



PONZA

Swimming and snacking along volcanic shores

LOCATION	Tyrrhenian Sea
COORDINATES	140.91° N, 12.96° E
AREA	4 sq. miles (10 sq. km)
POPULATION	3,339
MAIN TOWN	Ponza

Rising sharply from the topaz surface of the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Italian island of Ponza has never lost its primeval aura. Though its port towns today have tight clusters of confetti-colored houses, Ponza’s beaches are backed by embankments of raw lava petrified into striking shapes—a natural monument to the earth in its formative years, and a reminder of how this outpost looked to the Etruscans and Greeks who arrived here on early explorations of the area.

“We’re out here in the middle of the sea, following in the footsteps of Ulysses and reconnecting with the philosophy of the ancient Greeks,” says eminent Roman artist (and protégé of Cy Twombly’s) Alberto Di Fabio, who purchased a remote property on Ponza a decade ago, transforming the white stucco home over long summers into a refuge from urban life. “This place is where I go to dream of more analog times,” he says with a smile.

Though Di Fabio has apartments and studios in Rome and New York, his “cave home” on Ponza is where the painter found he was able to settle into a contemplative frame of mind. “Visitors here are left enraptured by the purity of nature,” he says. Di Fabio’s neighbors are agriculturalists committed to

growing in harmony with the land, and whose ventures include the acclaimed vineyard of Antiche Cantine Migliaccio, where ancestral methods and the Biancolella grapes (for centuries grown only on the Pontine Islands, of which Ponza is the largest) produce wines redolent of hawthorn flowers and the terrain’s igneous flavor.

The wine is a natural match for Ponza’s culinary delicacies, including linguine c’o Fellone, which is made with the island’s native spider crabs, local red shrimp (often eaten raw), fresh-caught anchovies served with cherry tomatoes, and cicerchie, a flat pea that grows wild here.

Di Fabio spends his summer months on Ponza “reading, writing and gathering energy for new ideas,” even occasionally painting, but when he takes a break from his ruminations, he heads to the dockside Bar Tripoli for an aperitivo and views of sailboats bobbing in rows on the water nearby. He may also duck into Hotel Chiaia di Luna where, gazing from the pool-side terrace at the rift between two hills opening to a stretch of sea, “the sunset is incomparable.” Around the central Piazza Carlo Pisacane, dinner is best taken at Ristorante l’Aragosta, at





GETTING THERE

Most Italians visiting Ponza arrive from either Naples or Rome. From Naples, take the train to Formia and then the ferry. From Rome, board the train to Anzio or Formia and then the ferry. The crossing from Anzio will last just over an hour, while the crossing from Formia takes two and a half hours. A direct ferry from Naples to Ponza runs a few times a week; other ferries depart from Terracina and San Felice Circeo.

SEE & TOUR

Rent a boat and duck in and out of the island's coves or travel to the smaller island of Palmarola. If you're lucky, the *barchino dei gelati* (ice cream boat) will catch you on the way. Alternatively, take a dip in the sheltered Piscine Naturali where you can rent sun beds and parasols. In the early evening, stop by the colorful harbor for aperitivo. Don't worry if you can't get a seat: the harbor wall is the best seat in the house.

STAY

Hotel Chiaia di Luna is head and shoulders above the other high-end hotels on the island. Its vast terraces are particularly spectacular in early summer when the bougainvillea is in bloom. Alternatively, there are several tastefully designed guesthouses. Villa Laetitia, owned by fashion royalty Anna Fendi, is a Bourbon-era building at the foot of Monte Guardia, renovated with Neapolitan tiles and antiques.

WORTH KNOWING

Between 1922 and 1943, when Italy was subjected to fascist rule, Ponza served as a prison for high-profile political opponents including Ras Imru Haile Selassie, a cousin of Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie. After he fell from power in 1943, Benito Mussolini himself was also imprisoned here, although only for a couple of weeks—he was moved to Sardinia to keep his location secret from Germany.



