



Italy Island Dreaming

Exploring the picturesque Pontine Islands

By Stella Fong

The melodic chime of the nearby church, Santa Maria della Pietà, beckoned my husband and me from slumber. Our sailboat pulled urgently at her mooring and we looked at one another as the reality of being on the Italian island of Procida near Naples sank in. Today, we were to start our cruise on the Tyrrhenian Sea. But last night and this morning, the impatient clanking of the halyard told us that the wind was up.

As the 25- to 30-knot mistral blew from the north, we rethought our plan

to head north to Ventotene, 20 miles away. After we watched a 46-foot captained charter suffer the embarrassment of getting wrapped up in multiple bow anchors while trying to leave the marina, we decided to stay and explore the island instead.

We had arrived the previous afternoon. After landing at the airport in Naples, we took the Unico Alibus for 3 euro to Molo Beverello, the main ferry landing. The short ride gave us a glimpse into a frenetic city where buses, cars and motorbikes moved en masse with brave pedestrians forcing their way through gaps. Scratches

and dings marked every car as they nudged into the desired direction of travel. Parked cars were stacked on top of each other. As we would soon learn, yacht parking in Italy followed the same principles.

For 13 euro, we were transported to the Moorings base on Isola Procida, about 45 minutes by high-speed ferry. The large swells made travel challenging for many passengers. Attendants handed out barf bags as though they were passing out magazines. Needless to say, we were relieved to make it to land. The charter office was an easy walk, located

about 1/4-mile east of the ferry dock.

After going through the formalities with the Moorings, including an informative skipper's meeting, we boarded our home for the week, *Stai Soft* or "You are Soft." Unfortunately, "soft" was not the way I boarded.

A 10-foot wood plank bridged the gap between the dock and cockpit. I demonstrated my inexperience by stepping on the steep side and lifting the board on the opposite end only to have it slam down on the boat.

The boat, a Moorings Beneteau 37, was in near-new condition and well-equipped with paper charts, R80 chart plotter and Heikell's pilot book of the Italian coast. The materials included a list of local marinas with phone numbers and VHF contact channels. The skipper's meeting informed us that there were two basic options for a weeklong charter—go northwest and explore the Pontine Island group (an archipeligo that has been populated since Etruscan times), or go southeast, affording a visit to the Amalfi coast, Sorrento and Pompeii. We opted for the island exploration, guessing that we would have a wider variety of mooring options and more protection should the winds pipe up. The Amalfi trip required longer passages between protected areas and fewer anchorage options.

A FLAVORFUL BEGINNING

The islands near Naples are of volcanic origin. The craggy land juts out of the sea, forming strategic high points for fortified castles. On Procida, Terra Murata is situated 300 feet above sea level and provides a spectacular view of the fishing village of Corricella below with colorful buildings bracing the hillside as captured in the movie *Il Postino*. Inside the castle grounds were arches, facades of bright colors, outdoor staircases and small courtyards. But the hidden treasure was the Chiesa

di San Michele Arcangelo with abbey and museum, made up of three naves, with the central one adorned by a ceiling of wood, gold and a collection of ancient books.

From the top of the island, we descended cobblestone streets just wide enough for a small car, darting into porticos, making ourselves as skinny as possible whenever we heard the sputtering of a motorbike or the grind of an automobile behind us. From Via Pizzaco, we descended steep stone stairs, shadowing bronzed locals towards Chiaia beach. Just before arriving at the black sands, we turned into the entrance for La Conchiglia Ristorante. Hovering just above the water and across from the Corricella Marina, the interior—reminiscent of an old boat with dark wood paneling and windows—invited in the sea breeze, offering views of hillside residences, beachgoers and water-



Opposite, Procida, as seen in *Il Postino*. Top, Joe at the helm; bottom, *Stai Soft's* recalcitrant plank

craft. Here we savored the traditional Caprese salad with fresh tomatoes, mozzarella and basil with a plate of spaghetti al nero made from squid ink, followed by *pesce fresco* of baked dorado garnished with tomatoes and onions. The meal was a flavorful beginning and a prelude to the fantastic dining this area offers.

