

# FOOD *and* TRAVEL

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escapes

# Glam rock





**Beyond the glitzy yachts and bikini-clad belles of the Italian isle of Capri, simpler pleasures await – such as home-grown food eaten in spectacular natural surroundings. By Hattie Ellis**

Photographer **Jill Mead**







**In the famous Blue Grotto, a woman with magnificent mozzarella breasts swam through the black and blue as the songs of the boatmen echoed around the chamber**

Capri has glamour. For two millennia, this four-mile stretch of limestone soaring out of the Tyrrhenian Sea has been the playground of the big cats, from orgiastic Roman emperors, like Tiberius, to Jackie O and Bardot, who used to walk barefoot through the famous Piazzetta of the main town. Such is Capri's allure, which also extends from reality into legend - singing sirens tried to tempt Odysseus to these shores. On the 40-minute hydrofoil journey from Naples, you approach not just an island, rising craggy as a crocodile from the azure sea, but also a reputation.

So much for stories. I was suspicious that I would find Capri a wild island tamed for tourism: its winter population is 13,000, but more than that arrive every day in summer. On the other hand, would I feel a touch underdressed without a villa and a sleek boat? Off-season, in the relaxed warmth of autumn or the heady scents of spring, Capri's appeal remains unspoilt - and accessible: a beguiling mixture of sophistication and simple, staggering, natural beauty.

Simplicity is an important aspect of the food. Like much southern Italian cooking, the best of Capri's dishes rely not on posh chef skills but rather on ingredients blessed by the sun, baptised by the sea and anointed with olive oil. In few cuisines is the quality of produce so starkly apparent. Insalate Caprese - a salad of tomatoes, mozzarella, basil and olive oil - is transformed when each part is perfect. When Elizabeth David visited the writer Norman Douglas on Capri, she recorded that he always dropped in on a restaurant in the morning to make preliminary inquiries about the day's ingredients, the state of the fish, and whether the mozzarella was dripping, positively dripping fresh'.

At more expensive restaurants you pay for silver salver treatment, but not necessarily for better food. One of Douglas' regular haunts was Le Grottelle near the Arco Naturale, a rock formation which makes cathedrals look like Lego. The restaurant was described to me as 'primitive'. Partly gouged out of a cave, its terrace edges on to sheer space with water crashing somewhere far below. The grandfather of this family-run establishment, Antonio Vuotto, makes pizzas in a wood-fired oven on a ledge even higher up the rock face, turning between a marble slab and the silvered glow of the ashes, looking like a DJ mixing smells and savours to the sky. The rabbit stew was fragrant with the rosemary hanging in the island's air. In the kitchen, Antonio's wife, Rosa, stirred clams around a pan, throwing in a handful of parsley as they opened. Air, fire, rock, wine, water, seafood, garlic, olive oil, tomatoes: the whole place had an elemental freshness.

Yet, walk for 15 minutes and you can be in the middle of Capri Town's square, Piazza Umberto 1, known as La Piazzetta, which Douglas called the small theatre of the world'. There is a bar at each corner where, in the evening, a seat and a drink will buy you a slice of Capri's aperitivo action: the entertainment of exotic birds in designer plumage, accompanied by sugar daddies with greedy eyes glinting like the gold on their young women's wrists.

Or, you can take a chairlift up Mount Solaro, the highest part of the island, and walk in the valleys to see another form of bird life, at its best in October; or, in spring, spectacular flowers slashes of yellow, blowsy whites, piercing blues, exquisitely fragile oranges. Not far from the summit, you find the little church and hermitage of Santa Maria di Cetrella, which is surrounded by orchids in April. People must come up to this uniquely peaceful spot for parties, or family gatherings. On a shelf I found a pan the height of a small child. Its use? Spaghetti for 40.

From Santa Maria there is an outstanding view of Capri and a heady sense of the remoteness and containment of an island - the feeling that you are master of all you survey. A two-hour boat trip around the shore gives another view of the supremely romantic outline. Villas crown impossible crags and the Casa Malaparte, a masterpiece of Italian 20th-century architecture, has steps trailing down from its roof like the tail of a modernist dinosaur. In the Blue Grotto, Capri's most famous sight, an underwater hole allows in enough light to turn the water an otherworldly, electric turquoise. On my visit, a woman with magnificent mozzarella breasts rolled in and swam through the black and blue as the songs of the boatmen echoed around the chamber.

