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Per Lucia,
Con affetto,
Michael Ross





Italy's Undiscovered Islands

Tired of crowded beaches and overpacked restaurants, *Michael Gross* goes in search of the country's hidden archipelagos—rustic hideaways where English is a rarity and unfettered authenticity is a way of life. *Photographed by Alistair Taylor-Young*

The rugged cliffs of La Cattedrale,
on Palmarola. Opposite: Fishing boats
docked in the Ponza harbor.

A DECADE AGO, MY WIFE, BARBARA, and I spent a week on Italy's Sorrento Peninsula, mostly driving at a snail's pace behind smoke-belching buses on twisting two-lane coastal roads, with the sea just out of reach. A couple of days before we were due to fly home, a restaurant owner overheard me griping about the mean, crowded pebble beaches of the Amalfi Coast and demanded to know why we had not been on the water. The next day, his uncle Yé Yé took us to Capri on his wooden *gozzo* (or belly boat, named for its shape).

We thought we were quite the cognoscenti. Staggered by Capri's beauty, we returned year after year, but eventually, we had to admit the island was congested, there was too much English spoken at the *spiagge*, too many cigar-waving Americans outside the Quisisana Hotel. Then, two years ago, Roman friends invited us to join them on a jaunt to their favorite secret getaway: the Tuscan Archipelago, which lies between the Ligurian coast and Corsica, about 300 miles north of Capri. We visited a comma-shaped speck in the Tyrrhenian Sea called Giannutri, where we snorkeled in crystal waters and swam carefully through a vast colony of sea urchins. Later, we sailed around granite-edged Giglio and lunched on *scampi crudi* at a family-run restaurant in the tiny port. No one there spoke a word of English. We were the only foreigners in the room.

The waters off Italy are full of islands, but many of these places are overexposed and overrun. The super-yachts that crowd the small harbors obscure what drew their owners into dock in the first place. Charming little restaurants quickly lose their charm when you can't get a reservation. Only a few spots remain undiscovered—and for good reason. They are difficult to reach, unattractive, unfriendly, or lacking in basic amenities. Giglio was something else: an easily accessible aquatic paradise with some trappings of civilization. We vowed to return soon—and started investigating to see if we could find other, similar Italian islands.

It wasn't easy. The people who know of such hideaways aren't entirely convinced that getting the word out is a good thing. These places have no advertising, publicists, or fancy Web sites boasting of their attractions in six languages. Our attempt to contact hotels by e-mail and fax elicited little response. Finally, though, we found out about two other clusters that, hiding in plain sight, are unknown to most non-Italians: the Pontine Islands, an hour south of Rome, and the Pelagi Islands, 160 miles from Sicily and 80 miles from Tunisia.

These island groups are not for everyone. The food is native and unembellished. Forget designer boutiques—there are none. Even where there are hotels, the accommodations are not luxurious. If your idea of a perfect morning is drinking an espresso while reading the *International Herald Tribune* or watching CNN in your room, you would be well advised to look elsewhere. And if your prerequisites for a happy journey include the regular use of the English language, you may want to turn the page.

But despite their inconveniences, these discoveries satisfied our craving for what has become the greatest novelty of all: authenticity.

