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3 cool summer destinations

LA DOLCE VITA
Rejuvenate on Ischia

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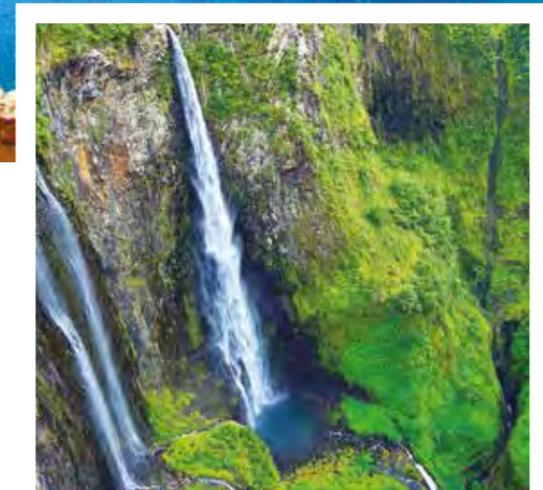
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FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

This small volcanic island in the Bay of Naples once inspired one of the world's hottest romances. Ischia today is a refuge for rejuvenation and authentic cuisine, as Grace Trofa experiences.



In the 1950s and '60s, Ischia, along with neighboring Capri and the Amalfi Coast, was a haven for the international jet set. Prominent among the glitterati was Milanese publisher and film producer Angelo Rizzoli. "Il Commendatore," as he was known, fell in love with the beauty of Ischia and constructed the exquisite Regina Isabella hotel, still the island's resort queen, in the late 1950s. Among the stars that chose Ischia for their private getaway were Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, who began their tryst while filming scenes for the movie "Cleopatra" on the island.

Today, Ischia continues to attract the rich and famous. But it's all very discreet on *Isola Verde*, or Green Island, as it's nicknamed for its verdant hills. The locals are accustomed

to celebrities in their midst, so no one pays much attention to the helicopters that make their way from Naples to the Regina Isabella or yachts anchored in the harbor, although the size of the yacht *A did* impress during a recent stopover.

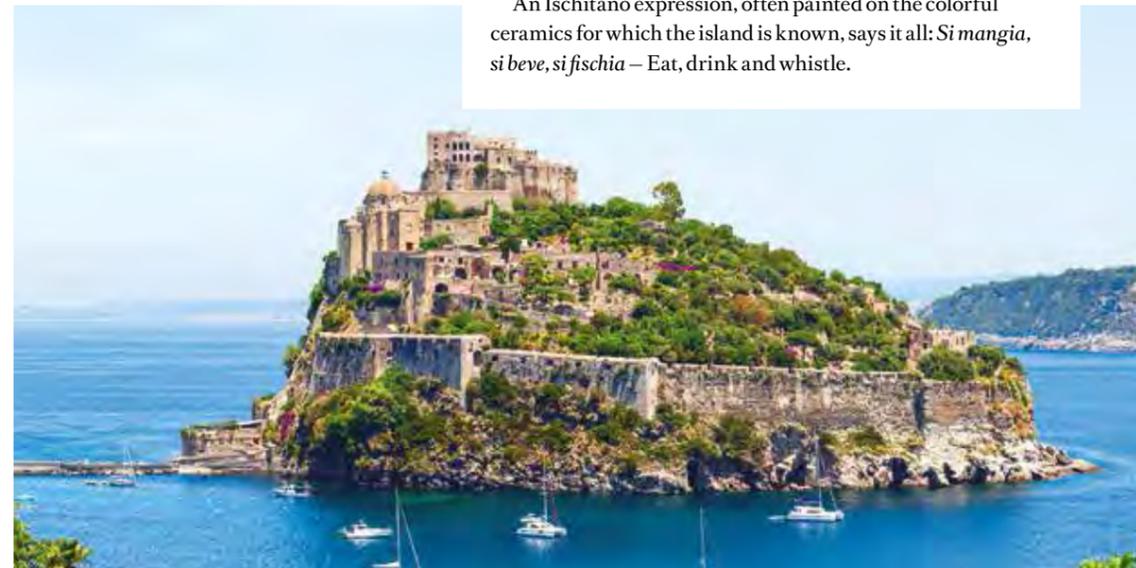
Happily, *la dolce vita* is still alive and well here. Six communities make up this mountainous 18-square-mile island with 65,000 year-round inhabitants. Capri may be better known for its glamour and glitz, but Ischia is more about *benessere* (well-being). The island is rich in thermal waters from deep springs that have been known since ancient times for their healing properties. The island's 53 types of mineral waters are reputed effective in the treatment of muscle and bone ailments, respiratory problems