If you want to catch island life beyond the tourists, leave the town centre or get up early. Before the four bars on the Piazzetta put their tables out, workmen stand about in groups, easing sociably into the day. Many goods are imported from the mainland, where the volcanic soils and dry, warm, soft climate of Campania produce the best fruit and vegetables of Italy. Boxes of courgette flowers, with egg-yolk-yellow tentacles, are piled up to be carted through the streets. The exotic appearance of these fiori di zucca is lost on cooking, but the small, green crunch of the base is one of Nature's aces. This was revealed to me in a pasta dish at Da Paolino, a restaurant below Capri Town shaded by 130 lemon trees, where waiters bring little iced glasses of limoncello (the real thing, not the cheap version which has the rasp of lemon squash). I had another memorable taste here: salt crusted, grilled pezzogna - a prized fish off these





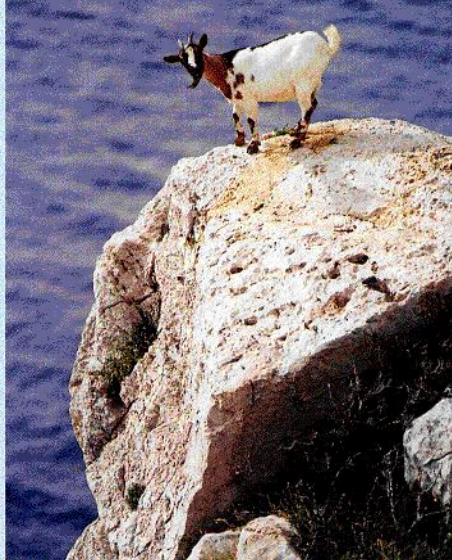
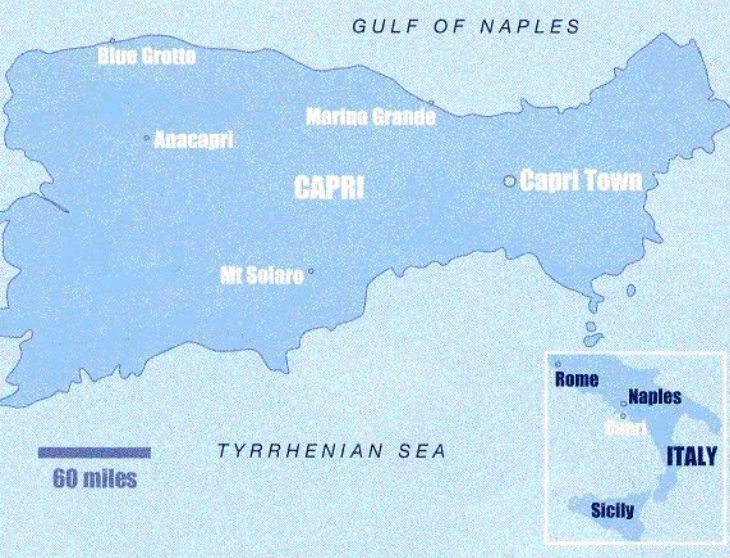
Opposite page: boatmen outside the Blue Grotto. This page, left: the seawater swimming pool at Punta Tragara; below: the glamorous side of life on Capri



Below left: the Gam ferry from Capri to Naples; below right: a red flag marks a section of inaccessible sea, the waves crashing against the Faraglioni rocks







**One lady took me to the house where Lenin played chess with Gorky. Such is the closeness of island life that on the briefest of conversational strolls you can happen on such stories**

## Travel information

Prefix all Capri numbers with the international dialling code 00-39-081. For details of currency and climate, see Guidelines. Note that many places close from early November until March or April.

