





From far left: Niki de Saint Phalle sculpture in Capalbio; buttero at work; fresco in Pieve di San Nicola church. *Opposite, clockwise from top left*: oysters and a shaded table at La Dogana Beach Club; Lake Burano; Locanda Sospesa's drawing room

LA DOLCE VITA,

the sleek new Orient Express train, has a route through Tuscany into Siena and on to Venice from Rome. Leaving the grandiose Ostiense station and the city suburbs behind, I'm soon gliding up the Tyrrhenian coast into the wildlands of Tuscany's Maremma, past nameless, shuttered hill towns that rise above the plains. On these wide-open spaces, worn as faded corduroy, the legendary broad-torsoed Maremmana horses gather, and the long-horned cattle of the region graze in the shade of the umbrella pines. To the west a vast seascape rolls into the glare of the afternoon. Some of my fellow passengers, inured to the crowds of more familiar Tuscan hotspots such as Florence and Pisa, exclaim at the sense of abandonment in the fleeting views of ruined farmsteads, and the seeming emptiness stretching down the coast south of Livorno and towards the gorges of Pitigliano. Rolling through a region once written off as a desolate malarial wasteland, to which Dante compared a forest in the seventh circle of hell where "the brute Harpies make their Nest", I count the ancient watchtowers that stalk the shoreline, protection against banditry and pirate raids. In the 1920s and '30s, Mussolini had the marshes drained and built canals; the land was reclaimed for agriculture and grazing in the 1950s.

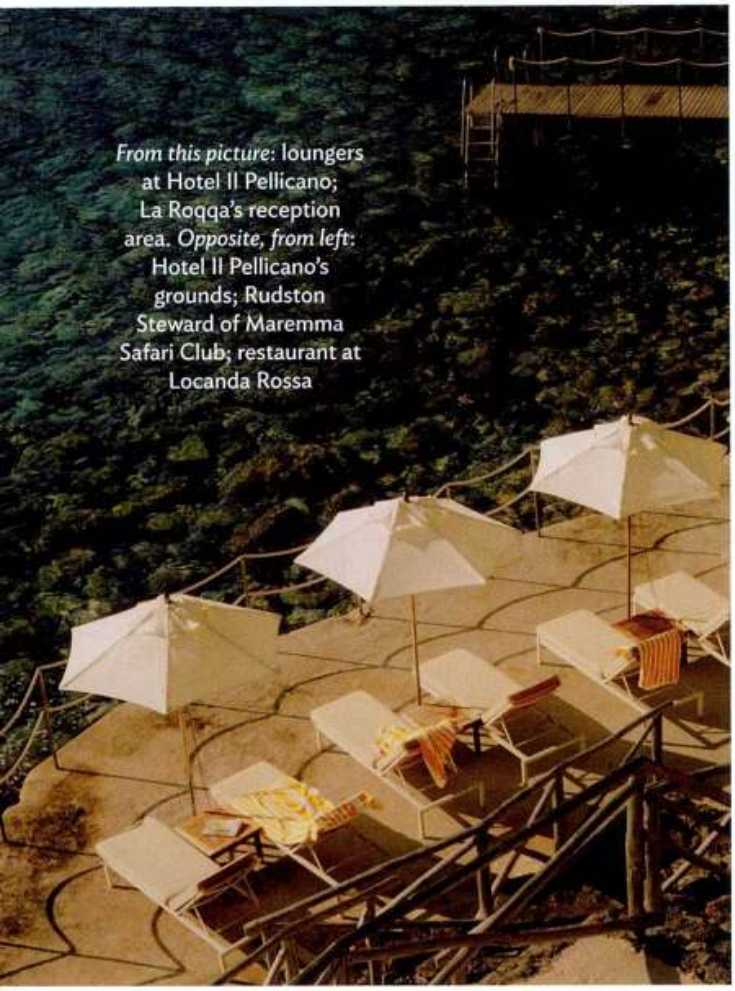
It was on the railway into this wilderness, which has existed since the 1860s, that I made the journey that defined my student days, when the two-hour Trenitalia ride from Rome to the Maremma village of Capalbio Scalo cost less than €5. Today it's still under €10, in striking contrast to a trip on *La Dolce Vita Orient Express*, which, with its unparalleled service and exclusive access to private palazzi in Siena, will set two travellers back almost £7,000 for a round trip from Rome to Venice.

