

Guide & Handbook



43° 3' N 9° 50' E



1461

MER MÉDITERRANÉE
CÔTE OCCIDENTALE D'ITALIE
ILE CAPRAJA

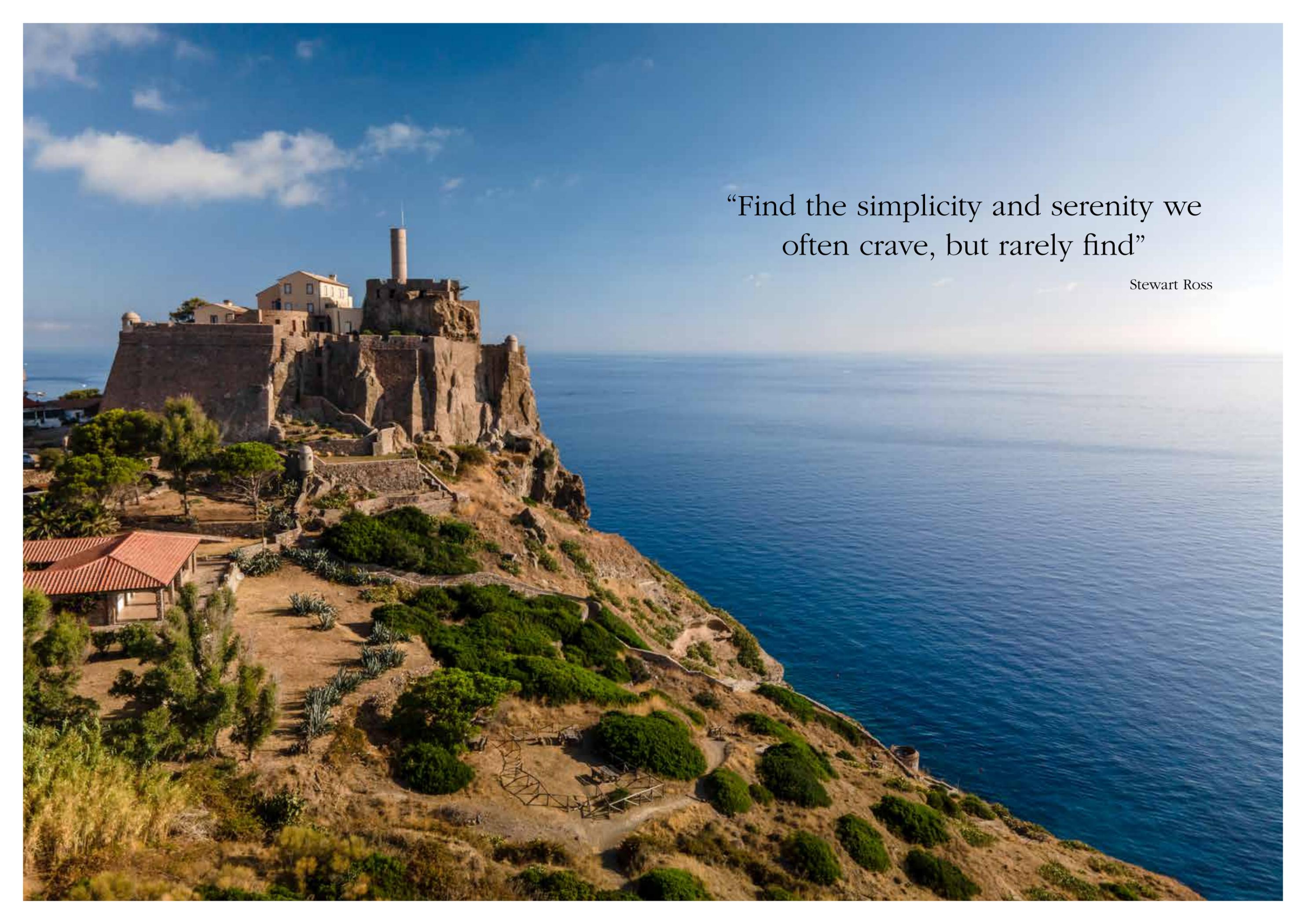
Levés en 1852
par M. DE LA ROUE, POUYFF, DEBAYE & BASSY
Ingénieurs Hydrographes
SERVICE HYDROGRAPHIQUE DE LA MARINE
Paris, 1854

Les hauteurs sont exprimées en mètres
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Échelle de 1:50,000

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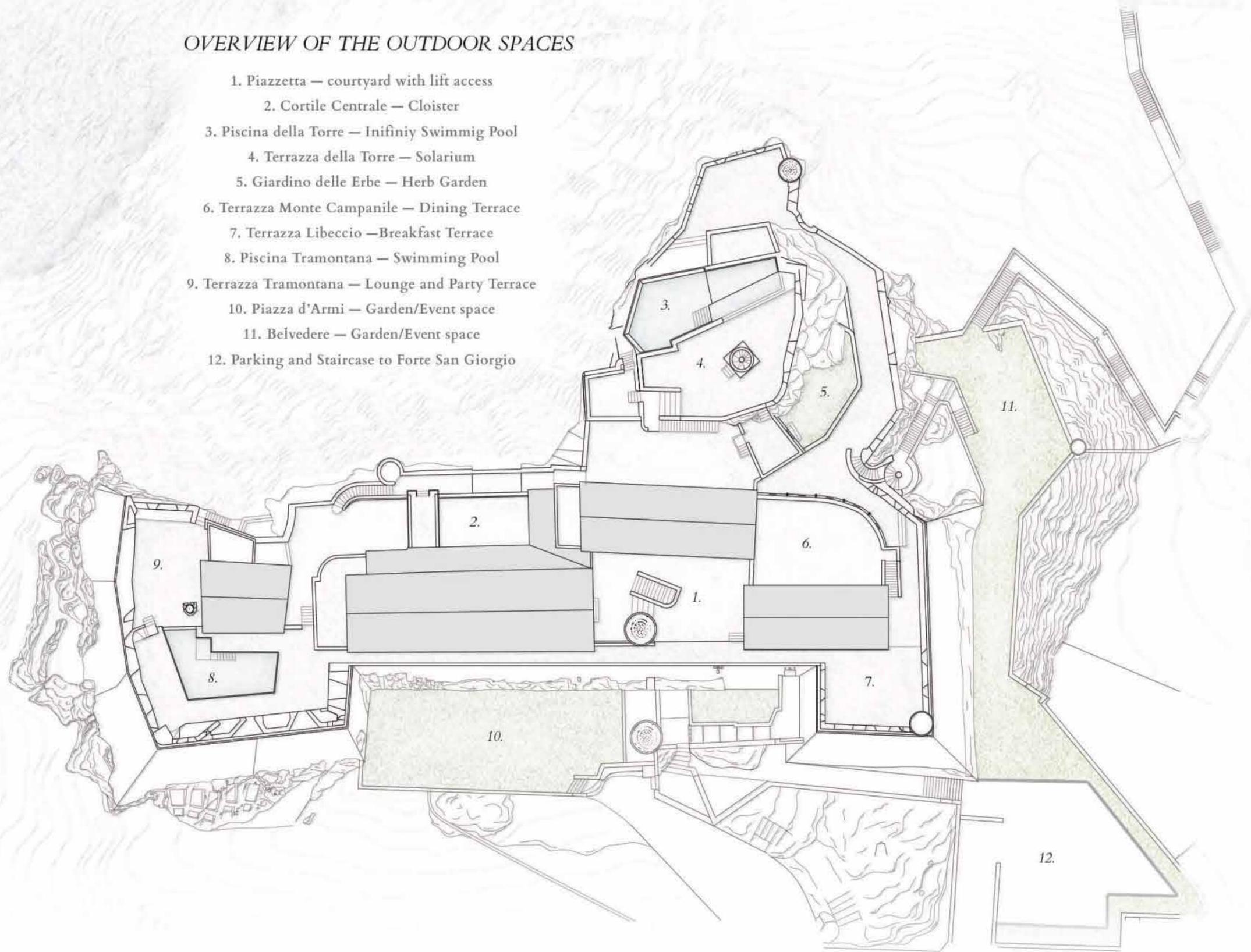


“Find the simplicity and serenity we
often crave, but rarely find”

Stewart Ross

OVERVIEW OF THE OUTDOOR SPACES

1. Piazzetta — courtyard with lift access
2. Cortile Centrale — Cloister
3. Piscina della Torre — Inifiniy Swimmig Pool
4. Terrazza della Torre — Solarium
5. Giardino delle Erbe — Herb Garden
6. Terrazza Monte Campanile — Dining Terrace
7. Terrazza Libeccio — Breakfast Terrace
8. Piscina Tramontana — Swimming Pool
9. Terrazza Tramontana — Lounge and Party Terrace
10. Piazza d'Armi — Garden/Event space
11. Belvedere — Garden/Event space
12. Parking and Staircase to Forte San Giorgio





Welcome to the wild island

Capraia is known locally as the Wild Island. Its wildness lies not in the hedonistic hullabaloo of popular resorts, but in the almost miraculous way nature and good fortune have preserved it as a haven of tranquillity at the centre of a hurly-burly world. The island's special delight is not just in its simplicity and quiet – the Maldives, the Caribbean and Australia's Gold Coast offer similar sanctuaries. No, what makes Capraia and Forte Saint Giorgio so special is a near-unique symbiosis of the human and natural world: history and heathers, architecture and oleanders.

We have put together this short guide book to share with you our fascination for our island home. After living here for many years, the endlessly shifting seascapes still bewitch us; the stillness of the hillsides and nights beneath canopies of stars still bring us peace; above all, we continue to be surprised by the rich diversity of history, culture, flora and fauna all around us. It is quite frankly astonishing that such a tiny piece of volcanic rock, a mere eight kilometres long and four kilometres wide, could contain so much of interest in so numerous and diverse spheres.

The following pages will explain some of that infinite variety, thereby adding a new and perhaps sometimes surprising dimension to what we hope will be a truly memorable Capraian experience.

Note on names

Capraia's two settlements, the town beside the Forte and the buildings around the harbour, have no specific names. The former is called simply *il Paese*, meaning the Town, and the latter *il Porto*, the Port. To keep things simple, in this guide we stick to Italian usage but without the indefinite article: the district at the top of the hill we call Paese and that by the sea we call Porto. The former area of settlement inland is known as both *il Piano* and *il Piana* – we've opted for the former.



Forte San Giorgio – the story behind the stones

You are staying in the most interesting building on Capraia, and very probably in the entire Tuscan Archipelago. Begun by Pisans, blessed by a storm-tossed Pope, flattened by pirates, rebuilt by a bank, stared at by Columbus, possessed by Nelson, frowned at by Napoleon, the biography of Forte San Giorgio is some story.

The Pisan castle

It is likely that the rocky outcrop on which the present Forte stands has always been a point of refuge for an island community threatened by marauders from the sea. Its commanding position, protected by sheer cliffs on one side and steep rock on the other, and with panoramic views over the harbour and eastern coastline, made it an obvious place for a stronghold. Nevertheless, the earliest remains of a formal fortification date not from classical times but from the beginning of the 13th century. At this time all the islands of the Tuscan Archipelago belonged to Pisa, one of the major city-states of medieval Italy.

Recent archaeology suggests that the Pisan castle (*Castello Pisano*) was more of a walled community than a castle. The simple defences, remnants of which can be seen in the basement below the *Sala Sant' Antonio* (Great Hall), comprised a stone wall about two metres high and 60 cms thick. This relatively puny barricade was more effective than it now looks because it stood on top of a sheer two-metre cliff cut from the base rock. Neatly combining thrift with security, the locals built their sturdy little houses right up against the wall's inside face – giving them a four-sided dwelling for the cost of a three-sided one!

The simple Pisan bastide housed the town's church. Probably built in the 15th century, it remained the principal place of worship until 1760, when the Church of St Nicholas in Paese's main square was opened.

Dragut

Defended by locals (led on one occasion by a warrior priest) and perhaps reinforced by a small garrison, the Pisan fortress was sufficiently strong to withstand small-scale raids by pirates. In 1504 and 1506 it beat off two such attacks. The stronghold's two deep wells provided sufficient water for the entire population of the island to shelter inside for weeks on end. But though its relatively slender stone walls may have been sufficient to keep out sabre-wielding brigands, they offered scant protection against cannon fire. Enter Dragut.

The Ottoman commander Turgut Reis (1485–1565) – Dragut to his foes – is labelled according to one's taste (and faith) as either a 'merciless pirate' or 'one of the finest generals of all time.' Trained as an artillery expert from the age of twelve, and with a flawless map of the Mediterranean etched inside his head, by 1540 the fearsome pirate-warrior had captured numerous vessels, ravaged ports and coastal towns, and even smashed the vastly more numerous fleet of the Christian Holy League. To this 'drawn sword of Islam' Capraia's paltry and outdated walls might as well have been Lego. The attack began on Sunday 6 June, and in four days Dragut had smashed his way in, set the place on fire and carried off the terrified inhabitants for the slave markets of North Africa.

The fate of these wretched Capraisi is told in the section on the island's history. As far as the island's fortress was concerned, the episode marked not the end of the story but the beginning of a new and far more splendid chapter. Out of Dragut's fire, Forte San Giorgio was born.

The Genoese castle

For a while Capraia had been in the hands of the city-state of Genoa, which had replaced Pisa as the leading Christian power in the Ligurian and Tyrrhenian Seas. More specifically, the task of governing Capraia had passed to the staggeringly wealthy *Compere di San Giorgio* (Bank of St George), the world's oldest chartered bank, whose activities had become virtually indistinguishable from those of the Genoese state.

