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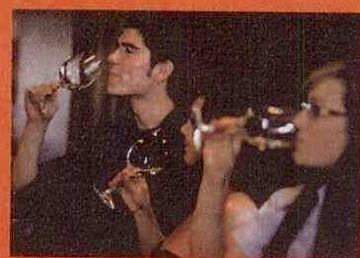
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48 HOURS IN...

Ponza

Just 25 miles off the coast of Lazio, Ponza is a favourite holiday haunt of the Romans. **Mario Matassa** embarks on a voyage of discovery to Italy's undiscovered island

There's something about island holidays that brings out the boy adventurer in me. From the moment I see the ferry navigating its way into port I feel a tingle of excitement that land-bound holidays somehow fail to inspire. Once on board it's a race against my sons to see who reaches the deck first. I sense their excitement and I know exactly how they feel. As the mainland slowly disappears into the horizon, there's nothing but open blue sea and the mystery of that island somewhere far ahead.

The island of Ponza stands out as something of an anomaly. Say 'Sardinia', 'Sicily' or 'Capri' and everyone nods in recognition. But mention Ponza and, more often than not, you're greeted with a blank stare. The Romans, for good reason, like it this way. In over three decades of mass tourism, they have managed – miraculously, some might say – to keep this place virtually a secret.

Ponza (Isola di Ponza) is the largest of the six Italian Pontine Islands, a string of volcanic formations off the coast of Lazio. It is located about 25 miles south of Cape Circeo in the Tyrrhenian Sea. It's small as far as islands are concerned – approximately seven kilometres long and barely two kilometres wide.

LAND AHOY!

After two hours of uninterrupted serene blue sky and sea I'm beginning to wonder if the captain knows where he's going. Then, suddenly, it's there. The island rises out of the horizon like a mirage – tall white cliffs, a smattering of tiny buildings, craggy stalagmites rising from the water. Yet, even though the first sight



Photography © Mario Matassa



WHERE TO EAT

RISTORANTE ACQUA PAZZA 1

Piazza Carlo Pisacane 10, Ponza

☎ +39 0771 80643

Owner, Gino Pesce, is a local celebrity on the island. If you want to experience a delicious meal that is creative and exuberant, book well in advance. Demand to dine here is high, so much so that Gino has turned away the Belgian royal family – although it has to be said that he didn't know who they were at the time!

Around €75 per person, excluding wine

IL TRAMONTO 2

Via Campo Inglese, Le Forna

☎ +39 0771 808563

Located in Campo Inglese in the middle of the island, the restaurant boasts stunning views. This is a great location for a long lunch if you're exploring the island on foot.

Around €50 per person excluding wine

RISTORANTE EEA 3

Corso Umberto, Ponza

☎ +39 0771 80100

At Ristorante EEA you'll find exceptional cuisine in an elegant setting. Like most restaurants on the island seafood features heavily and meals are accompanied by fabulous views over Ponza.

Around €60 per person including wine

ORESTORANTE 4

Via Dietro la Chiesa 3, Ponza

☎ +39 0771 80338

Choose from the three different set menus (or à la carte), the vegetarian menu (€50) and the children's set menu (€30). The place can get a little frantic, especially in July and August, which is not surprising given its central location and a particularly fine wine list.

Around €70 per person excluding wine

NAUTILUS 5

Via Banchina Di Fazio 24, Ponza

☎ +39 0771 80791

For those who don't want to miss a single minute on the beach, grab yourself a *pizza al taglio* (slice of pizza), for lunch before heading out for the day. It makes for a great picnic!

Around €5-10 for a slice of pizza

PIZZERIA DA LUCIANO 6

Via Spiaggia, Santa Maria

(open from 4pm to 10pm)

☎ +39 0771 80690

Check out this pizzeria with a wood burning oven on the beach. Spend a few hours soaking up the sun and once you've built up an appetite grab a pizza and a couple of cold beers here! Not a bad way to spend the afternoon.

Around €9 per person



The emerald waters of the coastline are perfect for swimming and diving

DON'T MISS

THE GROTTOS

The coastline is bursting with beautiful grottos.