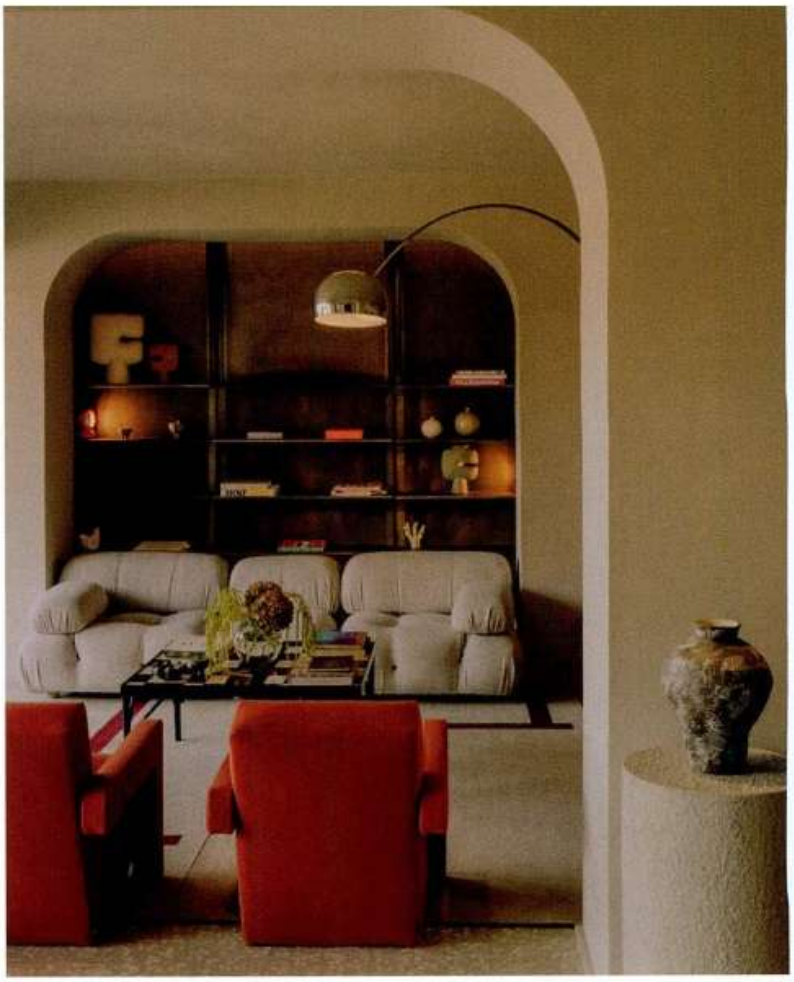
The outskirts of Capalbio were, and are, the location of a favourite weekend haunt, Casa di Garavicchio – the house of my friend, author Marella Caracciolo – now available to rent. It sits high, overlooking olive groves and uneven macchia, the land falling away to the wide shoreline below, a 12-minute drive away. There's the dark hump of the Monte Argentario promontory on the horizon, and the crenellated silhouette of Capalbio, a medieval hill town buzzing with life – artists' studios, workshops, trattorias – at the villa's shoulder. Draped around the pool on a warm afternoon, I can always hope to find (in degrees of undress) Marella's tribe of friends, sundry dozing hounds and her talented long-limbed daughters, Theodora and artist Costanza, reading, singing to a guitar accompaniment in Italian and English, painting or holding a pose for someone's sketch. An incontinent giant fig tree drops fat fruits that stain the limestone terrace purple and intoxicate the bees.

It's all straight out of a Bertolucci vision of a bohemian summer – his coming-of-age classic, *Stealing Beauty*, was filmed in this region. I worked as an extra on the house party scenes which, like Casa di Garavicchio, conjure the pleasures of youth, its lazy freedoms and the creative unleashing prompted by Tuscany's bounty. As in *Stealing Beauty* it's always open house in the easy, flowing spaces with terrazzo floors, whitewash, terracotta and high-beamed ceilings, where "women come and go / talking of Michelangelo", as TS Eliot put it in "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock". Until the early 1990s there was also freedom to roam through artist Niki de Saint Phalle's adjacent famous Giardino dei Tarocchi – the Tarot Garden – on Marella's acres, before it started admitting the public and opening hours were imposed.