Capraia's position gave it a vital strategic importance in the defence of Genoa. So, to ensure that it would not again fall into enemy hands, after taking back control of the island in the summer of 1540 the Genoese set about updating its defences. The first step was to replace the ruined Pisan fortress with a vastly superior castle.

The task was supervised by Captain Genesio da Quorto. From Genoa he brought with him stonemasons, craftsmen and 104 soldiers. Surprisingly, he also had Genoese stone ferried over from the mainland – he didn't think Capraia's volcanic rock strong enough for cas-

tle-building. Owing to inclement weather and the constant fear of pirate attack, construction took over a year, but when completed and armed with up-to-date cannon, Forte San Giorgio stood as a striking symbol of Genoese power.

Captain Genesio surmised that the main threat to the castle would come from the landward side. From a military point of view, of course, he was correct. No enemy, however skilful and daring, would be able to scale the 100-metre cliffs on the seaward flank. The captain can hardly be blamed for failing to see that the principal danger from that direction came not from human enemies but from the sea itself.

That problem lay far in the future, and for the time being the Genoese were content to rest behind massive walls flanked by two huge bastions, the Tramontana and the Mezzogiorno. Smaller bastions guarded the two seaward corners, and a lofty lookout tower soared bravely over the whole building – as it does today.

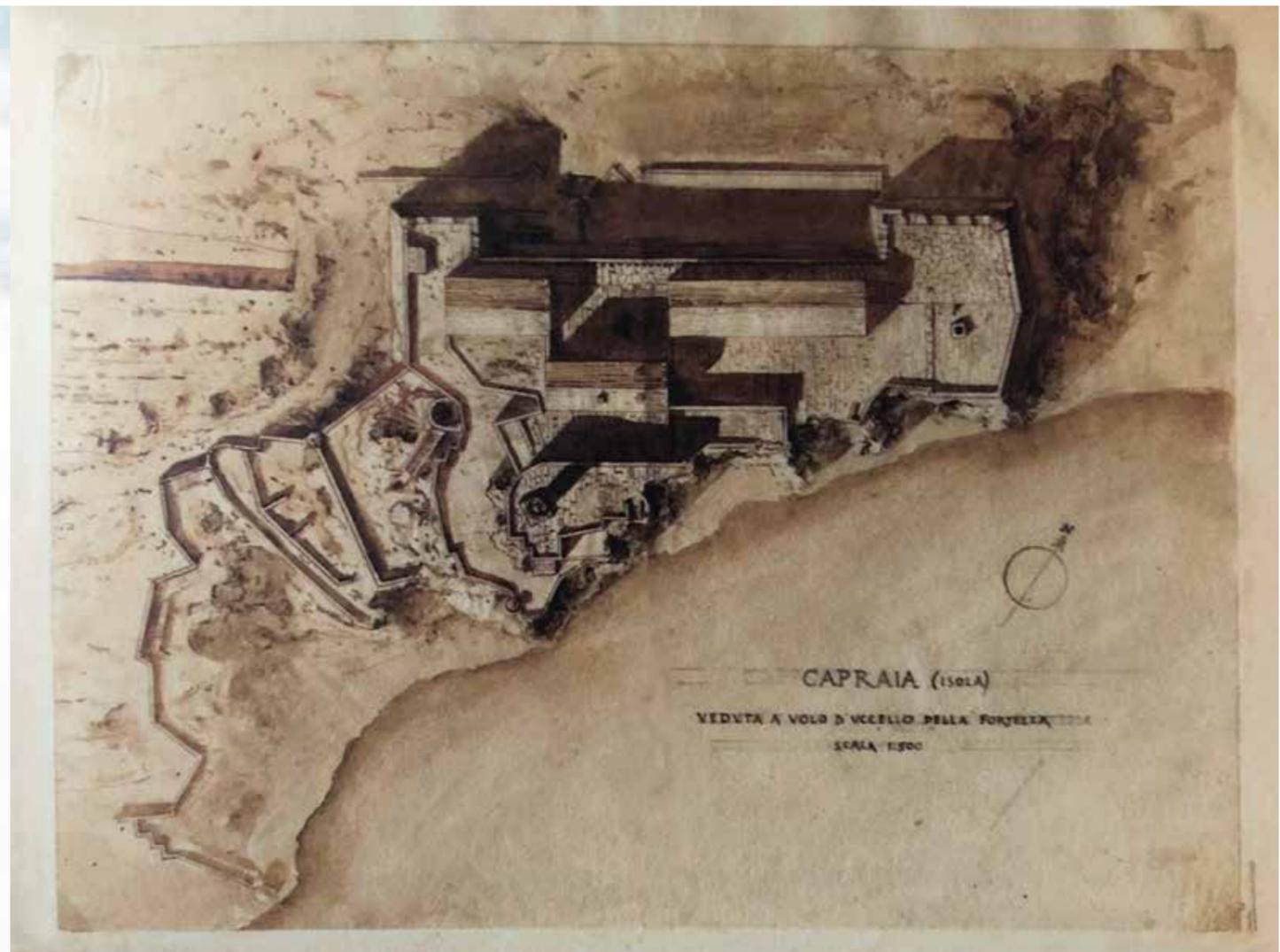
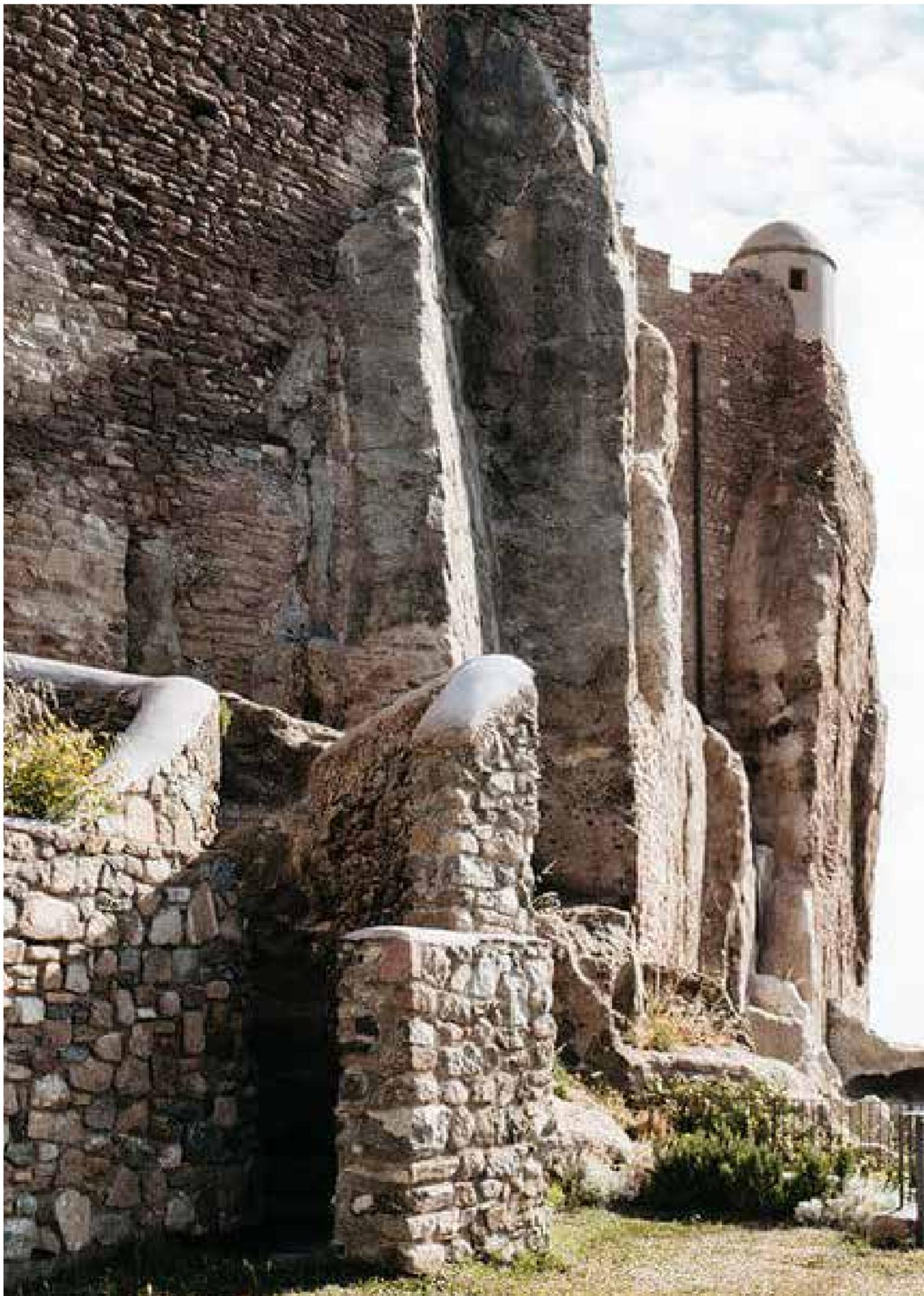
A quasi-military base

The relatively uneventful history of the castle over the next two centuries is testament to both its strength – its defences were never seriously challenged – and the gradual lessening of the threat from the Ottoman Turks as their empire slid slowly into a long and painful decline. By 1682, we are told, the Forte housed eleven soldiers, a handful of families and a few widows. In other words, it was more a militarised boarding house than a defensive stronghold. The presence of the local church within the walls continued to give it local importance, as witnessed by the mystery of the skeleton.

In the later 1760s, Corsica and the surrounding islands, including Capraia, were visited by James Boswell, author of the famous biography of Dr Johnson. When writing up his travels, he mentions with some awe Capraia's high and mighty 'Citadel' and relates how, in May 1767, for the first and only time in its existence it was besieged and its garrison surrendered.

Reading between the lines, it was not much of a fight. The Genoese had long neglected the defences and the Forte was low on provisions and ammunition. Morale was undoubtedly even lower because the Corsicans' siege was supported by the Capraiese themselves, fed up with Genoa's insensitive and exploitative rule. (The Genoese Commissioner continued to demand 60 sacks of corn p.a. as his feudal due.)

In 1768, Genoa sold Corsica (and Capraia) to France, and the following year the islands were declared a province of France. If the Capraisi hoped French ownership would bring peace and prosperity, they were sadly mistaken. The Genoese garrison remained in place. Worse still, 1789 saw the outbreak of the French Revolution and consequent long years of war. Initially,



the island was used as a base for French warships, pressuring the islanders into siding with the revolutionaries. This set the scene for the Forte to pass into English hands for the first time.

Horatio Nelson

In 1796, furious that Capraia was allowing French warships to shelter in its harbour, Sir Gilbert Elliot, the British commander in the region, wrote, *I have judged expedient to take possession of the Fort and Island of Capraja in the name of His Majesty... The British flag must be raised on the Fort and on the Towers.* It was duly done. And the officer responsible for the operation? None other than the up-and-coming Captain Horatio Nelson.

Having landed on the north of the island and seized the Torre delle Barbici (alternatively known as the Regiani or Teja Tower) on Punta della Tegli, Nelson's sailors set up a battery of heavy guns on Monte Capo. At the same time, Royal Naval warships patrolled the coast beneath the Forte, daring its Genoese garrison to fire on them. Hopelessly outgunned (they had



only twelve low-powered cannon), and with only three days' supplies, the defenders wisely accepted generous British terms and surrendered *at four o'clock after lunch* on 29 May. Barely a month later, the Royal Navy came under serious strategic pressure in the region and the British withdrew. They would not return to the Forte for two and a half centuries.

Whether Britain's most illustrious naval commander actually set foot inside the Forte remains a moot point. Nevertheless, as we walk the battlements and gaze out to sea, our spines tingle when we remember how, all those years ago, the great Horatio Nelson might well have done precisely the same thing. And when the future admiral cast his eyes towards Elba, could he possibly have imagined that his greatest foe, the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, would eighteen years later stand there in exile, staring out over the blue waters back towards Capraia and the unmistakable silhouette of Forte San Giorgio?



Rescue and reconstruction

The Forte was reconstructed by the efforts of Alfredo d'Andrade, whose doughty persistence resulted in the building being listed as a National Monument of considerable architectural and artistic merit. Finding a place for Capraia's Forte in the same basket as Rome's Forum, Florence's Duomo, and the Leaning Tower of Pisa was quite some achievement. It meant that when the Ministry of Finance sold the Forte to Edoardo Facdouelle in 1903 for 4,000 lire, the sale clearly stipulated that he had a duty of conservation.

Though it was now illegal to knock the Forte down, its preservation in a habitable condition remained unsure. In the period 1908–1948, four further owners came and went. None of them was prepared to invest the sort of money needed to secure the building's long-term future. In the 1920s and '30s, the Sala Sant' Antonio served as a summer dormitory for troupes of Balilla, the Italian Fascist youth organisation. The Germans, who recognised the Forte's strategic importance as a lookout post, occupied it for a short while during the later stages of World War II.

Back in private hands in the 1950s, the increasingly dilapidated Forte was run as a hotel. The 1970s saw the Sala Sant' Antonio come briefly alive as the island's disco. By the end of the 20th century, it was clear that the succession of underfunded enterprises was doing the Forte no good at all. The nettle was finally grasped early in the new millennium when the Forte San Giorgio Company bought the building and, with help from the state, undertook to restore and preserve its ancient fabric. To get its money back, the company planned to convert the building into a complex of seven or eight luxury apartments.

At this point, the present owners came sailing by...

