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# Condé Nast Traveler

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

JULY 2003

**COMEBACK!**  
Surprising but welcome  
news about coral reefs

SPECIAL ISSUE

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2003

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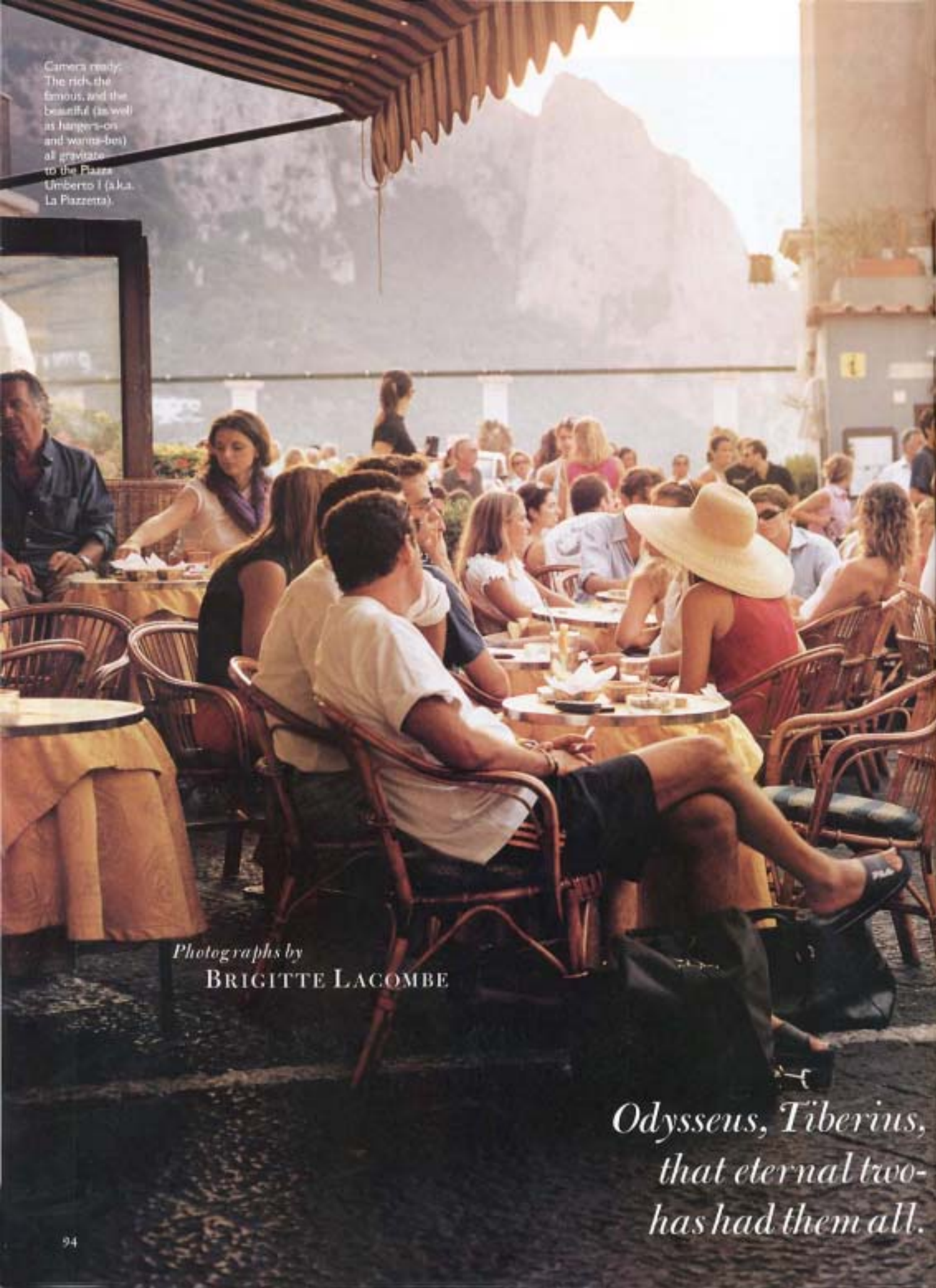
Sun, surf, and city in  
exotic Penang

U.S.A. \$  
Foreign £



Condé Nast  
**Traveler**  
TRUTH IN TRAVEL



A photograph of a busy outdoor cafe in Rome. The cafe is filled with people sitting at round tables with yellow tablecloths. In the foreground, a man in a white t-shirt and dark shorts sits in a wicker chair, looking towards the right. A woman in a red top and a large white sun hat sits next to him. The cafe is covered by a brown striped awning. In the background, a large, rugged mountain rises against a clear sky. The overall atmosphere is warm and social.

Camera ready:  
The rich, the famous, and the beautiful (as well as hangers-on and wanna-bes) all gravitate to the Piazza Umberto I (a.k.a. La Piazzetta).

