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magazine

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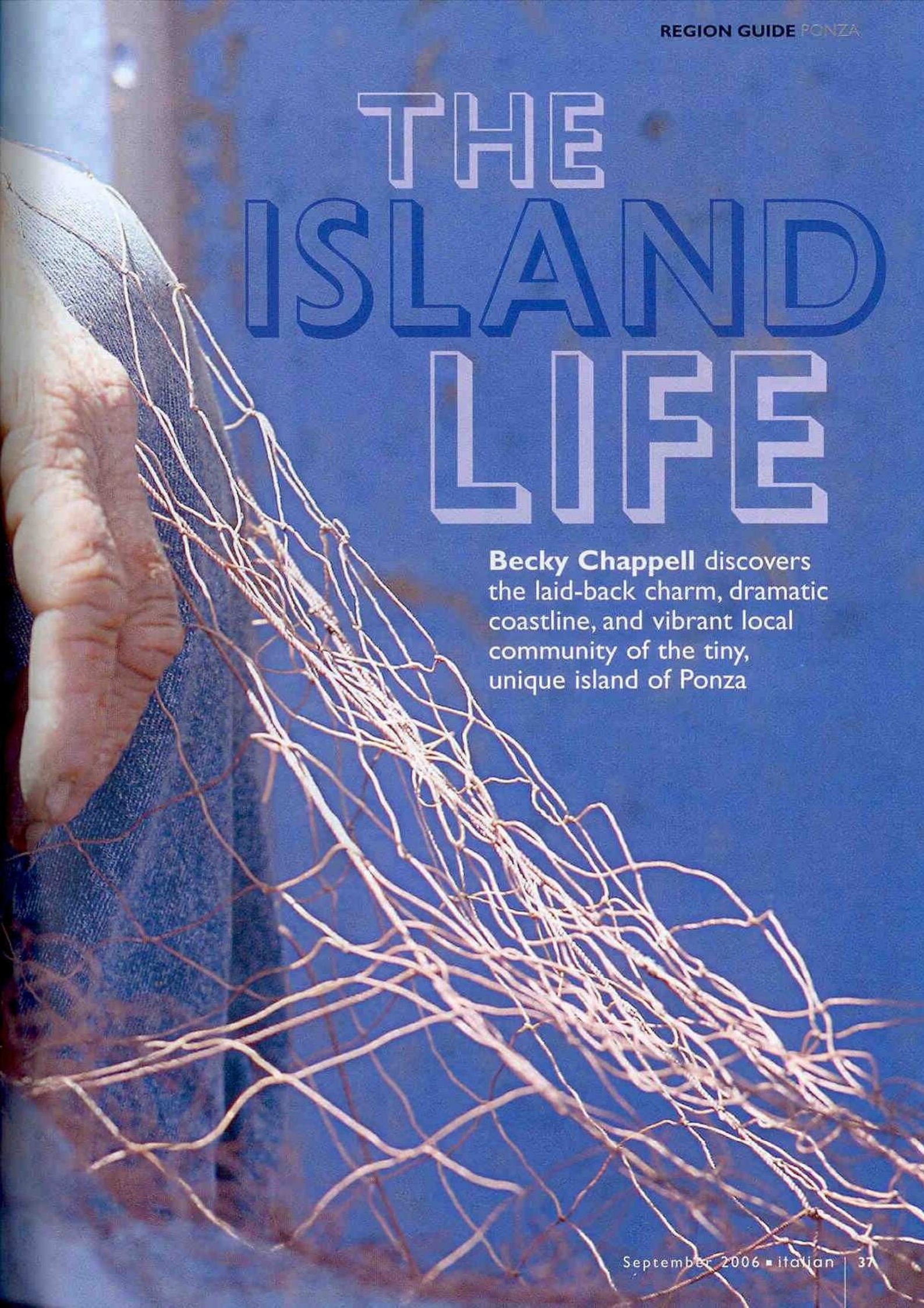
Fall in love with the Veneto's  
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## SECRET ITALY

- Be the first to discover Ponza's *island paradise*
- Get off the *beaten track* in forgotten Cilento
- Relocate to *Tuscany's* hidden Lunigiana coast





A close-up photograph of a hand holding a fishing net. The net is made of light-colored, thin twine and is draped over a dark blue fabric. The background is a solid, deep blue color. The text 'THE ISLAND LIFE' is overlaid on the right side of the image in a large, bold, white font with a blue shadow effect.

