Ischia Wonderland

A HEALING PARADISE OF THERMAL SPRINGS AND MULTI-COLOURED VILLAGES IN THE BAY OF NAPLES

By Mohammed Reza Amirinia

CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



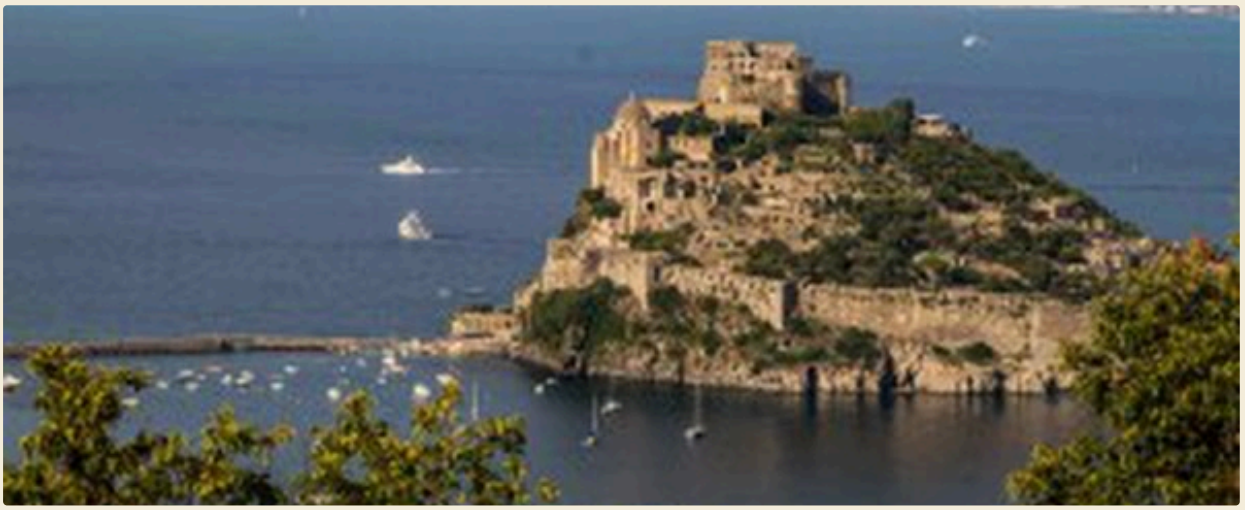
ISCHIA PORTO	LACCO AMENO	ROCK FUNGO	ARAGONESE CASTLE
The Landing Point	*San Montano Bay*	*The Mushroom Rock*	*Jewel of the Island*

THE WONDERLAND OF ISCHIA

Ischia wonderland

A naturally created volcanic island laid out beautifully near the bay of Naples — a delightful utopia that has charmed many visitors even before the Romans

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Aragonese Castle

It was early afternoon on a sunny day, pleasantly warm and colourful. After spending four days in Napoli, I was leaving behind this dramatic city with all its magical, frozen-in-time monuments.. I was departing from the city's port to go on one hour-long journey to discover the wonderland of Ischia Island. As the crowded hydrofoil started sailing, the city and the giant volcanic mountain of Vesuvius became smaller and smaller and soon faded away from my view.

The smell of the sea breeze, the breath of sea air was stirred by the wind on the open-air deck. Beautiful scenery was rapidly passing in front of me like a film and I could not resist not taking out my camera and going out on the deck to take pictures.

I enjoyed the splendid blue sea, watching shiny silver reflections of the sun on the surface and far away islands. My spirits were high with thoughts of visiting the island. The boat calmly approached the harbour and the green hilly town emerged with multicoloured houses in Mediterranean style and traditionally painted in yellow, green and red all squeezed together like a defensive wall. They were tall with arches and curved ceilings.

II



My landing point – Ischia Porto

I landed in Ischia port, the largest gateway to the ancient volcanic island of Ischia, a naturally created 46.3 square kilometers land, laid out beautifully near the bay of Naples, a delightful utopia that charmed many visitors even before the Romans. The mountainous island which has many sandy beaches and very mild climate is well known for its hot thermal springs containing healing substances. The whole island is a thermal park, catering for health and well-being tourism. Called Green Island because of tuff, a type of rock created from volcanic ash after a volcanic eruption over 56000 years ago, this prosperous island has everything in one place from the prehistoric era through ancient history and the mediaeval period as well as culture, good food and the beauty of nature to offer visitors.