A good place to get a sense of the landscape from the sea is the Capo Bianco, where the sheer white cliff face plunges into the blue water, making for a striking contrast. In the immediate area you can visit the Grottone di Capo Bianco and the Grotta delle Streghe, della Donna and del Desiderio.

➤ of land from a distance was spectacular, it's nothing in comparison to the picture postcard spectacle that confronts you from the moment that you disembark.

It is an explosion of colour and activity. The dazzling hues of pinks, blues and yellows of the Moorish-looking cubed houses rising steeply from the harbour look like an assortment of randomly scattered Neapolitan chocolates. Below, in the crescent-shaped harbour, sits a no less impressive array of boats – comprising everything from ferries, sailboats and luxury yachts, which mingle seamlessly with the simplest and most charming fishing and rowing boats.

Immediately I knew we'd come to the right place. But then, we were in good company. During the winter months this tiny little island is home to a mere 3,000 inhabitants. In the summer, however, numbers swell to 30,000. It's a popular resort amongst Romans and is a favourite of international celebrities. Distinguished vacationers to Ponza have included Kirk Douglas and his son Michael, Burt Lancaster, Sophia Loren and Princess Caroline of Monaco – not to mention Jacques Cousteau and his

son Philippe, who also filmed several documentaries in the area.

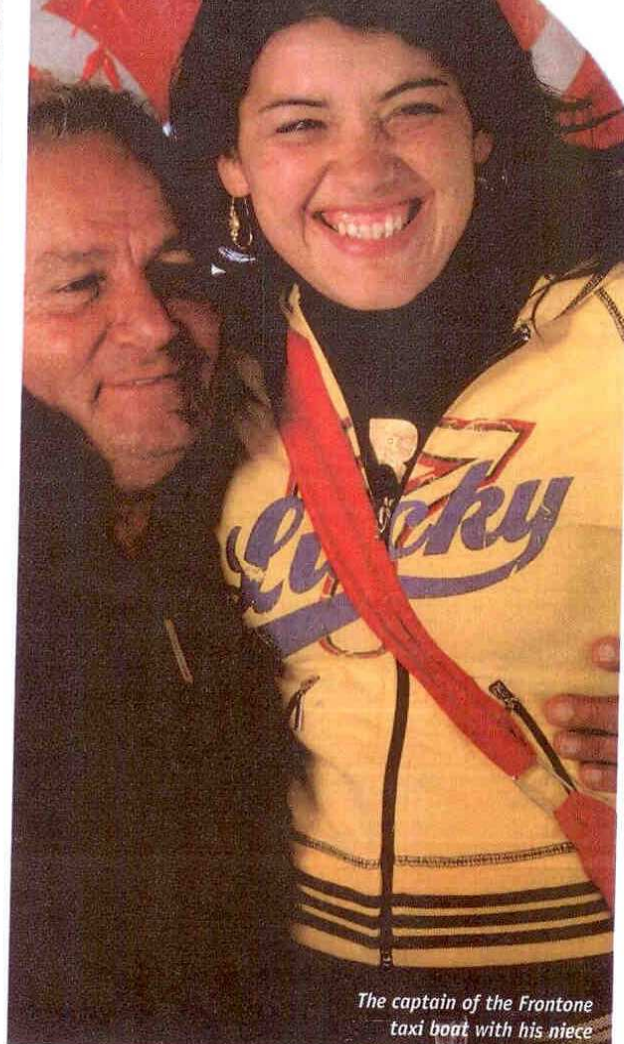
THE PERFECT TOUR GUIDE

As we disembarked we were greeted by Antonio Iacovella – Tony – our host for the next couple of days. His family originate from Lazio, and he spent 20 years in Dublin before returning to Italy where he met his wife Nina, a true Ponzese. Together they now run a charming B&B on the island.

Moments later six of us, along with baggage, were bumping through the warren of streets in Tony's battered but trustworthy old Fiat Panda.

I wouldn't advise bringing your car to the island. The roads are steep and, in places, it looked as though even his Panda couldn't possibly fit. In fact, some streets appear narrower than the average footpath. Once you've seen them you'll understand why vehicle rentals on the island are limited to mopeds, yellow-painted Pandas, miniscule jeeps and golf carts!