and infertility. Today, though, the focus is on beauty. Mud and minerals are used in beauty products developed on the island. Try warm mud or *fango* treatments, and they will become part of your daily routine.

A vacation on Ischia is about relaxation, rejuvenation and the joy of being pampered. Sure you could pick up a tennis racket, but why would you want to? The island boasts three Michelin-rated restaurants. The local cuisine features beautiful cherry tomatoes and rich purple eggplant, juicy peaches and fat lemons. Wash it down with a glass of Biancolella from Casa D'Ambra, the best of the many island wineries, delight in the flavor of the local limoncello and meloncello produced by Sapori d'Ischia, then burn off those calories, not on a treadmill, but with a joyful dive into the clear-blue Mediterranean Sea. Follow it up with a healing mud bath to clear what ails you or just because life is meant to be savored.

An Ischitano expression, often painted on the colorful ceramics for which the island is known, says it all: *Si mangia, si beve, si fischia* – Eat, drink and whistle.



THE LUSH LIFE

While it is nice to take a stroll along Via Roma for some quality shopping in Porto d'Ischia or visit the galleries in Ischia Ponte's artistic center, your best bet is to avoid the crowds and head for the hills. The island's true nature reveals itself as the road spirals up the mountain through pine forests and cultivated fields, and it is here that you will find some of the most luxurious accommodations. I recommend four stellar properties (see next pages), each with its own unique style, each a pleasure.



PACIFIC PEARLS, OPPOSITE: ISTOCK/FFRIST (TOP), ISTOCK/BADROMAN (INSET), THIS PAGE: ISTOCK/KWISSE (FROM TOP), ISTOCK/EVGENY SERGEEV, ISTOCK/CHRIS GRAMLY, COURTESY OF REGINA ISABELLA (ISTOCK), ANGELATO, ISTOCK/ANTONIO GRAVANTE, ADRIAN STOK, ISTOCK/NEVGEN BEI (L)



SAN MONTANO RESORT AND SPA

It's easy to let the mind wander with the Mediterranean panorama spread out before you at this breezy hilltop retreat on Mount Vico, and it's no wonder the ancient Greeks chose this site for their acropolis. San Montano is the last spot on Ischia where the rays of the setting sun cast their spell.

General manager Maurizio Orlacchio, a native of Ischia and veteran of Four Seasons, oversaw the extensive recent renovation of this oasis of well-being owned by fellow Ischitani. Five pools perched on terraces overlooking the Med follow the direction of the sun, descending in temperature as they drop in altitude, down to the lowest-level sunset pool. Cascading waterfalls, Jacuzzis, a Turkish bath, Finnish sauna and a natural sauna carved out of the Ischia *tufa* are all temptations. The spa, bright and cheerful with expansive windows to take in the view, features the latest in technology and treatments. Among the 25 therapies are body contouring and oxygen facial treatments,

plus 24 types of massages. San Montano has its own mineral water springing from a source 65 feet into the mountain at 203 degrees Fahrenheit. Don't leave without picking up a product from Spa Director Catrin Surabella's personal line, Ischia Beauty. For the future, Orlacchio envisions adding a techno-free zone with a Zen Garden, while the restaurant will launch new wellness menus, sourced from the bounty of the onsite garden.

Dinner at the restaurant already is a special treat. As the lights begin to glimmer on the island below, a piano provides background music. The menu items showcase local ingredients, beautifully plated. How does a simple dish of pappardelle with native porcini taste so delicious? To end a magical evening, all eyes turn to the sky as the hotel puts on a display of fireworks.