## RESOURCES

**Italian State Tourist Board** 1 Princes Street, London W1 (020-7408 1254; [www.enit.it](http://www.enit.it)). On Capri: in Capri Town there's a tourist information centre at Piazza Umberto 1 (837 0686); in Marina Grande at Banchina del Porto (837 0634); in Anacapri at Via O Orlandi 59/a (837 1524). The website is [www.caprionline.com](http://www.caprionline.com)

## MAPS AND BOOKS

**Librerie Studio La Conchiglia** is an excellent bookshop with three branches: two in Capri Town - Via Le Botteghe 12 (837 6577) and Via Camerelle 18 (837 8199) and one in Anacapri, located at Via G Orlandi 205 (837 2646). The shop sells an elegant introduction to the island, *A Brief Historical Guide to Capri* (L15,000). *Time Out Naples* (2000, Penguin, £10.99), *Michelin's In your Pocket Naples* (2000, £4.99) and *Cadogan's Bay of Naples and Southern Italy* (2001, £14.99) all cover Capri. Elizabeth David's essay on her friend and Capri resident Norman Douglas is in *South Wind Through the Kitchen: The Best of Elizabeth David* (Penguin, £7.99). Norman Douglas' out-of-print classic *Siren Land* is worth seeking out. Shirley Hazzard's *Greene on Capri* (Virago, £12.99) is a well-written memoir on the novelist's visits to his villa in Anacapri, and gives a fresh angle on the recent past of island life. The tourist information centres sell two maps for L1,500. Also look out for the Alisud 1:7500 map.

## SPECIALIST TOUR OPERATORS

**Headwater Holidays** (01606-813333; [www.headwater-holidays.co.uk](http://www.headwater-holidays.co.uk)) has an independent seven-night 'Enchanted Island of Capri' trip, from £499 per person, including return flights to Naples, b&b in a three-star hotel, map and walking instructions.

**Italian Expressions** (020-7435 2525; [www.expressions.holidays.co.uk](http://www.expressions.holidays.co.uk)) can tailor holidays to Capri. A seven-night trip, including hotel accommodation, half board and return flights to Naples, costs from £804 per person, based on two sharing.

shores with its juice, sweetness and firm flesh perfectly retained.

From the square you can wander around the labyrinthine alleyways of the old town, or take paths further out to the edges of the island.

The pathways are notably quiet no cars are allowed in Capri Town apart from electric buggies, which carry anything from posh suitcases to sofas to old ladies. Safe, peaceful wanderings are part of the pleasure of Capri: coming across a cat picking at a pile of spaghetti carbonara on a wall; old people tending smallholdings, with potatoes growing under the shade of vines; a small shop where a woman whirrs up ruffled bikinis in colourful cottons.

Many dismiss Marina Grande as the place where the boats arrive and tourists buy postcards. But the far end is a slice of downhome Capri, where we found a travelling greengrocer weighing up fruit and veg with his hand-held brass scales, a bakery with pastries ridged like scallop shells (called *sfogliatelle*), and fishermen mending their nets. These nets would once have been dark, dyed with bark to disguise them in the water, but now they have faded to pinks and soft browns. The fishermen had tales to tell of the Russian exiles who lived on the island at the start of the 20th century, and whose mothers used to provide spa baths of sea water for the women. One lady took me to the house where she said Lenin had played chess with Gorky and tried to persuade him to return to Russia and revolution. Such is the closeness of island life that on the briefest of conversational strolls you can happen on stories like this.

From Capri Town or Marina Grande you can take a bus to the other side of the island, centred on the town of Anacapri - which is more relaxed and spread out. A half-hour stroll from the town is the rural *Da Gelsomina alla Migliera*, a place locals go to escape the crowds and eat food and wine made from the owners' produce. In the autumn, and for a short time in spring, they pick wild mushrooms on Mount Solaro for the pasta and for the restaurant's exceptionally fresh antipasti. The ravioli Caprese were filled with a gently sweet home-made cheese, flavoured with marjoram and sauced with the rich, deep, sharp-sweet red of tomatoes, and they do a fine version of *torta Caprese*, an almond and chocolate cake, using new-laid eggs.