Self-provisioning for our trip was easy on Procida. With a popula-





Top, the dock at Procida; middle, a fruitful provisioning stop; bottom, the stairs at La Conchiglia restaurant



tion of over 10,000 people living in a three-mile square area, there are many small markets with fresh meat, fish and produce. The small CRAI market next door to the charter office provided the basics. From the deli, we bought fresh loaves of bread, olives and smoked mozzarella. A few doors away, sliced mortadella, prosciutto and pancetta were secured at Salumerie Marcelleri, while La Primizia Scotto di Perrotolo provided us with fresh Roma tomatoes, basil, wild arugula and black plums. Around the corner and up the street was the Enoteca Peccati di Gola, where we picked several local wines made from Fiano di Avellino and Falanghina grapes. Be aware that most businesses are open in the morning, shut down midday, and re-open in the late afternoon.

WE COME

The next morning, as the winds calmed, we left Procida behind and headed towards Ventotene. About 10 miles from the island, with winds around 12 knots, we turned off the motor and put up the sails, gliding across clear topaz waters.

We approached the marine park on Santo Stefano Island to the west of Ventotene, becoming anxious as we unsuccessfully tried to contact the marina at the old Roman harbor. The narrow harbor entrance was difficult to see, but behind a seawall and below pastel-colored buildings, we did spot several masts.

After a half dozen dropped phone attempts, we radioed the harbor. In phrase-book Italian, we informed them of our presence. “We come,” was the response on the VHF, and almost instantly, two men buzzed out in an inflatable from behind the seawall. One of the *ormeggiatori*, as the dockhands are known, indicated he would like to come aboard. Marco, a tanned, dark-haired man, took over the helm while saying “festa,” meaning festival. Not sure of the significance, we followed the driver of the inflatable and gasped. Between the stone outcropping and the dock, there was no more than 50 feet of space. Boats were crammed everywhere in this port dug out of volcanic rock by Roman slaves long ago. Marco directed our boat to a space that was no more than six-feet



Ventotene's Il Forno, top; bakery, bottom; and narrow harbor entrance, right

wide. He slowly edged us in, forcing a space between the adjacent yachts. With our fenders compressed completely flat, several forceful shoves by Marco shifted the neighboring boats over to each side to fit us perfectly into our berth for the night.

The Italian stern-to mooring technique was different than we anticipated. At all of the established marinas we visited, there were heavy

pre-set bow hawsers laid to anchors or chains that are permanent. We did not have to drop our own bow anchor. They use this method because the marinas are generally quite small, and numerous individual bow anchors would make maneuvering precarious. Depending on the marina, there were either one or two heavy lines—attached to the quay by a light line—that were hauled up to the surface at the stern and handed over to the crew on the boat, walked forward and then attached to the bow cleat with as much tension as possible. Stern lines were then thrown to dock hands and passed through rings or over cleats, then back to the boat. Lacking Italian fluency, our initial attempts were somewhat humorous, but after a few days we got the hang of it. Departure

was quite simple. Depending on the wind direction, we released the bow or stern first, and motored away.

Marco's "festa" became clear once we landed. Serendipitously, we had secured front row seats for the Festeggiamenti in Onore di Santa Candida, a festival honoring the patron saint of the island, Saint Candida. From the Piazza Chiesa, the procession with the statue of the saint began with all the townspeople and the church's clergy following. As the group moved forward, fireworks exploded overhead in the light of the late afternoon. When the procession reached the docks a few hours later, fireworks went off directly over our heads and unmanned hot air balloons were released into the clear black sky. Shortly after midnight, the island's saint was honored with more



colorful explosions.

After a morning run up the stone streets of the tiny island, we stopped at bakery Antico Forno Aiello for sfogliatelle, or the “many leaves” dessert filled with orange-scented ricotta. We left behind an island where history had been bored into its physical core. The excavations, with exterior arches dug into the volcanic rock, once imprisoned Roman outcasts, including Augustus’ daughter and Nero’s wife, Flavia. These days, the island captures visitors with its rustic charm.