A member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World, the property has 73 rooms and 10 bi-level suites. www.sanmontano.com



TERME MANZI HOTEL AND SPA

The Relais & Châteaux Terme Manzi Hotel and Spa thrones on a small piazza in a charming neighborhood not far from Ischia's bustling megayacht port. In 1863, Luigi Manzi discovered the healing properties of the Gurgitiello Springs and erected the hotel and spa above the site. Film producer Angelo Rizzoli restored the property in 1960, and in 2000, the current owners embarked on a five-year renovation.

The décor is eclectic — all of the invading hordes are represented — but not random; the family wanted it to reflect the hotel's history. Some of the artifacts from the original spa, such as the tub used by Giuseppe Garibaldi during his stay at Terme Manzi in 1865, are on display in the lobby.

The spa is central to the experience at Hotel Manzi. A Thai designer created a beautiful Zen environment in keeping with the spa's holistic approach to healing. The formula — *fango, bagno, massage* (mud treatments, thermal bath and massage) — dates back to ancient times. The thermal water pool is a work of art, a mermaid fountain surrounded by columns and beautiful mosaics. A private, medieval-theme corridor lined with Roman torches provides a discreet exit back to your room. Equally impressive is the rooftop thermal water pool, surrounded by Roman statuary, a great spot to enjoy a late-afternoon swim and *aperitivo* against a mountain backdrop.

Most nights, I lingered at the intimate hotel bar for a nightcap and conversation with the congenial bartender, Carmino. Some hotels just have that pixie dust. Don't be surprised if you decide to extend your stay. www.termemanzihotel.com



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF THE SAN MONTANO RESORT AND SPA (TOP), COURTESY OF THE TERME MANZI HOTEL AND SPA (BOTTOM)



L'ALBERGO DELLA REGINA ISABELLA

This is still the island's queen with her timeless elegance and air of civility. As was succinctly explained to me by management, every place in the world has beautiful five-star hotels, but what's often missing is a soul. When the hotel was renovated, the owner was adamant about retaining some of the décor elements from the 1960s, when the Italian elite would descend on the hotel for the summer. As I eat breakfast in the dining room with its pleated- and tufted-fabric ceiling, I half expect to run into Gianni Agnelli's ghost.

In my room are two small cards. The first one reads, "To enjoy the beautiful sea view from your room, our procedure during the turndown is to not close the shutters and curtains," a gesture I appreciate as the breeze fills my spacious room overlooking boats tied up below my terrace. The other card advises, "For dinner and the bar it is desirable to wear an elegant dress, suits for gentlemen are recommended." I would not dare to do otherwise.

The hotel exudes grandeur in the old European tradition, from the small details, such as the lush tassel on my weighty room key, to the spaciousness of the 128 rooms, with high

ceilings, grand French doors, deep bathtubs and tile floors, crafted by hand on Ischia. The property has four buildings: the main hotel, the Sporting, the Spa and the most recently renovated Royal; its suites are the size of apartments styled with more modern amenities and décor. Each of the fourth-floor accommodations has a terrace with private Jacuzzi, which is filled daily with your choice of thermal or natural water.

I am determined not to leave until I sample the cuisine of the Michelin-starred Indaco restaurant, headed by 37-year-old Chef Pasquale Palamaro. It does not disappoint, though I would have been happy to just bathe in the ambiance. Every evening the restaurant, a vision in white, is set up on a terrace by the sea amid green *tufa* rock formations illuminated by golden lights. As I dine, a small motor yacht pulls up to the nearby dock; a prince from Qatar steps ashore, quietly enjoys dinner and just as quietly slips away. My dessert is a single, small "pearl," filled with chocolate and a liquid passion-fruit center, served in a white seashell.