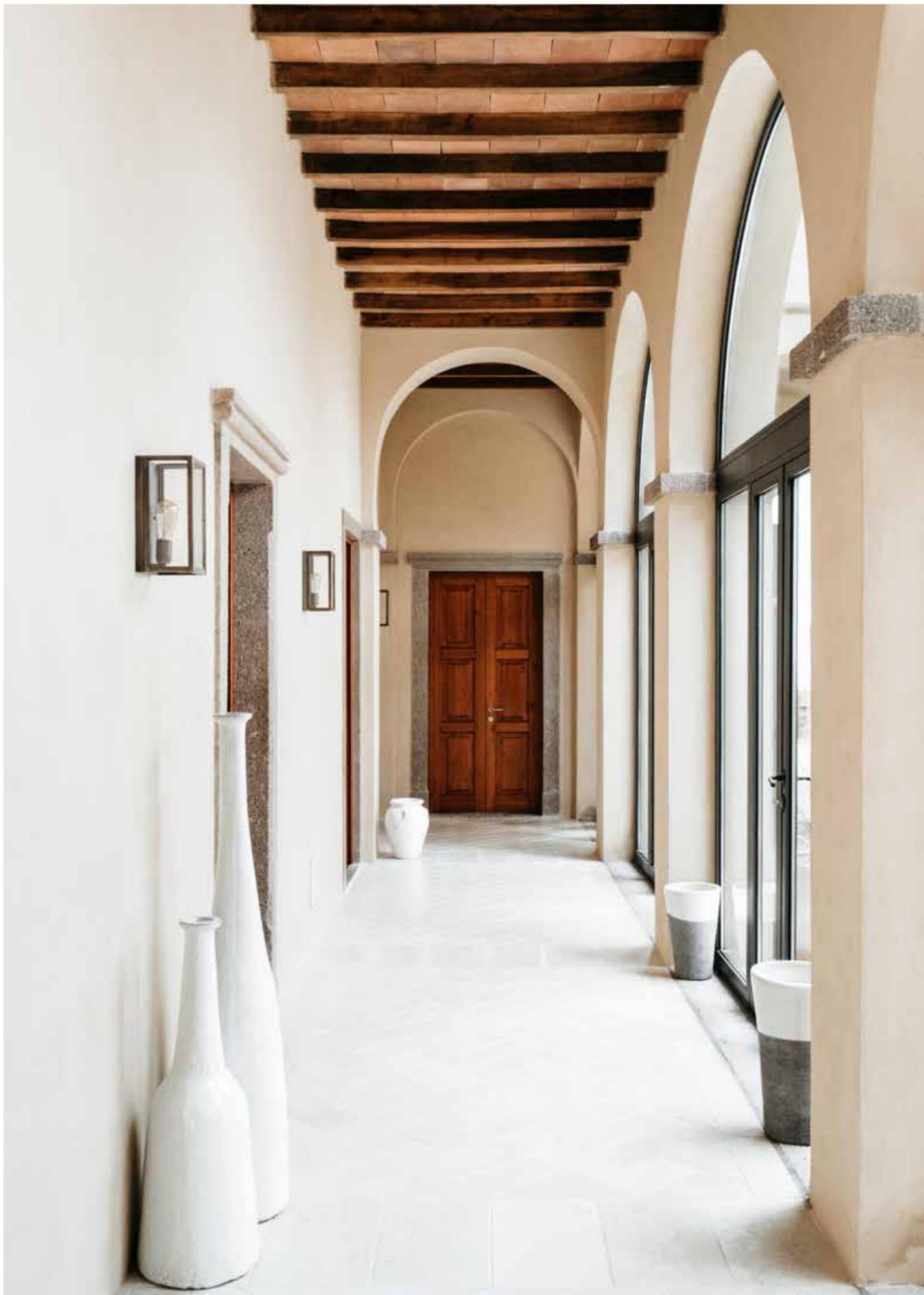
They had heard of the Forte from a friend and visited the island a couple of times before rough weather obliged them to pay a third visit while en route from Corsica to Nice. Coming ashore, they made their way up to the Forte to take a look at the restoration work. The place was a ruin, but it had possibilities. Distinct possibilities. And the location, the views... If not love at first sight, it was certainly the start of a romance.

Discussions began, contracts exchanged, and the renovation continued for a further ten years. Marrying the wishes of the family with the requirements of the archaeologists and scholars under the guidance of Professor Marco Milanese of Pisa University was not always easy, but we're sure you'll agree the union, executed with impeccable taste, was well worth it.

The scene was now set for the entry of our guests, central characters in the concluding chapter of the remarkable, 800-year story of Forte San Giorgio.

A guide to Forte San Giorgio





We'll start in the open *Piazzeta* (central lobby) where those who have entered via the lift meet their friends who have climbed the stone steps...

The entrance

The stairway is more or less as it would have been in the 16th century when the present Forte was built: narrow, steep, and with a sharp bend to make it easily defensible against attackers who had managed to force their way through the massive iron gate (extant) at the entrance. The crucifix on the stairwell is the oldest fresco (a painting done quickly on plaster while it is still wet) in the property – it was customary for those entering or leaving the property to cross themselves here as they passed.

Yes, you're quite right: the neat cupola housing the lift is not original, though it does reflect the tasteful manner in which the Forte has been restored.

As you came up the stairs or in the lift, you may have wondered why the walls and buildings of the Forte are so high above ground level. The answer lies in the Dragut siege of 1540, when a well-directed cannonade smashed the walls of the old fortress and a host of piratical assailants poured in. To ensure this could not happen again, the new stronghold, begun a few months after the sacking, was placed directly on top of the old one. It sits on a massive plinth of rock and stone, splayed outwards at the base for added strength against cannon fire and undermining.

On with the tour...

The Sala Sant' Antonio and the old church

If you face north (the generous Capraian sun should help you get your bearings) with your back to the *Refettorio* (Dining Room) and with the Forte offices to your right, you will see in front of you the magnificent wooden doors that open into the Forte's most impressive chamber, the Sala Sant' Antonio. (For practical purposes, the Sala is normally approached through the entrance lobby, guarded by another mighty iron gate, hanging to the right of the formal doorway.)

As you enter the Sala, you will notice that its floor is about a foot higher than the connecting cloister-style corridor and the airy *Cortile Centrale* (Central Courtyard or atrium) to your right. This is because the Sala stands above the old Church of Capraia, the remains of which would have been further despoiled if the Sala floor had been lower. A doorway on the left side of the lobby of the Forte's offices leads down to the excavated ruins of the church. Here you

can see the ancient pillars and vaults, a stone altar, and what is left of the medieval wall of the Pisan fortress. This area is now an elegant games room and is a 'must-see' during your stay.

Back to the Sala Sant' Antonio. While admiring the modern furnishings, you might like to consider the various uses this space has been put to over the years. When the military had moved out, it became a dormitory for Fascist youth, then a hotel dining room and finally, in the 1970s, a disco!

Note the medieval frescos on the Sala wall near the door: it is thought they once adorned the wall of the church below. The frescos on the vaults and walls of the three fine bedrooms of the Sant' Antonio suite are of the early modern (Renaissance) period.

The Cortile Centrale and Maestrale Suite

The Cortile Centrale straight in front of you as you leave the Sala Sant' Antonio was imaginatively created in the space between the Sala and the part of the Forte that fell into the sea.

The stairway to your left as you leave the Sant' Antonio suite leads to the three bedrooms, living room and kitchen of the Maestrale suite with its breathtaking views over the sea, the harbour and the north-east of the island. The suite was created out of the garrison barracks and is notable for the exposed stone vaulting that forms the ceiling of the principal bedroom. The other vaulted ceilings have been plastered.

Interestingly, the private owner who turned the Forte into a Fascist youth camp (see above) also distorted the classical lines of the exterior of the Maestrale suite by adding neo-baroque decoration. This was removed during the restoration, recreating the clean lines of the 18th-century original.

It's now time for a walk right round the Forte.

Along the ramparts

Standing in the Piazzeta facing the Refettorio, the two-bed Libeccio suite (ground floor) and one-bed Elba suite (first floor) are on your left.

Make your way up the steps on your right to the battlements, facing north (again, the sun will help you get your bearings). From the ramparts you will have a clear view of Paese, Porto, the ancient tower beside the deserted 18th-century convent, the signal station on the cliffs beyond the harbour, and the remains of the prison colony slightly to your left. Unless it's night or the weather is distinctly unfortunate, you will be able to see the bizarre (triumphal?) arch that marked the colony's boundary.

The higher part of the prison site is now a winery, where Capraia's much lauded organic wine is made. Monte Capo, where Horatio Nelson established the battery of heavy naval guns that cowed the Genoese into submission, lies further to the north.

The Tramontana Bastion

Walking along the battlements in a clockwise direction, you come to an ideal party area at the top of the Tramontana Bastion. Its comprises the *Piscina Tramontana* (Tramontana Swimming Pool), the *Terrazza Tramontana* (Tramontana Terrace) and the shady Salina Pool Bar. Nearby is the luxurious Salina suite, with its large bedroom and living room, and private terrace.





Island views

On the right is Elba, from whence Napoleon escaped back to France before he met his final come-uppance at Waterloo. To the left is the mainland, with the tiny anchovy-rich island of Gorgona further to your left.

To the right of Elba, almost directly due south, lies Pianosa. Today, it is virtually uninhabited and forms part of the Tuscan Archipelago National Park. Until 1998, however, the island's reputation was altogether less gentle: it was the notoriously brutal detention centre for captured Mafia bosses.

Behind Pianosa lies Montecristo, whose name inspired the title and some settings of Alexander Dumas' rollicking historical novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Though not as famous as *The Three Musketeers*, it's a fun read, especially as staying on Capraia one is so near to the action.

The tower

Let's leave the battlements, with the bridge to the Maestrone suite on our right and make our way to the Monte Cristo suite and the Forte's *pièce de résistance*, the stunning *Piscina della Torre* (Tower Swimming Pool). From here, with the narrow watchtower rising above you, you can see precisely why, during the World War II, the Germans prized the Forte's position so highly. The views, covering an arc of virtually 360°, are every look-out's dream.

The path to the sea

Further gems are left for us to explore. Re-

turning to the battlements above the Piazzeta, this time head anticlockwise. The walkway takes you to the *Terrazza Libeccio* (Breakfast Terrace) and beyond and above it the *Terrazza Monte Campanile* (Dining Terrace). Continuing round, you come to the *Giardino delle Erbe*, the special little herb garden that nestles beneath the rockface on the Forte's southern flank. Opposite is a blocked-off spiral stairway that once led down to the zig-zag pathway linking the Forte to the sea.

This steep climb, which ends in a tower on the shore, was once covered to protect users from both hostile fire and the elements. The primary purpose of the route was to bring supplies from ships up into the Forte – and one's heart bleeds for the poor devils who had to sweat up those hundreds of steps under the weight of barrels, boxes and baskets!

Beyond the walls

There are stories of a secret passage running from the Forte to the Convent of St Antonio near the *Torre del Porto* (Tower of the Port). Like most such tales, this is pure fantasy, fuelled by scurrilous tales of clandestine subterranean assignments between the wives and daughters of garrison soldiers and friars unwilling to keep their vows of chastity!

More authentic is the series of rectangular and square basins carved out of the rock below the castle walls. These are medieval *palmenti* (wine presses). You will notice that the basins are arranged in pairs, with the larger of the two linked to the smaller one below it by a small channel.

Harvested grapes were placed in the upper basin where they were trodden or crushed by a heavy stone weight. (Nearby indentations are said to have been post-holes for the levers operating the weights.) The juice flowed from the upper basin to the lower, where it was collected.

Another story tells of a larger channel that once conveyed the juice directly from the *palmenti*, down the cliff on a sort of fruity stairway, to barrels on the shore ready to be loaded aboard ship. Though a nice idea, it does sound a bit far-fetched.

Today's pirates

On the south side of the Forte, near the carpark, the owners have created a delightful garden. The idea behind this and the Forte's other gardens is to blur the boundaries between the building and the surrounding National Park. The southern garden stands in the space between the castle rock and what's left of the outer defences. These are surmounted by an electric fence to keep out 21st-century pirates – Capraian mouflons (see below, p. xx) that eat almost anything!

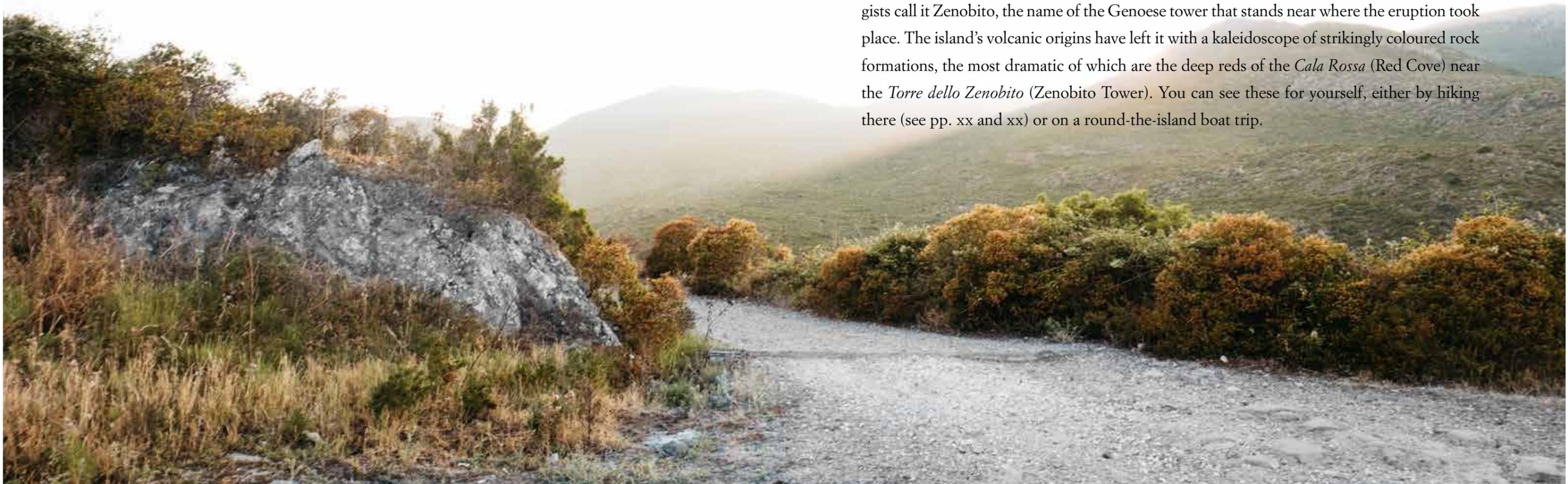
The geography and geology of the island

Two volcanos

We'll begin at the beginning. Around nine million years ago, a slow and sleepy volcano began heaving upwards from the seabed. It spewed out a steady stream of lava to create an island far bigger than the modern Capraia. Over millions of years, the wind, rain and waves gradually reduced the island's size and smoothed its volcanic roughness. Vegetation and birds appeared.