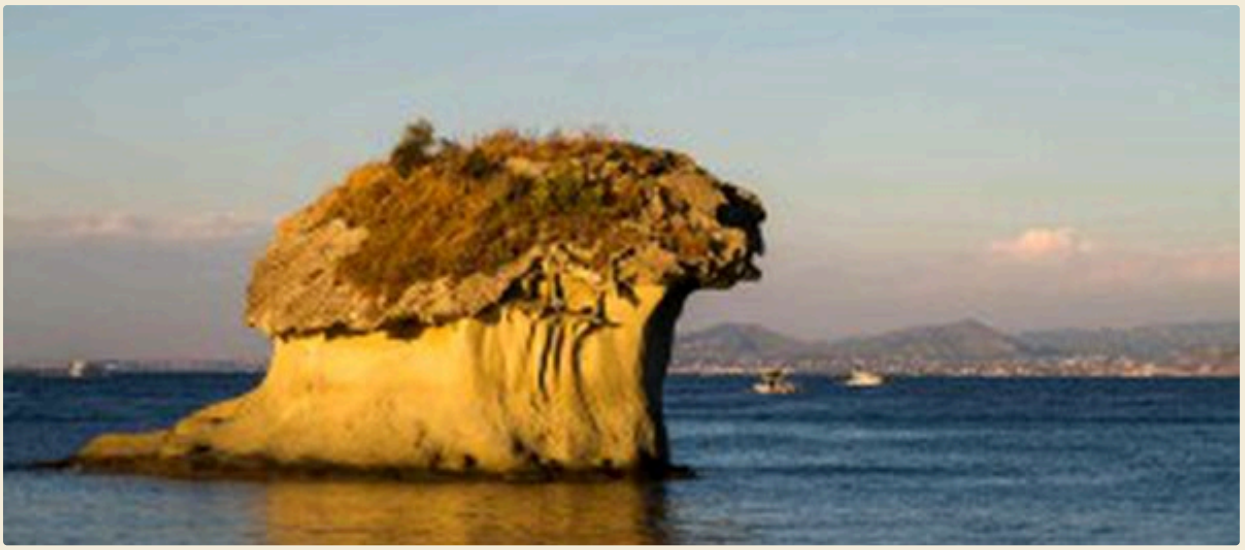
III



the view of San Montano Bay in Lacco Ameno

The taxi drove across roads overlooking sea, passing small villages in Casamicciola Terme as it negotiated a way along very narrow roads through hilly woods before reaching a 5 star luxury hotel. I arrived there exhausted. As I was guided to my room with a sea view, I was amazed and overjoyed by the spectacular natural setting of Mezzatorre Resort and Spa, which lies over the rocky hill above the sea on San Montano Bay near the small village of Lacco Ameno. My room was in the fifteenth century tower, which gives its name to the hotel.

IV



Rock Fungo – the mushrom rock – in Lacco Ameno

I could have relaxed there all day long, like many other guests forgetting all about the world. but I had to discover the island. I rushed out to take the hotel shuttle service to discover the tranquility of the nearby village of Lacco Ameno, recognised because of an 11th century church, built over the remains of an ancient Greek colony. The museum of Santa Restituta which houses several prehistoric findings and Greek artifacts from the 8th century BC is also well known for the image of a mushroom rock called Fungo. The village was pleasantly lit at night and a few boutiques were open till late. It was very calm and quiet. I saw locals seating outside cafes near the beach chatting and laughing as the sound of piano drifted across from one of the hotels in Piazza Santa Restituta.

My second day saw me taking the island's packed bus service which, being sardined mean that it was difficult to see the scenery. I visited the town of Forio with its appealing cobbled streets, colourful shops and most of all, the charming 13th century church of "del Soccorso". White in colour, it is built on a rise with a spectacular view of the sea. Not far away is the preserved fishing village of San'Angelo with its narrow curving streets, which is only accessible on foot.