The spa at the Regina Isabella may be the island's oldest. Under the basement of the existing building are four hot springs, discovered by the Romans more than 2,000 years ago. If you want something more than just a freshening of face and form and desire a life change, this spa can set you on the right path, starting with a consultation with Spa Director and native New Yorker Costanza Popolano. This multi-level spa focuses on wellness and balance. Ozone supplements, underwater massage, cold bandage therapy...the list of treatments is endless, including weeklong programs. During the winter months, mud is created at a *fugi*, a facility with 10 pools of mineral water, each with specific benefits, before being released for use in the spa. On Ischia, they take their mud seriously. www.reginaisabella.com



BY BOAT

The megayacht dock at the marina in Lacco Ameno, not far from the Regina Isabella, can accommodate 10 yachts from 40 to 130 meters and provides water and electricity. Porto d'Ischia also has facilities for yachts up to 60 meters at Riva Destra, the popular waterside dock lined with bars and restaurants, as does the port in Casamicciola, not far from the Manzi. Lovely St. Angelo has a small dock for yachts up to 30 meters and is one of the protected coves for anchoring on the island along with San Pancrazio and San Montano, within view of lovely Mezzatorre. The other ideal location to drop anchor is more central in Ischia Ponte at Cartaromana, within sight of the Aragonese Castle.

Ischia native Nicola Iacono and ex-superyacht crew Rossana Arcamone of Silver Star Yachting are ideally situated to assist with port reservations, air and helicopter transportation and just about any nautical needs. Contact Nicola@silverstaryachting.com.

PHOTOGRAPHS: GRACE TROFA (INSET LEFT), COURTESY OF REGINA ISABELLA (TOP, CIRCLE, BOTTOM)



MEZZATORRE RESORT AND SPA

The road leading through a pine forest, a driveway not much wider than a Fiat 600 and red Roman arch provide but few clues as to what awaits on the other side – a medieval cobblestone courtyard with a romantic fortress at the edge of the sea. Cobblestoned paths connect cottages nestled among 17 acres of pine groves with the Sciué-Sciué restaurant and a private bathing area at the shore side.

Typical of numerous defense and sighting towers built along the Italian coastline to defend against marauding Saracen pirates, Mezzatorre Resort and Spa's tower dates back to the 16th century. Once owned by Baron Alberto Fassini, it now houses the spa, a limited number of exquisite suites and salons. Its décor is the epitome of Italian chic: floating white linen curtains, overstuffed white settees, creative displays of cut flowers and thought-provoking artwork, all against the endless backdrop of the sea. The place is magical with the sound of the cicadas lulling you into a sense of peace. Donatella Versace and Jennifer Lopez are among the notables who take refuge here, especially during the film festival.

Every room is unique, but the tower suites are exceptional, spacious, with tile and wood floors, beamed ceilings and beautifully appointed furnishings. The Bellevue Suite with a private outdoor Jacuzzi is made for romance. Mezzatorre's modern spa and wellness center is equipped with cutting-edge technology and indoor thermal pools for balneotherapy and thalassotherapy. Full-body lymphatic drainage, seaweed Reducing Wraps, Slim Leg treatments and thermal baths with ozone are part of an extensive list of cosmetic procedures.

The service is impeccable. General manager Giovanni Sirabella runs a tight ship and takes a personal interest in your welfare. One evening, returning back to my room at 10:30, I lamented to the valet that I had not had dinner. Although the hotel has two restaurants and several dining areas, it was past the dining hour. Shortly after settling into my room, I heard a knock at the door and there stood Luca, the hotel's head maître d', with menus and an offer from the kitchen to prepare whatever I desired from the formal Chandelier restaurant or the

casual Sciué-Sciué (quick, quick) eatery. I chose the latter and he accompanied me to the water's edge. At midnight, I enjoyed a meal by candlelight to the sound of the waves breaking just below my seaside table and the soft murmur of a few other guests just as reluctant as I was to leave. Luca then escorted me to the piano bar's cozy outdoor sitting area. The mountain breeze billowed the white draped linens and guests stretched back on comfy sofas. With the interior lit by small lamps, it looked like a Roman movie set. The late film director, Luchino Visconti, whose palazzo is now a museum nearby, would have approved. Ambro, the bartender, filled me in on the history of limoncello and when it was time to leave, a waiter escorted me back to my room. It was hospitality at its most sincere. On the day of my departure, I commented on the fragrant scent of lavender in my room and, as I was preparing my bag, the head housekeeper presented me with linen bags filled with fresh lavender and the wish that its aroma would bring back wonderful memories of my stay at Mezzatorre. www.mezzatorre.it





LE FUMAROLE DA NICOLA

Take a quick boat ride from St. Angelo to Maronti Beach for lunch here. What began as just a grotto in the mountain celebrates 50 years in business this summer. Located right on the beach, the stark-white terrace with colorful awning is a favorite dining spot of Roman Abramovich. It doesn't

hurt that owner Giorgio Di Meglio (son of Nicola) is such eye candy, a vision in Ralph Lauren white.

