TRAVEL SPECIAL

Not So Lonely Planet
The Island of Love

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

By Lawrence Osborne

Off the coast of Capri: boats luxuriate in the gemstone waters.
CAYRI, LIKE MANY islands, has always coalesced 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 lex 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 eccentricities and wealthy fantasists could exercise 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 her sycophancy with sexual equality 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 strange the sobriety of the past. The Naples hydrofoils diaphragm the day trippers wearing color-coded baseball caps and, around their necks, translation devices connected to their ears. They move slowly, in their groups, like medieval mercenaries. Stranger are the Russians, anxiously headhponed, dressed in Black Sabbath T-shirts and Creole beachwear and led through the piazzetta by guides covered with buttons. Since they expect 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 Blies 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 exigency of “travel”

But the mall is not everything. The rich, who have made Capri their little oyster, are not only inclined to wallow in their own excesses. We waltled 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 unvarying way are already known, internalized: the magnificent limestone cliffs bristling with umbrella pines and wild becomes the gemstone water. One can walk down to the water along a cobbled 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 affair with an 18-year-old local barber and amateur musician named Adolfo Schiano. Schiano was rumored to enjoy opium with the locals at the bottom of his path, where his yacht was often moored. It was named, of course, the Parian.

Fersen’s beautiful Villa Lysis still stands not far from Tiberius’ ruined palace, its white columns encrusted with gold mos- sales and its tile opium den intact. It was named for Plato’s dialogue on the nature of male love. Fersen also committed 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 pa- ragon of the ancient homosexual, but it had found at last a place that did not spur it. Climbing along the wild cliffs above the sea at dusk, lost in back paths bordered by fliasking vines and orange trees, eating wild leeks and distingue Groco di Tufa wine, one could recall that Capri was named, possibly, for its goats. Just as, lis- tening to the cicadas and the bells and the sea on all sides, one could forgive Fersen’s obsession with Pan and the quiet lus- closhness of nature.

Much of Capri is pedestrianized, and the alleys carry ever- nentry quaint signs admonishing the ambivalent rich to main- tain values of “pulito e santo”–cleanliness and silence—which is presumably what they want anyway. By Tragara lies the Villa Malaparte, the house and stone stepped with a roof where Jean-Luc Godard filmed Le Mépris. (And originally the house of the journalist Garzio Malaparte, many times inspir- ioned by Mussolini.)

Meanwhile, the Punta Tragara, designed by Le Corbusier, was once the villa of the Countess Enrica Mantoffi. It domi- nates the Tragara belvedere with its orange walls and thickets of saguaro cactus, intimate and elegantly homely in a way that accords more with the island’s former idea of discreet aristoc- tacy. Tapestries on the walls, Ugo Rha sculptures, and antique mounted rifles. You can sleep outside on the terrace and feel you are out at sea; around it the cliffs curve around covers of menacingly brilliant blues. When Capri was “discovered” by the German artist August Kogischi in 1826, it was these se- cretive covers and forests that charmed.

Why do places become the way they are? Capri was certain- ly shaped by the myth of Tiberius himself, an emperor who has always been misunderstood. His hostile biogra- pher, Suetonius, invented the myth of an aging de- nacher locked away on his favorite island and having himself serviced by girls and boys nick- named "minnors" who would ridicule beside 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 Tiberians we want to imagine, and the Tiberians of Capri is a monster created by a fusion of absolute power with inscruf- able island solitude. For 10 years the Roman Em- pire was ruled from here, but no one at the time seemed to know why. The island seemed to have intimated the ruler of the known world, and the tourist bourgeoisie of the early 20th century took up this theme delicately.

The island still has its amorous speechlessness. On the remote path between Lysis and Pan, among the vines and ferns and wild asparagus, the land breathes a sexual heat and brightness. Enormous lemons grow in the sunken gardens, the white pilli- car house and set among strawberry trees like the villas of Minosion Crete. At night, on the path that skirts the sea toward the Arco Naturale, we visit a deserted Roman cave shrine on the cegs that lead up to the almost aerial restaurant at La Grotta. My companion could not shelve it from her nightmares.

At the other end of the island, another place that keeps aloof of the past is the Caesar Augustus hotel in Anacapri. This former residence of a Russian prince, Emmanuel Ballack, sits on thousands-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-hotes whose prime virtue is their unostentatious simplici- ty. 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 Festa, on offer is Seppia linguine with conch and king crab and egg- plant and fava and sweet mint from the hotel onto a bot- tle of chilled Fiano di Avellino. The great urban restaurants don’t get near this level of soul.

You can complain about what Capri has become—about the endless twaddle stores, the yuppie underwear outlets, and the signs for “custom-made sandals”—but personally I’ve never cared about the consumerism and the consumption and even the Russians in Black Sabbath T-shirts. The nights still smell of sea and pine. The Caesar Augustus hotel’s Lifetime stea- se of that emperor in an exact cape, as it happens, of the one found at the Villa Lysis in Rome. Prince Ballack had it commis- sioned. One might say even that the Island of Augustus and Tiberius is still there, and in some ways it also reminds me of India in the 1970s at the end of the period of people, cycli- men, and wild rosemary, the pajun past rises. www

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