*Photographs by*  
**BRIGITTE LACOMBE**

*Odysseus, Tiberius,  
that eternal two-  
has had them all.*



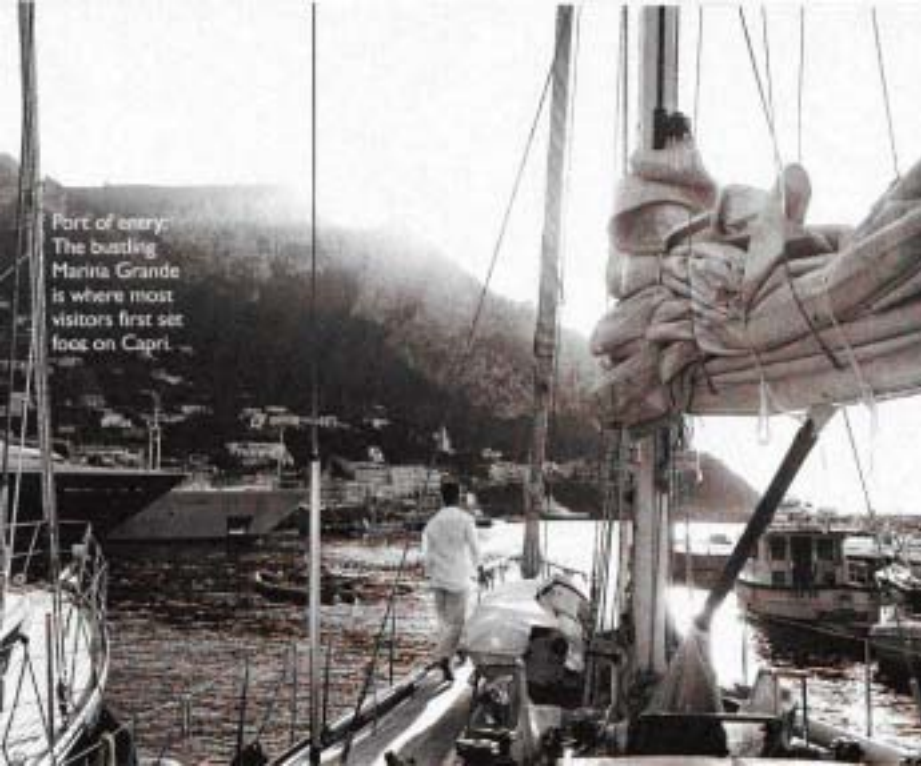


*Ciao,*

*Bardot, and Onassis—Capri,  
thousand-year-old seductress,  
ALAN FURST joins the club*

*Bella!*





**"OF COURSE IT IS THE TOP." SAYS MY CAFÉ SOCIETY**

friend, who can be counted onto know such things. He is speaking of Capri. "It's the absolute top, the best."

"Even though it's supposed to be?" I say.

"Even more so." He is American by passport, British by birth, European by inclination. "The Caprese," he says, "are a little enthusiastic about its reputation decadence and so forth but you always get what you come for, the Mediterranean bliss, and that's been true for two millennia, so..."

He is, as usual, right. The competition is powerful--- Cap-Ferrat, Majorca, Portofino, Juan-les-Pins---but farther south, the umbrella pines are taller, the scent of resin is stronger, the terra-cotta is a softer shade, the oleander, hydrangea, and bougainvillea are brighter, the cicadas are more insistent, and the sea is bluer. Up close, most water is the color of water, but not here. The sea off the Isle of Capri is a rich, dense, creamy blue. Riding on a boat, I keep putting my hand in it. "Don't stay too long," they tell you here. "You might not leave."

Alas, there are moments en route when you think you might not arrive getting there is not half the fun. A flight to Rome or Milan, another to Naples, a Neapolitan taxi adventure, a hydrofoil to the island's port, the Marina Grande, a uniformed man who captures your baggage while saying soothing words in Italian (it will reappear in your room), a funicular ride up the hill, and then a good long walk to your hotel. West of the Piazza Umberto I, the main square of upper Capri, the streets are only a few feet wide, in fact paved paths, with no cars and no taxis. The island is only about four miles long and a mile and a half wide but works in human, not automotive, scale, so once here you will walk and you will climb. But you will swim, eat with the gods, and, if you're lucky, make love. Homeric sailors, Roman emperors, Nordic sensualists, and British novelists did it for two millennia, and now it's your turn.

It is almost midnight by the time we arrive at our hotel,



Hot rocks:  
An island  
landmark,  
the Faraglioni  
are reachable  
via a pathway  
near the Punta  
di Tragara.





*The terra-cotta is a softer shade, the oleander is brighter,  
the cicadas are more insistent, and the SEA IS BLUER*





the Villa Brunella, a twenty-room gem built into a hillside with gardens. The view from the dining room goes on forever to brush-covered rock rising from the moonlit sea and the endless night sky beyond. We order Campari and soda and fool indecisively with the menu. Then Signor Ruggiero, the owner, gently takes it away. "Please," he says, "let me bring you something you will like." To that, we instantly surrender. He brings us plates of hand-hewn strips of thick pasta with calamari and shrimp and mussels, then slices of ricciola, a sweet white fish cooked in saintly olive oil and garlic. Thus heaven begins. The tender but chaotic toils of Alitalia fade into memory, along with some other life we used to live. On Capri, open the door to your room's terrace and the silence is audible; there are a few birds and a breeze but nothing else.

The emperor Tiberius acquired Capri in A.D. 27 and built twelve villas there, living most of the time at the Villa Jovis, atop towering Monte Tiberio, with impossibly steep cliffs and wild forest between him and the brutalities of the political life he had lived in Rome. He had

murdered too many people, so he fled to Capri. "I will say no more," Robert Graves writes in *I, Claudius*, "than that he had brought with him a complete set of the fa-

mous books of Elefantis, the most copious encyclopedia of pornography ever gathered together. In Capri he could do what he was unable to do at Rome—practice obscenities in the open air among the trees and flowers or down at the water's edge, and make as much noise as he liked."

The Roman historians wrote a good deal about Tiberius. He was said to wander through his villa at night, in the cool air, among the sleeping rooms, which held a selection of girls and boys. Roaming from one chamber to the next, he would in time choose what he thought might please him. Better if it did. Not far from the villa is the so-called Salto di Tiberio, Tiberius's Leap—a euphemism for the sheer cliff from which, contemporary writers reported, people did not leap but were, rather, flung.