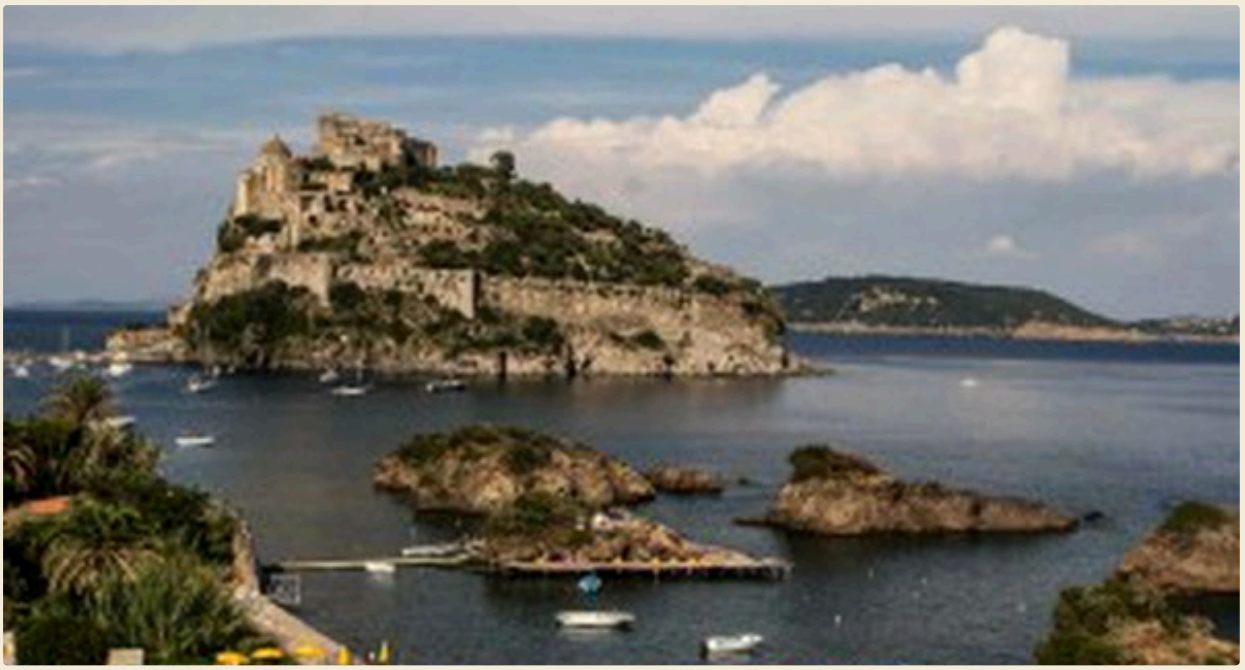
V



the Via Roma in Ischia Porto

I completed my day by visiting Ischia town, which is surrounded by lavish pinewoods. It stretches from the hills of St. Alexander to the Aragonese Castle, and is divided into two parts, Ischia Porto and Ischia Ponte. Ischia Porto, the harbour and biggest commercial centre of the island, is full of brilliantly decorated inns and taverns. The historic quarter of Ischia Ponte, with its multi-coloured stone streets is superficially frozen in time and the jewel of the island, the medieval Aragonese castle which sits gloriously at the top of a volcanic rock. I walked all the way from the port through the paved trendy streets of Via Roma and Corso Vittoria Colona which is full of traditional shops, restaurants and jewelers and is the main way visitors use reach the castle. I also observed small churches packed with people at prayer. By the time, I reached the gigantic rocky castle it was sunset and too late to visit.

VI



Anragonese Castle towers over the bay

I started my third day on the island by visiting Aragonese Castle which stands 113 metres high on a small volcanic island connected by a stone bridge to Ischia Ponte. It has a spectacular view, overlooking the sea and Ischia, with a vast perspective and endless horizon. The history of castle goes back to an old fort dated 474 B.C but the present castle was built by Alfonso D'Aragona in 1441. It can be climbed by an old pathway, but I choose to take a modern lift to reach the top. The castle used to accommodate 2000 families with 13 churches. Two interesting historical churches: the Church of the Immacolata and the Cathedral of Assunta are still standing. There is also a museum exhibiting weapons and torture instruments.

VII



Ischia Ponte

I returned to Ischia Porto to have my lunch in a recommended restaurant only to find it more than just a place to eat. Un Attimo Di Vino located at far end of right bank of the port. Raymond, the Sicilian born chef who chose Ischia as his ideal place to settle says: “this is my house and I treat my customers like my own guests.” His secret ingredients are the freshness of fish, seafood cooked exclusively with steam and his magical hand, preparing a fantasy starter and main courses with pasta and the best flavours of the sea. He even makes his own olive oil and Sicilian traditional desserts. His philosophy is based on: “I do not see it as a job. I love to work in calmness in search of the best tastes for my clients.” He owes his success to his wife, Teressa and love of two sons. I sat outside near the front of the restaurant with a nice view of the marina, watching people passing by. You can agree with Raymond on everything you want him to cook for you as there is no menu. Raymond even invited me into his kitchen while he was cooking my dishes. I enjoyed the meal, the pleasant, informal homely atmosphere and the music.

VIII



Looking from the castle over Ischia Ponte

My taxi arrived at Un Attimo Di Vino to complete the last phase of my trip around Ischia. Loredana who had inherited her taxi from her father is one of just five female taxi drivers. Her taxi was a small mini Vespa, comfortable, looking like a rickshaw and designed to go through the narrow streets and pathways of Ischia. She took me to unknown and hidden places as well as the highest points of island, from where there were great scenic views of Ischia Ponte and the castle. She also showed me some rock houses and caves at the top of the island and a restaurant which was built within the rock. We also visited a stone church built over 100 years ago over a running spring. She told me that the natural and historical heritage of the island is preserved because only local residences are allowed to drive their cars. It was nice to explore the island with a native resident in a short period of time. She was not just a taxi driver, but also a very knowledgeable guide.

IX

I ended my night by having dinner in The Regina Isabella Hotel which has the most renowned spas on the island as well as having three restaurants including the Michelin-starred Indaco.

On my last day on the island before I returned to Naples to take my flight back home, I spent a few hours in Mezzatorre's spa, resting in thermal pools and swimming in the sea. It was very refreshing to go under high presure thermal waters, recharging my body and soul.

◆

The Ischia is a memorable dreamland, with a lot to offer in history and nature. It is a healing paradise to relax and enjoy life. I would love to come back to Ischia, to research it more deeply and spend more time in its small towns and villages.

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For more about Ischia, click here.

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