Four million years after the first eruption, the region was shaken by a violent earthquake that split Capraia and hurled its western flank beneath the sea. The result can be seen in the difference between the steep cliffs of the western shore and the less abrupt eastern coast.

The earthquake released a second volcano, smaller but more active than the first. Geologists call it Zenobito, the name of the Genoese tower that stands near where the eruption took place. The island's volcanic origins have left it with a kaleidoscope of strikingly coloured rock formations, the most dramatic of which are the deep reds of the *Cala Rossa* (Red Cove) near the *Torre dello Zenobito* (Zenobito Tower). You can see these for yourself, either by hiking there (see pp. xx and xx) or on a round-the-island boat trip.



Neighbours appear

Capraia is the only volcanic island of the Tuscan Archipelago. Fifteen thousand years ago – when the last Ice Age was coming to an end and our forebears were on the point of swapping a nomadic existence for agriculture – the level of the world’s oceans was rising fast. Vast swathes of the Italian coast disappeared beneath the waters, turning the higher ground into islands. So were born Capraia’s six siblings: Elba, Giglio, Montecristo, Pianosa, Gorgona, and Giannutri. (The same was happening further north, where Britain was experiencing its original Brexit from continental Europe.)

Upheavals and inundations left Capraia its present size and pearl shape: eight kilometres from top (Punta della Teglia) to toe (Punta dello Zenobito), and four kilometres across the waist, roughly from Punta della Bellavista (just south of the Forte) to Punta del Recisello on the west coast. Its surface area is 17.5 sq km, or some 20 times smaller than the Isle of Wight, with a circumference of 30 km. Its highest peak, Monte Castello, rises to 445 metres above sea level. The Italian mainland is 56 km to the east, Corsica 31 km to the west, and Elba 40 km to the south-east.

The National Park

Scholars disagree over the origin of the name ‘Capraia’. Some say it comes from the ancient Greek for ‘land of sheep’ (*aegylonmegas*); others prefer descent from an Etruscan word for ‘stone’, making the place ‘stone land’.

Nowadays, Capraia is known not for its stones or sheep but for its central place in the Tuscan Archipelago National Park. This much-praised conservation area, Italy’s first, was established in 1996 with Capraia at its heart: over three-quarters of the island is under the Park’s very strict control, with a long stretch of the western coast completely out of bounds. The waters are a marine sanctuary for a wide variety of creatures great and small.

Once out of the small residential area around Porto and Paese, walkers soon find themselves beyond the range of mobile phones, wandering across unspoilt slopes rich in heathers, grasses and shrubs (see pp. xx-xx), some unique to the island. Myrtle and curry plants scent the breeze, Honey Buzzards hover overhead, and the very air is filled with a dreamlike serenity.

It comes as no surprise to read that Capraia’s restorative powers were noted as long ago as the 14th century. Sick and injured soldiers were sent here to recover, and when the prison colony was closed in 1986, several inmates refused to leave. Who could blame them?

How come so beautiful a place as Capraia did not fall victim to the haphazard and insen-

sitive development that disfigured so much of the Mediterranean coastline in the 1960s and ’70s? The answer was the island’s status as a prison colony (see p. xx), which precluded expansion of the tourist industry. The empty buildings may look a bit grim nowadays, but don’t be too harsh on them: they have saved our beautiful haven from far worse.

When the wind blows

Most visitors know only one Capraia, the sunny island of summer months. At other times of the year the climate is less kindly. It occasionally snows during the winter months, and when gales sweep in from the north-east (the *Grecale*) and south-west (the *Libeccio*), the ferries are unable to operate. It is not uncommon for the island to be cut off for five days on end. To lessen the hardship, the small shop in Paese has installed a large deep-freeze that is well-stocked with essentials.

Though weeks of fog and rain can test the endurance of the few Capraiese choosing to remain on the island during winter, they know their patience will be richly rewarded. With the spring, the sunshine returns, and Capraia once again becomes a small corner of paradise.



A short history of Capraia



The first settlers

The discovery of Stone Age implements indicate that Capraia was first settled from the mainland about 6,000 years ago. It's difficult for us to imagine what the island was like then, but its heavily wooded shores and slopes, secure from most dangers, must have been a pleasant, if primitive, haven.

As seafaring developed, Capraia's natural harbour became a welcome staging post for the merchant vessels of several classical civilizations. Phoenicians and Greeks came from the Eastern Mediterranean, Umbrians and Etruscans from the Italian mainland. It is not known how they reacted with the indigenous population, nor whether they settled on the island; most experts think they did not, but stayed long enough to cut down trees for firewood.

Rome

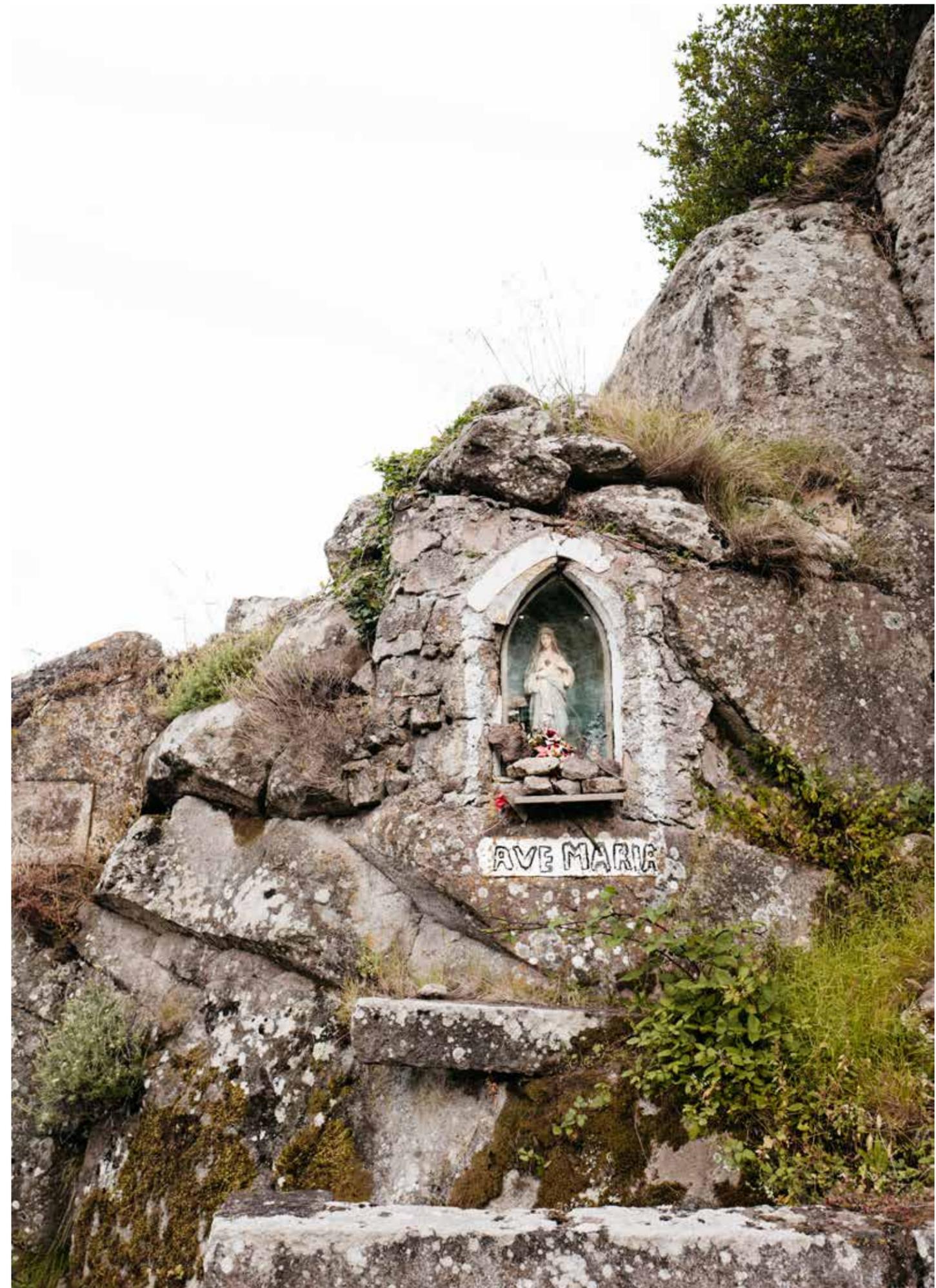
By around 200 BC, Rome had taken control of most of the Italian peninsula and its adjacent islands. The move heralded the first age of Capraian civilization. The Romans clearly loved the place as much as we do, and once Pompey had cleared the surrounding seas of pirates, Roman citizens made it their home. The remains of two large villas have been found: one at Porto, near the present-day Church of the Assumption; the other at il Piano, near the Church of St Stefano. There may, of course have been others.

It is interesting to find churches so close to these Roman sites. A villa contained a shrine dedicated to ancestors and household gods, and these were sometimes constructed on sites already considered sacred. If the Christians then deliberately erected their places of worship nearby, it suggests a fascinating continuity between prehistoric and modern holiness.

Roman wrecks litter the seabed around the coast, many containing the fractured remnants of the amphorae in which Capraia's prized wine (then as now!) was shipped to the mainland. The discovery in 1917 of a stunningly beautiful statue, the Venus of Capraia, confirms the Roman island as a place of wealth and culture. It also bears out the ancient legend: when Venus (we prefer Aphrodite, her Greek name) emerged into the world from flecks of Tyrrhenian sea foam, her necklace broke and seven bright pearls tumbled into the water; there they remain, the islands of the archipelago – and the brightest of all is Capraia.

A holy isle

During the 5th century, with more of a whimper than a bang, the Roman Empire fell apart. It had become Christian long before this, and in the 4th century AD, its monastic tradition had spread from Egypt to the rest of the Christian world. Communities of monks were es-



tablished in quiet places conducive to prayer and reflection, and it comes as no surprise that Capraia was one such sanctuary.

It is possible that monks (*Zenobiti* in Italian, distinguishing those belonging to a religious community from those living the solitary life of a hermit) were living in the inland Piano region of Capraia by 500 AD. This supports the tradition that the medieval Church of Santo Stefano occupies a site – and perhaps even the 1,500-year-old foundations – of a building that dates back to the beginning of the Christian era. There is something mystical, almost magical, in the quiet atmosphere suffusing these ancient stones that makes such a possibility entirely credible.

Clash of faiths

In 803, the chants of the Zenobiti fell silent, drowned out by the *adhan* or Muslim call to prayer.

Following the death of the Prophet Mohammed in 632, his followers – sword and Koran in either hand – had carried his message across the Middle East and along the North African coast to the Berber people. By 711, the warriors of Islam were in Spain and heading north into France.

Despite defeat by Charles Martel at Poitiers in 732, further south the Muslim tide swept on across the Mediterranean. In the following century it overwhelmed Corsica and then Sicily. It hit Capraia in 803, driving out (or enslaving) the Zenobiti and apparently leaving the island uninhabited for two centuries.

The Pisan era

For the next 800 years, the Mediterranean was the battleground for an interminable and far-reaching conflict. English readers may like to consider how its influence pervaded even their northern culture, from *Robin Hood* (Richard the Lion Heart met Robin on returning from crusade), through *Othello* (a Muslim Moor), to *Robinson Crusoe* (Robinson was captured by North African pirates before he was marooned on a desert island). Though fought under the banners of Christianity and Islam, it was as much a story of land, loot, pride and piracy as of faith. Capraia, a bulwark protecting the rich cities of the Italian coast, was in the front line: a bastion for Christians and a target for Muslims – hence Forte San Giorgio.

In the 11th century, after enduring two centuries of murderous and costly raids, the Italian city-states got their act together and took the fight to the enemy. Pisa led the way. Those guests who stopped off in this city to view its quirky tower and the adjoining magnificence of

the Duomo and Baptistry will get some idea of its wealth and power in the Early Middle Ages. Its merchants traded across the Mediterranean while its warriors cleared the seas of ‘Saracen’ (to use the word favoured by Italian guide books) pirates. Capraia, secure under the Pisan umbrella, thrived.

How do we know? The evidence is mostly physical. This was the period when the Church of Santo Stefano was rebuilt, when the Church of the Assunta (aka the Church of St Mary of the Port) was erected, and when the palmenti on the Forte rock flowed with rich red wine from the hills above. The little documentary evidence we have tells us that the island was certainly a valued Pisan possession by 1149.