The ruins of the Villa Jovis remain. It is a trek to get there, climbing up and up for an hour, but there

## PLACES & PRICES

Small it may be, but Capri has an endless supply of restaurants and hotels. For the best, see page 140.

*You will swim, eat with the gods, and, if you're lucky, Homeric sailors and Roman emperors did it, and*



A woman in a white floral dress is walking across a paved terrace. In the background, several other people are sitting on benches. The terrace has a decorative metal railing and a pergola structure with a green awning. The view beyond the railing shows a town built on a hillside with mountains in the distance.

High times  
Take the  
funicular from  
the Marina  
Grande to the  
top of Capri  
for breath-  
taking views.

A boy is diving from a rocky cliff into the sea. Another boy is standing on the cliff edge, looking down. The cliff is made of dark, jagged limestone rocks. The sea is visible in the background.

Boys of sum-  
mer: Capri's  
craggy lime-  
stone rocks  
lure "cliff"  
divers (here,  
at the Punta  
di Taggare).

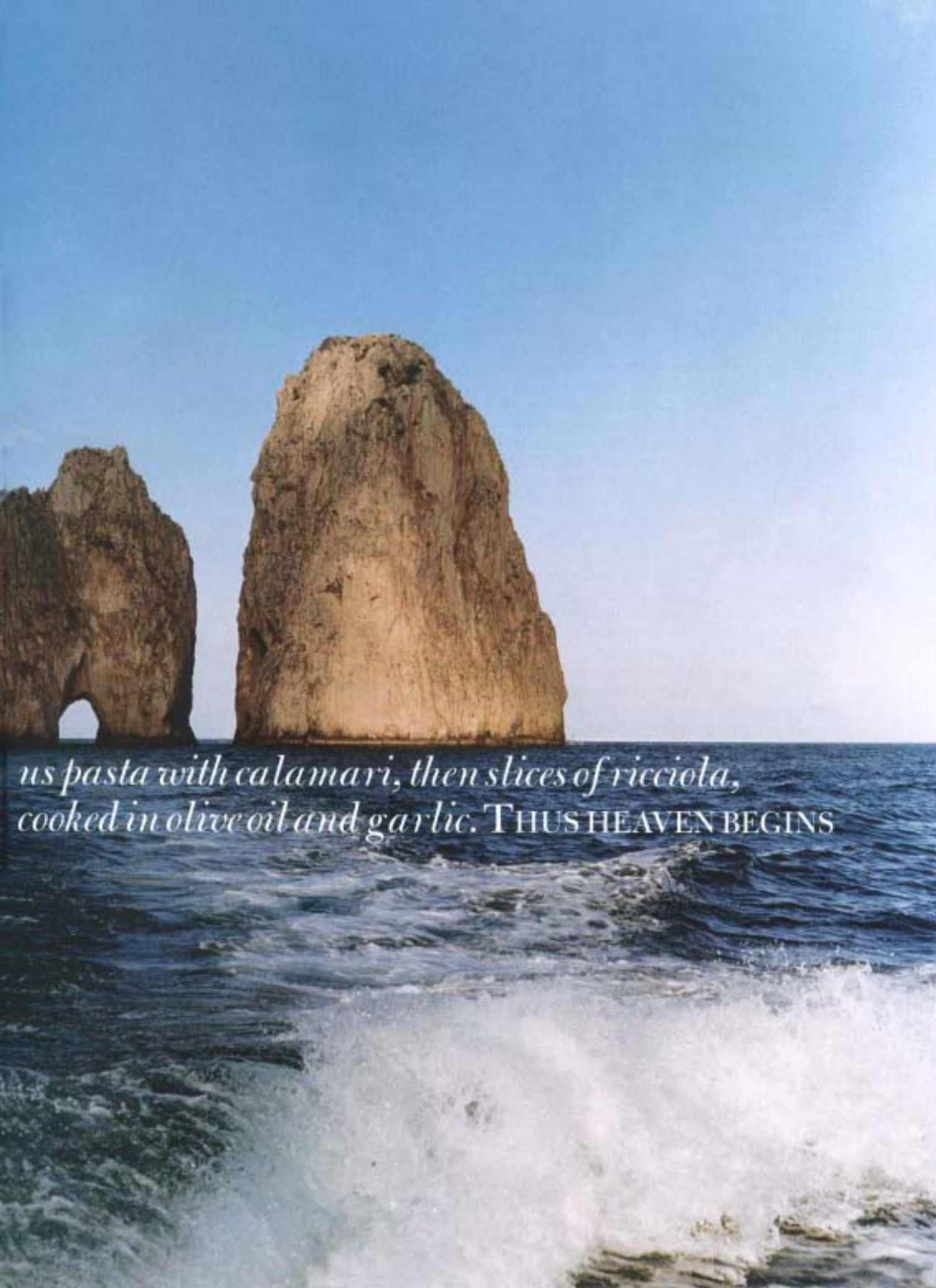
MAKE LOVE,  
*now it's your turn*



Upright citizens: Before being eroded by water and wind, the Faraglioni were part of the mainland.

*The owner brings  
a sweet fish*





*us pasta with calamari, then slices of ricciola,  
cooked in olive oil and garlic. THUS HEAVEN BEGINS*



are luscious villas to be seen on vine-shaded entry paths planted in wisteria and jasmine. The Villa Jovis is one of those ancient sites where the things that went on haven't entirely gone away. The wind actually roars through the pines as you climb around the tepidarium, the room heated to medium temperature, and the apodyterium, the dressing room, and something is there with you that doesn't quite have a name.