# THE ISLAND LIFE

**Becky Chappell** discovers the laid-back charm, dramatic coastline, and vibrant local community of the tiny, unique island of Ponza

Clockwise from right: Glistening calm waters by the uninhabited island of Palmarola; unspoiled coastal scenery overlooking the Cala Feola bay; pretty beaches and colourful fishing boats can be found all around Ponza



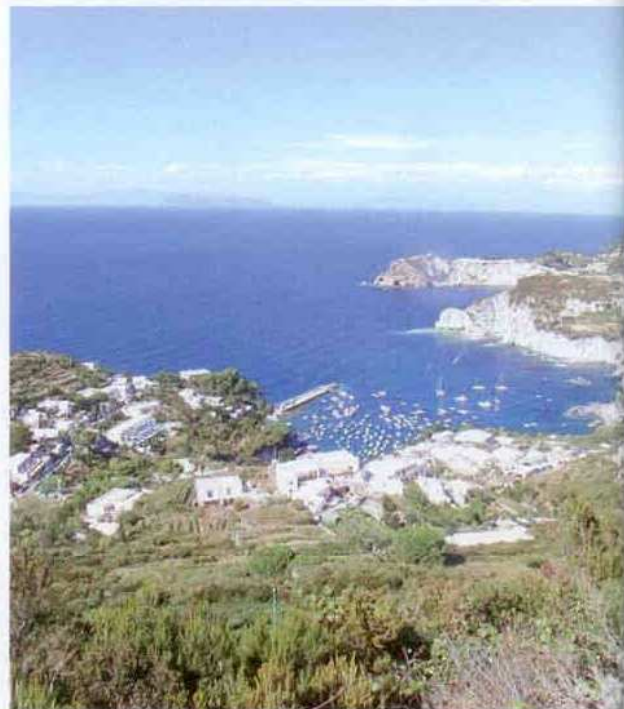
**E**merging out of the turquoise waters of the Tyrrhenian sea, just off the Lazio coast, lies the windswept island of Ponza. Although its surface area is just 7.3 square kilometres, it is the largest of the Pontine islands, with a population of around 3,600 seafaring folk. A place of understated rural beauty I was told, Ponza boasts pretty harbours, spectacular coastal scenery and a myriad of secret beaches and caves. After the sticky, crowded streets of Rome, which I had just left behind me, it all sounded extremely appealing.

Arriving by boat, as the crescent shape of Ponza came into view on the horizon, I could make out its rugged green cliff tops; approaching the harbour, a collection of pastel coloured houses on the port, and as we moored, the comical figure of a rather rotund, middle-aged Italian jogging laboriously down the jetty to meet us. The figure turned out to be Maurizio Musella, the life and soul of the island and my guide for the duration of my stay.

No sooner had introductions been made, jokes exchanged and my suitcase wrestled from me, we were sipping cocktails on the harbour watching the sun sink into the sea. After a visit to Ponza, Italian author Eugenio Montale wrote, "I lose myself in the beauty of these sunsets and find paradise on earth." I couldn't have agreed more.

#### MESSING ABOUT IN BOATS

The next morning, already feeling like a local, I piled into Maurizio's little motor boat along with an assortment of his



friends, relatives and general hangers-on. With a topless Maurizio at the helm and not a cloud in the sky, we set off to explore Ponza's coastline, making our way clockwise from the harbour towards the southern tip of the island. Our first stop was the fascinating Grotte di Pilato, a series of three man-made caves with inter-connecting underground



channels and submerged 'tanks', thought to be sacred pods used by the Romans for keeping fish and, according to local legend, man-eating eels. Removing my trailing fingers from the water, I was glad to be safely in the boat as we chugged on around the magnificent headland.

Formed by a series of underwater earthquakes and volcanic eruptions millions of years ago, Ponza's inhospitable yellow-white cliffs are now covered with low-lying shrubs, cacti with a splash of colour provided by the brilliantly pink Hottentot fig. Our little boat took us in and out of numerous inlets and grottos carved out by the constant lapping of the sea onto the soft tufa rock. Ignoring the larger stretches of sand in favour of tiny deserted coves, we stopped off to explore, relax and on one occasion, smear ourselves with chunks of moist sulphurous rock, which apparently does wonders for the skin. The more popular beaches like Chaia di Luna with its backdrop of imposing cliffs, and party venue Spiaggia di Frontone can be reached by foot from the mainland and are also worth visiting out of season.

