

FINDING A TRANQUIL SIDE OF CAPRI

Days are filled with strolls on flowered paths
to Roman ruins, sybaritic lunches and afternoons
reading or dozing on the terrace

By SUSAN ALLEN TOTH

ON our first morning in Capri, I stepped onto our sunny terrace, looked beyond our yellow-splashed lemon tree to a blue-green sea, and immediately felt as if I had stepped into a frame of "Enchanted April." In this 1992 fairy-tale movie, several unhappy, chilled Englishwomen, fleeing the rainy gloom of London, open the shutters of their Italian villa to an astonishing flood of sunlight and lush greenness. The promise of romance floats in the air almost as faintly as the lace swaths of wisteria.

It is easy to feel star-struck in Capri. Just hearing its name can make one think of movies, old popular songs ("The Isle of Capri") and celebrities. Ever since Caesar Augustus discovered the charms of this small, flowering island in the Bay of Naples and purchased it in 29 B.C., the rich and famous have moored in its two inviting harbors, climbed its steep streets to admire its cascading flowers and plants (more than 800 species), taken in dazzling views of the bay and neighboring islands, sat on its sunbaked terraces, or swam in its clear turquoise waters.

Capri welcomes day tourists, too. Between Easter and November, they arrive in boatloads from Naples or Sorrento, only 20 to 75 minutes away via frequent ferries. Because Capri seemed so immoderately well-known, I had wondered whether my husband, James, and I would find its glamor our tensely and its scenery interrupted by elbow-to-elbow sightseers. But our trusted rental agent, Daniel Morneau at Vacanza Bella in San Francisco, assured us that by staying in La Cubia, an airy, spacious and stylish house tucked away at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac, we could avoid the crowds and discover a tranquil, hospitable island. Despite the pressure of modern tourism, he said, Capri had not been spoiled.

To our delight, he was right. For 10 days on this island, James and I would find its glamor our tensely and its scenery interrupted by elbow-to-elbow sightseers. But our trusted rental agent, Daniel Morneau at Vacanza Bella in San Francisco, assured us that by staying in La Cubia, an airy, spacious and stylish house tucked away at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac, we could avoid the crowds and discover a tranquil, hospitable island. Despite the pressure of modern tourism, he said, Capri had not been spoiled.

After cooking a light supper — Capri's many small gardens provided us with treats

night life, but it was just what we had dreamed about during a wintry, gray March.

Much of the pleasure of an extended stay on Capri lies in not having a car. (Though residents own cars, tourists usually cannot take them onto the island.) Minibuses ply between several key locations, including the two main towns of Capri (population 8,000) and Anacapri (2,000), and a fleet of taxis, including vintage convertibles called bath-tub taxis, hover near the main port, Marina Grande, and close to the two town squares.

Although several main streets connect key points on the island, most other lanes, narrow and twisting, are necessarily traffic-free, except for occasional motorized carts ferrying heavy goods. With trails crisscrossing the hills, and a maze of intriguing lanes, this is a walker's island.

Capri offered more enticing itineraries than we could fit into 10 leisurely days. Our guide was "Capri Anacapri in 12 Tours," a hard-to-find paperback (try a well-stocked newspaper shop), with maps, color illustrations and literary excerpts.

This handy book outlined 12 walks, some arduous, others only an hour's mild stroll. They led us to monuments like the Certosa di San Giacomo, a former Carthusian monastery that is now a museum and school; the Gardens of Augustus, a flower-filled park on a hill; Anacapri's 18th-century church, San Michele, with a splendid mosaic floor; and several other landmarks. For longer walks, we also carried a detailed map of the island.

Most of our walks ended somewhere high on a limestone cliff overlooking Capri's glinting waters. On such a compact island — 4.2 miles long, 1.7 miles at its widest point — we were never far from a glimpse of the sea.

One favorite short walk took us from Anacapri's main square, only a few steps from our house, along a paved path carved into the side of Monte Solaro, the island's highest point (1,932 feet). Passing secluded houses and intensely cultivated vineyards sprang from the hillside, we passed tiny sunbathing lizards and bees humming among the fragrant flowering bushes. In half an hour, we arrived at the Belvedere della Migliara, a terrace with views of Capri's lighthouse, and a few steps farther, of the Faraglioni, rock outcroppings rising dramatically out of the waves.