Tony's B&B, Casa D'Atri, is perfectly located. Via Scotti runs high above the town and the view from the terrace, which overlooks the bay, was mesmerising. The house, parts of which are carved out of the mountainside,



The captain of the Frontone taxi boat with his niece

dates back to the Bourbonic period when the Kingdom of Naples re-colonised the island.

Naturally, as you'd expect on an island, activities centre around the water. There are several beaches on Ponza, the most popular being the Spiaggia di Frontone and the Chiaia di Luna or Half Moon Beach. The

After our long journey the idea of relaxing on the beach was too tempting to resist

latter is only accessible by a 2,500 year old Roman gallery tunnel carved through the mountain. Unfortunately, at the time of my visit it was closed as some careless local workers had used explosive gelignite instead of a chisel to dig a conduit. It was, however, being repaired. Other beaches scattered along the coast are really only accessible by boat. These can be rented at a reasonable cost or alternatively, for anyone not comfortable at the helm, there are all sorts of organised boating excursions to choose from.

After our long journey the idea of relaxing on the beach was too tempting to resist. Tony's 12-year-old

son Giovanni volunteered to act as our personal tour guide, although we were under strict instructions that he wasn't to go into the water (Italians believe that anything below 35 degrees is too cold for swimming!). We took the taxi boat from the harbour to Spiaggia di Frontone, which takes about ten minutes. The boat pulled up just a

few metres from the beach and we all spilled out into the water. Within minutes I'd failed miserably in my role as temporary guardian. Giovanni, along with my two sons, just weren't to be contained.

Later that afternoon, after we managed to drag the kids out of the water, we headed into town. There are two main shopping streets running parallel with the harbour. There's no shortage of boutique shops and the local ceramics are well worth a second glance. The Saperi & Saperi shop sells a broad range of typical local products. While the boys were busy devouring an enormous mound of ice-cream in

DON'T MISS

ROMAN TUNNEL AND BEACH OF CHIAIA DI LUNA

The Roman tunnel was built in 500 BC and connects the village to the beach. If you get the chance, take an evening stroll through the tunnel onto the beach to watch the sun set – it's the perfect vantage point. However, be warned that after sunset the tunnel can get very dark so remember to bring a torch.

WHERE TO STAY

B&B CASA D'ATRI 7

Via Scotti, Ponza

☎ +39 0771 80366

www.casadatri.prolocodiponza.it

Owned by Tony and Nina Iacovella, you're guaranteed a warm welcome here. The B&B is a short walk from the town centre. Breakfast is served on the terrace where you can enjoy fantastic views over the island. A great way to start your day.

Rooms from €80 per night

B&B DA LIMONAIA A MARE 8

Via Dragonara, Ponza

☎ +39 0771 809886

www.ponza.com/limonaia

Italian fashion giant Fendi and partner recently opened this luscious B&B. With its terrace, roof garden and simply decorated rooms, it is restrained enough to seem it belongs here, yet stylish enough to appeal to the international jet set.

Rooms from €105 per night

GENNARINO A MARE 9

Via Dante 6, Ponza

☎ +39 0771 80071

www.gennarinoamare.com

Everywhere you stay in Ponza is close to the sea. The Gennarino, which has 12 rooms, is built on the sea. Standing on stilts, every room in this hotel has its own balcony with a view of the bay.

Rooms from €140 per night

GRAND HOTEL SANTA DOMITILLA 10

Via Panoramica, Ponza

☎ +39 0771 809951

www.santadomitilla.com

One of the island's more sophisticated hotels, which boasts its own salt water swimming pool located in an old Roman cave. The hotel offers a variety of beauty treatments and relaxation therapies.

Rooms from €200 per night

GRAND HOTEL CHIAIA DI LUNA 11

Via Panoramica, Ponza

☎ +39 0771 80113

www.hotelchiaiadiluna.com

This is the ideal location for those who love tranquility. The hotel has a panoramic saltwater pool and magnificent views. It also offers a free bus service to and from the harbour from 8am until 9pm.