Lunch was a rustic affair with yet more of Maurizio's jovial buddies at the sheltered fishermen's cove of La Marina, situated below Le Forna, Ponza's second largest village. On the menu was fresh tuna, tomatoes and *rigatone* with plenty of the strangely salty homemade wine, the latter contributing to a pleasantly lazy, hazy afternoon in which we completed our circular tour of Ponza at an even more leisurely pace.

Back at Ponza's harbour, the combination of sun, wine and sailing left me swaying slightly and in need of a quiet

## "PONZA BOASTS PRETTY HARBOURS, SPECTACULAR COASTAL SCENERY AND A MYRIAD OF SECRET BEACHES"

spot in which to recover. Maurizio however, had other ideas. Appearing with a bright red moped, two helmets and a beaming smile, he hopped on and patted the seat behind him. Hesitantly, I climbed aboard and we lurched forward just as I realised my helmet was about five sizes too big.

### HEAVEN IN THE HILLS

Clutching Maurizio's sizeable waistline as we headed for the hilltops, I peeked out from under the rim of my headgear to be greeted with breathtaking views of Ponza's western coastline, tinged with the pinks and reds of the sunset backdrop. We sped on through the narrow streets of Le Forna, towards the north of the island and ground to a halt at a picturesque spot above the natural harbour of Cala Fonte, where brightly coloured fishing boats jostle against each other for precedence. Allowing me to admire the scene for a moment or two, Maurizio beckoned me over to enjoy a *limoncello* with his friends Igino and his wife who owns a little trattoria overlooking the bay. >>

Above left: Taking in the peaceful sea view at the Cala Nave  
Above right: Ponza harbour is a boat lover's paradise



Clockwise from top left: The Cala Nave beach, looking back to Ponza from neighbouring Ventotene; fishing boats in Ponza Town; the islands' colourful homes

I awoke to gloomy grey skies on my last day on the island, demonstrating how changeable island weather can be. Undeterred, I made my way to the hubbub of island activity, the Corso Carlo Pisacane of Ponza Town, which leads to Piazza Carlo Pisacane on the harbour front. While Maurizio joined half the island for a confirmation service, I spent a pleasant morning ducking into various shops, boutiques and Gildo's, a delectable *pasticceria* to avoid the drizzle.

Possibly the most captivating place along the street is the Al Brigantino bookshop. Owned by the charming Silverio Mazzella, a twinkly-eyed, weather-beaten old fellow, whose depth of knowledge about the Pontine islands is matched only by his evident love and respect for his homeland.

Quite content to sit and chat, as the wind whistled outside, Silverio regaled me with historical yarns mixed with a smattering of folklore, involving pirates, shipwrecks and ghosts. According to an earnest Silverio, his namesake and Ponza's patron saint, St Silverio, is said to haunt the nearby uninhabited island of Palmarola, a rugged, exposed place where he was banished in the year 537 and later died. Legend has it that Palmarola also provides the venue for a ghostly reunion every full moon.

#### THE HAUNTED ISLE

With uncanny timing, I received a call from Maurizio inviting me on a boat trip to see the infamous Palmarola.

## THE PERFECT ITINERARY: SEVEN DAYS IN Ponza

**Day 1-4:** Hire a motorboat and spend a few days exploring the coastline of Ponza, sunbathing in your own private cove and swimming in the crystal clear sea. Spend a couple of evenings trying out various restaurants on the vibrant Piazza Carlo Pisacane.

**Day 5:** Take the time to

discover Ponza's inland. Try a guided walk with local geologist Ingrid Schatz (+39 0771 808650; [www.ponza.com/ingrid](http://www.ponza.com/ingrid)) or pick up a moped to cover the island at speed. Check out the sunset over the beautiful Chiaia di Luna beach on the south west side of the island.

