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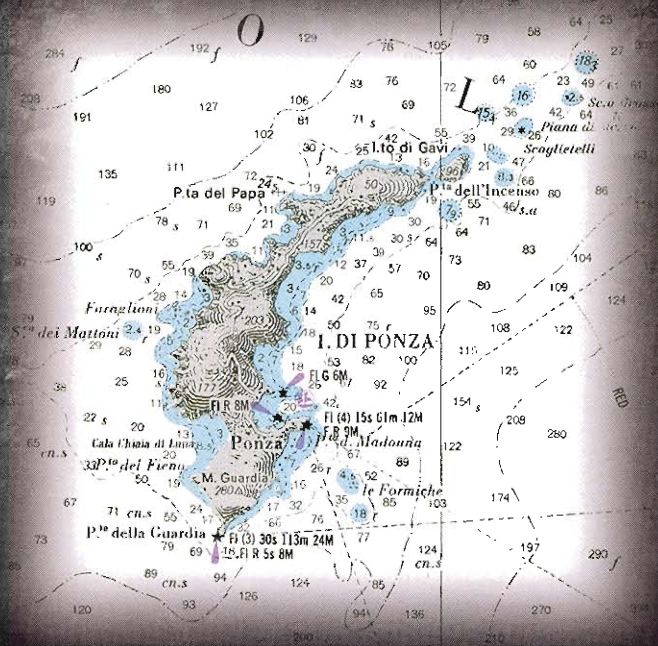
PACCHERI CON GAMBERI
E LENTICCHIE P.71

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**BUON
VIAGGIO**
E BUON APPETITO



secret location



The largest of the Pontine Islands and a short hop from the mainland, Ponza remains off the radar—kept classified by its locals. Surrounded by the shimmering Tyrrhenian Sea, it's a paradise less traveled, and a place where cars give way to boats.



Our small vessel rocks in the wake of a large motorboat

as the island of Ponza comes into view. Towering rocks known as the Faraglioni della Madonna rise from the water, and a few colored houses basking in the afternoon sun dot the island's rugged hillside. Soon, we turn and enter the buzzing port, surrounded by excited shouts echoing over the water, small tour boats coming and going, docking sailboats and yachts, ferryboats ready to set off for the mainland, and the Bourbon-period houses that line the curve of the wharf.

Every place has its story, but Ponza—part of the Isole Pontine, a scattering of islands born from volcanic explosions just off the Lazio coast about 30 miles from Gaeta—has many, though most of all, it's a centuries-old getaway destination. During Roman times, Ponza and nearby Ventotene were the preferred holiday destinations of the royal family. Later, Pope Silverio came to Ponza to escape persecution by the Byzantines and became the protector of the island. He's still celebrated here every year on June 20th. More recently, illustrious figures of the last century have visited: Giorgio Amendola, Lelio Basso, Sandro Pertini and even Benito Mussolini, who was sent here for ten days before being transferred to the mountains of the Gran Sasso.

Ponza is the largest of the six islands that make up the Isole Pontine. It and the island of Ventotene are the only two that are inhabitable. For most of its existence, Ponza has been a destination for Italians, but in recent years, foreign tourists have begun to discover its temperate waters and unspoiled beaches.

Accessible only by water from the mainland, with regular connections to Anzio, Formia and Naples, the main port is scenic and historic, and features most of the island's boutiques and places to eat. Ponza's small size protects it from large groups of tourists, and there are only a handful of hotels. The Hotel Mari was the first to open on the island, during the 1960s. Next to the port, it is simple and lovely, with little excess decoration. Luigi Tagliamonte, the discreet owner of the hotel, gives us advice on how to get around the island, which has only a small network of roads. He suggests renting a Citroën Mehari, a rugged, open-roofed off-roading truck, at the port—he says it's the best way to travel the short road that connects the island's two main centers, the towns of Ponza and Le Forna. Yet many prefer a boat to a car, because it can be easier to make your way to the island's attractions by sea, given Ponza's few roads and craggy hills with steep inclines.

Thought to be the mythical island Aeaëa, home of Circe from *The Odyssey*, Ponza retains an impressive collection of ancient sites. Must-visit attractions include Chiaia di Luna, the island's main beach, which is connected to the town of Ponza by a tunnel built by the Romans. The incredible Capo Bianco is a natural monument, discernible by its dazzling contrast of white cliffs and blue sea. Another set of dramatic rock formations is Lucia Rosa,

named for a martyred woman who threw herself into the sea after being forced to marry against her wishes. On the east side of the island, the town of Frontone also boasts a beach and fort but was too touristy for my taste, while the beautiful Schiavone beach further north is worth a visit, along with the nearby postcard-perfect natural stone arch called Arco Naturale o Spaccapolpi, named after its resemblance to a pair of pants.