Rooms from €140 per night

IMMOBILIARE TURISTCASA 12

Via Roma 2, Ponza

☎ +39 0771 809886

www.turistcasa.it

If you fancy that little extra space and perhaps even doing a little cooking during your stay, Turistcasa has self-catering apartments to suit every taste.

Apartment for four from €250

WHAT TO DO

ISLAND OF PALMAROLA

This is the most westerly island of the archipelago, four miles off the coast of Ponza. The island takes its name from the dwarf palms that grow here. The waters around this uninhabited (apart from a restaurant on the beach) island range from the deepest blue to the most intense emerald. Even inhabitants of Ponza admit that Palmarola is even more beautiful than Ponza. Take one of the many boat excursions and decide for yourself.

PISCINE NATURALI

These are a series of natural pools found on the west coast of Ponza. They are formed from the extinct craters of volcanoes. Now filled with water they are the perfect place to dive in and go for a refreshing swim.

MONTE GUARDIA

Not all activities on the island have to include taking to the water. Monte Guardia, the highest point on the island, stands at 283m above sea level. Take a hike to its summit, which can be reached following a pedestrian trail. From here you'll be able to see the whole Pontine archipelago.

DIVING EXCURSION

Diving excursions are popular on the island and when you see the incredible waters, you'll understand why. Take a day trip out to the caves and you'll find yourself swimming amidst the beautiful reefs. Lessons are available for beginners. Prices from around €35 for a single dive plus equipment hire. See www.barcaioliponza.it for more details.

A BOAT EXCURSION

This is unquestionably the best way to appreciate the sheer beauty of the coastline. Excursions start at about 10.30am and end in the late afternoon. The boat will stop every so often for about 30 minutes for diving and swimming. Some excursions detour to Palmarola for lunch, while others stop at Cala Feola, a picturesque fisherman's bay with an excellent seafood restaurant that looks like a shack. Approximately €20-25 per person for the day. For full details see www.barcaioliponza.it

BUY A BOTTLE OF THE LOCAL WINE

Take a hike to the south of the island to Il Fieno. Here you'll find the island's wine producers whose *cantine* are situated in a 2,000-year-old necropolis. The island produces sweet white wines, which are excellent. However, production is extremely limited so you might have to convince or plead with the producer to sell you a bottle or two!

Isola di Ponza



DON'T MISS

THE BEACHES
Frontone beach is one of the most popular and has a couple of bars that serve great cocktails. It's accessible by taxi, by boat or on foot. The Spiaggia della Felice to the north of the island is the place for celeb spotting and, if so inclined, there's always the secluded little Spiaggia del Nudisti (translation hardly required).

► the *gelateria* next door, I sampled my fair share (and my wife's) of the local *limoncino*, as well as a chocolate and a melon flavoured liqueur. I couldn't decide which I liked the best as they were all utterly delicious, so I left with a few bottles in hand.

As evening approached, numbers

Explore the island by bus and on foot or do it the way nature intended – from the sea!

on the streets began swelling as Italians emerged for the customary pre-dinner *passaggiata*. As one would expect, Ponza is a seafood lovers' idea of paradise and there are any number of good restaurants to choose from on the island. For tonight we opted to take a taxi to Il Tramonto, located in Campo Inglese (English Camp), which is named after the site where the English soldiers were garrisoned after their invasion of the island in 1813. The English, it has to be said, were by no means the first to invade Ponza. Over the years it has been captured at one time or another by – amongst others – the Spanish, Greeks, French,

Moors, Carthaginians, Egyptians and Canaanites. History lessons aside, the restaurant occupies a dominant position in the middle of the island and enjoys some rather special views from the terrace of neighbouring islands Palmarola to the west and Zannone to the east. And it was

a bonus that the food here happened to be rather special too!