It was Marella's grandfather, then her environmentalist father, Nicola Caracciolo, and her uncle Carlo, the charismatic and elegant

ARTWORKS: *NANA MOSAIQUE NOIRE* (CIRCA 1999) BY NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE/2026 NIKI CHARITABLE ART FOUNDATION/ADAGP, PARIS AND DACS, LONDON; PORTRAITS BY SÍAN EVANS





From this picture: loungers at Hotel Il Pellicano; La Roqqa's reception area. *Opposite, from left:* Hotel Il Pellicano's grounds; Rudston Steward of Maremma Safari Club; restaurant at Locanda Rossa

and ambition of the Terre di Sacra estate along the ramparts: the contained tracks of water; the dishevelled dunes pinned by juniper bush and myrtle; the distant outlines of beach clubs La Dogana and La Macchia; the irrigation grid of canals and channels like seams in the patchwork of the cultivated areas. These are certified organic and supply fresh produce to Terre di Sacra's score of rental villas and cottages. Where once these rustic retreats were rented quietly to family and friends, all 29 villas and cottages have now become part of a larger project. They offer privacy and sanctuary for peace-seeking celebrities who want to recreate the uncomplicated holidays of childhood fantasy.

Glamour is an indefinable commodity, and here it is as much about the impression of effortless elegance and healthy living that Puri Negri and Pallavicino exude as it is relaxation and exclusivity. It finds its most vivid expression at the estate's La Dogana Beach Club. With its neutral tones, pristine sands and supersized loungers, it's quite the convivial scene, where caramel-skinned Italians air kiss, play beach padel and laugh into their phones.

The beach club is a cornerstone of the Italian summer. Its multi-generational and democratic charms are epitomised further down the beach at Ultima Spiaggia, which has a more hectic feel than La Dogana, with parading sarong sellers, football and music lapping against the restaurant's tiered decks. Then come the miles of wild spiaggia libera before Terre di Sacra's inner sanctum, La Macchia: a club on the beach, with carmine-red upholstery, that can only be accessed by members and their friends. Further along the shore are the rumpled dunes and fringed pine forests of La Feniglia, on whose sandbanks Caravaggio is thought to have died of malaria.

Isolotto, the newest kid on the beach club block, is hidden away along the coast on the Monte Argentario headland. Shoehorned into the rocky promontory on the edge of a deep emerald sea, groomed and contained, it is already a classic, despite having been open for only a couple of years. It launched as a five-star attraction for guests staying at La Roqqa hotel, although anyone can visit for a fee. La Roqqa is an exciting addition to Porto Ercole, wedged as it is into a tight corner of the bay beside one of the Spanish forts. The Monte Argentario holiday hub for the Roman elite, Porto Ercole is as refined as only a place that refuses menus in English can be. It is hard even to find a souvenir shop. The launch of La Roqqa as a paean to the modernist design and optimistic style of the 1960s and '70s was an event on this isthmus, which remains curiously under the radar despite being anchored to the mainland and to Orbetello by two sandbars – and despite concealing, within its seaboard, the region's most exclusive address. Hotel Il Pellicano was immortalised by Slim Aarons's idealised photos of beautiful people lounging. Like Terre di Sacra, it started as a family place and a summer hideaway for friends. Marie-Louise Sciò, the daughter of the previous owner, can be credited with turning it into a successful 50-room hotel and brand without sacrificing its rarefied sheen.

When the time comes to wash the sea salt out of our hair, we head inland. Maremma is also the cradle of the Etruscan civilisation, whose culture predates that of the Romans. Although the hotels can organise e-bikes and trips into the area's hauntingly lovely interior, the best conduit into the mysteries of the strange tombs, sunken roads and perched Etruscan villages carved into the volcanic tufa rock is Rudston Steward of Maremma Safari Club. The South African former New York resident was drawn back to Italy after his university years to







join a commune in the Tuscan countryside with Roman schoolfriends. It didn't work out, but his journeys on foot have taken off, and he's now celebrating his 10th year of operations with an Etruscan Journey itinerary that joins the dots between the ancient strongholds of Sorana, Sovana and Pitigliano via the thermal hot springs of Saturnia and ending on the shores of Lake Bolsena.