A RUGGED REWARD

Our next stop was Ischia, the largest of the Pontine islands. After cruising around the large conical

rock at the southern entrance to Sant’Angelo, we docked near fishing boats on the east side of the isthmus connecting the rock cone to the main island. No road runs down to the port dotted with restaurants and shops, so there was no car traffic. Small streets wove around and up to the higher terraced parts of the island.

Just a short walk from the boat, we discovered Enoteca La Stadera, a wine bar and store. Here, we met Evo, who served us local wines matched with local fare. For 6 euro, we tasted a white Biancolella and Fiano paired with spicy dried red peppers, anise crackers and pecorino cheese. Next, with three reds—an

Aliganico and two Piedirossas—we were served fennel sausage and a spicy pepper spread with bread.

The next morning, after spending an evening sandwiched between two boats filled with spirited, cigarette-smoking Turks, we were ready for some fresh air. We took a walk up the ancient stairs to tree-covered Mount Epomeo. As we climbed to the peak, we walked through colorful arches, saw grape vineyards and talked to a man who was making homemade wine, pressing juice from his Biancolella grapes. We rose quickly, testing our muscles and lungs, and were rewarded by spectacular views of the blue water and rugged terrain below.

Opposite, Ischia's Port Sant Angelo, Enoteca wine and pesce fresco. Bottom, the famous Capri Arco Naturale

FIVE-STAR SLIP

After our intimate time at Sant'Angelo, arriving at the world famous island of Capri felt as though we had landed in a metropolis. Hundreds of ferries transit the marina on a daily basis—we dodged several while entering Marina Grande, and fortunately arrived as another yacht was departing. Transient space is limited and comes very dearly, at \$165 per night in mid-September, with rates of \$250 per night during summer season. We were given an exposed space on a dock adjacent to the entrance of the harbor where we experienced the wake of every passing watercraft, but the view of Capri Town and Anacapri above was amazing.

From the marina, most catch the funicular up to Capri Town, where luxurious hotels, fine restaurants and designer shops abound. But on the afternoon after our arrival, we chose to walk to the Arco Naturale, taking us up above the harbor, through back streets and down steps to a view of an arched rock that framed the blue waters below. After checking our email at Bar Il Gabbiano, we took the funicular up to Capri Town. Here, we ate outside in a booth perched next to the promenade at modern Ristorante EDODÉ. We watched designer-clad couples walk by while we enjoyed a modern Italian meal of tuna tartare with lemon zest and olive oil, and local pork with a tomatillo and green pepper sauce flavored with vanilla.

The next morning we hiked up the old steep Phoenician stairs, or Scala Fenicia. The path was a good way to arrive at Anacapri, as the alternative route was walking on the main road, dodging cars, buses and scooters. The stairs led to Axel Munthe's Villa San Michele, a villa-museum with a large garden, renovated chapel and a sphinx overlooking the

sparkling view below.

Our last night was spent in Ischia Porto. Tucked into the middle of the harbor and right on the footsteps of the restaurants and villas with balconies, our slip was as good as any five-star accommodation. We sipped Piedierossa at an al fresco bistro table at Enoteca Un Attimo di Vino and devoured grilled sole at Ristorante-Pizzeria La Bitta.

We sailed back to Procida on our final day, hurried along by high winds and rain squalls. As we were escorted back into our slip, the church bells chimed, bidding us *arrivederci* for our time in the Pontine Islands. ~

Stella Fong divides her time between Montana and Washington. She explores the world through wine and food with her husband, Joe Dillard. Her articles have appeared in The Washington Post, Fine Cooking Light, and Western Art and Architecture. Stella has taught cooking and wine classes for Sur La Table, Macy's Cellar and Montana State University, Billings. Currently, her main endeavor is to help realize a new library in Billings, Montana.

If you go...

The Moorings operates three Italian bases through local owner SailItalia. Sunsail operates out of Procida, and the boats are also managed through SailItalia. For an extra fee, one-way charters are available. www.sailitalia.it/en