PELAGI ISLANDS

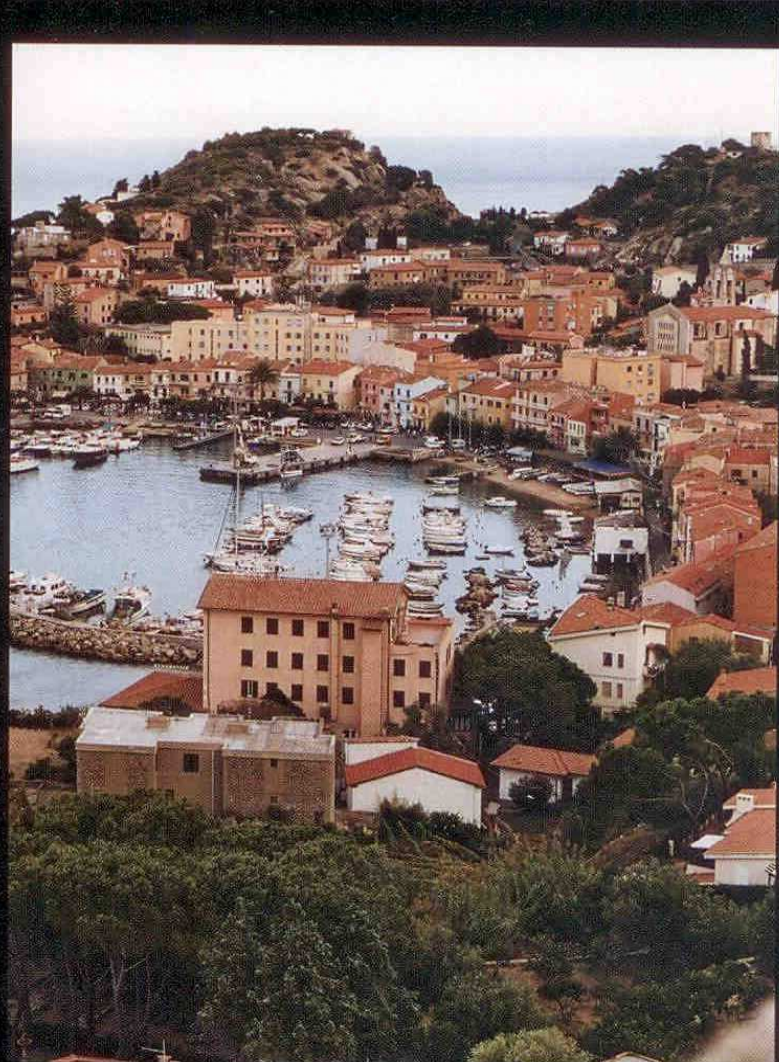
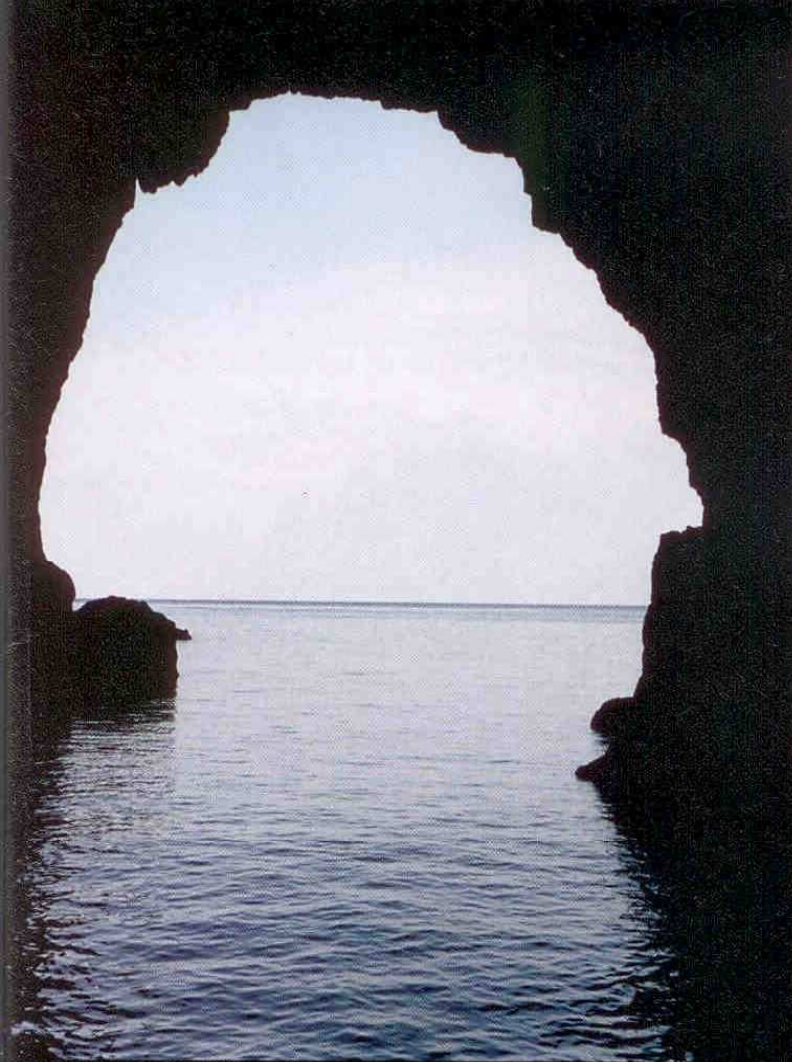
"It is Africa!" announces Renato Righi, owner of El Mosaico del Sol hotel, as he greets us at the airport just outside Lampedusa's single, sunbaked town. And indeed, the island—long, flat, scrubby, subtropical, and distinguished by ancient, endless vistas, a desert palette, and Arabic architecture—feels more like Morocco than Italy.