Of the sites that can be accessed only by boat, there are the Pilatus grottoes, a series of connected, cut-rock basins that were once Roman fish tanks. Inhabited by eels, locals say the Romans used the grottos to torture people by feeding them to the fish. Other sites include Circe's grotto, another reference to *The Odyssey*, supposedly where the witch once lived; the rocks known as Le Formiche (named after their resemblance to ants), which are a short distance from the southeast side of the island; and the Piscine Naturale, a series of natural pools where you can go swimming or snorkeling. Take a trip to the uninhabited island Palmarola to escape the crowds, visit the heaches and nature reserve, and eat from its few summer-only fish stands.

Among the island's culinary specialties are lentils, which grow throughout Ponza, figs, rabbit and seafood such as sea urchin, anchovies and lobster. After the island's first rain, in either August or September, locals hunt snails by lantern at night. Fifty-year-old Oreste Romagnolo, a former skipper and jewelry-maker, got to know Ponza by sailing in the area. Not surprisingly, he fell in love with the place and decided to stay. Today, he is the chef of Orèstorante, where he cooks up creative seafood dishes served on a series of terraces. Also known as Da Oreste, almost everyone on the island hangs out there. Also the president of the Ponza Yacht Club, Romagnolo and his wife, Valentina, a sommelier, attract clients with dishes like calamarata, amberjack served on a hot stone from Palmarola, and large shrimp wrapped in kataifi with sea urchin mayonnaise.

I met one of the island's personalities, Antonio De Luca, at the port. Born and raised on Ponza, De Luca is a poet, sailor and winemaker, and the nonconformist voice of Ponza. Whenever possible, he retreats to Punta Fieno, where he tends his vineyards. At 283 meters above sea level, Punta Fieno is Ponza's highest point and one of the most beautiful areas of the island, which is worth a visit for the views alone.

About a half of the island of Ponza hosts grapevines for making wine. Further up from De Luca's are the vineyards of the Antiche Cantine Migliaccio, which produces well-known local wines called Fieno di Ponza. Under the scorching midday sun, we drink a glass of white wine fresh from the cellar offered by Liberato, one of the owners. The panoramic view from here is magnificent, with Palmarola on the horizon, and it's yet another memorable place on Ponza to watch the sunset.



*This page: Punta Fieno.
Previous pages: A view
from within the Arco
Naturale o Spaccapolpi.*



This page: A view of Feola bay. Opposite, front top: Table set on the terrace of Orestorante; the restaurant's patcheri with shrimp and lentils.

AT ORÈSTORANTE in the town of Ponza, chef Oreste Romagnolo makes a simple pasta dish that brings together the flavors of the island's fresh ingredients.

paccheri con gamberi e lenticchie

paccheri with shrimp and lentils

1 hour 15 minutes • 4 servings

Lentils from Ponza are difficult to come by in the U.S. Castelluccio and Colfiorito lentils—both Umbrian varieties—are more commonly found here. They are delicious and hold their shape well when cooked. If Umbrian lentils can't be found, substitute French green lentils.

- 1¼ cups small lentils, preferably Castelluccio or Colfiorito
 - 1 cup plus 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
 - ½ cup packed fresh basil leaves
- Fine sea salt
- 2 garlic cloves, gently smashed and peeled
 - 16 jumbo shrimp (about ¾ pound), preferably head on, peeled and deveined
 - ¼ cup dry white wine
 - 1 (14-ounce) package paccheri pasta

Rinse lentils and discard any stones or debris. Put lentils in a medium saucepan, add enough water to cover by 1 inch. Partially covered, bring water just to a boil; reduce to a simmer and cook for 20 minutes, then drain lentils (lentils will be only partially cooked).

In a 12-inch nonstick skillet, heat ¾ cup oil over medium-high heat until hot but not smoking. Add lentils, 6 basil leaves and ¼ teaspoon salt. Cook, stirring occasionally, until lentils are tender, about 8 minutes. Remove skillet from heat; remove and discard basil.

