa

It is, in other words, impossible to get bored or to follow one itinerary. As Mezzatorre's concierge Francesco puts it, "Ischia offers something for everyone. That's what makes it so unique."

That's also why, he tells me, a network of local hotels and businesses – including Mezzatorre – launched the campaign "Ischia is More" in 2020, which aims to make the island a year-round destination, rather than a mere summer escape. "We have a multi-faceted identity that begs to be discovered," Francesco says. "Coming here means having a true Italian experience."

And, compared to showy Capri, a different, simpler taste of *la dolce vita*. Still, there are plenty of elevated offerings to be had. Besides Mezzatorre, whose premises include a spa, pool deck and private sea access, Ischia boasts Michelin-starred restaurants Danì Maison and Indaco, as well as other luxury accommodations like the recently refurbished Botania Relais and Spa, an adults-only property with whitewashed villa-style suites and rooms; and San Montano Resort and Spa, possibly the best aperitivo spot to catch the sunset (order their Spritz selection, made with local spirits and bitters). Unfussy as it might be, the island still epitomises blissful Mediterranean flair.

Ultimately, it's their diversity that makes both eminently worth a trip. Sisters with radically different personalities, Capri and Ischia bewitch you at different paces, each striking the right balance of timeless island pleasures and modern creature comforts in their own ways. Visiting one without the other would be like seeing only one half of a beautiful family – and what's the fun in that? ≡

IMAGES: Marianna Cerini, Mezzatorre Hotel & Thermal Spa, @oriani_vergani

A DAY IN NAPLES

Any trip to Capri or Ischia starts from Naples, where you can embark on the ferries or hydrofoils that depart daily to the islands. Here's how to make the most out of your stop at the Italian city

Eat: No visit to Naples would be complete without pizza. For a modern take on it, head to Da Concettina ai Tre Santi in the Sanità neighbourhood. A hip venue with exposed brick and large artworks, it serves some of the best Neapolitan-style pizza you'll have, courtesy of young and inventive chef Ciro Oliva. Word to the wise: For a truly memorable experience, order the tasting menu, and ask the sommelier for a wine pairing. You'll be surprised by how well pizza and champagne go together.

Play: Besides the most obvious sights – Piazza Plebiscito, the Duomo di San Gennaro, the lavish Royal Palace and Castel Nuovo – make sure to explore Naples' budding contemporary art scene at Madre, a remarkable contemporary art museum, and Made in Cloister, another contemporary hub, housed in the renovated cloister of the Santa Caterina a Formiello's church.

Stay: Part boutique hotel, part artisanal workshop of designer and craftsman Vincenzo Oste, son of celebrated artist Annibale Oste, Atelier Inès Arts & Suites in the Vergini district is a tranquil oasis in the heart of the city. Rooms are spacious and decorated with bespoke pieces designed by Oste himself. Inès, Vincenzo's wife, oversees operations, and is the kindest host you'll come across. A short walk from the hotel are historical landmarks such as the monumental complex of the Vincenziani, with a magnificent chapel made by Vanvitelli, and the Palazzo dello Spagnolo, dating to the 1700s, with its iconic staircases designed by the eclectic architect San Felice.