Six miles from the mainland are three islands in the Bay of Naples: Ischia and Procida, which are volcanic in origin (Vesuvius looms on the horizon), and Capri, part of the limestone chain of the Apennines. Capri is all soaring sculpted rock, grottoes, floating seagulls, and goats, despite the island's name, which is derived from the Greek word *kapros*; meaning wild boar. The island has always been popular with hordes of day-trippers, who come in on the ferries from Naples. May and September are perhaps the ideal months to visit; August is swarmed. Yet, somehow, Capri transcends its popularity. The paved paths and arched alleyways wind off into silence and birdsong, while the crowds tend to congregate in the T-shirt streets around La Piazzetta. Here and there, on the mortared stone walls that border the pathways, you will find ceramic plaques with pretty blue writing that read, when translated: "Courtesy and silence are indications of civility. Respect them." Curiously enough, on Capri anyhow, except for the aforementioned tourist corrals, this actually seems to work.

"You'll find a way to ignore the crowds," my café society friend insists, "and see the Blue Grotto." So, all right, I do it, and he is right again. Inside, it is wondrously eerie and astonishing: dazzling, pulsing azure light caught in a sea cave. It takes more than an hour to get in, with a line of sightseeing boats as well as a line of pedestrians down the staircase that leads to the water. We wait for passage on the small rowboats, in which you must lie flat in order to slip beneath a rock lip into the famous grotto. For the desperado traveler, the strategy is to wait until six in the evening, when the boats leave, and then swim inside. But best to heed the local wisdom: Don't go alone, and don't try this in any but the calmest of seas. People have drowned in the Blue Grotto.

And there are, in fact, better ways to swim in the Mediterranean. You have a choice of beaches-rock ledges, in fact, not sand-which can be reached by bus or taxi. On Capri there is the popular Marina Piccola, and on Anacapri-the western heights of the island--there is the lighthouse beach at Punta Carena. But the best is the highly recommended Fontelina, the beach club on the right at the end of the Via Tragara, below the plaza in front of the Hotel Punta Tragara. Being the most desirable, it naturally cannot be reached by bus or taxi. You must walk down, on steep switchbacks that cross the face of the hillside (wear grippy sandals), and you will discover, in the process, that visiting the landfall (*Continued on page 153*)



*CURZIO MALAPARTE was an atrocious Fascist but the Caprese view him with a shrug and a melancholy*





*a good writer;  
shake of the head*



Luxe life: For jet-setters, the Grand Hotel Quisisana has long been the gold standard of life on Capri.



[Iceland]

embassy is at 21 Laufásvegur in Reykjavík (562-9100; usa.is).

**Lodging**

On a farm or in a hotel, you will be comfortably and cheerfully lodged, but for the former, inquire about a private bath if that is a necessity for you.

In Reykjavík, the **Hotel Borg** pleasantly revives its 1930s ambience and is the most centrally located hotel in the old town (551-1440; www.hotelborg.is; doubles, \$285; (5)). The luxurious **Landmark Hotel** has six suites in a central, converted Jugendstil town house. It has lots of character, but the service could use some polishing (552-8700; landmark.is; doubles, \$230-\$380). New this summer is the four-star **Nordica Hotel**, owned by Icelandair (444-5000; nordicahotel.is; doubles, \$230-\$355; (5)).

If comfort is easy to come by in the countryside, luxury is not. I did,

however, hear very good things about two upscale places. In Saudárkrökur, at the Skaga Fjord, on the northern coast, is a wooden lodge called the **Hotel Tindastoll**. The oldest on the island, it dates to 1884 (453-5002; hoteltindastoll.com; doubles, \$185-\$225). Very new but designed in a traditional style, the **Hotel Búdir** is in Snaefellsbaer, below the Snaefellsjökull, or Snaefells Glacier (435-6700; www.budir.is; doubles, \$225-\$260; (5)).

A small hotel favored by salmon fishermen, the **Bláfell** is in the town of Breiddalsvíkin, in the beautiful eastern fjord area. A very agreeable place, it has been newly redone, and the upstairs rooms can match those of a first-rate city hotel. I was pleased, too, by an authentic Icelandic meal: a pot-au-feu of mutton with turnips, and some excellent homemade cake (475-6770; blafell@centrum.is; doubles, \$120; (5)).

Near the iceberg lagoon, the Svaðafells Glacier, and the Ingólfrhöfði bird sanctuary, the **Hotel Skaftafell** is well kept, with an efficient staff (478-1945; hotelskaftafell.is; doubles, \$175; (5)). In Egilsstaðir, the 1903 **Guesthouse Egilsstaðir** is the best place to stay before driving through the eastern fjords. It's a bit worn here and there but has a pleasant nostalgia, and some of the rooms have good views of the adjoining lake (471-1114; egilsstaðir.info; doubles, \$160-\$205).

I spent most of my nights at farms that double as guesthouses. I would recommend all but the one at Brekkur, near Vík, where the food was unacceptable. You can book farm accommodations through **Icelandic Farm Holidays** (570-2700; www.farmholidays.is) or, as I did, through the Paris agency **Comptoir d'Islande**, which is its biggest client and consequently can procure

rooms that are otherwise hard to get—and at better rates. Franck Lemaître, who is in charge of client relations, is an Iceland freak, and I found his advice very helpful in planning my trip. The company will handle your reservations even if you book your flights elsewhere, and they speak English, though the Web site (comptoir.fr) is in French (33-1-5310-2150; flemaitre@comptoir.fr).