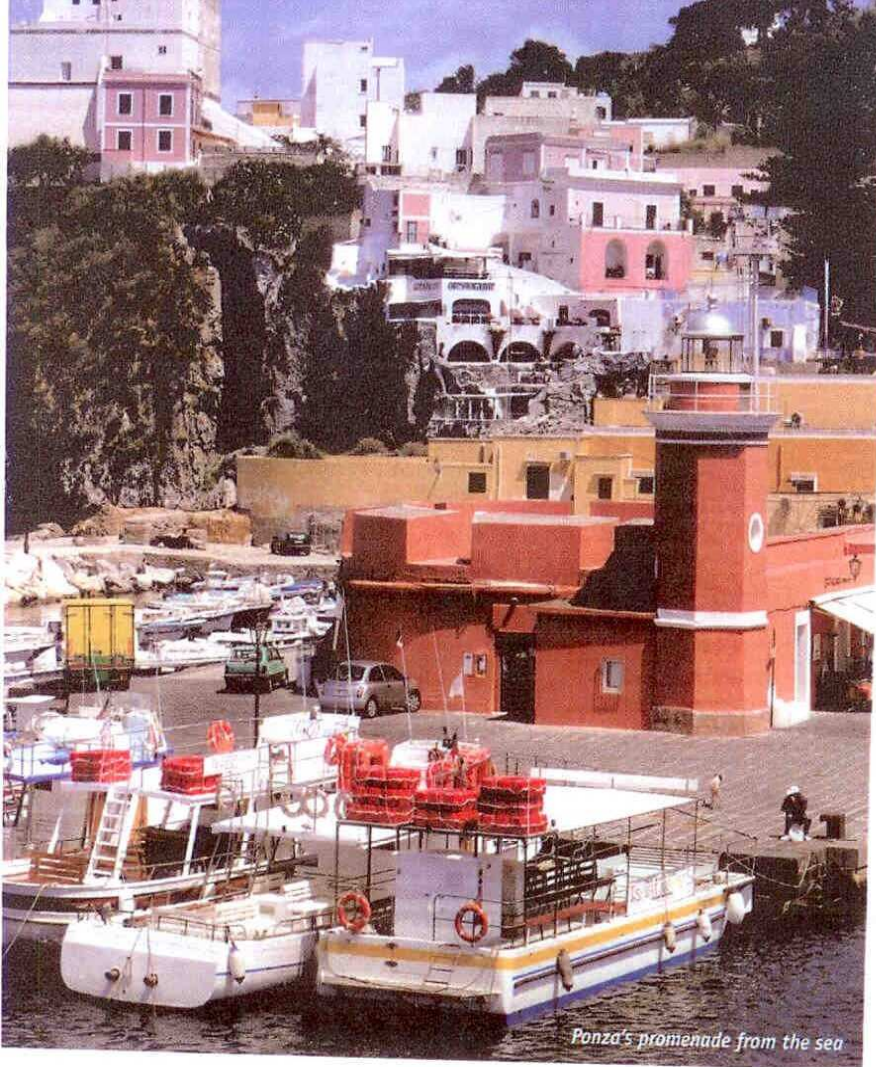
A BOAT EXCURSION

When I awoke the following day our de facto guide Giovanni was waiting patiently, keen to get started on the second leg of our tour. His enthusiasm was contagious and after breakfast on the terrace the boy adventurer in me was raring to go. We had two choices: either explore the island by bus and on foot or do it the way nature intended – from the sea, of course! While the idea of a day as captain of my own boat appealed to me, my wife was less convinced of my nautical prowess ►