We have suggested that the Mediterranean wars were less about religion than power and money. There is no stronger evidence for this than the fact that once Pisa had exerted its dominance over the Muslims it immediately fell out with its Christian ally, Genoa. When the Pope, the Holy Roman Emperor (don’t ask!) and Florence involved themselves in the squabble, it grew mind-blowingly complicated.

Thankfully, as far as Capraia was concerned, little changed, and the islanders appeared to carry on relatively oblivious to the mainland chicanery. They prospered, too. By 1298, thanks to profits made from its trade in wine, cereals and livestock, the island was paying the second-highest tithe in its diocese (5 lira and 5 soldi).

Genoa

At different times, Capraia passed from Pisan control to that of Florence and Genoa, ending up firmly in the hands of the latter by the later 15th century. Nevertheless, it retained a large degree of independence and the commune continued to follow its traditional Pisan statutes of governance. Just three incidents are recorded as raising the island’s collective pulse.

The first was an accidental visit by a pope in 1243. The English chronicler Matthew Paris tells how Innocent IV planned a summit with Emperor Frederick II. En route, the pope got cold feet, ran into a storm, and washed up on the Pisan island of Capraia. He was greeted most warmly. Having said mass and granted absolution in the Church of the Assunta, he sailed off to Genoa. No pope has ever returned.

The second incident was an attack by Florentine galleys in 1362 that saw 1,000 valuable farm animals carried off. The third was a violent revolt in 1504 against the rule of the De Mari, a family of overbearing Genoese magnates. This led to the island coming under the Compere di San Giorgio two years later.

Famous footsteps

Capraia was within the Genoese sphere of influence in 1451, the year Christopher Columbus was born not far from the great trading city. Ten years later, he began his sea career on a Genoese ship. Surely, at some stage during those early years, the vessel he was on called in at Capraia? When it did so, eager to explore (something he was to prove rather good at), Christopher must have come ashore. Which means – if you accept our romantic supposition – that when you disembarked from the ferry you trod in the footsteps not only of Admiral Nelson and Pope Innocent IV, but also of Christopher Columbus...

Danger returns

By the 13th century, the Muslim threat was again a problem for Capraia. This time the danger was not of invasion and occupation but from raids of freebooters based in the ports of North Africa. Their galleys would dash in, rape, pillage and burn, then sail away with their plunder (slaves were especially sought after) before the arrival of Italian galleys from the mainland.

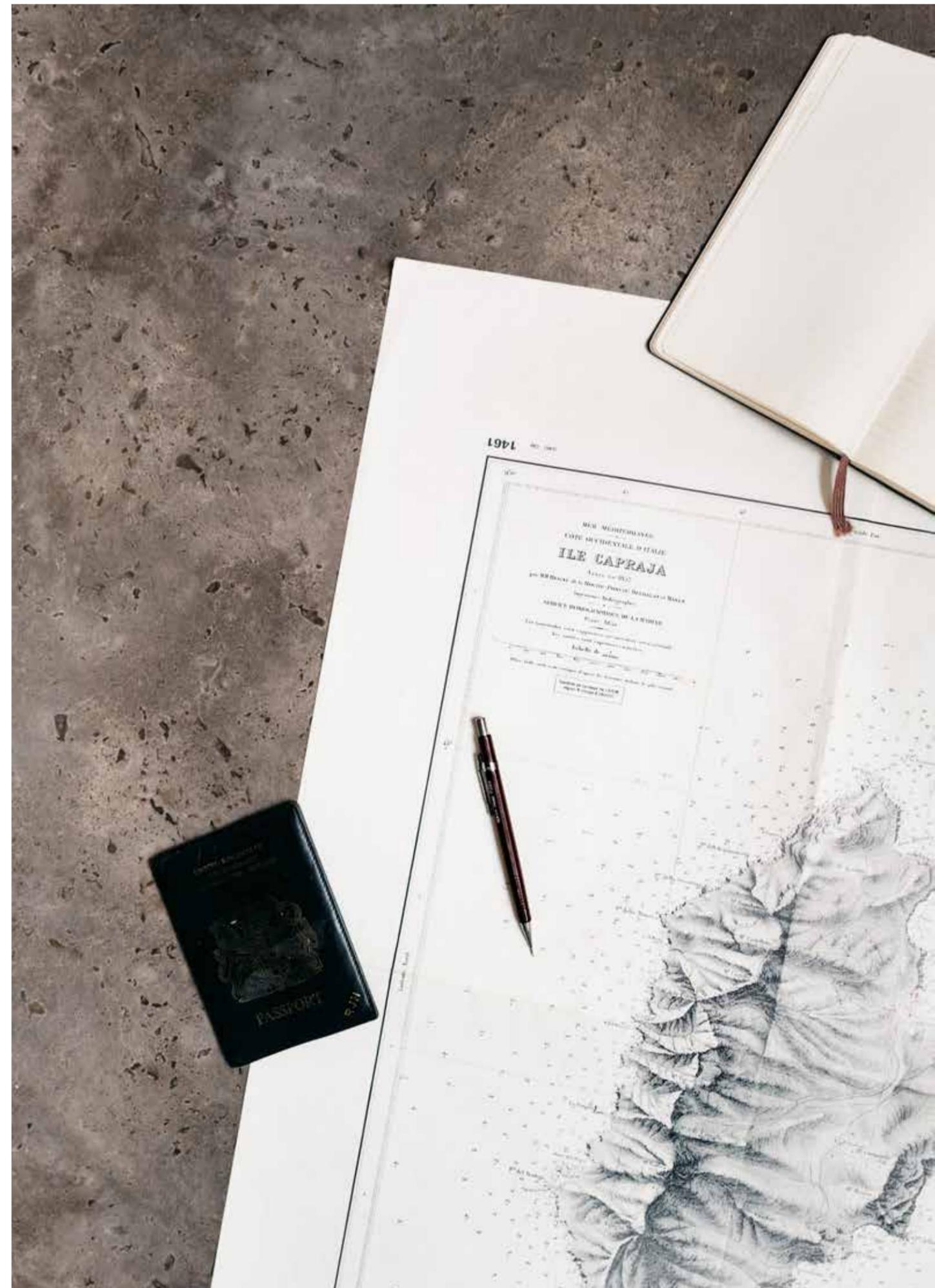
It was to counter this threat that the Pisan stronghold beneath the Forte was built (see p. xx). It is also why the main island settlement moved from the vulnerable Piano region to cluster around the rock overlooking the harbour. Here the houses were built in a unique, semi-fortified Capraian style, with the living quarters accessible through a trapdoor above a stone-vaulted ground floor. Via Umberto I (as you come down from the Forte, it's on the right opposite the tourist office) has a number of ancient dwellings from which it's possible to imagine how the Paese must once have looked.

In 1506, a serious attack was beaten off only with difficulty, as a result of which the ancient fortress was modified and strengthened. Despite this work, the limits of the old and slender walls were soon revealed: against serious, concentrated cannon fire they were nigh on useless.

1540

Dragut's capture and destruction of the Pisan fortress in 1540 is dealt with on page xx. His ravaging of the rest of Capraia was equally ferocious. Buildings were burned, livestock killed, crops fired. Worse, his ships sailed off with at least 600 Capraiesi (sources vary over the precise figure) chained below decks. Men, women and children, they were destined to be sold in the slave markets of Algiers.

Fortunately for the captives, help was at hand. A fleet of 21 Genoese galleys under the command of Gianettino Doria had been after Dragut for some time, and it finally caught up with him in the Gulf of Girolata, Corsica. Dragut's eleven vessels were outnumbered and



outgunned. Nine of them, including two galleys, were captured and over 2,000 prisoners released, including the grateful and mightily relieved Capraiesi. Dragut was taken in chains to Genoa, from where he was released in suspicious circumstances a few years later.

The attack resulted in Capraia becoming the most heavily fortified island in the entire Tuscan archipelago. When the defences were complete, they comprised the imposing Forte San Giorgio and three stout watchtowers with garrisons enjoined to keep an eye on all ships entering the island's waters. The Torre del Porto, clearly visible from the walls of the Forte, overlooked the harbour. A second tower, the Torre dello Zenobito, guarded the southernmost tip of the island, while the Torre delle Barbici stood on the northern cape. The latter two can be visited on foot, though it's a substantial hike; it is more usual for visitors to see them on a round-the-island boat trip.

To supplement these physical structures, the Genoese set up a bonfire early-warning system (signalling with smoke by day and fire by night) that linked Capraia to Genoa, Corsica, Elba, Monte Cristo, and other islands of the archipelago.

Settling down

The fortifications and signals did not stop further raids. In 1553, for example, two boys and eight girls were snatched from the shore of Capraia and carried away to slavery. Nevertheless, the frequency and intensity of such attacks gradually declined. This was partly due to the shift in the balance of power in the Mediterranean that followed the annihilation of the Ottoman (Turkish) fleet in the Battle of Lepanto (1571), the last major naval engagement fought with galleys. Several of the victorious Genoese ships had Capraiesi among their crew.

In 1562, the Compere di San Giorgio sold Capraia to the state of Genoa, which put it under the command of the Governor of Corsica. This made little difference to the lives of ordinary Capraiesi. With peace came greater prosperity, and secure beneath the walls of Forte San Giorgio the men fished, especially for anchovies, while the hardy womenfolk managed the agriculture: growing crops, raising lean livestock, and making their popular wine.

Highlights of these years include the so-called Anchovy War of 1721, a bizarre incident that involved the shooting dead of a Capraieso sailor who had – apparently – been fishing for anchovies in the waters around Gorgona without obtaining a permit from the Duke of Tuscany's island garrison or from the Carthusians friars who ran the place. The matter was smoothed before it could flare into a major diplomatic incident!

The Enlightenment had virtually no impact on Capraia, and the closure of the church

within the Forte led to its immediate replacement in 1760 by the new Church of St Nicholas and the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Paese. The capture of a rare monk seal in nets also made the news.

A population of around 700 in the 16th and 17th centuries rose to 2,000 or more in the 18th. The rise is partly explained by an increase in naval traffic as Genoa struggled to quench a fiery Corsican independence movement. (It was not just the Americans who were seeking to break free from the mother country.)

Revolution and decline

The struggle with Genoa came to a head in 1767. Fed up with the city-state's insensitive and grasping rule, the Capraiesi sided with a Corsican liberation force that had landed on the island. The Forte, built to protect Capraia, had become a symbol of oppression, and the locals joined with the Corsicans to besiege it. We are told the garrison had neither the skill, the will, nor the means to withstand a lengthy siege, and with its surrender Genoa's long-standing control of Capraia came to an end.

As elsewhere in Europe, the next fifty years were at best unsettled. During the wars of 1793–1815, Capraia experienced government by Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, Genoa (briefly) and Britain (even more briefly) before ending up as part of the Kingdom of Sardinia in 1815.

At this point Capraia entered a long and painful period of decline. The resident population fell to fewer than 700 as men left to work in the rapidly industrialising mainland – there were no new industries on Capraia, apart from a dismal, part-subsidised cigar factory that opened in Paese town square in 1838. The island's fleet of small wooden vessels was superseded by steam-powered iron ships based in the large ports of Genoa and Livorno. In short, by the time it was absorbed into the new Kingdom of Italy in 1861, only tradition and the doggedness of the dwindling population had prevented Capraia from becoming a wilderness.

Forced labour

The authorities of the newly established Italian state noted Capraia's predicament and decided to put it to good use. They had a problem. Italian unification, exemplified by the daring exploits of Giuseppe Garibaldi, had led to an alarming upsurge in brigandage as old authorities crumbled and new ones were slow to take their place. To combat this, in 1863 a law was introduced that permitted trouble-makers to be tried in military courts and, if found guilty, shot or sentenced to forced labour for life. A number of remote places were identified

by royal decree as suitable for convicted brigands to spend the rest of their days, and one of these was Capraia.

The bulk of the prisoners were housed in the Forte, which was of little military use following the collapse of 1853 (see p. xx) and had been sold by the Italian Navy. Others were housed in the Franciscan Convent of St Anthony (near the Torre del Porto). A sad shadow of a once thriving institution, the convent's resident community had dwindled to three venerable friars. Understandably, tensions arose between the felons and locals, and ten years later they were formally separated by the establishment of a convict colony in the area above the harbour.

A prison island

The Capraia prison colony remained in operation for 113 years, finally closing in 1986. In the long run it proved a mixed blessing for the islanders. Obviously, sharing their beautiful home with convicted felons was hardly ideal, for it removed the possibility of development that could have boosted employment and prosperity. The island's few tourists coming over on the ferry were disconcerted to find themselves sharing the deck with lawbreakers detained in a barred cage. On the other hand, the lack of tourist development preserved Capraia's special charm. This made it an obvious choice for Italy's first, strictly protected National Park (1997).

Stories from Capraia's 'prison years' are many. The colony was no Alcatraz. The convicts grew food and made wine which they were permitted to sell to islanders at special low prices. They even had their own fishing boat, rowed by convicts but captained by a couple of warders. Successful escapes were rare. We are told that one convict, having scarpered from detention, cadged overnight accommodation in the tent of an unwitting German couple before handing himself in! Indeed, some inmates became so attached to their island home that they were loath to leave when the colony was closed down. One, apparently, went as far as to commit robbery in the hope that he could remain imprisoned on the island! An extreme move perhaps, but we can sympathise with his motive.