The other Pelagi include tiny, unpopulated Lampedusa and Linosa, a strikingly black volcanic rock with a small village, one hotel, and a couple of restaurants. Lampedusa is the largest and the most welcoming, but on first glance not easy to love. Deforested in the 19th century, it was later flattened by Allied bombs at the end of World War II. The peanut-colored terrain remains mostly dusty and barren. In 1986, Lampedusa's U.S. Navy base was the target of a mouse-that-roared bombing raid by Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi. He missed. Boatloads of refugees from Libya and Egypt are more accurate, landing here regularly—only to be shipped home.

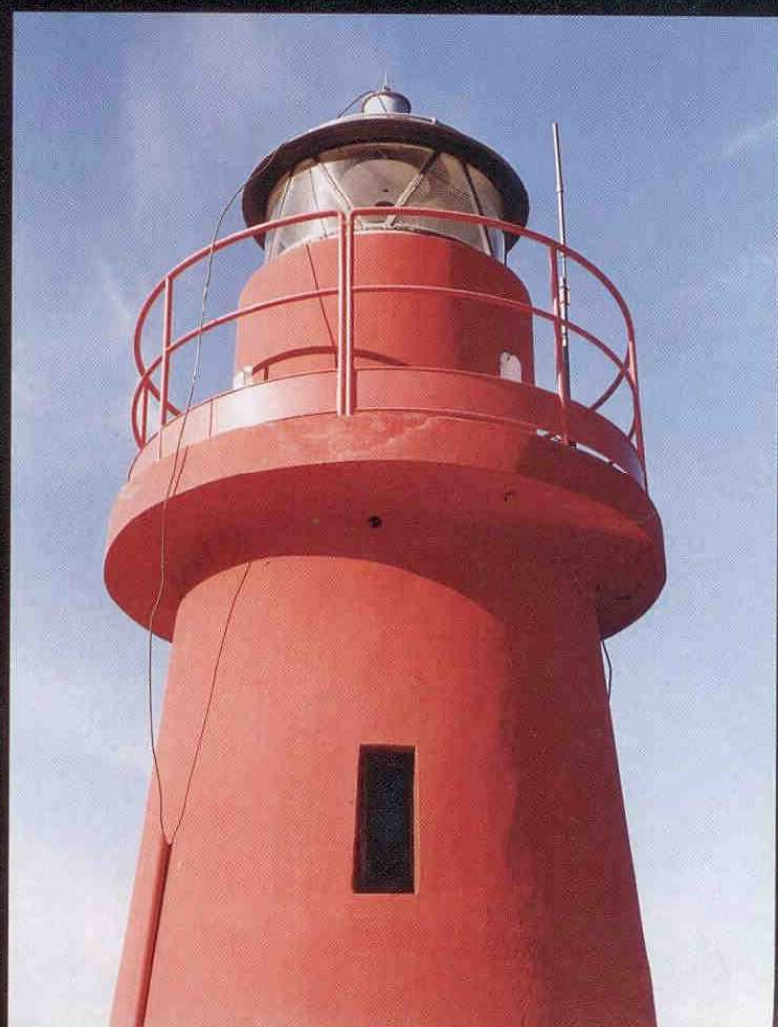
Tourists get a kinder reception. Most of Lampedusa's better hotels throw in a free rental car, all meals, and daily yacht trips. There's Il Gattopardo, a compound on the bay of Cala Creta with thick