Ristorante Eéa (Ponza is thought to be cited as Eéa in Homer's *Odyssey*) or at Gennarino a Mare, where the dining terrace is built right into the waters along the shore. For dinner with "vistas of faraway horizons," where the sea and sky can be appreciated in vast expanses, Di Fabio suggests the westward-facing Tramonto ("sunset") restaurant, situated high above the hills in the exact center of the island.

The artist also recommends visiting other regions on the island, engaging with the traditional atmosphere of its smaller towns. "If you want to experience Italy as it was in the 1950s and '60s, you have to go to Le Forna," he says of the area at the island's northern tip. Here he suggests Ristorante Punta Incenso, or Da Igino—"the absolute top, with fish served roasted or salt-baked that comes directly from the fishermen working in the Cala Fonte bay there." Di Fabio always stops to appreciate the view of the fishermen's old wooden boats sheltered by the dramatic rocks curving around the cove. Nearby, he likes to swim at the Cala Gaetano, a crystalline inlet with a rocky shore surrounded by prickly pears and blackberry brambles. It

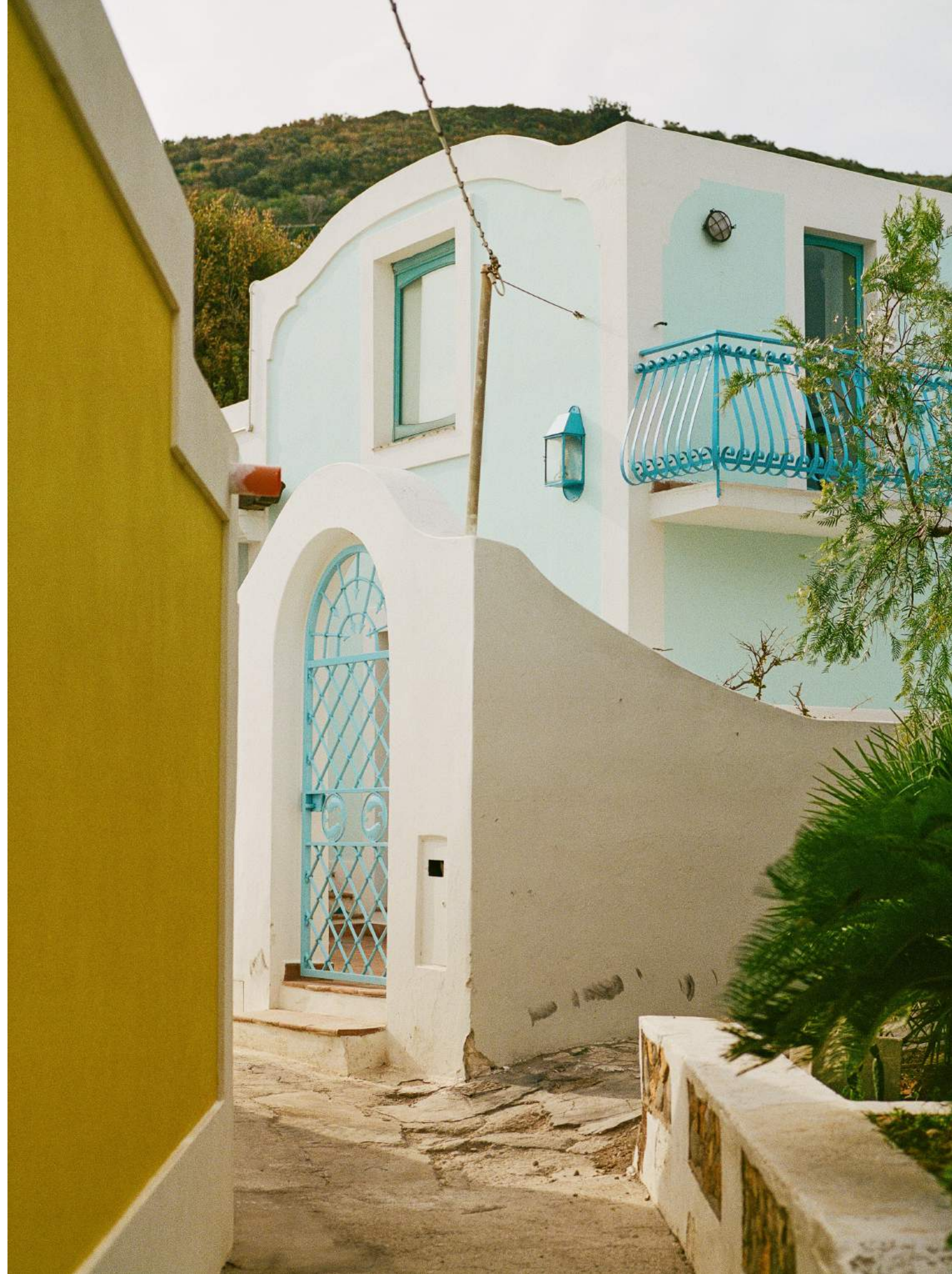
can be reached only by the ambitious—the steep climb counts over three hundred stairs—but it keeps the beach uncrowded. At one of the few sandy beaches on the island, Cala Feola, the Ristorante La Marina is "unmissable," as are the natural pools that have formed along the shoreline. Di Fabio also makes the journey to Bar Zanzibar to enjoy a drink by the pebble beach of Santa Maria, encircled by the town's colorful houses.