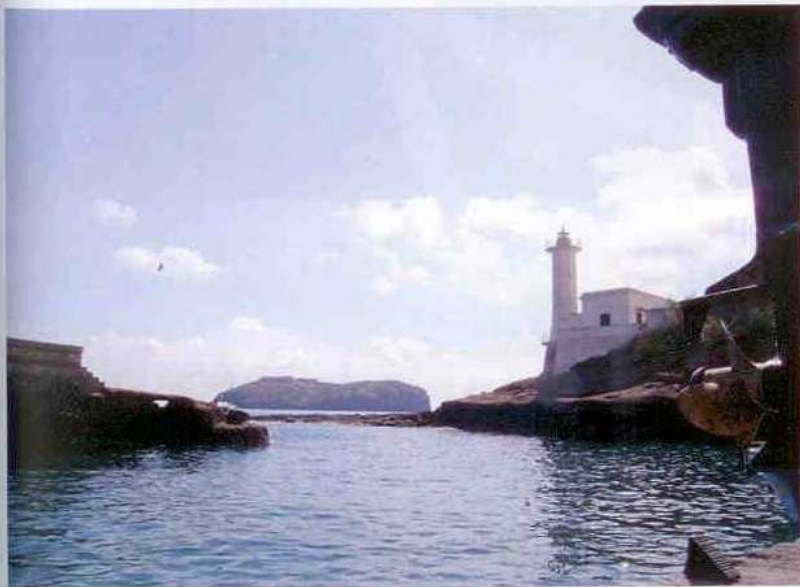
**Day 6:** Hop on one of the

many pleasure boat trips bound for the neighbouring island of Palmarola, which allow you to spend a pleasant day diving off the rocks and swimming through its enchanting caves. Snorkeling gear and other marine equipment can be bought at Ditta Paesano Maria Antonietta (Via Pisacane 19; +39 0771 80660).

**Day 7:** Stock up on tasteful souvenirs at the shops along the Corso Carlo Pisacane. Silverio's hand-painted watercolour maps of the island make a wonderful reminder of your stay (Al Brigantino book shop; +39 0771 80122; [www.ponziane.com](http://www.ponziane.com)). There's also a pretty ceramic shop and several places to pick up beach gear.



“WE WERE SIPPING COCKTAILS ON THE HARBOUR WATCHING THE SUN SINK INTO THE SEA”



Intrigued by Silverio's ghostly folk tales, I agreed, albeit with a certain amount of trepidation. Later that afternoon as I climbed aboard a powerful looking speedboat, the rain had stopped, leaving a moody sky befitting our ghostly destination. Driven energetically by Gino Pesce, local chef extraordinaire, we were soon making our approach to the Spiaggia il Porto on the western side of the island, flanked by perilously craggy cliffs. As Gino cut the engine, a silence punctuated by the shrill cries of nesting royal seagulls fell over us.

Truly a haunting place, Palmarola's imposing landscape is composed of higher peaks and wilder terrain than the gentler island of Ponza. Nowhere is this more striking than the La Cattedrale cliffs at the northern tip of the island, so-called because their jagged, grey, towering peaks and needles resemble a Gothic cathedral. Although it is possible to land on the island, it is too inhospitable to explore on

Clockwise from top left: the winding streets of Ponza town; ancient water urns on display at a local museum; Ponza's colourful buildings add to its vibrancy; the tranquil Porto Romano on the island of Veritotené, a short boat ride from Ponza



foot. To get a true sense of Palmarola's magical atmosphere it is best to circle her by boat.

Returning to the warm and welcoming arms of Ponza at top speed, as if to shake off the spirits of Palmarola, Gino yelled above the roar of the engine that we must eat at his restaurant, Acqua Pazza, for my last night. Situated on the bustling Piazza Carlo Pisacane overlooking the harbour, where the islanders congregate to gossip, Acqua Pazza, meaning 'crazy water' is anything but. Only open in the evenings, when the square quiets down for the night and >>



**Above:** Exploring the Grotte di Pilato, one of many secret caves around the island **Far right:** A local diving competition gets underway **Near right:** the island's tempting turquoise waters **Opposite page, clockwise from top left:** Gino Pesce of Acqua Pazza; a Ponzesi fishing boat; pleasure boating around the bay



wizened old Ponzese men take up residence to ponder the day's events, it is a peaceful, friendly place serving an exquisite selection of local seafood, lovingly prepared by Gino.