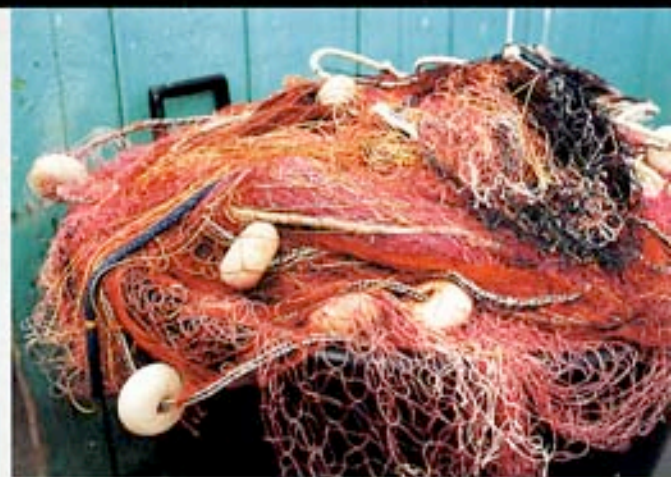
Behind the restaurant were some blue books tied to a tree. These turned out to be guides to a philosophical park, set up by a Swedish professor, Gunnar Adler-Karlsson. Here, paths punctuated by quotations wind through the wild flowers. There is no charge. 'I wanted to make somewhere that was free,' Adler-Karlsson said. A surprising number of Capri's pleasures, if you seek them out, are free.

*Hattie Ellis and Jill Mead travelled with the Italian State Tourist Office*





Opposite: a wild goat poses. This page,  
far right: view over Capri Town; right:  
Antonio Vuotto making pizzas in Le Grottole



Left: catch of the day  
at Le Grottole

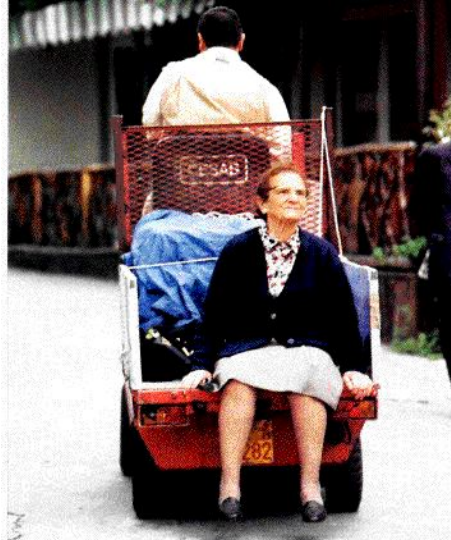


Above: the turquoise waters in the Blue  
Grotto give the cave its name; right:  
strings of lights hung over the Piazzetta





The paths are notably quiet - no cars are allowed in Capri Town apart from electric buggies, which carry anything suitcases to sofas to old ladies



## Travel information continued

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Note that many places close from early November until March or April.

### GETTING THERE AND AROUND

**Alitalia** (0870-544 8259; [www.alitalia.co.uk](http://www.alitalia.co.uk)) flies seven times daily to Naples, from London Heathrow or Gatwick, via Rome or Milan. Return fares start from around £163, including tax.

**British Airways** (0845-773 3377; [www.britishairways.com](http://www.britishairways.com)) flies twice daily direct from London Gatwick to Naples. Return fares start from around £130 return, including tax.

**Go** (0845-605 4321; [www.go-fly.com](http://www.go-fly.com)) flies daily direct from London Stansted to Naples. Return fares start from £90 return, including tax.

**Regular ferries and hydrofoils** (up to ten and 20 a day respectively) go to Capri from the central Molo Beverello in Naples (the journey takes one hour and 20 minutes by ferry; 40 minutes by hydrofoil).

There are also hydrofoils from Mergellina in west Naples. Hydrofoils and ferries also regularly make the shorter crossing from Sorrento. Visit [www.caprionline.com](http://www.caprionline.com) for timetables.

From the harbour at Marina Grande, take the funicular up to Capri Town, or get a bus or taxi to Capri Town or Anacapri. Electric carts take luggage around the town but cars are banned. There are regular buses between Capri Town and Anacapri and around the island. Boat tours around the island leave from Marina Grande.

### WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Prices quoted are per head for a three-course meal with half a bottle of wine.

