

EXILE ON ELBA

ELBA IS THE BIGGEST ISLAND OF THE TUSCAN ARCHIPELAGO AND THE THIRD-LARGEST ISLAND IN ITALY AFTER SARDINIA AND SICILY, YET IT'S RELATIVELY UNKNOWN. GISELLE WHITEAKER EXPLORES THIS UNEXPECTED PARADISE.



“Apparently, we turn here,” I tell my boyfriend Elio, who glances at the narrow road questioningly before tugging on the steering wheel of our hire car. We’ve just disembarked from the ferry between Piombino on mainland Italy and Portoferraio on Elba’s northwest coast and we’re heading for our boutique accommodation, Hotel Ilio, in the village of Sant’Andrea. It looked like it was going to be an easy cruise along the coast, but I hadn’t factored in the mountainous terrain on Elba.

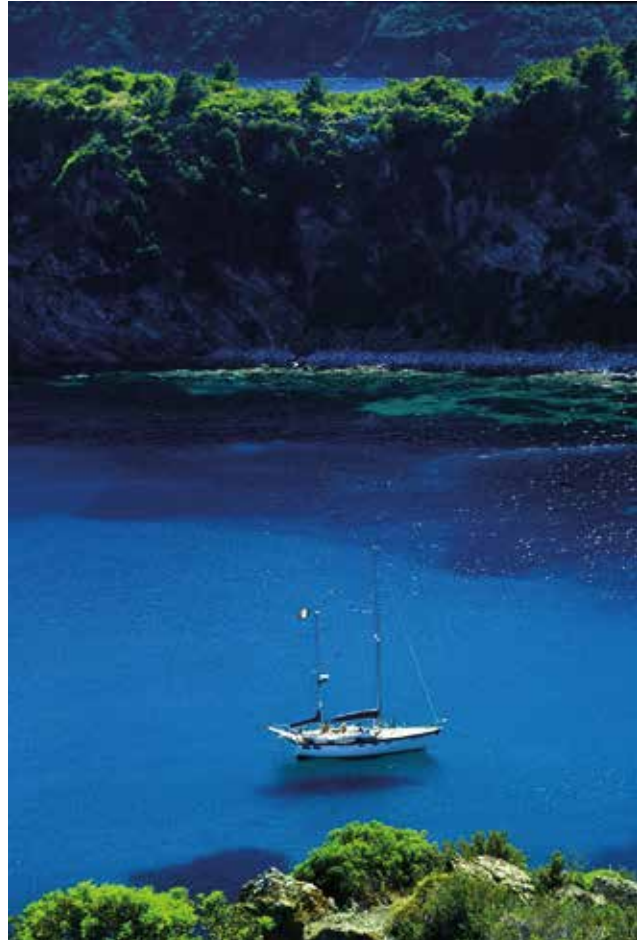
A pastel village sits on the side of the mountain, overlooking lush greenery that drops down to deep-blue water stretching to the horizon.



Top: One of the rooms at Hotel Ilio, facing the garden.
Above: One of Elba’s many beautiful bays.



The island is surrounded by clean, clear water.



Boating is popular on Elba.

We wind our way upwards, around hairpin bends and sweeping curves, grateful we don't meet any oncoming vehicles on the narrow road snaking into the hills. After a particularly sharp turn, we pull over to take in the views. A pastel village sits on the side of the mountain, overlooking lush greenery that drops down to deep-blue water stretching to the horizon. It's spellbinding.

The road widens slightly as it heads downwards, giving us a little more breathing space, before it compresses and turns into the enclave of Sant'Andrea. A few minutes later, we arrive at Hotel Ilio, where we are warmly greeted. "If you like, we can arrange a dinner for you in the village nearby," says Nikita as she places glasses of Prosecco before us. Sitting on the sun-drenched terrace, we can make out the sea below, just a few hundred metres down the road.

Post-aperitif, Nikita ushers us alongside a garden in bloom, with sun loungers and seating for guest use. We swiftly unpack, turning the comfortable room into our temporary home, before dressing for dinner.

Publius restaurant is in the mountainside village of Poggio and has lured names such as Rod Stewart, Queen Rania of Jordan, and Formula One champions Hakkinen and Alesi. Jutting out over the hillside, the enclosed terrace has spectacular views, all the way down to Marciana Marina and out to sea. Publius focuses on specialities of the Tuscan region – truffles, fresh seafood and wild boar are the stars of the menu – making it a perfect introduction to the dining



Middle: Historic Portoferraio.
Above: A Mediterranean-style suite at Hotel Ilio.



The hilltop town of Marciana.

Publius focuses on specialities of the Tuscan region – truffles, fresh seafood and wild boar are the stars of the menu – making it a perfect introduction to the dining scene on Elba.