The ruins of the prison colony, particularly its extraordinary triumphal-arch entrance gate, can be seen above Porto. Behind the arch and beside the road to the vineyard lie the remains of a church, workhouses, cells, wardens' accommodation, and an unusual trompe d'oeil mansion).

War and peace

Outside the prison colony, and excepting the activities of the Fascist youth camp and a

brief period of isolation following German occupation, island life rolled on very much as it had done for centuries. A small naval garrison remained until 1953, manning the lookout post near where Nelson had threatened to blow the Forte to smithereens. Prisoners rebuilt the track up to il Piano, allowing farmers to till the same soil as their ancestors. Fishermen still worked from wooden rowing boats. Most journeys were made on foot – the island's first motorised vehicle was an ex-US Army jeep belonging to the prison colony.

The Roman Catholic Church continued to be held in high esteem, too, and a visit from an ecclesiastical dignitary, such as that of Cardinal Minoretti in 1930, was the occasion for great celebration. And after he had returned to the mainland, the Capraiesi discussed what had gone on long into the night using their own unique (and almost incomprehensible!) patois. You don't get it? Then you need, as the Italians say, *portare pazienze* – or in Capraiesi speak, *abbózze* (to be patient)!

The closing of the prison, the acquisition of National Park status, and the renovation of the Forte bring us more or less to Capraia today – and that's where we'll go next.

Capraia today



When, on a bright summer's day, you step off the Livorno ferry onto the smart quay and look around at the gaily painted bars and restaurants to your right, you may be excused thinking that Capraia is not really as isolated or unspoilt as you were led to believe. But as you no doubt realise by now, that was Capraia at her party best. The little splash of tourist colour on the quayside is just about the island's only nod towards the outside world.

Almost everywhere else is peace and calm in wide open spaces. Three percent of the island's surface is occupied by Porto and Paese; the rest is National Park or the site of the former prison colony.

Two Capraias

According to the time of year, there are two Capraias. One is the lively, three-month summer island, when the resident population swells to over 300, and half-a-dozen small bars and restaurants – some no more than shacks – pop up in Porto and Paese. The other is the winter Capraia, when only a handful of islanders remain, when the sea is whipped to a fury by cold winds from the north, and when the Livorno ferry remains in its berth for days on end. Between these two extremes, the island is a child at the dawn and dusk of a long day, either waking in preparation for the fun ahead, or yawning and getting ready to sleep.

The community

The tiny community is served by four policemen (one responsible for traffic!), a postman, two grocery stores, four fishermen, a school, and a priest. There are tourist offices in Porto and Paese, a handful of restaurants (their quality appears to increase the nearer one gets to the ferry mooring), two hotels (not open all year) and a number of self-catering apartments. The island fire engine, staffed by volunteers, was a gift from a former Belgian firefighter, now a Capraia resident, who was given it by generous colleagues as a retirement

present! Lorries collecting the rubbish come over in the ferry from the mainland.

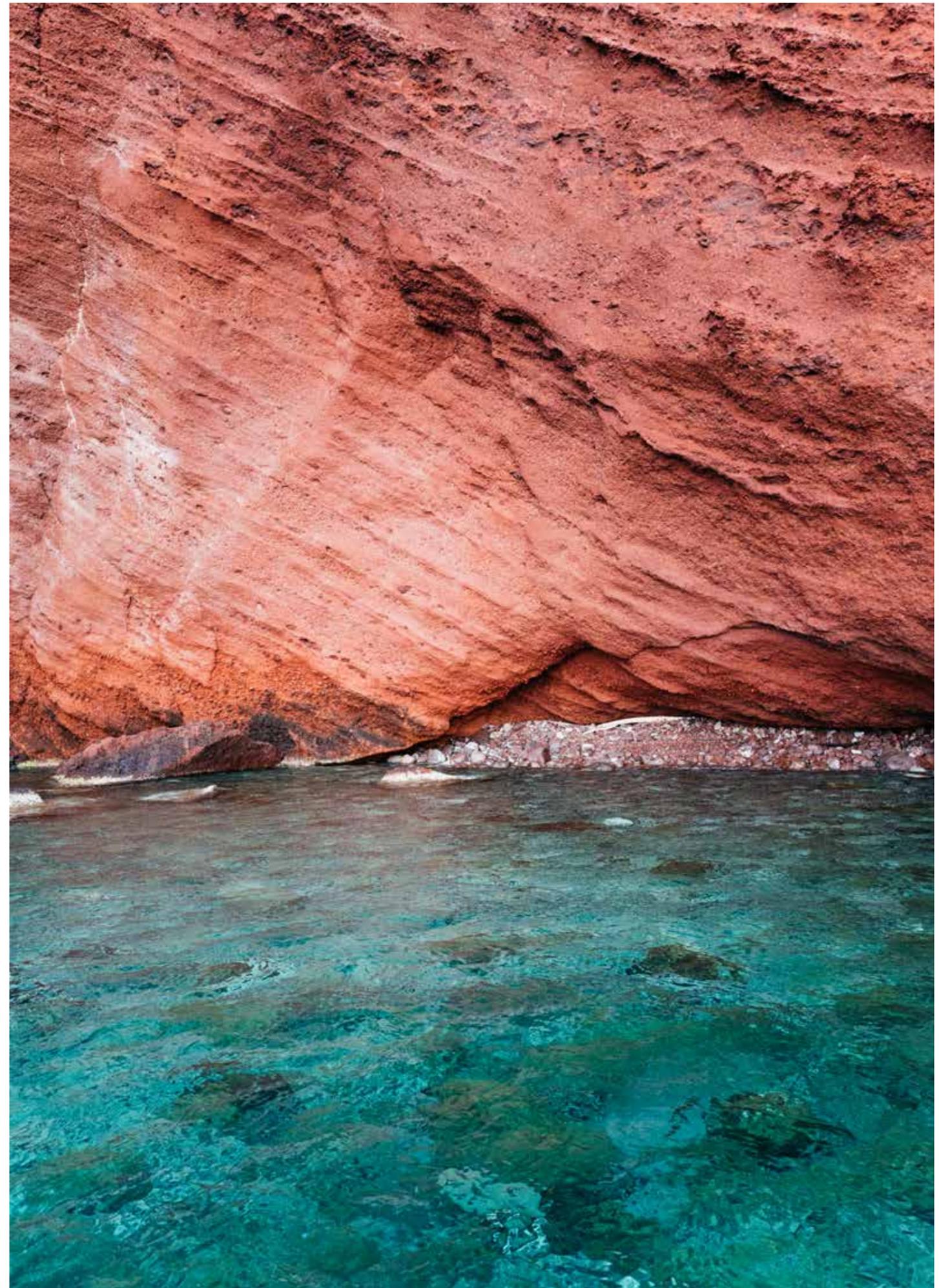
It is often said there is one paved road on Capraia. This is not quite true. There is one paved *main* road which runs about 800 metres from the harbour to Paese; at the top it branches like the fingers of a hand into a number of smaller streets which are also tarred. Beyond these, it's footpaths, dirt tracks and ancient highways surfaced with flat, uneven stones.

Many Capraiesi have two houses, a summer one on the island and a winter one on the mainland. Other houses on the island are holiday homes, popular with nature lovers, walkers, academics and artists of every calling. One such is a Florentine professor of drama. Each summer, he writes and directs a simple drama based on the *Odyssey* for performance in the ancient Church of San Stefano in il Piano.

'Getting and spending'

The economy of the island is seasonal. It is based on tourism – the cash and employment provided by hotels, apartments, restaurants, bars and miscellaneous activities such as boat trips and underwater adventuring. Other income is provided by fishing, especially for anchovies, and from the production of quality red, white and rosé organic wine (not to be confused with La Capraia Chianti, a product of the mainland). The sheltered harbour is a popular stop over for yachts cruising the archipelago.

Understandably, there is always degree of tension in local politics between those who wish to keep the island as it is and those who would like to see its facilities expand to provide more jobs, especially for the younger generation. That would mean building and possible damage to the island's unique atmosphere. It's a difficult dilemma – best left to the Capraiesi themselves to sort out. We wish them luck.





The National Park

The island of Capraia, especially its National Park, is one of the most unspoilt regions in all Italy. That said, it is by no means virgin territory: the entire island was once covered with the black-barked and spiky-leaved Ilex Oak (also known as the Holly Oak). Over the millennia, farming, construction and ship building gradually reduced the wooded areas to the point where the Ilex survives in two spots, one in the prison colony and the other on Monte Campanile.

The aim of the Park authorities is to allow the Capraia landscape gradually – over a period of years, even centuries – to return to its natural state. Who knows, perhaps when our children’s children visit the island they will wander among oak groves, just as their distant ancestors did all those years ago? The mouflons, however, may have other ideas!

Regulations

The Park covers the entire island, apart from a relatively small area – roughly the shape of Great Britain (with Porto as East Anglia) – to the west and north of the harbour. The Park itself is divided into two zones. Zone One, which covers approximately the central half of the west coast and its adjoining waters, is out of bounds to all but a nominated few. Visitors may not land, fish or dive here. Zone Two is also subject to strict regulation: no ‘wild camping’ or lighting of fires; and, with special exceptions, no motorized vehicles or fishing.

Other regulations state that no flora or fauna may be introduced, damaged or removed – i.e. no picking of wild flowers, no matter how lovely they may look! And however hot and sweaty you may feel after the long walk up from il Piano, please do not swim in *Stagone (il Laghetto)*, the island’s tiny lake!

Unique flora

Surveys suggest there are around 650 species of flora on Capraia, three of which are unique to the island and another six are found only in the Tuscan Archipelago. The three unique

plants are *Centaurea gymnocarpa*, a delightful soft purple cornflower with silvery foliage; *Orchis provincialis Capraia*, a creamy yellow orchid; and *Calicotome villosa inermis*, a distinctive type of thorny broom endemic to the tiny islet of Peraiola on the west coast.

Of the six species found only on the archipelago, three are unique to Corsica, Sardinia and Capraia: a type of borage or starflower, a slender-flowered thistle, and *Stachys glutinosa*, a woody, sticky and smelly plant of the Lamiaceae family. The others, occurring on Capraia and neighbouring islands, are a variety of sea lily, a type of Corsican mint, and *linaria Capraia*, a variety of the oddly named toadflax.

Varied vegetation

Botanists divide the vegetation of the National Park into scrub, garrigue and steppe. Guests who take walks away from the populated areas will notice all three, though they may be surprised that the experts make such fine distinction – to the untrained eye there is just mile after mile of scented heathland beneath an azure sky.

Scrub comprises a preponderance of larger plants and trees, such as the omnipresent Mediterranean strawberry tree, the Montpellier rock rose, broom, and euphorbia, whose sap, according to legend, was used by the witch Circe to make magic potions. The pillows of euphorbia turn the colour of fire in the heat, but only broom flowers in the summer (June). However, visitors arriving in May will catch the white and yellow flowers of the Montpellier rock rose.

This rose is also found on garrigue together with the yellow-flowering curry plant, a form of aromatic daisy. The steppe, mixed with patches of garrigue, is a potpourri of colours and fragrances. Lavender, thyme and rosemary grow wild, their scents mixing in the breeze with those of curry plant, sweet myrtle, woundwort, and wild oleander.

These short paragraphs cannot possibly do justice to the sights and scents accompanying any walk through inland Capraia. Those who would like to learn more are invited to speak with the Forte staff and dip (depending on one's Italian) into one of the more detailed guide books available in the tourist office.

Fauna

As with the flora, there are three species of creature endemic to Capraia. Two – a mollusc and a slug (!) found on Peraiola – are of little general interest. The third, an endemic Italian wall lizard, looks much like any other gecko to anyone but an expert. Another rarity is the bright green Sardinian tree frog. Equally at home in the water as on land, it is also found on Elba, Corsica and Sardinia.

The island's snakes are harmless. Apart from rabbits, rats (whose coats the convicts made into 'furs' against the winter cold!) and smaller creepy-crawlies, the only other animal of note is the mouflon. Contrary to what you may be told, even by locals (who should know better!), the mouflon is not a goat but a variety of primitive sheep from whom our domestic sheep are descended. There are at least 50 on the island, easily identified by their size, dark brown coat, and the huge curled horns of the rams.

Birds

The Corsican finch is Capraia's sole bird endemic to the Tuscan Archipelago. Nevertheless, the close proximity of 40 species of resident bird in so small a space makes the island an ornithologist's dream. Indeed, several visitors come back year after year simply to observe the avian residents.

Best-known is the population of sea birds. The hundreds and hundreds of yellow-legged gulls top the list, followed by the black-feathered shag and varieties of shearwater. Rarest are the Arduin's gulls and petrels, though pairs of ospreys are challenging for this position.

Visitors are not alone in finding themselves fascinated – even disturbed – by the sounds of some of these creatures. Fishermen call Cory's shearwaters 'talkers' on account of their ghostly, human-like cry, and the sad call of the *procellaria* (petrel) is said to remind sailors of drowned colleagues.

Flight, form and colour

Occasional hikers are inevitably struck by the form, colour and song of the inland birds. The jet-black raven, the largest of all, inspires awe even in those unaware of Edgar Allen Poe's poem of the same name. Birds of prey are represented by pairs of buzzards and peregrine falcons, both species majestic in flight and fascinating to watch as they hover and swoop in the hunt.

Prizes for sheer beauty go to the multi-coloured bee-eaters, the wallcreepers and blue rock thrushes; those for singing are shared between the many warblers, larks, pipits, whitethroats and, of course, the cuckoo. Swifts, swallows and martins arriving from Africa in the spring carry off the gold medal for sheer balletic beauty.

Again, as with the flora, this guide is but a brief introduction to the very special displays that grace Capraia's skies. Please ask, or take part in a guided tour (see p. xx) if you would like to know more.