At Frontone, a sandy cove surrounded by small verdant cliffs, Di Fabio likes to dine and stargaze at Da Enzo, where tables are set out on the rocks by the water—the owner transports guests to their table in a rowboat. In the daytime, the nearby Ristoro da Gerardo serves its homey dishes in a more rural setting, "a paradise on the hillside with chickens and goats wandering around you," as the artist describes it. The owner has even set up a self-made ethnographic museum in one room, laying out the antique tools and folk art of life in old Ponza, with the scythes and fishing nets they've used to collect their food and models of the boats they've used to sail around these remote waters—all glimpses of an analog time that feels much closer on Ponza's ancient shores.

BELOW
Gamberi & Capperi—which translates as “shrimps and capers”—is one of the island’s most celebrated restaurants, featuring innovative takes on island staples that chef Luigi Nasti delights in preparing directly at the table. From the whitewashed terrace outside, you can look down onto the town of Ponza and, beyond it, the harbor—where the fish on your plate likely came from.

OPPOSITE
Bar Nautilus sits next to the island’s Piscine Naturali. These saltwater pools, formed by ancient volcanic activity, are perfect swimming holes—shallow and sheltered from the weather out at sea. The surrounding cliffs are dotted with sun loungers and bar shacks. If the heat gets to be too much, take a plunge off the pontoon slide or dip inside one of the surrounding caves.





BELOW

Porto di Ponza will be most visitors’ entry point to the island. From here, you can take a boat out to the tiny, almost completely uninhabited island of Palmarola, which features extraordinary vaulted grottos set back into high cliffs that you can swim and snorkel into. Local fishermen will happily complete the twenty-minute journey and help you catch your lunch along the way.

FOLLOWING PAGES, RIGHT

The striking Hotel Chiaia di Luna is situated next to the beach that lends it its name. Chiaia di Luna, which translates to “Half-Moon Beach,” is a thin strip of white sand surrounded by vertiginous cliffs. The only land access to the beach—a tunnel built by the Romans—has been closed for several years now due to the high risk of rockfall. The area must be admired from afar, either from the water or the surrounding cliffs.







BELOW LEFT

Antonio Balzano, the former mayor of Ponza, outside his pizzeria Tartaruga Pub. Balzano was mayor between 1993 and 2001 and now says he enjoys the job of restaurateur because he's able to talk to people from all over the world. The small restaurant books up quickly, so it is worth making a reservation during the summer season.