**Dining**

The food in Iceland is quite acceptable, although expensive compared with the rest of Europe. Wine is particularly pricey. I never encountered such folkloric specialties as sheep's testicles pickled in whey or putrified shark meat, but pizza, burgers, and fries were common, and the village of Reykholt even had toasted bagels.

Local cod, haddock, mutton, and lamb frequently appear on menus, but it all gets frozen before it arrives at market. Icelanders favor mutton over lamb. Puffin and gannet, smoked or pickled like salmon, are game birds commonly eaten.

**Reading**

**Lonely Planet's Iceland, Greenland & the Faroe Islands** is the standard (\$20), and the **Rough Guide Iceland** (\$18) is also thorough, opinionated, and helpful. Many of the hotels recommended here, and dozens more, are listed at **hotel.is**, part of the larger **tourist.is**, with clickable links, local and e-mail addresses, and fax numbers.

—G. Y. Dryansky

Going Wild in Iceland  
Timing Is All

Camping, trekking, fishing, birding, riding—take your pick, but remember: Everything has its season

You'll get a lot out of Iceland just by experiencing the startling natural environment, but you can also camp, trek, and enjoy some of the world's best fly-fishing, reindeer hunting, bird shooting, and horseback riding.

The three-month salmon-fishing season falls between June and September; trout-fishing season is from April through early October (exact dates depend on the species). In Iceland, fishing clubs provide lodgings, food, and fishing licenses and can supply equipment, too. Rates, which are all-inclusive, run from \$500 to more than \$1,200 a day. Eric Clapton reportedly caught 80 salmon in two days with **Angling Club Lax-a**, the club that runs the greatest number of streams (557-6100; lax-a.is). Another well-regarded company is **Angling Service Strengir** (567-5204; strengir.is).

Both outfitters also guide hunters. Reindeer season is August through early September, while goose and duck hunting season runs from mid-August through mid-March.

Horseback riding can be arranged almost anywhere; on the



Biking to infinity.

Web, search Iceland horse and you'll be swamped, or go to **Iceland touristboard.com** and click on "Fun things to do." The Icelandic horse has a unique gait, between a walk and a trot, that is an incredibly smooth experience in the saddle.

Bird-watchers interested in venturing onto the Ingólfrhöfði promontory should reserve with **Einar Sigurdsson** (478-2382; www.hofn.net). Two national bird sanctuaries worth seeing are the **Dyrhólaey**, which closes for the nesting season from mid-May through June, and the **Bakkagerói**, situated on a beautiful promontory, past the fishing village

of the same name.

Snowmobiling and glacier treks on the Vatnajökull can be reserved through **Vatnajökull Tours**, which also offers jeep excursions for the less athletically inclined and boat tours of the Jökulsárlón iceberg lagoon, a few miles south (478-1000; glacierjeeps.is).

Having good guidebooks on Iceland's birds and plant life can greatly enrich your trip. **The Icelandic Bird Guide**, by Jóhann Óli Hilmansson, and **Flowering Plants and Ferns of Iceland**, by Hörður Kristósson, are both excellent. You can easily find copies in bookstores around Reykjavík.

—G.Y.D.

Capri



There's only one word for time spent on Capri and that's sybaritic. And all good sybarites agree that long walks and climbs on the island's winding pathways tend to heighten the pleasures of the hotel pool and its adjacent bar. A

**Sea Cabs** If you want a motorboat at your beck and call on Capri, phone Taxi del Mare (39-081-877-3600).



[Capri]

good walking map is an absolute necessity, as is a guidebook that tells you what you're looking at (see "Reading," below). The Villa Jovis walk is demanding but well worth the effort: Follow the signs on the corner walls (you have to watch for them). To see the island's lush flora, walk along the Via Tragara from the Via Camerelle, the high-fashion street, to the lookout point in front of the Hotel Punta Tragara. For a town walk, stroll the Via Botteghe, filled with grocery stores, boutiques, and wine shops; to extend this journey, take the Via Maternània Grotto. Then descend 600 steps, take the path to the staircase side of the Casa Malaparte, and swing around the Via Pizzolungo back to town. The Villa Damecuta, a romantic ruin by the sea, is best reached from Anacapri (the booklet "**Guide to the Ancient Monuments**"—see "Reading"—has directions, but follow the map starting at the Via Boffe).

The country and city code for Capri and Naples is 39-081. Rates quoted are for the current month, which is high season. The U.S. consulate is on the Piazza della Repubblica in Naples (583-8111; [usembassy.it/naples](http://usembassy.it/naples)).

**Lodging**

If you ever needed a reason to go upscale on hotels, Capri is that reason. The **Villa Brunella** is small and intimate, the staff are extremely attentive, and the owner serves as the concierge and will find you anything you need on the island. Ask for a room with a terrace and a sea view. The restaurant more than deserves a visit, even if

you aren't staying here (837-0122; [villabrunella.it](http://villabrunella.it); doubles, \$230-\$350; \$). The 30-room **La Scalinatella** has a near-perfect ratio of intimacy to marble and is the choice of many longtime Capriophiles (837-0633; [scalinatella.com](http://scalinatella.com); doubles, \$530).

High on Anacapri, with terraces overlooking the Bay of Naples and Vesuvius, the **Hotel San Michele di Anacapri** is an excellent buy, and breakfast is included (837-1427, fax -1420; doubles, \$174-\$206; \$). The **five-star Capri Palace**, on the other hand, is at the top of the class in Anacapri (978-0111; [capri-palace.com](http://capri-palace.com); doubles, \$295-\$480).

