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You've heard the expression see Naples and die. We preferred to "See Ischia and live". And we did it in style.

For those seasoned travelers who haven't yet visited this miniature Mediterranean marvel, let us tell you what you are missing.

Nestled in the bay of Naples, twenty miles from the mainland, the island of Ischia packs 87 spas, and more than 70 hotels into an area no larger than Manhattan Island. Curiously, even though we were on Ischia at the beginning of the tourist season, it never felt crowded.

Ischia has been inhabited for about 5,500 years. Even then the population knew of the magical properties of the myriad of natural hot springs which bubble up all over the island. Just stand on any hill as far as you can see, watch steam escape from hundreds of fissures in the ground.

Today the hot springs have reached their dizzying zenith in a Disneyland-style thermal park called Poseidon. This sprawling complex of 20 pools and hot springs draws a large number of German tourists seeking cures for a lexicon of ailments. Some of the springs are mildly radioactive and cures for a variety of cancers have been claimed from bathing in these potent waters.

But even if you've come here in the peak of fitness there's a lot to do while you're soaking up that golden sun. In Lacco Ameno while Jonelle shopped for linen tablecloths made by an order of nuns on the island, I took photographs of a weathered fisherman tending his well-used net.

The fish that swim around Ischia you will not find in Pacific or Atlantic waters. That evening we dined on a delicate though ugly Gari. Never heard of it? Neither had we. And you won't find it in your local fish market. It lives only in this area of the Mediterranean. We washed it down with a bottle of Forastera -a grape that's also exclusive to this island. It reminded us of some of the best Semillons we had tried in the Napa valley. But at US\$4.50 a bottle from several grocery stores on the island, the similarity ended with its flavor.

The ancient Greeks introduced vineyards to Ischia. And the vines are still cultivated in the same way, on terraced fields, a method very different from the rest of Italy.

For 450 years Ischian wines were exported to the Italian mainland and other seaports





Ten after World War II production dropped dramatically. Today you are unlikely to find any of the island's delicious red and white wines anywhere but Ischia. One more reason to visit

The following afternoon, after a lazy and prolonged breakfast, we decided we needed exercise. The hotel taxi dropped us near the beach in "downtown" Ischia. It's here that the island has its mini Rodeo Drive. If you want it, it's here:

There are Italian leather handbags made of the softest cabretta; Gucci shoes; designer dresses; enough platinum and gold watches to embarrass Fort Knox. And then there's the food. There's pasta enough to make you say "Mama Mia" more times than is decent for a tourist. There's freshly baked bread that will make you salivate even if you've just eaten. And delicatessens display cured meats of all descriptions. And then there's dessert. But don't get me started on that.

We came here to get some exercise, and get some exercise we will. After wandering dazed through streets of enticing stores, we took the route out of town and kept walking. We kept an eye on the road behind-just in case a bus appeared. It didn't. Within about 1 1/2 hrs the road turned into a causeway, and above us.....well above us, stood the medieval Castle Aragon.

Perched on a lofty promontory with a view of most of the southwest corner of the island, Castle Aragon was built from the 5th to the 15th century as a refuge from pirates and other unpleasant invaders. At the first sign of incoming ships the Ischians would lock themselves inside the castle and head for the top. Inside they could grow their own food, raise sheep and cattle and be self-sufficient for months if necessary. Usually the raiders became bored and left. We just became exhausted and went back to the safety of our hotel.

The hotel Ischia & Lido was our base for most of our stay on the island. It's an updated version of the first hotel built on the island. It's on the beach and sports a sweeping view of the harbor. It provided the perfect central base for our excursions to other parts of the island.

Three brothers, Giorgio, Fabio, and Luca Orofino, who operate a tour group, Stay and visit, own the hotel. Although their backgrounds are rooted in Law and Engineering, this dynamic trio is on a holy crusade to help American tourist visit Ischia and other parts of Italy with the maximum amount of exposure to local culture and the minimum amount of discomfort.

The idea is novel, but seems to work flawlessly. Travelers use one hotel as their base. For the 14 day tour of Campania the Hotel Ischia and Lido serves as home. Getting there is painless. You fly into Naples airport and are met by a tour guide who whisks you by hydrofoil to the island. The first day is spent setting in and recovering from jet lag. Here are some highlights from the tour.

DAY 4: Pompeii and Sorrento. On a bad day in 79 AD thousands of residents of Pompeii woke to the wrath of Mount Vesuvius, a volcano with an attitude. Men, women, children and animals were asphyxiated by the volcanic ash as they ate slept or tried to run from the advancing tidal wave of lava. This is an eerie and fascinating place.

Sorrento is the cliff-top dwelling of the mythical sirens that lured sailors to their deaths you will be travelling by land.

Day 6: The Amalfi Coast. This one's an overnighter, so bring a tooth brush. The Amalfi coast links three cliff-side towns: Positano, Amalfi and Ravello. This area is arguably one of the most beautiful stretches of coastline in Italy.

To get to these picturesque pink and yellow tinted towns some of the roads here are so narrow they make HWY 1 look like a super-highway.



Day 8: A tour of the Castle Aragon. I told you about this one earlier. Great fun. Bring a sturdy pair of walking shoes and a camera.

Day 9: Capri. Nearly 2,000 years ago the Emperor Tiberius traded Ischia for Capri and made this tiny island his retirement home. Who got the better of the deal? You be the judge.

Day11: Tasting the Wines of Ischia. If you're asleep for the rest of the tour, wake up for day 11. In an area of just 24 miles Ischia grows four outstanding white wine grapes: Arilla, Biancollela, Forastera (my favorite) and S. Lunardo. The dominant red wine grapes are Guarnaccia and Pediroso o Pere e Palummo.

I'm not sure if it's the age of the vines-typically 17th century growths-or the skill of the winemakers at the 6 wineries on the island, but nothing w tasted here was less than an 87 in my book.

So there it is. A stress free tour of the Campania region of Italy. The cost is reasonable: US\$2,400 including all meals(with the obligatory wine and mineral water) and accommodations. Any admissions fees incurred on the tour were also covered. In fact unless you go crazy on a shopping spree for souvenirs, it's difficult to spend money. Believe me now and hear me later.

If you fancy other parts of Italy, there are two week tours of Sicily, Tuscany and Umbria and also Liguria.

Would I go again? Let me look at my diary.

©Jonelle Bardmess, 1997

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