

EXCLUSIVE REPORT: PAKISTAN RAMPS UP NUKES

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**TRAVEL
SPECIAL**

Not So Lonely Planet



An aerial photograph of the sea off the coast of Capri, Italy. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, speckled with white foam from the boats. Numerous yachts and smaller vessels are scattered across the frame, some with their sails up, others with their engines running. The boats vary in size and color, including white, blue, and yellow. The overall scene is one of a busy, luxurious maritime environment.

The Island of Love

Refuge to emperors and princes,
poets and eccentrics, Capri retains
its amorous spookiness.

By Lawrence Osborne



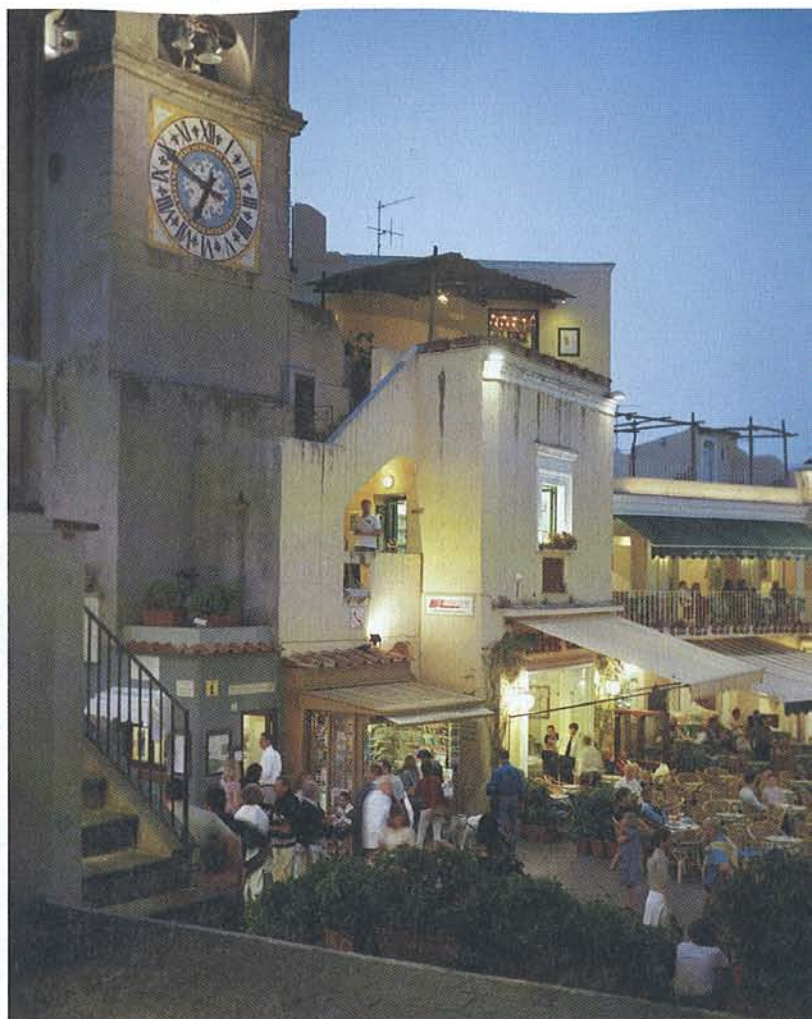
CAPRI, LIKE MANY islands, has always colluded in its own secretiveness. The Villa Jovis of Tiberius, the most notorious pleasure palace of the Roman Empire, still stands at its eastern tip, and all over its cliffs of ilex stand the empty villas of the Belle Époque, when Capri was not only the gay capital of Europe but a sanctuary from an increasingly violent and industrialized continent. It was a place where eccentrics and wealthy fantasists could exorcize their demons. Rilke loved Capri. Norman Douglas made her his literary heroine. The San Michele, the stupendous villa of the Swedish doctor Axel Munthe in Anacapri, welcomed Oscar Wilde and Henry James. During the 1920s it was a paradise for romping lesbians who were alarmingly easy to satirize, and its synonymy with sexuality seemed easy, natural. It was the Island of Love.

Lovers still come, armed with all their credit cards. Yet democratic tourism has also come to avenge the snobbery of the past. The Naples hydrofoils disgorge the day trippers wearing color-coded baseball caps and, around their necks, translation devices connected to their ears. They move slowly, in tribal groups, like medieval mendicants. Strangest are the Russians, anxiously headphoned, dressed in Black Sabbath T shirts and Crimean beachwear and led through the piazzetta by guides covered with buttons. Since they evince no joy whatsoever, no one knows why they are there.

One quickly realizes that the town is little more than a spectacular open-air outlet for the likes of Ferragamo and Roberto Cavalli, and that it doesn't especially matter one way or the other because people travel now mostly to shop at exactly the same stores they shop in at home. The enigma of "travel."

But the mall is not everything. The rich, who have made Capri their little oyster, are not always inclined to wallow in their own excesses. We walked from the piazzetta down the long Via Tragara to the **Punta Tragara hotel**, where Eisenhower and Churchill ran much of the Italian campaign near the end of the Second World War.