**Dining**

Capri has an elevated reputation for dining, and the standard is indeed unbelievably high. The island is essentially a piece of Naples that drifted out to sea, so the cuisine is Neapolitan, with a few local specialties. For an appetizer, there's always *insalata caprese* (tomato, basil, and mozzarella), or *fried mozzarella*, or the local *cacciata* to cheese. And try the antipasto table, which has seafood salads galore (you'll be charged based on the size of your plate).

At **Da Gemma**, the specialty is *fritta alla Gemma*: fried mozzarella, fried potato cakes (elsewhere called *bomba*), and fried zucchini blossoms (837-0461; entrées, \$5-\$11). At **Da Paolino**, try the *penne with eggplant*. After dinner, have the iced *limoncello*, a lemon liqueur (837-6102; entrées, \$5-\$18).

The super-relaxed **Da Gelsomina** is a long way from the center of town, down a road too

narrow for taxis. Call the restaurant and someone will come to the bookstore in the Piazza della Vittoria and pick you up. Lunch is simple, and perfect for a long, hot afternoon in southern Italy. Late-night revelers at **Gelsomina** will have to stay over. Its rooms are very moderately priced, and a pool overlooks the kitchen gardens and the sea (837-1499; [dagelsomina.com](http://dagelsomina.com); doubles, \$136; entrées, \$8-\$15). If **Gelsomina** leaves you feeling vaguely overindulged, take the 900 steps of **La Scala Fenicia** (the Phoenician Stairway) back down to the Marina Grande.

**Shopping**

All the classic fashion houses have stores here, side by side on the Via Camerelle. **Amina Rubinacci**, however, is local, with silk, cashmere, and linen clothing designed and manufactured in and around Naples (13/15 Via Vittorio Emanuele; 837-7295). **Carthusia** has perfume made from local flowers, especially wild carnations and lilies (10 Via Camerelle; 837-0529; the factory store is on the Via Matteotti). Next door, **La Conchiglia** is an excellent bookstore with art books and works by authors of local interest (837-8199).

**Reading**

The best book about Capri is Shirley Hazzard's *Greene on Capri*, which, being a literary biography, comes at the place sideways but captures it perfectly (Farrar Straus and Giroux, \$12). Robert Graves's long and winding **I, Claudius**, all depravity and plots, brings Tiberius and the classical period sharply to life (Vintage, \$14). In the realm of guidebooks,

**Fodor's Naples, Capri and the Amalfi Coast** is immensely useful (\$17). One of the best guides—and also the lightest—is the blue and yellow "**Isola di Capri**" map, published by Litografia Artistica Cartografica. It shows the paths outside the towns as well as where cars and buses can and can't go, and, on the reverse side, has astonishingly concise descriptions of local walks and hotels and restau-

rants (with phone numbers), as well as all the emergency numbers. You can get the map at the tourist information office on the right-hand side of the Piazza Umberto I and at the curio store on the Via Certosa, catty-corner to the Gardens of Augustus. If you had nothing else, you could make do with this one guide (\$5). Still, pick up the booklet "**Guide to the Ancient Monuments of the Island of Capri**," available at the tourist office, the Villa Jovis, and many archaeological sites (\$2), and the free paperback **Capri/Anacapri in 12 Tours**, which will tell you what you're looking stand will keep you from getting lost.

The island is admirably Web sited, with [capriweb.com](http://capriweb.com) as well as [capri.net](http://capri.net), which captures hotels, restaurants, museums, and bars using a 360-degree spinning camera (hence the endless photos and endless information). **-Alan Furst**

**Penang**



The drive to the island from the Malaysian mainland takes you over the famous Penang Bridge, which, at more than eight

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**★ THE FORUM**  
 What are your favorite diving or snorkeling spots?

Travel Planner					
		Afternoon temperature (F)	Daily hours of sunshine	Number of rainy days	Per diem
Capri	july	82°	10:48	2	\$279
	dec.	58°	3:30	12	
Penang, Malaysia	july	90°	6:29	12	\$117
	dec.	89°	6:50	11	
Reykjavik	july	57°	5:48	15	\$355
	dec.	36°	0:17	20	



(Continued from page 102) of Homeric sailors turns out to be a Homeric pain in the ass.

There is no casual access to the sea on Capri. For a visit to Fontelina or any of the lidos, call the club and make a reservation for lunch—you won't be sorry—which brings with it a preferred space amid the well-oiled seal colony sprawled on the rocks that line the water. You are, for a small fee, a one-day member of a beach club, entitled to a few feet of warm limestone, an umbrella, and pads or beach chairs.

Directly offshore at Fontelina are the Faraglioni (the Sons of Capri), dramatic rock towers that thrust up some 350 feet from the sea and serve as symbolic images of the island. When you're tired of sunbathing, you climb down a ladder into the cool, clean water and gaze up at the mythic rocks. It's strange, but being in Mediterranean water is better than being in most other water (I'm sorry, it just is). You're in there with Poseidon and Neptune and the rest of the guys, and if you are not borne up by ancient gods, you certainly will be by the extraordinary salinity. If you tire of floating, about fifty feet out from the ladder is a rock with a comfortable moss carpet where you can stand. It was occupied, when I got there, by two American lawyers, but courtesy is a fact of life on Capri, and they soon ceded the space to a handsome couple from Hamburg.