Specialties include simple dishes of grilled fish and chicken and Ischitano cuisine such as rabbit cooked in white wine and cherry tomatoes, chicken perfumed with *piperna*, an herb grown on Ischia's tallest mountain, Mount Epomeo, fried zucchini flowers, delicate white pezzogna or branzino in *acqua pazza* (crazy water), all beautifully presented on colorful ceramic plates made on the island. The garden on the mountaintop

above the restaurant produces fresh vegetables and fruit that find their way onto your plate. The

owner's young nephews, who gave me the grand tour, explained how they fish from the terrace in the evening with nets and, when I motored away from the restaurant, blew me kisses from shore.



BUON APPETITO

I learned a new expression while on Ischia; *kilometer zero* is the Italian equivalent of farm to table. You can dine very well at the hotels, but a trip to Ischia deserves some exploration.

Here are a few of the restaurants favored by locals.



TRATTORIA CASA COLONICA

Negombo Park at the north end of the island is a garden with thermal baths, and tucked away in a corner is this magical outdoor garden restaurant. The young owner, Gioacchino Monti, tells me the décor of colorful mismatched chairs, plates, "everything all mixed up like a salad," was inspired by Ischia in the 1970s, when not much was happening. But today, he assures me, the island has a strong following of internationals who love cuisine.

At the beginning of the year, he funds a farmer to grow all the food for the restaurant. My tasting at lunch is eggplant with orange zest and a reduced wine syrup, zucchini with mint, vinegar and oil, roasted yellow peppers with capers and olives. The bread has texture, the local olive oil is pure, the fresh milky mozzarella from Caserta is served with luscious bright-red tomatoes, and I can't stop eating. At a nearby table, a beautiful fried fish arrives wrapped in a parchment cone and I want more, though I am bursting. Gioacchino has three menus; all vegetables in the morning, late afternoon lunch of bread and cured meats and, in the busy evening, five appetizers, five first courses and five second courses. Find your way there *pronto*.



TRATTORIA IL FOCOLARE

Grab a cab or you will never find it and head up the mountain to this farm restaurant. Owner Riccardo d'Ambra is president of the Slow Food movement in Ischia and neighboring Procida and takes his food seriously; no soda is served, just wine and water, no fish, just vegetables and meats from his land. He invites me to his dirt-floor cantina for a glass of wine and a discussion about the local cuisine. We munch on chickpeas and potato croquettes, tiny roasted finger peppers and zucchini lightly fried in batter while we discuss the classic dish of rabbit and his quest to bring back the more natural way of breeding rabbits in a pit, among other important culinary issues. Though in summer it is wonderful to dine outdoors, the spacious interior has the warmth of a dear friend's kitchen: Plates, faded posters and photos on the walls, square tables topped with red and white tablecloths, books on shelves acting as dividers. His wife, Loretta, scribbles my order for pasta on a piece of paper (she'll decide what's best) and makes a wine suggestion. A bottle quickly appears on the table.

If you can get past the idea of eating a bunny, this would be the place to sample this classic dish. There is nothing quite like the flavor of food directly from the farm. Tastings appear like magic at my table from the kitchen, two different types of homemade pasta, beautiful string beans in a rich red tomato sauce...

On my way out at midnight, I pass a group of 25 coming in for dinner. The owners seem unfazed; if anything, they seem to relish the opportunity for lively discussion into the wee hours as they hustle over bottles of wine and baskets of bread. There is a wonderful camaraderie when people gather around the table in Italy, and I leave wistfully but not before buying some heirloom beans and marmalade. ☐



FOR SHOPAHOLICS

Don't leave without dried herbs and spices, porcini mushrooms and limoncello. In Porto d'Ischia, shop La Faida for Italian fashion, Rustica Domus for antiques, Di Meglio for island ceramics, and pick up a lovely little painting from the artist set up by the church.