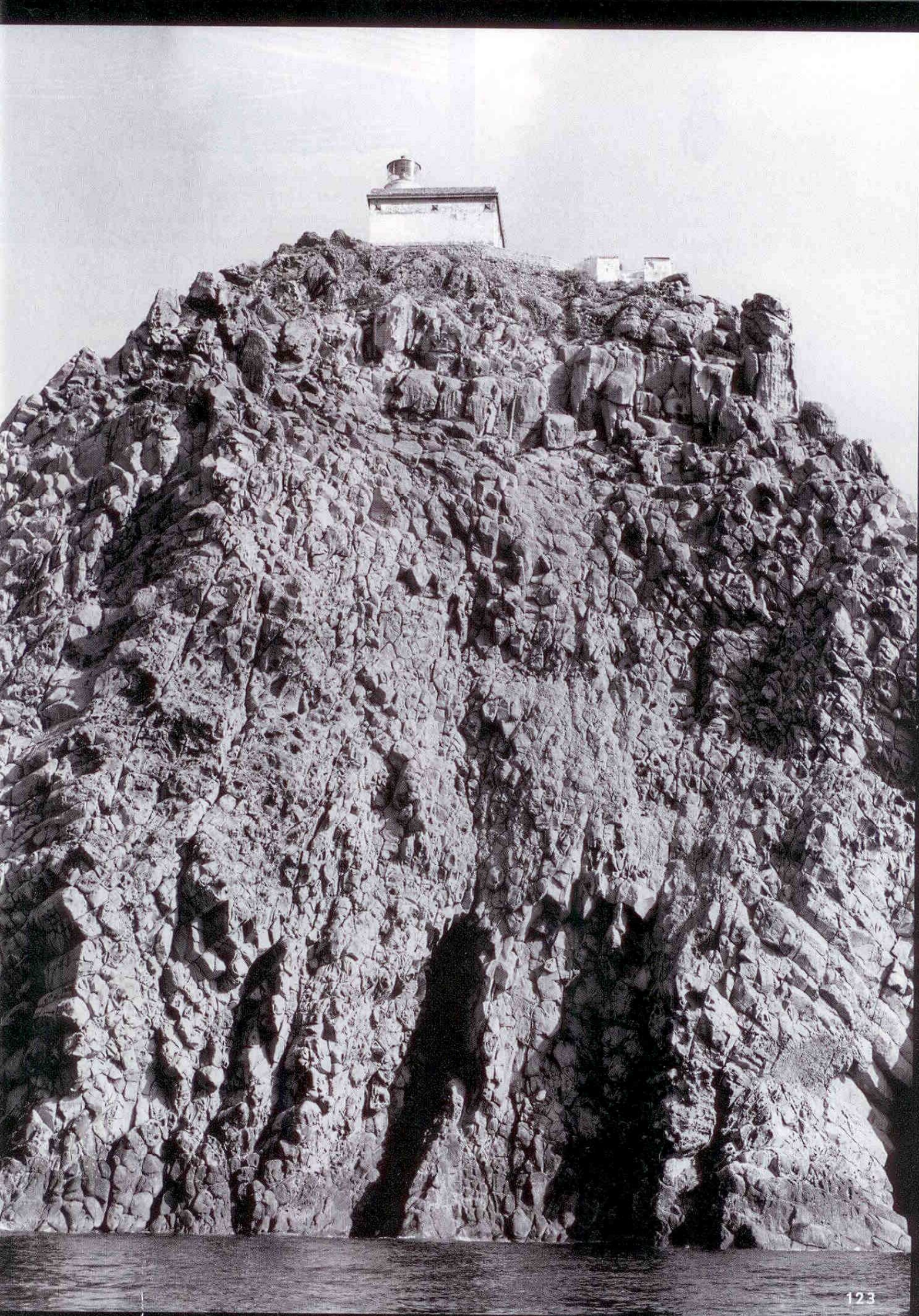
A prickly detail
at Pardini's Hermitage, a
hotel on Giglio.