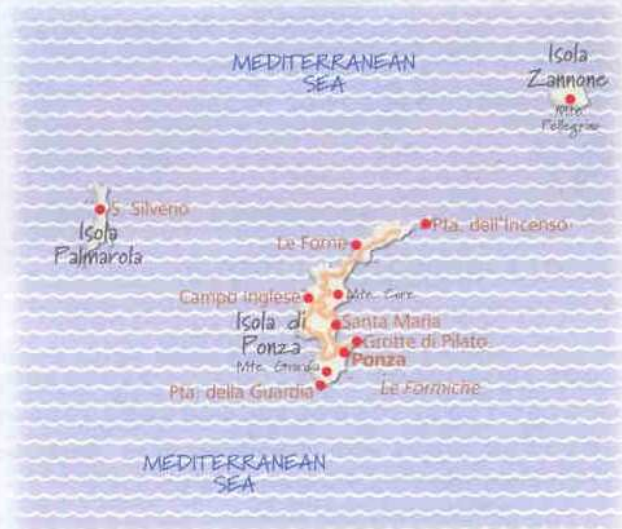
Full of good food and good wine, I was quite content to while away the rest of the evening at the harbour's edge, but I wasn't allowed to get too comfy. The effervescent Maurizio insisted that I experience Ponza nightlife and whisked me away to the dubious Il Tunnel club on the other side of the cove. After a few drinks and having finally convinced Maurizio's friends that I would not be taking part in the karaoke competition, I made my way up the whitewashed streets to my little bed and breakfast for a well-earned rest.

The sun was shining again for my final morning in Ponza, glistening invitingly on the turquoise sea and making it even harder to pack up and leave. After saying my goodbyes and promising to visit again, I felt as if I was leaving long lost family members as I was bundled aboard the ferry headed for the mainland. As it moved out of the harbour, I smiled inwardly as I watched the stocky figure of Maurizio turn and stride back into the village, stopping to exchange a few words with passers-by, terminating each conversation with an enthusiastic kiss or a hearty slap on the back. Eventually, he became a speck in the distance, swallowed up by the colourful mass of streets and houses of the village. **TIM**



# essentials

for information on renting or buying property in this area, turn to page 84



## THE ITALIAN MAGAZINE RECOMMENDS

### WHERE TO STAY

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

Hire an apartment from €600 per week, particularly good value if you are traveling as a group. **Turist Casa** (+39 0771 809886; [www.turistcasa.it](http://www.turistcasa.it)) has a good selection.

#### MID-RANGE

**Limonaia a Mare** bed and breakfast (Via Dragonara, +39 0771 809886;

[www.ponza.com/limonaia](http://www.ponza.com/limonaia)) has individually decorated, spacious double rooms from €105. There's also a pleasant roof garden with a view out across the harbour.

#### LUXURY

The Greek-style **Chiaia di Luna** (Via Panoramica; +39 0771 80114; [www.hotelchiaiadiluna.com](http://www.hotelchiaiadiluna.com)) is a chic getaway boasting its own seawater pool and fantastic coastal views. Prices start from around €60 per person per night.

### GETTING THERE

Easyjet (0870 600 0000; [www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)) fly to Rome Ciampino, where you can take the train to Formia or Anzio on the coast ([www.trenitalia.it](http://www.trenitalia.it)). Ferries and hydrofoils to Ponza leave daily from Formia (+39 0771 22710; [www.caremar.it](http://www.caremar.it)) or Anzio (+39 0771 80565; [www.caremar.it](http://www.caremar.it)) and the hydrofoil from Anzio (+39 0698 45085; [www.vetor.it](http://www.vetor.it)) takes just over an hour.

### GETTING AROUND

Ponza is small enough to cover by foot, but it's worth hiring a boat or a moped for a day or two. For moped or boat hire, try **Cooperativa Ponza Mare** (Banchina Nuova; +39 0771 80679). There are no car hire services on the island.

### WHEN TO GO

Ponza's sea breezes ensure that it rarely becomes unbearably hot and sticky, even in August. However, this is when locals from Rome descend on Ponza, so avoid this month if you are looking for some peace and quiet.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Ponza tourist office:** Via Molo Musco; +39 0771 80031

### WHERE TO EAT

#### FAST FOOD

For a quick and tasty snack, the **Pizzeria Rosticceria Ponzese** (Via Carlo Pisacane; +39 0771 80609) on the waterfront is a good bet.

#### TYPICAL TRATTORIA

Serving rustic local fare including sea fennel and fresh fish, **Bar Ristorante Cala Fonte di Igino** (Via Cala Fonte; +39 0771 808366) is tucked away towards the north of the island, overlooking the pretty Cala Fonte bay.

#### TOP CLASS

**Ristorante Acqua Pazza** (Piazza Carlo Pisacane 10; +39 0771 80643) offers unpretentious, contemporary dining. The *crudo di pesce* (seafood sushi) is out of this world.



### BECKY'S CHOICE



"The stylish and spacious Villa il Gabbiano has panoramic views over the whole of the island and is available to rent from €1,000-1,500 per week."

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