The sea and shore

Capraia's 30 km of shoreline are considered by many to be its finest feature. For others it is not the rocks that fascinate so much as the sea creatures swimming in the clear waters beneath them.

Coves and capes

The views of the east coast from the Forte's walls and the Punta della Bellavista (see p. xx) are splendid. For sheer drama, however, the cliffs and capes of the west coast are unsurpassed. A word of warning, however: Capraia is, as we mentioned at the outset, a wild island; steep and dangerous escarpments are not fenced off or signed, so please take the greatest care when venturing to the west coast on foot. Indeed, it is recommended that visitors wishing to explore the far side of the island do so with one of our guides.

Sailing up the west coast from south to north, four views stick in the memory. The first and perhaps most spectacular is Punta dello Zenobito, the island's southernmost tip. Here, beside the famous Cala Rossa, stands the ancient tower from which, back in the 16th century, the Genoese garrison kept watch for roving pirate galleys.

Moving north, we come to the dramatic cliffs of the Punta del Trattoio with its lighthouse and the 410m peak of Monte Arpagna (topped by the rusty remains of a military semaphore station) in the background. The area is alive with colonies of yellow-legged gulls and is a popular hunting ground for peregrine falcons.

A little further on we meet the boundary of the National Park's strongly protected Zone One, and must make a wide detour to the west. On the coast are the lichen-encrusted caves of Cala del Vetriolo beneath the colourful slopes of Monte Rosso. The tiny island of Peraiola (with its unique slugs and thorny broom!) is barely distinguishable from the adjacent coastline.

Leaving the rugged Punta del Fondo, Punta del Recisello and Punta della Manza on the starboard beam, we return to the coast and sail north-east along the deeply caverned coast

towards the 100-metre high Punta del Dattero. The Mediterranean fan palms clinging there are the most northerly in the world.

Rounding Punta della Teglia and the Torre delle Barbici (see p. xx), we swing south down the east coast. As we pass Punta del Vecchiaione, the Forte comes into sight dead ahead – and we will soon be home.

Sea creatures

Threefold delights await snorkellers and scuba divers in Capraia's waters. Guests are not advised to take to the water without consulting local experts recommended by us: like all marine environments, the seas around Capraia are subject to strong currents that can catch even the most experienced swimmers unaware.

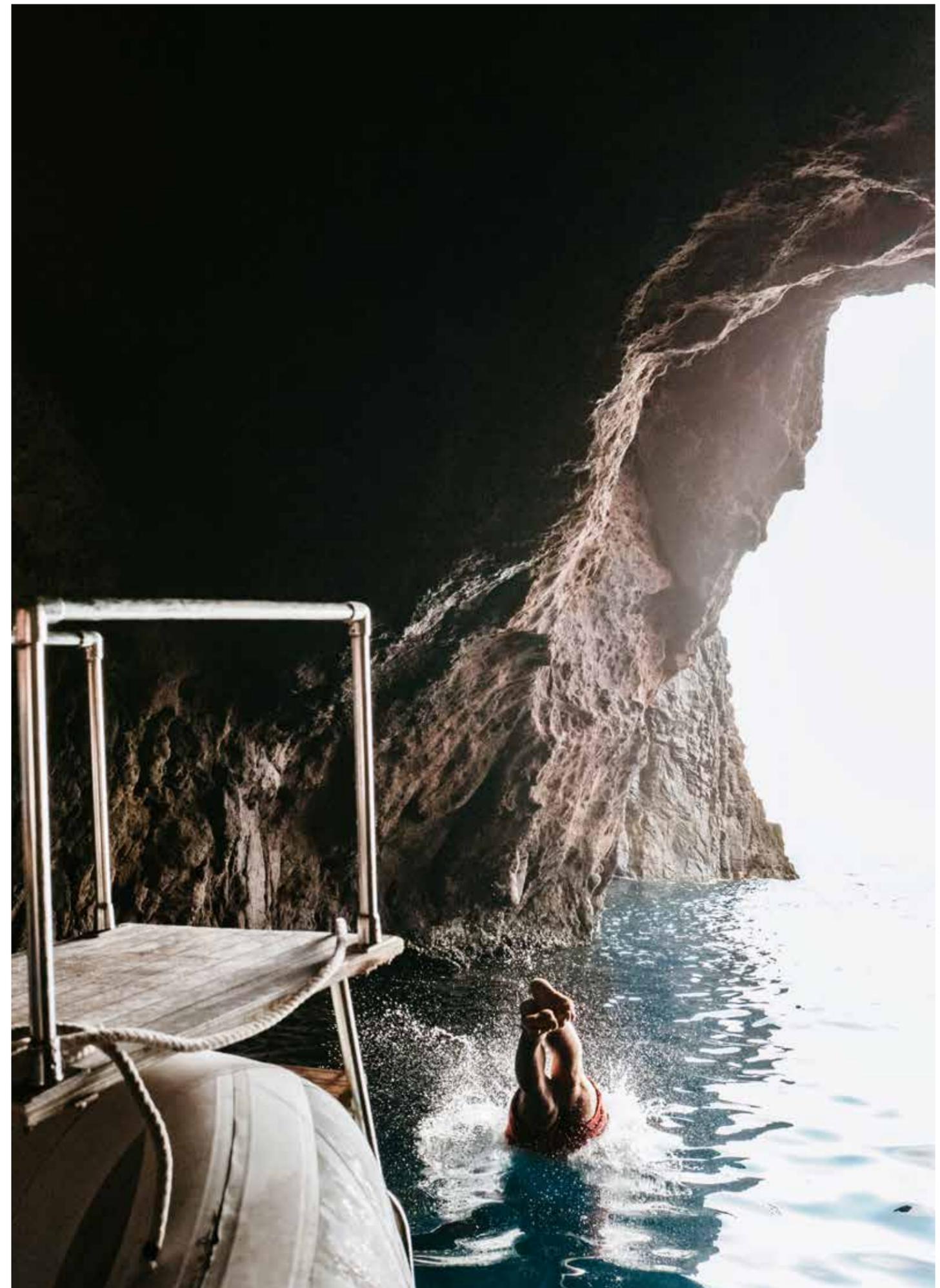
The glass-clear waters of blue, green and aquamarine are a joy in themselves. The rocky coast, strewn with nooks, crannies and underwater caves, is home to myriads of creatures that for the sake of stealth or safety prefer shade to sunlight. Beside the urchins, eels, lobsters, crabs, squid (cuttlefish), and octopus swim as wide a range of fish as an underwater explorer could wish to find. It ranges from giant 600-kg tuna to flashing schools of sardines, anchovies and damselfish.

Back on the surface, keep your eyes peeled! If you are lucky, you may see a 50-ton (or larger) sperm or rorqual whale rising to the surface to send a plume of spray high into the air. Experts believe a group of these magnificent creatures regard the northern part of the Tyrrhenian Sea as their home.

Jumping fish abound. Bottlenose and stenella dolphins lead the way with acrobatic displays of joyful frivolity. Lichias jump to avoid predators, while tuna rise to the surface as part of their hunting strategy. Macho male swordfish leap like javelins when showing off to the ladies!

Less boisterous, but still visible, are easy-going, side-swimming sunfish whose exposed dorsal fins get them mistaken for sharks. If you are very fortunate you may spot a marine turtle making its ungainly way to somewhere safe, we hope. They eat the ubiquitous jellyfish – which they find hard to distinguish from plastic bags, with disastrous consequences.

The bright blue verella are a less well-known relative of the jellyfish. These strange carnivorous creatures float with the aid of an air-filled bladder and use a weird, semi-translucent sail to catch the wind. As they have no means of steering, they are at the mercy of the weather, and sometimes get blown onto the beach in their thousands. They make up for their lack of attractiveness with an array of delightful nicknames: little sail, purple sail, sea raft, and (best of all) by-the-wind sailor.





Exploring on foot

This is the out-and-about chapter. We've focussed on shorter journeys because though there is plenty of information for those intending to hike across the island, we believe the majority of our guests would like first to familiarise themselves with the area around the Forte.

Strolls

Stroll one – Paese

Leave the Forte and follow the road ahead of you, taking care on the uneven rock just below the gates where the palmenti are situated. You are on Via Carlo Alberto which, if you continue straight ahead, becomes an ancient mule track leading down to Porto. Before you reach the town square, the general store is on your right, and on your left are a nondescript sort of haberdashery, a small bar and the tourist office/travel agent.

The pretty, tree-shaded square is the Porto bus terminal. The unexceptional baroque Church of San Nicola, built in the mid-18th century to replace that within the Forte, is on the southern side. A plaque outside gives basic information, including the fact that it was built to hold 1,500 souls, far larger than the island's present population. The garden-monument area to the left of the church as you face it is where the cigar factory (*il Palazzone*, meaning large building or palace!) once stood. Behind you, on the north side, is a cash dispenser and post office.

The road leading downwards almost opposite the church is Via Umberto (named after the second King of Italy); it's well worth a visit as it is lined on both sides with traditional Capraian houses. The road next to it, Via Vittorio Emanuele (the first King of a united Italy, 1861), leads to the main paved road to Porto by branching left after fifty or so metres into Via Regina Margherita (the wife of King Umberto – the Capraeisi, like the British, have a strong monarchical streak).

We complete our stroll by turning right on Via Regina Margherita after the Centrale bar and restaurant, turning right again and, keeping to the right, following the road round to the central square and so back to the Forte.

Stroll two - Torre del Porto and the Church of San Antonio

Our second stroll begins along the same route as the first, almost as far as the Paese square. Take Via Umberto I (see above) on the right, past the Post Office and continue to the Saracen Hotel. Here you swing left and downhill towards the Torre del Porto and the Church of San Antonio. Where the road divides, the left fork takes you to the tower, the right to the church.

The church, almost certainly locked, is in a disappointingly dilapidated state. A plaque outside tells the sorry story. It was deconsecrated well over a century ago and is now used only occasionally for artistic events. The enormous Franciscan convent (built 1661) beside it – part of which is inhabited by tenants – is in an even worse condition. Both buildings, but especially the convent, represent the Capraia Dilemma: do the island authorities redevelop (the convent would make a fine hotel) or leave well alone? The former would remove an eyesore, help the economy and provide jobs; the latter would leave the island uniquely unspoilt.

The Torre del Porto was built at roughly the same time as the Forte. A plaque outside gives a brief history. After visiting it and the church, you may wish to return by going right along the unnamed road that has good views over the harbour and takes you past the Ristorante Officine del Mare. Turn left when you meet Via Regina Margherita (see above), then right along Vittorio Emanuele to the square and thence back to the Forte.

Sea bathing

When you leave Torre del Porto, you may be tempted to take the narrow track on your right leading down to the sea. Don't bother! The unkempt path – the one on the other side is even worse – ends in a sort of ugly and broken-down bathing platform decked out with a few rusty sun loungers. It is called (appropriately enough) la Grotta and is dangerous – no fun for adults and wholly unsuitable for children.

Two other sea-bathing sites within striking distance of the Forte are marked on the tourist map. Neither are recommended. One is behind a concrete wall at the far end of the jetty where the ferry comes in (hardly riviera), and the other (il Bagno) is beside the tower at the foot of the ancient zig-zag stairway between the Forte and the sea. While swimming from the latter is tremendous once in the water, the difficult access makes it unsuitable for all but fit and healthy adults.

Those eager to experience the delights of swimming in the crystal-clear seas around

Capraia – probably most of our guests – are advised to ask the Forte staff for advice on where and how.

Stroll three - Punta della Bellavista

We particularly recommend this stroll in the early morning or on a quiet summer evening. Leave the Forte, turn left beside the car park, and continue straight ahead past a small restaurant to an open area. On your left are the island's newish (and somewhat awkwardly designed) social centre and the public path to Il Bagno; the helipad is on your right. Where the track divides, take the clearly marked left fork to the stunning viewpoint appropriately named Bellavista.

The 220° panorama swings from Gorgona, the Forte and the mainland round via Elba to Pianosa and – just about! – Corsica. Sailboats, seabirds and the scent of wild flowers complete a memorable experience.

Stroll four - Porto

We are unsure whether to include this as a walk or a stroll. You decide! A trip down to Porto on foot takes about 20 minutes, though the uphill return will almost certainly take longer.

There are three ways to and from Porto. The old Roman road is the least steep of the three but tricky to navigate. If you wish to explore it, please ask for directions. The choice of the other two routes is between the road and an old mule track. The former is easy walking, but you will probably have to stand aside for the occasional car, or even the island bus; the latter is traffic-free and aesthetically more pleasing, but it's unlit, more rugged, and may be a little overgrown in places. Why not – in suitable footwear – do as we like to do: go down on the road and back up the footpath?

The road to Porto follows the route suggested in Stroll One, past the Centrale and down to Ristorante Chèrie on the sharp bend at the foot of the hill.

The footpath (known as Via San Leonardo) leads straight on from Via Carlo Alberto (see Stroll One). Cross the town square and take the street marked '410' on a white background with red flashes on either side. Then take the road as far as the empty house on your right and a telecommunications post and mast on either hand; now go down the cobbled footpath (Via San Leonardo) between trees and bushes to Ristorante Chèrie.

The harbour

The Chèrie, where you can sit outside, affords pleasant views over the boatyard and har-

bour. There's another little bar on your right, down by the estuary (La Fiumarella). After that, the road passes through a small, untidy zone we call 'industrial' Capraia: car parks, caravans, repair yards, bits of old boat, paddles, containers, engines, a recycling centre, etc. – all the usual stuff of a working harbour.