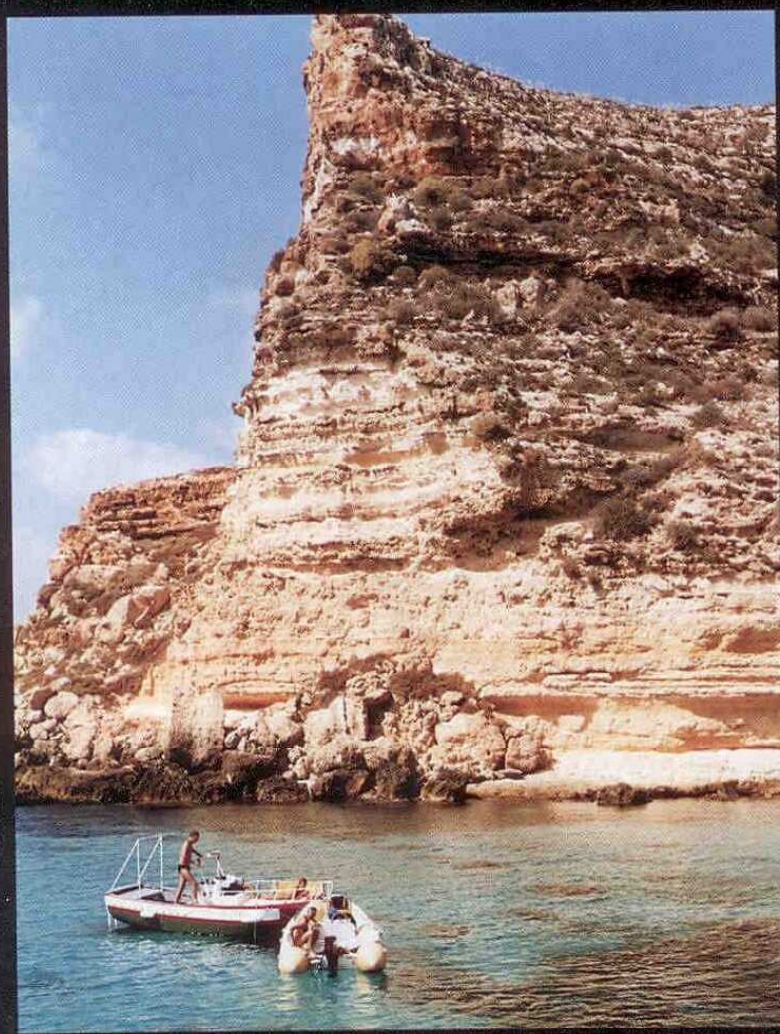
Views to Remember Clockwise from above left: One of the many grottoes lining Lampedusa's southern coast; Ponza's bustling harbor, seen from a terrace at Anna Fendi's Ponza B&B, La Limonaia a Mare; a lighthouse on the end of a jetty in Giglio's port; rustic chic in the living area and terrace at Il Gattopardo hotel, on Lampedusa.