Taking the healing waters at Saturnia is a rite of passage. In my student days, we would strip at the waterfalls of the Cascate del Mulino and wallow under a full moon in the pools carved into the travertine terraces. For decades the waters have bubbled up from a crater deep within Tuscany's Mount Amiata, filtering through millennia of clay layers at a steady, steamy 37.5 degrees. The sulphur-, potassium- and magnesium-dense water acts as both a relaxant and an exfoliant. Bathing here was prescribed to the Roman army on their return from battle, just as it is today by the Italian national health service to support wellbeing.

This time I check in at Terme di Saturnia, one of the largest spa resorts in Italy. Thirty euros unlocks a day pass for four hot spring pools, jets and whirlpools, and a variety of beauty treatments explore the revitalising properties of the natural bio plankton. There's a golf course, too, and all generations – grandparents, couples, teens, preteens – bundle in together. Friday is the big day, with late-night closing for bathing alfresco under the moon. While a huge reservoir pumps in new water and wafts its sulphurous vapours into the cool air, guests bob about, rubbing the gelatinous plankton into each other's backs and thighs, quaffing the brutal liver-cleansing spring water from the communal tap and toasting each other as though it were Champagne. If this is taking the waters the Italian way, I am happy to take a little more.

BEST OF THE COAST

Terre di Sacra (*terredisacra.com*) is a vast private estate with 29 villas and cottages, a glamping retreat and wooden cabins in Capalbio. There's farm-to-table produce and dining on a vast swathe of WWF-protected nature reserve, which also offers reservations at **La Dogana Beach Club**. Marella Caracciolo's **Casa di Garavicchio** (*excellence.villas*), just outside Capalbio, has five bedrooms and can be rented alone or with neighbouring **Villa Sofia** (*book via effe.loda@gmail.com*), another Caracciolo house, belonging to Jacaranda, daughter of the late Carlo. Five-bedroom Villa Sofia offers a more refined experience with primped gardens, a home spa, sauna, cinema and museum-standard collection of works by contemporary female artists. **Hotel Il Pellicano** (*pellicanohotels.com*) in Porto Ercole is a timeless retreat that's been going strong since 1965. Hidden away on a deep green promontory, it has the relaxed familial allure of a private club. **La Roqqa** (*laroqqa.com*), also in Porto Ercole, has a 1960s vibe, a roof terrace and **Isolotto Beach Club**, open from mid April to mid October. Hotel guests have priority access to the club's tiered terraces besides the restaurant. **Locanda Rossa** (*locandarossa.com*) is a beloved rambling country inn painted oxblood red outside Capalbio town. It started life as an agriturismo in a converted barn, and now has 33 rooms and four villas, some with kitchens so guests can cook up their supper using ingredients foraged from the 50-acre estate and olive groves. The restaurant and bar are popular with non-residents in all weathers. It's worth leaving space for the ice creams made from the orchard fruit, the watermelon margarita and the pappardelle al cinghiale, or wild boar, washed down with an intense Scansano red. **Locanda Sospesa** (*locandasospesa.com*) is a secret and bijou antiques-filled B&B in Pereta, a jewel of a hill town. This sensational Liberty palazzo has a garden overlooking the landscape of northern Maremma. Saturnia restaurant **I Due Cippi** (*iduecippi.com*) has been around since 1976 and is famous for its hormone-free steaks with porcini, cooked on the open hearth. **I Pescatori** (*ipescatoriorbetello-centrodegustazione.it*), in the charming Spanish garrison town of Orbetello, is a fishermen's cooperative with decks out over the lagoon – plates of grilled grey mullet and ricci, and Ansedonia's mineral-tasting whites are specialities. **Carmen Bay** (*@carmen_bay_ristorante*) in Capalbio is the stuff of holiday fantasies, a feet-in-the-sand but elegant restaurant on the seafront that excels in classic fish dishes. Trattoria **La Bersagliera** (*@_labersagliera*) in Orbetello is much lauded for its wood-fired pizzas and pasta. **Fontanile dei Caprai** (*@fontanile_dei_caprai_*) outside Capalbio is a rustic restaurant with local flavours, such as pasta with wild hare, and a cosy, informal atmosphere.