But perhaps the best swimming of all is to be had by boat. My boatman was maybe sixteen, and intensely concerned that I appreciate all the sights to be seen on the two-hour trip around the island. Thus I saw the White Grotto, the Grotto of the Saints, a congregation of rocks at prayer, and, my favorite, the Green Grotto. "You want to swim here," said the boatman. And he was right, I did. From your boat, you can stop for a swim whenever you like, and everybody does, but immersion in the Green Grotto is highly recommended. The water here is a milky sage color, and you swim beneath a natural rock arch to be met on the other side by your boatman. The Romans turned the grottoes into nymphaea (small sanctuaries), and it is from these sea caves that the Sirens sup-

posedly called out to Odysseus and his sailors. He resisted, according to Homer, but I didn't and neither should you.

From the perspective of the sea, you will have an unusually good view of one of the great architectural sites of Europe. That is the Casa Malaparte, constructed in the 1930s on the Punta Massullo, famous for its color, a kind of deep Renaissance red that suggests the colors of Venice, and for its trapezoidal staircase. The house was built by the writer Curzio Malaparte, born Kurt Erich Suckert, a prominent figure in the local marching corps of the bad and the beautiful. He was actually maybe a little worse than that. In the 1930s he was a great admirer of Mussolini, who apparently gave him permission to build on the otherwise forbidden shoreline. He called on his countrymen to "burn the libraries and disperse the families of the vile species of intellectuals." Like Louis Ferdinand Céline and Ezra Pound, he was an atrocious Fascist but a good, at times magnificent, writer; thus the Caprese view him with a shrug and a melancholy shake of the head.

Malaparte accompanied the German attack on Russia as a foreign correspondent in 1941, went to prison on his return to Italy, and made an opportunistic conversion to communism after the war.

Toward the end of his life, he got cancer and was told that the only place he could be cured was China. As a result, he left the Casa Malaparte to the People's Republic of China, but his will was successfully contested and the property was assigned to a foundation that was to make the house available to students of architecture.

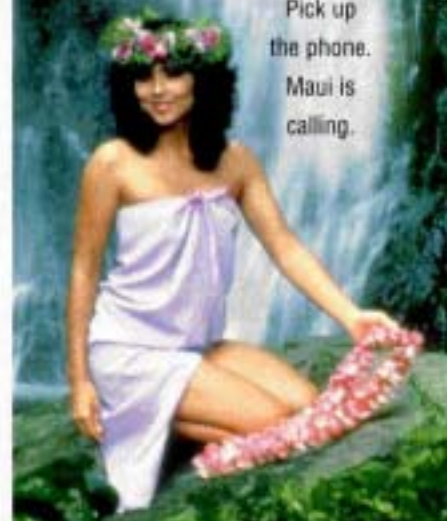
Malaparte wrote a novel about occupied Naples, *The Skin*, which is virtually impossible to read, and a novelized memoir called *Kaputt*, a savage and ironic portrait of fascism, an indictment of war itself, and one of the best novels to come out of World War II. As the book ends, Malaparte—for refuge, for sanctuary, for the salvation of his mortal soul—tries desperately to return to Capri. He reaches, at last, the harbor of Naples. He writes: "The sight of the sea moved me, and I began to weep. There, before me, was the warm and delicate sea, the Neapolitan sea, the free

You're in there  
with Poseidon  
and Neptune and  
the rest of the  
guys, and if you  
are not borne up  
by ancient gods,  
you will be by  
the extraordinary  
salinity

# Maui Calls

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## CAPRI

blue sea of Naples-all crumpled into little waves that rippled after one another with a gentle sound under the caress of a wind scented with brine and rosemary."

IN THE EVENING, ON THE WATER-front of Capri, motorcycles whine along the quay and a rusty freighter stands at anchor. Among the bars and cafés lining the street is the unassuming L'Approdo. You do not sit and read a menu at L'Approdo. Signor Giaminelli, the owner, walks you to a table laid out with fish and seafood. For each, a method of preparation is described. "I am descended from seven generations of octopus fishermen," he says, "and we have, over time, made a book of recipes that we like more than fifty of them."

Would we, perhaps, care to try one?

The tiny white octopuses are finely minced, mixed with flour, shaped into cakes, and fried a golden brown. These are improved, if that's possible, by Signor Giaminelli's choice of wine, the dry white Falanghina, more or less the favorite with seafood on the island. The name of the

vineyard is Campi Flegrei-"fire fields"-suggesting the flinty volcanic earth below Vesuvius

For a second appetizer we have *fragalia*, baby shrimp and a small mound of those silvery little minnows that are eaten with sighs of pleasure all around the Mediterranean. The curious thing is that it's like eating a fillet: There's no sense of individual fishes, and they're too young to have bones. This is followed by *pappardelle* with plum tomatoes, zucchini blossoms, and clams the size of your thumbnail, and then *merluzzo alla pro vaza*, a cod scrupulously removed from its skeleton by a surgically inclined waiter. Of course you are on seafood island here, but this meal is almost too good to be true. Dinners on Capri are typically generous, and reasonable in price, but with all the walking and climbing and swimming, you'll likely go home a pound lighter.

Just past La Piazzetta, the taxis wait near the post office on the Via Roma. Cabs here have names painted on the door, and we take the one called Bugs Bunny up the hill to Anacapri. This is a

stimulating ride, something like the climactic chase scene in an Italian movie (hairpin turns around breathless drops) and is intensified by the fact that Caprese taxis have their tops removed and replaced with canvas awnings, so there is plenty of fresh air on the way up.