Island Life Clockwise from above left: Hand-embroidered Italian linens in one of the five simple rooms at La Limonaia, on Ponza; a *dammusi*-inspired veranda, designed to keep visitors cool, at Il Gattopardo; the entrance to a private house in Giglio's harbor; a promontory overlooking Lampedusa's Cala Creta bay.



stone walls and domed roofs inspired by the naturally cooled local dwellings called *dammusi*. La Calandra, a cliffside hotel right next door, is almost as attractive, as is Club Cala Madonna, a former private house on the other side of the island. But all of these require a week's stay. We settled on El Mosaico del Sol, which rents rustic-modern rooms with kitchenettes by the night and has a swimming pool, one of the few on the island.

Although it is the southernmost point in Italy, Lampedusa is easier to reach than Capri or even the more popular Aeolian Islands off Sicily: the airport receives direct flights from all over Italy. Outside of town, however, it is mostly undeveloped, with only two roads. One of these runs along the northern coast, with its sheer cliffs, moonscapes, and an abandoned military installation, before meeting the other, which veers to the south. We spend our first afternoon driving around. Here and there, we spot the signposts of Lampedusa's future: new villas, built by Milanese millionaires. We stop briefly atop the cliff that overhangs Spiaggia dei Conigli (Rabbit Beach), a broad, sandy spot popular with both breeding turtles and sunbathers. Still jet-lagged, we decide against parking in the helter-skelter of cars, motorcycles, and scooters and hiking down the long, winding path to the beach.

Instead, we return to town for a stroll and a dip at a neighboring beach, then happily retire to our room to nap. We wake just in time for the cocktail party that owner Righi gives every night. Over local wines and *bottarga* (mullet roe) on crackers, we meet our fellow guests—all Italian—and try to coax a few words from the shy African waiter. We dine in a nearby restaurant, where our use of English makes us so conspicuous that a wide-eyed child spends her own dinnertime watching us intently from behind a pillar next to our table.

Lampedusa's magic and austere glamour are best appreciated on the water. So, the next day, we take a trip aboard the *Balù*, Il Gattopardo's 50-year-old vessel, as it plies the waters off the southern coast. We first take a swim at Cala Madonna, where a tiny white chapel clings to the rocks, then La Tabaccara, a turquoise bay where striated cliffs funnel down into caves. Around the island's western point is Scoglio Sacramento, a Dover-like white cliff. Some guests stay aboard for nonstop sunning; others are in and out of their snorkeling gear, diving at every opportunity.

After a lunch of eggplant, fish, octopus salad, and fried bread, cooked by the *Balù*'s captain and accompanied by Sicilian wine, we stop at Spiaggia dei Conigli. Rabbit Island, a little sugarloaf, is connected to the shore by a sandbar; the shallow iridescent water between them is a natural swimming pool. Just off Rabbit Island, we make our last stop, at the Madonna sott'acqua, a statue set in a stone arch 49 feet below the surface. We dive down to the ghostly yet benevolent Virgin, who is gazing up from her silent blue sanctuary.

The statue was placed there by Roberto Merlo, the former underwater photographer who founded Il Gattopardo with his wife, Silvana. After 24 years, Silvana can still count her American clients on the fingers of one hand. She says she's never even had a German. That, of course, is what attracted us. "This is not Portofino or Capri," Silvana tells us as we motor back to the port. "It's for people who love the true sea. Everything is stronger here—love, jealousy, the sun, the salt. You find a flower, and even its perfume is stronger. It's all excessive. And when bad weather arrives, it's dangerous. So you must love this place. If not, don't come." She smiles meaningfully and adds, "It's nice that not everyone can love it."

PONTINE ISLANDS

After a quick flight back to Rome, we drive an hour south to Anzio, one of four towns where ferries leave for Ponza, eponym of the Pontines and the archipelago's main destination. Compared to the bustling ferry docks in Naples that service Capri, Anzio's is tiny and refined, attended to by valets in orange shirts. The seven Pontine Islands were a regular stomping ground for Roman emperors beginning with Augustus. These days, they are a haven for sailors, like our Italian friend Marsillio, who calls the area the most beautiful place he has ever visited. En route to Ponza on the 70-minute ferry ride, (Continued on page 166; see page 167 for The Facts)

The 18th-century Giglio Castello.