**Buca di Bacco** Via Longano 35, Capri Town (837 0723). Good value for pizzas and grilled fish, near the Piazzetta; L40,000.

**Da Gelsomina alla Migliera** Migliera 72, Anacapri (837 1499). Rural place using home-grown ingredients. See text; L48,000.

**Da Paolino** Via Palazzo a Mare 11, Capri Town (837 6102). Set in an arbour of lemon trees. See text; L65,000.

**Il Bizantino** Hotel Punta Tragara, Via Tragara 57, Capri Town (837 0844). Smart hotel restaurant with views, a beautiful ten-minute walk from the Piazzetta; L90,000.

**L'Approdo** Piazzetta a Ferraro 8, Marina Grande (837 8990). Popular with locals and good for pizza, at the far end of the harbour; L50,000.

**La Savardina** Via Lo Capo 8, Capri Town (837 6300). Rustic restaurant in a garden, run by the charming Eduardo; L43,000.

**Le Grottelle** Via Arco Naturale 13, Capri Town (837 5719). Family-run restaurant built into the rock. See text; L58,000.

**Pulalli** Piazza Umberto 1-3, Capri Town (837 4108). A wine bar in the clock tower overlooking the square - a useful alternative to the high prices and spotlight of the four main bars.

### WHERE TO STAY

Prices are for a double room, in low season.

**Capri Palace** Via Capodimonte 2b, Anacapri (837 3800). A glamorous, white-marbled five-star hotel in Anacapri itself, with a spa; from L440,000.

**Da Gelsomina alla Migliera** Migliera 72, Anacapri (837 1499). Simple rooms in a rural setting a half-hour stroll from Anacapri, attached to an excellent, relaxed restaurant (see Where to eat); from L120,000.

**Hotel La Tosca** Via Dalmazio Birago 5, Capri Town (837 0989). Clean and friendly; from L120,000.

**Hotel Punta Tragara** Via Tragara 57, Capri Town (837 0844). A four-star hotel designed as a private villa by Le Corbusier, in a stunning position overlooking the Faraglioni rocks; from L450,000.

**Hotel Villa Sarah** Via Tiberio 3, Capri Town (837 7817). Set in a peaceful garden; from L280,000.

**Capri has recently set up a bed and breakfast** scheme. For details, write to: **B&B** [capri.it](mailto:capri.it) Casella Postale no 33, 80071 Anacapri, Capri, Italy, or e-mail [bb@capri.it](mailto:bb@capri.it); L150,000

### FOOD SHOPPING

**Capri Natura** Via Veruotto 5, Capri Town. Artisanal producers of limoncello, other liqueurs and preserves in a street off the Via Provinciale, which goes from Capri Town to Marina Grande.

**Gelateria Buonocore** Via Vittorio Emanuele 35, Capri Town. Home-made cones and good ice cream.

**Pasticceria La Vela** Piazzetta A Ferraro 15, Marina Grande. A bakery tucked away at the end of the harbour.

**Salumeria Simeoli** Via delle Botteghe 12a, Capri Town. Useful for groceries, prosciutto etc, on a street with plenty of food shops.

**Sfizi di Pane** Via delle Botteghe 4, Capri Town. Recommended bakery.

**Tocaceli Ivana** Via G. Orlandi 155, Anacapri. A good, small greengrocer - find some of those sweet tomatoes here.

**Also, Elio and Erica Attivo have a wonderful out-of-the-way small-** holding selling organic fruit, vegetables and honey at Via la Guardia 41, Anacapri. Phone ahead (837 2175).

### OTHER SHOPPING

**Antonio Viva** Via G Orlandi, Anacapri. A shoe-maker famous for his hand-made sandals.

**Susy e Mimi** Via delle Botteghe 61, Capri Town. Charming, small, cotton bikinis, plus some children's clothes, made to order from a good selection of colourful cottons.





Opposite page: an electric cart.  
This page, above: the baker and  
his wares, Marina Grande



Above: honey frame and beehives at  
Elio and Erica Attivo's smallholding;  
right: bottles for home-made wine  
at a smallholding in Capri Town