Anacapri is the town at the very top of Capri (from the Greek word *ana*, meaning above), with a crowded central square, the Piazza Vittoria, and a long alley of down-market tourist stalls. A fifteen-minute stroll from the piazza is the Villa San Michele, built atop the ruins of one of Tiberius's villas by Axel Munthe, a Swedish physician, philanthropist, and author. Munthe is really the single saint in the catalog of local sinners. A humanitarian and a great protector of the local birdlife, he wrote a best-seller in 1929, *The Story of San Michele*. The foreign-language editions-German, Turkish, Hebrew, and so on-are exhibited in a glass case on a stucco wall. If you're just crazy to see them, you'll want to tour the interior of the villa; otherwise, skip it.

What you want here is the lush and exquisite garden, built facing views of the Bay of Naples. This is a paradise for the romantic *flâneur*: a long alley of ancient cypress trees, a walkway shaded by a pergola covered in wisteria vine, corners filled with hibiscus and bay laurel. The pergola walk leads to the Sphinx Parapet, where, legend has it, if you touch the sphinx with your left hand-a hollow worn in the hindquarters shows you where-your wish will come true. Munthe never actually lived in this villa, well-stocked with phony antiques. The only real tenant was the Marchesa Casati, who became famous in the 1920s for leading a leopard with a diamond collar down the Champs-Élysées.

The horticultural life of Capri does not end at the walls of the villas. This is, after all, southern Italy, where food is understood as well as anywhere in the world, and the houses of the local Caprese all have kitchen gardens-even the beach clubs have kitchen gardens. Everyone grows a few rows of grapevines, with potatoes and zucchini planted between the rows, surrounded by basil, sage, and rosemary. Bay is everywhere, used mostly as an ornamental shrub, but if you snatch a leaf for the soup, who's to know? There are tomato plants tied up to stakes, small groves of lemon trees-they make a local liqueur here called *limoncello*-and love-

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ly, dusty-green olive trees. This island is, in fact, a vertical garden, with only a few small grocery stores to be seen. They buy seafood from the fishermen and make pasta on the kitchen table, so what survives on Capri is the wonderful old European dream of eating what is local, fresh, and perfect. And I wasn't in a single restaurant where the food didn't taste exactly like that. On every menu I saw, they had an asterisk next to products that had been frozen.

**O**N THE TERRACE OF THE GRAND Hotel Quisisana, 7 P.M. is the hour of the aperitif. Crowds stroll idly up and down the street, and nowhere else in Europe will you see so many desirable people—or, maybe this says it better, people who enjoy being desired—all kinds, all ages, and all nationalities. It's the place to wear something sexy and elegant, and to poke gingerly at the border of good taste doesn't seem so very wrong. That, in a way, is the great trick of this island. It is not churches and paintings—Capri has always been the height of pleasure and fashion in a Mediterranean setting, at its best when it doesn't pretend to be anything more.

And the Quisisana is just about the perfect vantage point for watching it all go by. Built in 1847 by a Scottish doctor as a tuberculosis sanatorium—*quisisana* means "here one is healed"—it was rebuilt as a hotel in 1912. A classic example of the European grand hotel, it is all marble and lawn and shrubbery, and forever the true magnetic north of Capri. It is owned (and this is typical of the island) not by a corporation but by the Morganos. *The* great hotel family of Capri, they also own the Scalinatella and the Casa Morgano, side by side on the Via Tragara, which is said to be the most beautiful street in the world.

At nine o'clock and not a moment before, it's time for dinner. We think of perhaps going to La Capannina or La Pigna, or of taking a taxi down to Da Paolino, where the whipped cream in a bowl on the dessert table stands eighteen inches high, or of walking to the local favorite trattoria, Le Grottelle, where the breeze blows in off the sea, or maybe to Da Gemma, Gra-

ham Greene's old hangout. Funny, but they're all somebody's old hangout, and you can feel it. All of them are informal, noisy, and lusty, with a thousand delicacies on the antipasto table and not a tie or a jacket to be seen anywhere. They're like places in a Hemingway novel—the local joint down a backstreet where you can be what you like and say what you want.


And that, too, is the great trick of this island: It's been an escape for two thousand years. It certainly was for Greene (one more proof of the theorem that warm Mediterranean islands draw cold English writers). Seeking privacy with his mistress, he ran to Capri from his home in Antibes—Antibes! But he is only one among many in a long history of fugitives, like the fake "Count" Fersen, who mounted a plaque on his villa dedicating it "to love and pain," or the writer Norman Douglas, or Baron Krupp of the German armaments family. (Capri was clearly insufficient escape for those last three, all of whom committed suicide here.)

It was Baron Krupp who initiated construction of the Via Krupp, which one architectural critic claimed as proof of the proposition that a road can be a work of art. The Via Krupp, which winds down the hill to Marina Piccola Beach, has lately been closed for repairs. High above the road stands the Villa Krupp, also built by the baron and now a hotel. Ironically enough, the Villa Krupp was once home to Maxim Gorky, Lenin, and a crowd of their Bolshevik friends, on the run after the Russian Revolution of 1905.

Capri is now not as star laden as it used to be the days of Brigitte Bardot and Jackie Onassis are no more. Certainly there is wealth and celebrity here, as always, but lately it has a taste for peace and quiet, and has learned to value discretion. The occasional television star still shows up in camera lights in front of the Quisisana, but it's no more than a moment in the life of the street. The real show, of course, is this sumptuous little island. In fact, that's always been true, and these days the world seems just at the point of figuring out that maybe, just maybe, that's more than enough.

Crowds stroll idly up and down the street, and nowhere else in Europe will you see so many desirable people—all kinds, all ages, and all nationalities

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