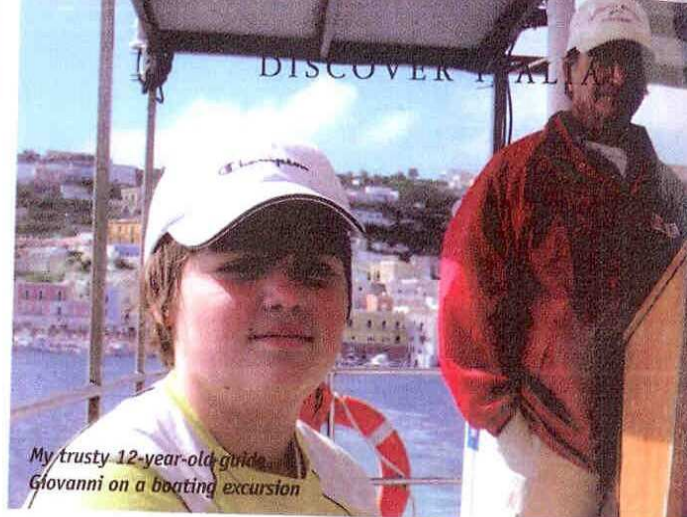


Clockwise, from top left: Enjoying lunch on the terrace with the owners of Casa D'Atri B&B; a bird's eye view of one of Ponza's many secluded bays; a view of Ponza's harbour at dawn; characteristic B&B Casa D'Atri; a typical house in the town centre in Ponza; quaint shopping street, Corso Pisacane, in Ponza; boats at night in the bay; Frontone beach – in June and September you can find a beach almost exclusively to yourself; ceramics on display in a gift shop





Ponza's promenade from the sea



My trusty 12-year-old guide Giovanni on a boating excursion



A ceramic map of Ponza on display in a local gift shop

➤ and insisted on hiring someone with a touch more experience to take the helm. As I almost fell into the water boarding the boat, any chance of a last minute change of heart disappeared.

The circumnavigation of the island is approximately 40km. Most excursions head southwards, passing first by the Grotte di Pilato, a series of echoing caves excavated by the Romans. These were used to breed moray eels, a Roman delicacy. More recently it has been suggested that the caves were also used for religious ceremonies, following the discovery of an altar and a statue of Apollo. Further up the coast we came to the Faraglioni di Lucia Rosa, a volcanic outcrop of rocks named after Lucia Rosa, a young girl who threw herself into the sea when she was forbidden to marry a poor local farmer. Today, in Italy and across the world, she is recognised as a martyr for women's rights and a symbol for human rights.

The length and breadth of the coastline is dotted with tiny beaches, coves and caves, giant stacks rising proudly from the water and, it must be said, there is no better way to take it all in than from the vantage of a boat. In fact, there simply isn't time to

explore all of it. Excursions will stop periodically, allowing half an hour to bathe. If you rent privately, you can choose where and when to stop and for how long. But to make the most of it I suggest you resist the temptation to stop every two minutes for a swim, no matter how inviting the water.

A PLACE APART

By late afternoon we were one in a flotilla of boats speeding back into harbour. Dinner time was approaching! That evening, sitting at a restaurant overlooking the harbour, I watched a couple of local fishermen cheerfully unloading their catch. It suddenly occurred to me what makes this place so special. For all its natural beauty, for all the glitz and glamour of the multi-million-pound yachts resting in the harbour, Ponza remains unspoiled and unpretentious. Life here is as simple and relaxed as it ever was.

The following morning Giovanni was up, ready and waiting to see us off. As our ship slipped back out to sea he stood diligently on the dock, waving farewell. In a way I envy him. I find it hard to imagine a more perfect childhood. After all, on an island, every day is an adventure. ■

DON'T MISS

FEAST OF SAN SILVERIO

On the 20 June the whole of Ponza comes out to celebrate the feast of the Island's patron saint. In addition to the usual festivities – music, dancing, food, wine – there is a full procession with an effigy of San Silverio on a boat strewn with roses. He is carried into the sea to bless the lives of the fishermen.

GETTING THERE

➤ BY BOAT

From May until the end of September there are regular services to the island both by ferry and hydrofoil.
 From Terracina – www.snapnavigazione.it
 From Formia and Naples – www.caremar.it or www.alilauro.it
 From Fiumicino – www.alilauro.it
 From Anzio – www.vetor.it or www.caremar.it
 Ticket prices range from €20-€50 return depending on the service and the month. Journey times range from 45 minutes (for the hydrofoil) to 2½ hours (for the ferry).
 Alternatively, if you really want to do it in style, take a helicopter from Rome or Naples (approximately €650).

➤ BY PLANE

Fly to either Rome Fiumicino or Naples, serviced by most major carriers from the UK, where you will be able to take a direct boat to Ponza from either location (see above).

➤ BY CAR

Take the A1 motorway (Milan-Naples) and exit at Cassino to reach the ports of Formia, Terracina, Circeo or Anzio. Alternatively continue along to the port of Naples.