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Capri's pulling power

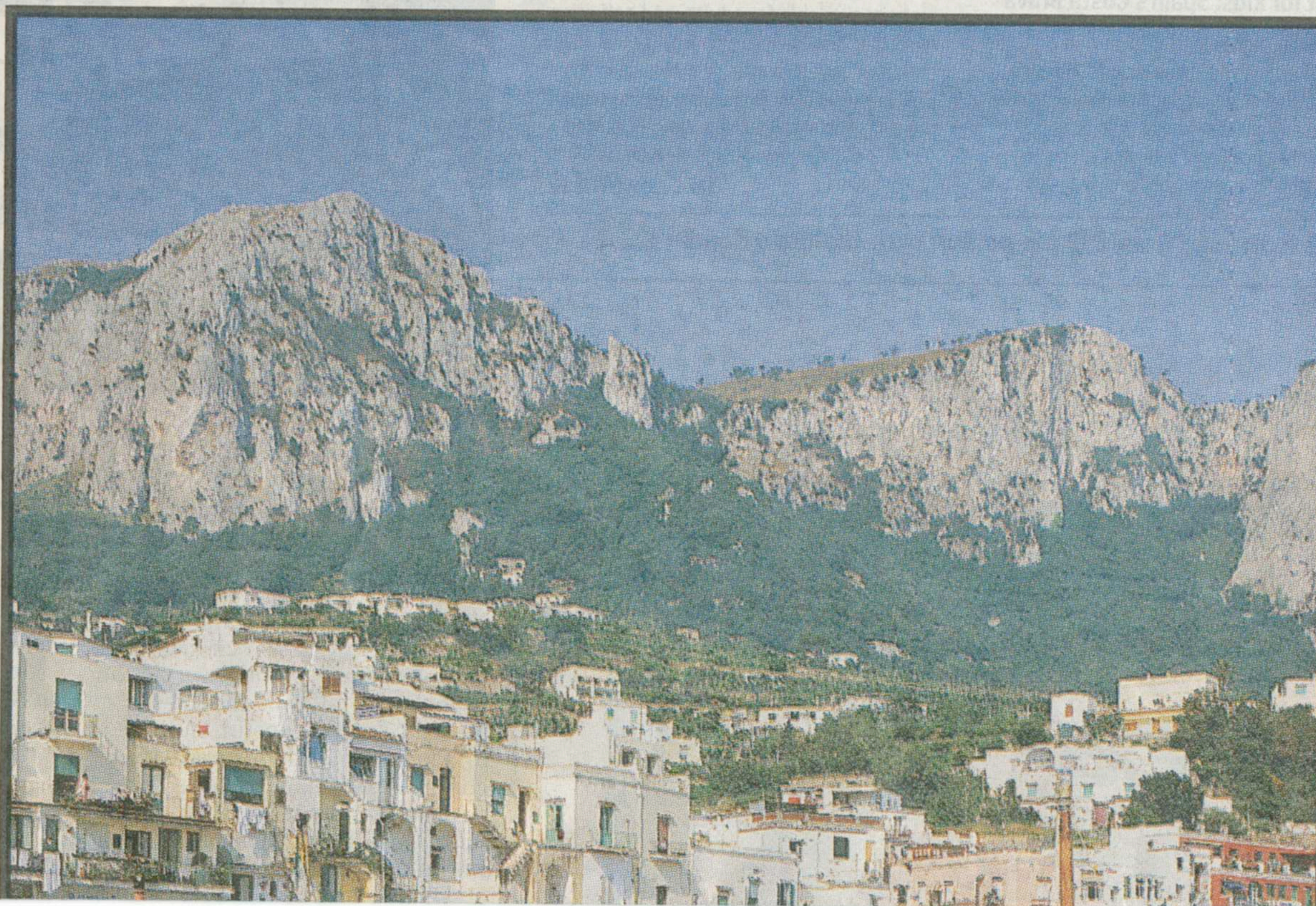
In the first of a three-part series looking at Europe's best holiday islands, we give you the complete guide to Italy's style isle

BY LYDIA GARD

The Reputation

Licentiousness, glamour and decadence that hark back to the era of the Grand Tour and, in more recent times, images of Greta Garbo and Sophia Loren posing in Jackie-O glasses. The island is also known for its natural beauty, perilous roads and spectacular grottos. Dismissed by some as overcrowded, expensive and passé.

The Reality



OUT AND ABOUT

Where to stay

Capri Palace Hotel and Spa (Via Capodimonte, Anacapri, 00 39 081 978 0111, www.capri-palace.com. Doubles from £195): sleek, chic and romantic. Many interiors are white. Donatella Versace stays at the Andromeda Suite. The spa is a must.

La Scalinatella (Via Tragara 10, 00 39 081 837 0633, www.scalinatella.com. Doubles from £295): a boutique hotel with a great view and intricate tiling. Some rooms have Jacuzzis. Does not accept credit cards.

Villa Le Scale (Capodimonte 64, Anacapri, 00 39 081 838 2190, www.villalescale.com. Doubles from £170): a restored, seven-bedroom, 19th-century mansion in Anacapri run like a family home — truly chic.