Public art on the way to Madonna del Monte.

scene on Elba. Working our way through a bottle of Elba Rosso, we feast on delicacies expertly delivered by friendly waiter Francesco, including chickpea tarts, cocoa ravioli with wild boar and Parmesan sauce, and tagliatini with truffles, rounding off with a sumptuous pear tart.

The dining scene on Elba is so extensive that Maurizio Testa, owner and manager of Hotel Ilio and Personal Elba Consultant, has compiled his own mini Michelin-style guide, outlining the best of the best. Maurizio quickly becomes our go-to for restaurant advice and bookings, tips on the island's must-sees, and hot spots for *aperitivo* – a pre-meal drink specifically designed to whet the appetite, often accompanied by finger food. Maurizio's contact network and deep knowledge of all things Elba smooth the way for our time here.

Not once does Maurizio lead us astray. We find the perfect aperitif – a Hugo Spritz with Prosecco, lime, mint and Sambuco liqueur – at La Cantina, on the waterfront in Marciana Marina. From this relaxed bar, it's a short stroll to Salegrosso for waterfront fine dining. The seafood here is particularly notable; the charred octopus is to die for. Alternatively, Scaraboci is around the corner and has a private terrace overlooking the rooftops, for special occasions. Even the more casual Sottomarino, just up the hill from Hotel Ilio, plates the freshest of seafood – and superb oven-fired pizzas. One thing is certain: foodies will not go wanting on Elba.

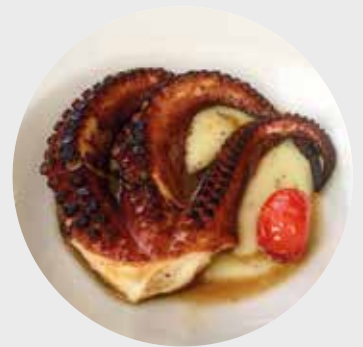
We are determined to spend part of every day at the beach, so post-breakfast on our first day we don swimmers and flip flops and stroll to Sant'Andrea beach, where light-grey granite sand leads to a crystal-clear, turquoise sea. Part of the beach is a concession, packed with sun loungers and multi-hued umbrellas, while the end section is free to



Fiocco di culatello – cured pork – at Scaraboci.



Cocoa ravioli at Publius.



Charred octopus at Salegrosso.



Pear tart at Publius.



The beach at Sant'Andrea.



Part of the path around the bay at Sant'Andrea.

use. Both are packed, so we decide to paddle through the shallow rock pool to the path that follows the bay to another smaller beach. The path quickly peters out and we find ourselves boulder hopping, following on the heels of the more confident locals, who seem oblivious of the drop to the ocean below. When we finally land on the beach, we stake a claim on a patch of sand and head straight into the water to cool down.

There are more than 80 beaches on Elba, some sand, some rock, all lovely in their own way. We sample several, but the proximity of Sant'Andrea calls us back on several occasions. We visit Pomonte one day, where the *Elviscot*, an Italian cargo ship, wound up shipwrecked in 1972. The entire stern, the bridge, and part of the forward side lie on the sandy bottom, just 12 metres deep. The area is easy to spot from the shore, marked by a plethora of dive boats and snorkellers. We consider hiring a paddle boat and joining the throng, but opt for an artisan gelato break instead.

Another day, we walk to Madonna del Monte, a church in an enchanting position atop a hill behind Marciana. Dating back to at least the 16th century, Napoleon used it for a short period in the summer of 1914 to get away from the heat of Portoferraio and spend time in private with Maria Walewska. It's a pleasant walk with spectacular views, although when it comes to panoramas, nothing compares with the chairlift in Pozzarello, which takes punters to the top of Monte Capanne, Elba's highest peak. At 1,019 metres,

it's not exceptionally tall, but the chairlift is a large part of the adventure. Rather than a traditional gondola or seated lift, open canary-yellow baskets, with room for two people standing, chug up the slope, taking 18 minutes to the summit, where mind-bending views await.

Time on Elba is magical. Mornings are gentle, tinged with warmth, the real heat reserved for the middle of the day, when the beaches call. The days seem longer, languid, slowly giving way to protracted sunsets and balmy evenings, designed for late dining. Despite the time stretch, though, we can't fit everything in. We don't have enough hours to explore Forte Falcone at Portoferraio, to visit the villas associated with Napoleon's exile on the island, or to delve into the Calamita mines in Capoliveri. We do have time though, to rejuvenate. And that's what time, on this Tuscan island is all about. ■

INFO

To learn more about boutique Hotel Ilio, or to book your stay, see www.hotelilio.com

For more information on Elba, please visit www.visitelba.com

We are determined to spend part of every day at the beach, so post-breakfast on our first day we don swimmers and flip flops and stroll to Sant'Andrea beach, where light-grey granite sand leads to a crystal-clear, turquoise sea.



From left to right: Villages nestle in the hills; the chairlift at Pozzarello; the view from Monte Capanne.