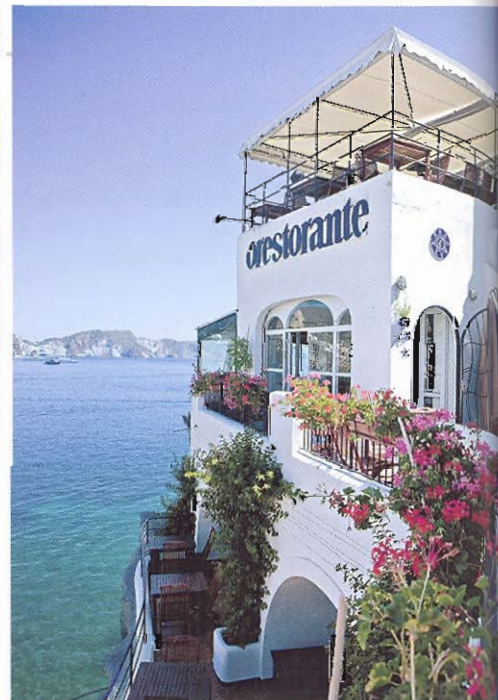
Bring a large pot of salted water to a very low boil (paccheri cook best at a low boil). Meanwhile, in a blender, purée half of the lentils until smooth, then transfer to a bowl. To the purée, add all but ½ cup of the whole lentils, stir to combine.

Clean and dry the skillet. Add ¼ cup oil, 8 basil leaves and garlic; heat over medium-high heat until hot but not smoking. Add shrimp and cook, turning once, for 2 minutes, then add wine and simmer until shrimp are cooked through, about 4 minutes more. Remove and discard garlic and basil. Reserving liquid in pan, remove shrimp from skillet and set aside. Add puréed lentils to skillet and stir to combine with liquid.

Add pasta to the gently boiling water and cook just until al dente, drain and transfer to a large bowl. Immediately add reserved whole lentils and remaining 2 tablespoons oil; toss to combine.

Gently warm puréed lentils, then divide among four bowls. Top with pasta, then shrimp. Garnish with remaining basil leaves and serve immediately.





Clockwise from top left: An old stairwell; in the town of Ponza, where many of the island's boutiques and eateries are located; skewers of amberjack that were cooked on a hot stone at Orèstorante, Oreste Romagnolo's place; outside of the restaurant, which overlooks the water; inside the Pilatus grottoes, a series of connected spaces cut into rock that were once Roman fish tanks and which still contain eels; the Arco Naturale o Spaccapolpi, the natural rock formation named after its resemblance to a pair of pants; the town of Ponza's port; flowering bougainvillea. *Opposite:* A view of Ponza from a staircase.



GETTING THERE

Ponza can be reached by ferry from Anzio, Formia, Naples and Terracina. Passenger ferries leave several times a day year-round. In high season, there is also ferry service for cars. But don't bring a car—there are almost no parking lots on the island and roads are limited. From Anzio to Formia, you can take a Vetur ferry (vetor.it) or, from June to September, Caremar (caremar.it) is another service. There are also boats from Naples ([Snav, snav.it](http://Snav.snav.it)) and Terracina (snapnavigazione.it).

WHERE TO STAY

HOTEL MARI

The first hotel on Ponza, located on the port, Mari is housed in an 18th century palazzo and has 20 rooms. The bedrooms are basic and clean with special lamps designed by Neapolitan architect Rosario Renino. The mini sfogliatelle and warm shortbread served at breakfast are a plus. Corso Carlo Pisacane 19, Ponza, 04027, tel. 0771.80101, double rooms from 132 euros, hotelmari.com.

WHERE TO EAT

ACQUA PAZZA

This twenty-year old restaurant is located in the main piazza of Ponza, just steps away from the port and hotel Mari. With one Michelin star, it offers some of the best fresh seafood around. Piazza Carlo Pisacane 10, Ponza, 04027, tel. 0771.80643, acquapazza.com.

ANTICHE CANTINE MIGLIACCIO

This winery doesn't serve food but is worth a visit for its notable local wine and spectacular views. Loc. Fieno, tel. 3207.079269, fienodiponza.it.

LA LATERNA DA SILVERIO

A historic restaurant on Corso Carlo Pisacane, where you can enjoy simple, but well-made, traditional dishes. Try the spaghetti with calamari or stuffed calamari with a hint of peperoncino. Via Corridoio 2, Ponza, 04027, tel. 0771.809826.

ORÈSTORANTE

Be sure to bring a sweater at night. The sea breeze fills the terraces of this restaurant with cool, pleasant air. The menu is based on the creative spirit of Oreste Romagnolo, and his wife, Valentina pairs it with wine. Via Dietro la Chiesa 3, Ponza, 04027, tel. 0771.80338, orestorante.it. □