Villa Sarah (Via Tiberio 3, 00 39 081 837 7817. Doubles from £110): an oasis of calm set among vines and pretty white villas.

Villa Brunella (Via Tragara 6, 00 39 081 837 0122, www.villabrunella.it. Doubles from £180): perfect for families, with panoramic terraces and a big pool.

Where to eat

the Med, drizzled with beautiful people who come to watch one another prancing around the piazza. The summer months invite well-heeled Milanese and Parisian women trailing accessory dogs and shopping. Day-trippers outnumber hotel guests by 10 to one, so evenings are more relaxing. By September the pine-blanketed hills are tranquil. Beyond the sheen, the unplastered walls of convents and the knotted lemon groves have inspired writers from Pablo Neruda to Graham Greene. Deliciously frightening, cliff-edge driving.

The Breakdown Capri Town

The Draw: wander through Via Camerelle (which makes Fifth Avenue look like Stevenage High Street) laughing at the price tags. Have tea on the balcony of Piccolo Bar or a Cosmopolitan at Bar Tiberio, both in the piazzetta — a must for pre-dinner people-watching. For old-fashioned Caprese cuisine, try La Capannina where Elton John, Mariah Carey and her breasts are all regulars (see box). Walk it off exploring the perilously hilly streets; the lazy can take the spectacular funicular ride from Marina Grande (every 15 minutes between 06.30 and 21.00hrs). Scialapopolo bar-gelateria (Via Vittorio Emanuele) has, without question, the world's best ice cream.

The Drawback: in mid-summer it's a bun fight — albeit a glamorous iced-bun one — to get a seat in the piazzetta. The four cafés jostling for custom create an intimidating stage on which the beau monde strut. For every kaftan-wearing chic summer babe there's a footballer's wife in stilettos.

Anacapri

The Draw: quieter and more rustic than Capri Town with few nightclubs. The town has fine views and some lovely buildings, including the church of San Michele. Walk the



On the waterfront: the picturesque side of the harbour, Marina Grande, is surrounded by the atmospheric old village

two miles from Anacapri via the ancient Phoenician Steps. Also get the bus to the lighthouse at Punta Carena at the south-west tip of the island or take the chairlift (March-October 9.30am-sunset) to the peak of Monte Solaro where the view over the southern shores is jaw-dropping. The Capri Palace Hotel (see box) is Anacapri's greatest asset, drawing a sophisticated, pampered crowd from Julia Roberts to British honeymooners. Visit the hotel spa's "Leg School" to recover from the walk.

The Drawback: the cliff-edge drive up to Anacapri (or the orange shuttle

bus) is nail-biting. The streets around the bus terminal are a maze of tourist shops selling Limoncello and ghastrly ceramics.

Out of town

The Draw: the rural side of Capri is the island's real pull. From the Marina Grande take the convertible white Mercedes to the entrance of the Grotto (from Anacapri there is a shuttle bus). Walk to the Arco Naturale — the most photographed piece of limestone — and take lunch in the Grottelle restaurant. Walk past the Faraglioni and up to the Belvedere Tragara for the best views. Visit the Villa Jovis (9am-6pm, May to

Sept) from where Emperor Tiberius flung his foes. The Gardens of Augustus are a pretty series of terraces above the sea. Swim from Marina Piccolo with its colourful bathing huts.

The Drawback: queuing for two hours for a two-minute row around the grotto (€8) and being serenaded by a Caprese oarsman, and bus-loads of American schoolchildren. Some sights will be hard to access for the elderly or infirm.

● NEXT WEEK: Part 2 on Sardinia

(Prices for two including wine)

L'Olivo at the Capri Palace (as above. More than £100 for dinner): the only Michelin-starred restaurant on the island. Try the gourmet menu and ask to see the cellar.

La Capannina (Via Le Botteghe 12, 00 39 081 837 0732; £35-£50 for dinner): great for Capri specialities — pizza bianco with mozzarella and rocket, roasted local fish with oil and lemon or with a zesty spinach garnish — people-watching and great service. Closed Wednesdays.

Add'O Riccio (00 39 081 837 1380; £25 for lunch): on the cliffside not far from the Grotto Azzurro, the seafood is as good as the views.

Buca di Bacco Da Serafina (Via Longano 35, 00 39 081 837 0723; £15-£20 for lunch): good Capri-style (with oil and lemon) grilled fish and pasta that don't melt the credit card. Closed Wednesdays.

Da Paolino (Via Palazzo a Mare 11, 00 39 081 837 6102; £20 for lunch): in a charming and rustic setting in a lemon grove, the seafood and salads are a must.

Villas and tour operators

Agency Trial Travel (00 39 081 552 9090, trialtravel@caprigap.com): organises private transfers and tours to Capri from Naples.

Capri Tours & Excursions (00 39 081 837 6895, info@caprieventi.com): arranges bespoke day trips around the island.

For information on private villa rentals visit www.capri.net and look under House Rentals

Useful stuff

Weather: to avoid crowds go in September when the sea is still warm. Temperatures in the summer (June-August) are at least 25C.

Visa requirements: EU citizens do not need a visa to visit Italy for up to 90 days.

Tourist information: Capri Town (00 39 081 837 0686), Marina Grande (00 39 081 837 0634).

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