The views in some unnerving way are already known, internalized: the vertiginous limestone cliffs bristling with umbrella pines and wild broom, the gemstone water. One can walk down to the water along a coiled path built by the German steel and armaments industrialist Friedrich Alfred Krupp in the 1890s. In many ways it was gay millionaires of refined tastes like Krupp and the French poet and real-estate heir Jacques Fersen who turned it into the place it has become today. Krupp wasted much of his time in Capri and committed suicide in 1902 after the exposure of his affair with an 18-year-old local barber and amateur musician named Adolfo Schiano. Krupp was rumored to enjoy orgies with the



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local youths at the bottom of his path, where his yacht was often moored. It was named, of course, the *Puritan*.

Fersen's beautiful Villa Lysis still stands not far from Tiberius' ruined palace, its white columns encrusted with gold mosaics and its tiled opium den intact. It was named for Plato's dialogue on the nature of male love. Fersen also committed

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Getting There

Ferries and hydrofoils to Capri leave from Naples, Sorrento, and—in summer—the Amalfi Coast. For the adventurous, helicopters fly from Rome and Florence.

Blue Grottos

Capri's most famous sea cave is Tiberius' nymphaeum, the Grotta Azzurra. The secluded Grotta di Matrimonia still bears the imprint of Roman rites of worship.

suicide on Capri, in 1923, by drinking champagne mixed with cocaine, and his house today is filled with photographs of his lover Nino Cesarini dressed as Pan. It was an affect, this paganism of the northern homosexual, but it had found at last a place that did not spurn it.

Clambering along wild cliffs above the sea at dusk, lost in back paths bordered with flaking villas and orange trees, eating wild leeks and drinking Greco di Tufo wine, one could



has always been misunderstood. His hostile biographer, Suetonius, invented the myth of an aging debauchee locked away on his favorite island and having himself serviced by girls and boys nicknamed “minnows” who would nibble between his legs as he took his daily swim. The Tiberian palace became a symbol of mad depravity, but modern scholars think it is more likely that the adopted son of Augustus lived a modest and abstemious life on Capri. No matter. We imagine the Tiberius we want to imagine, and the Tiberius of Capri is a monster created by a fusion of absolute power with inscrutable island solitude. For 10 years the Roman Empire was ruled from here, but no one at the time seemed to know why. The island seemed to have intoxicated the ruler of the known world, and the tourist hedonists of the early 20th century took up this theme deliberately.

The island still has its amorous spookiness. On the remote paths between Jovis and Lysis, among the irises and fernlike wild asparagus, the land breathes a sexual heat and brightness. Enormous lemons grow in the sunken gardens, the white pillar houses set among strawberry trees like the villas of Minoan Crete. At night, on the path that skirts the sea toward the Arco Naturale, we visit a deserted Roman cave shrine on the steps that lead up to the almost aerial restaurant at Le Grotelle. My companion could not shake it from her nightmares.

At the other end of the island, another place that keeps ahold of the past is the Caesar Augustus hotel in Anacapri. This former residence of a Russian

recall that Capri was named, possibly, for its goats. Just as, listening to the cicadas and the bells and the sea on all sides, one could forgive Fersen’s obsession with Pan and the quiet lasciviousness of nature.

Much of Capri is pedestrianized, and the alleys carry earnestly quaint signs admonishing the ambulant rich to maintain values of “pulizia e silenzio”—cleanliness and silence—which is presumably what they want anyway. By Tragara lies the Villa Malaparte, the orange house with a stepped roof where Jean-Luc Godard filmed *Le Mépris*. (And originally the house of the journalist Curzio Malaparte, many times imprisoned by Mussolini.)

Meanwhile, the Punta Tragara, designed by Le Corbusier, was once the villa of the Contessa Enrica Manfredi. It dominates the Tragara belvedere with its orange walls and thickets of saguaro cacti, intimate and elegantly homely in a way that accords more with the island’s former idea of discreet aristocracy. Tapestries on the walls, Ugo Riva sculptures, and antique mounted globes. You can sleep outside on the terrace and feel you are out at sea; around it the cliffs curve around coves of menacingly brilliant blueness. When Capri was “discovered” by the German artist August Kopisch in 1826, it was these secretive coves and forests that charmed.

Why do places become the way they are? Capri was certainly shaped by the myth of Tiberius himself, an emperor who

prince, Emmanuel Bullack, sits on thousand-foot cliffs that look across to Vesuvius and Naples, just below the Villa San Michele. It’s one of those Italian *cinque stelle lusso*—five-star luxe—hotels whose prime virtue is their unostentatious simplicity. From the balconies of the rooms one looks down at falcons, at the emerald shades of a sea that does not forget its centuries. In the beautiful restaurant run by Giuseppe Resta, on offer is *Seppia linguine* with conch and king crab and eggplant and fava and sweet mint from the hotel *orto* with a bottle of chilled Fiano de Avellino. The great urban restaurants don’t get near this level of soul.

You can complain about what Capri has become—about the endless tableware stores, the yuppie underwear outlets, and the signs for “custom-made sandals”—but personally I’ve never cared about the contaminations and the consumerism and even the Russians in Black Sabbath T shirts. The nights still smell of sea and pine. The Caesar Augustus hotel’s lifesize statue of that emperor is an exact copy, as it happens, of the one found at the Villa Livia in Rome. Prince Bullack had it commissioned. One might say even that the island of Augustus and Tiberius is still there, and yet in some ways it also reminds me of India: in the fields at midday, in the riot of poppies, cyclamen, and wild rosemary, the pagan past rises. **NW**

Osborne is the author, most recently, of *Bangkok Days*.