The ancient Church of the Assunta, dates from the 11th century and occupies the site of a Roman villa. It's in urgent need of a lick of paint – but do go inside. On the walls hang paintings of ships in various states of distress, assuring the congregation that the Virgin – guardian of sailors – has the power to protect mariners from the perils of the sea. The striking images are reminiscent of the opening scene of the magnificent John Huston / Gregory Peck movie *Moby Dick* (1956).

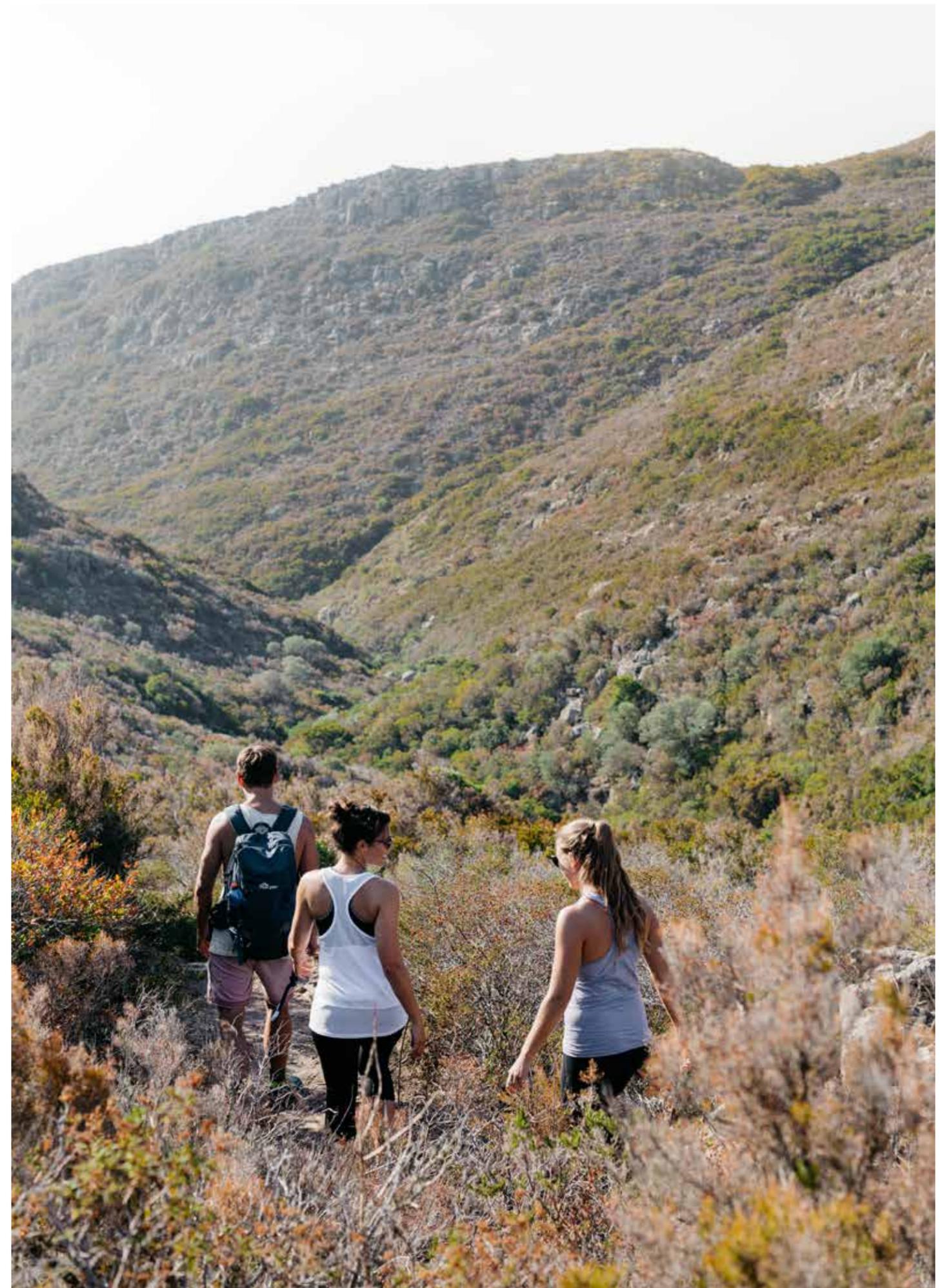
If you are on the island on 15 August, a bank holiday in Italy, don't miss the Ferragosto celebrations when the church's statue of the Virgin Mary is carried out to sea to remind sailors of the debt they owe Her. The more sceptical might be interested in the Ferragosto's history. It started life in 18 BC, when initiated as the pre-Christian *Feriae Augusti*, celebrations to honour the Emperor Augustus; later, the Roman Catholic Church took it over because, by happy coincidence, 15 August was the date when the Virgin Mary ascended bodily into heaven.

The quay

Passing the informal Nonno Beppe bar and another small section of the 'industrial' zone, we reach the quayside. Here you'll find the coastguard office beside the tourist office (with public toilets) inside a pretty courtyard. Moving further on, we enter the commercial and social heart of Capraia: the pharmacy and sub-aqua shop flanked by attractively-painted shops, bars and restaurants. It's the perfect place to stop for a drink or an ice cream in the shade after the hot walk down from the Forte.

Beside the office of Toremar (ferry operators), the Port Authority, and a taxi boat service, are old houses with stone steps leading to the first-floor living quarters – an evocative link to the old Capraia. Sleepy in the heat of the day, as the summer sun goes down the quayside, old and new, comes alive. Sailors from yachts in the harbour mingle with locals and tired hikers from the hills in long evenings of dinner and easy chatter beneath the stars.

The quay is for day-dreamers, too... As you sit in the sunshine and gaze across at the Torre del Porto with the national flag flying proudly on its mast, and beyond at the mighty Forte standing like a shepherd over its flock of houses, close your eyes and allow a vivid panorama of Capraia's colourful history to pass before you: wealthy Romans being rowed ashore by slaves, earnest *Zenobiti* falling to their knees in grateful payer, ferocious pirates from Agadir, the wide-eyed



Christopher Columbus, mercenary Genoese soldiers, Captain Horatio Nelson, bearded fisherman, tough housewives, chained convicts led ashore from a barred cage on board the ferry...

Capraia is such stuff as dreams are made on.

Walks

These two walks, as opposed to strolls and hikes, are our favourites. They pose no problem for regular walkers, but do please make sure you take water and a snack, and wear a hat and sunblock. Time: allow at least 4 hours there and back, with extra to dawdle, picnic or explore.

Walk One – il Piano, the Church of San Stefano Church and Cala del Ceppo

Follow Stroll One to the town square, then take the street to the left of the church towards open countryside. Bear right then left at the next two forks and carry straight ahead when the road (which may be of Roman origin) becomes a track.

You are now in open countryside with just birds for company for most of the way. The path – Strada Vicinale del Reganico – was rebuilt by convicts in the 1920s and, though uneven, is sound and relatively easy walking. Pass a small farm and apiary and continue until the marked turning for Saint Stefano on the left.

After a few hundred metres, where the way is blocked by gates to a vineyard (Azienda Agricola la Piana), turn right down to the church. Those wishing to continue to Cala del Ceppo simply follow the signs to the left from the main path. If you don't turn off, you will find yourself on a much longer hike towards either the Torre del Zenobito in the far south or the sights of the west (see 'Hikes' below).

Walk Two – the former prison colony and the winery

Start by going down to Porto, then take Via del Cornero to the right of the church. This leads to the island camp site (on the left) and via a series of hairpins to the former prison colony. A rather grand archway across the road marks the entrance.

The remains of the penal colony are all around you as the road winds up the mountain. It's certainly fascinating, but even on a summer's day there's a certain chill in the dark, barred windows of the barrack-cells. As the buildings have not been secured, guests are advised not to enter. Here, as at the San Antonio convent, you will be aware of the Capraia Dilemma. The former prison colony is not in the National Park, and some, regarding it as an unpleasant visual and metaphorical stain on the island, wish it to be developed for tourist use. The change would certainly bring money and jobs, but at what cost?

Higher up the track you come to an Agriturismo farmhouse on the right and a turning to stables on the left. Continuing, you reach the winery. Beyond that you are on the hiking route for the Monte Capo and the northern tower on Punta della Teglia (see 'Hikes' below).

On the way up, you will have spotted a magnificent array of plants and trees, including the venerable Ilex Oak, and dozens of birds – with luck you'll see buzzards, kites and harriers. On the way back, you are treated to fine views over the harbour with the resplendent Forte standing over it.

Hikes

Capraia's long-distance trails are largely unmarked and run outside the sphere of Google maps and beyond the range of mobile phones. Most end in steep and dangerous cliffs. Understandably, therefore, we do not advise our guests to tackle them unaided. The Forte staff will gladly provide experienced local guides who will also help you make the most of your journey by pointing out interesting features in the flora and fauna.

Three favourite trails are:

1. North beyond the prison colony and winery (see above) to Monte Capo in the north-east, the north-west coast (including the spectacular *Scoglio della Capra* – Goat Rock), and the northern (Barbici) tower (see p. xx) on Punta della Teglia.
2. South beyond il Piano to the Torre della Zenobito and Cala Rossa.
3. West *either* to the lighthouse on Punta del Trattoio via the former semaphore stations on Monte Arpagna, *or* to Lake Stagone and Monte Le Penne; the *very* fit might like to attempt both, returning in a loop below Monte Castello, the highest peak on the island (445m).

Travelling to and Around Capraia:

Only the ancient gods were able to fly directly to Capraia. Nowadays, we ordinary mortals must first pass through Tuscany. It's not such a bad deal. If Italy, because of its shape, is likened to a boot, then Tuscany and its charming archipelago are the golden buckle on that boot.

Few place names on the planet evoke such wonder. Tuscany, "a nation within a nation", boasts no fewer than seven world heritage sites, art and architecture to die for, gastronomic delights famed the world over – all wrapped in an almost tangible air of laid-back romance.

As we make our way to Capraia, therefore, let's take a quick tour of this remarkable region.

We begin – where else? – in Florence, birthplace of the Renaissance and the modern Italian language. Home to the celebrated Medici and one-time capital of the Kingdom of Italy, Florence offers a cornucopia of artistic delights: the grand Duomo cathedral and its attendant Campanile by Giotto, Michelangelo's striking David, and the glorious Leonardos, Botticellis, Raphaels and Caravaggios of the Uffizi Gallery. A week, a month, a year, a lifetime would not be sufficient to take it all in.

Our favourite is the 14th-century Ponte Vecchio, whose triple arches span the brown flowing River Arno. Little-known fact: this vibrant amalgam of a bridge – part shopping arcade, part monument, part lovers' meeting place – is said to have been where the word 'bankrupt' (*banca rotta*, broken bench) originated.

'Tuscania' is named after the Etruscans, the people who inhabited the region in the first millennium BCE. Though numerous intriguing remains of their civilization endure, those not keen on archaeology may find the glorious Renaissance cities of Pisa, Lucca and Siena more to their taste.

Pisa's airport is a frequent stepping-stone on the way to Capraia. Yes, if you have time, you really ought to take in that extraordinary leaning tower: it's a tourist site that never disappoints. We like to visit at night, when the crowds are less and the cathedral, baptistry and



eccentric campanile are beautifully floodlit.

A walk around Lucca's lofty walls is memorably evocative, and, time permitting, a visit to Siena is a must. The city-centre cathedral is breathtaking – and incredibly difficult to photograph! Enjoying a true Italian cappuccino on the corner of the Piazza del Campo, you may stare at its marble surface and wonder how on earth competitors remain upright during the traditional horse races held there.

And while you're here, why not take in San Gimignano, the fine hilltop town that was the inspired setting for E.M. Forster's novel *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905)? Finally, if you haven't done so yet, set aside a few hours to enjoy *La Dolce Vita* in a Tuscan trattoria. Italian cuisine was born in Tuscany: *chianti, pasta, ribollita, prosciutto, bistecca, panforte* ... Don't worry, the English-speaking waiter will be only too happy to translate and advise.

Our brief tour of the Tuscan mainland at an end, we stand on the quay at Livorno and gaze out over the broad sweep of the Tuscan Archipelago National Park that embraces part of the Ligurian Sea to the north and the Tyrrhenian Sea to the south. Within its 600 square kilometres lie seven quite distinctive islands. Once settled into Capraia and the Forte, you may want to take advantage of one of the special boat trips and go exploring.



Elba is a good place to start. Across a clear sea where dolphins, groupers, rare whales and even rarer monk seals swim, lies an exotic island rich in history. If the sandy beaches are not to your liking, then how about its castles, fortresses and Napoleon's dreamy Palazzina dei Mulini? The French Emperor was exiled to Elba after his defeat and abdication in 1814, and it was from here that he returned to France to face his Waterloo.

For fans of Napoleon, a visit to his ancestral home on the large island of Corsica is another must. Though outside the National Park, the French island boasts stunning scenery, sweeping beaches, its own language and, of course, French cuisine. Planning a couple of weeks at Forte San Giorgio? Better make it three!

The extra time will enable you to take in some of the archipelago's smaller islands. There's Giglio, where you'll find remains of an Etruscan shipwreck and a Roman villa; the mysterious Gorgona, shared by wildlife and those doing penal servitude; and Montecristo, the island given everlasting fame by Alexander Dumas' novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. And if you're lucky, you may be one of the 250 tourists per day allowed to visit the wildlife sanctuary that is the tiny island of Pianosa.

For the time being, however, all these delights can wait. Its high time we made our way to Capraia, the pearl at the heart of the Tuscan Archipelago.