Our excursions always included a stop at a tempting place to eat. Minutes from the



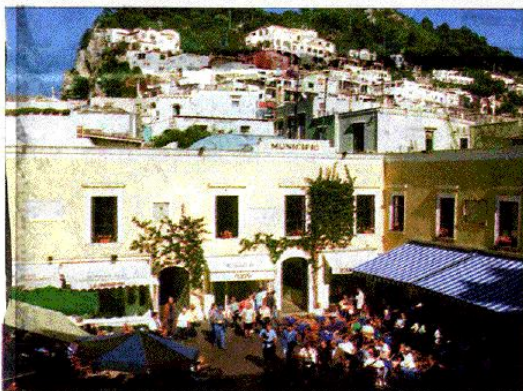
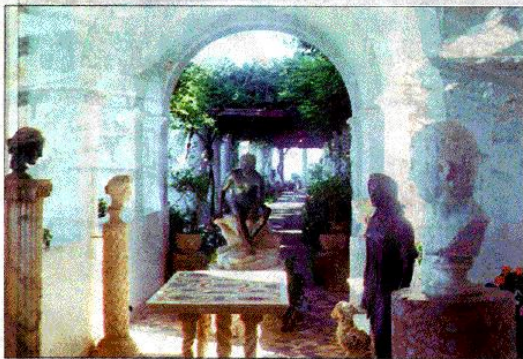
Photographs by Felipe Avalos for The New York Times

ABOVE: A view from the Gardens of Augustus.

LEFT: Dining along the Via Camerelle in the town of Capri.

FAR LEFT: Villa San Michele and some of its antique sculptures.

BELOW LEFT: "La Piazzetta," Capri town's Piazza Umberto I.



like juicy tomatoes, tender new potatoes, crisp arugula and baby asparagus, supplemented by local buffalo mozzarella and goat cheese — we talked, read and went to bed early. This was not a holiday for lovers of

SUSAN ALLEN TOTH's most recent book is "England for All Seasons" (Ballantine).

Migliara, we could relax at Da Gelsomina, a restaurant accessible only by foot. The restaurant's large sheltered terrace overlooks the sea, and in hot weather, it even provides an open-air swimming pool.

Another walk, beginning at Capri town's Piazza Umberto I, the island's most celebrated gathering place and known simply as



La Piazzetta, took us along Capri's elegant shopping street, the Via Camerelle. The windows of its boutiques, often built into an old Roman wall, glittered with Gucci, Ferragamo and other designer confections, as well as sleek Italian shoes ostentatiously displayed like jewels. This promenade ended above the Punta Tragara, a promontory

with more sweeping views of sea and sky, and close by, perhaps our favorite restaurant, the Terazza Brunella.

The Brunella's food was uncomplicated and delicious, and, given the rate of exchange, a relative bargain. One lunch, I had a risotto alla pescatore, with impeccably fresh mussels and langoustines; James

tried the scaloppine dello chef, two pieces of veal wrapped around spinach and mozzarella. With wine, a shared salad, and two cappuccinos, the bill came to \$44.

Other restaurants on Capri had equally good food (nowhere did we eat less than well), but the Brunella offered us unmatched seating. Our favorite table was placed at the edge of the dining room, itself hanging over a cliff, and in fine weather, nearly that whole side is opened to a low white railing. Looking out, we had a bird's-eye view of Capri's craggy mountainside, picturesque villas tucked among greenery, the tumbling rooftops of Capri town, and the sea below.

Much of Capri remains surprisingly wild, rocky land left to goats and sea gulls, maritime pines, semitropical shrubs and wind-swept scrub trees. One strenuous but rewarding walk plunges down what seem like hundreds of steps almost to the sea, past a grotto called Matromania, an ancient sacred site dedicated to the Great Mother. Then it winds among brush and woods, with occasional peeks at the sea, including the Villa Malaparte, a strikingly red Modernist house built on a rugged point, until it climbs back up, and up, to the Tragara belvedere and then blissfully downhill to the Piazzetta.

There, we toasted our stamina with delectable pizza at da Gemma, Graham Greene's favorite restaurant during his many years in Anacapri. (The novelist's former home, Il Rosajo, was the focus of another Anacapri walk.)

A steady uphill climb led us in an hour to the heights of Villa Jovis, an extensive ruin where the Emperor Tiberius once held court. Capri was his capital of the Roman Empire between A.D. 27 and 37, and remnants of Roman rule — walls, odd bits of ruins, ongoing excavations — crop up all over Capri. Villa Jovis became famous when Suetonius, a Roman popularizing historian, described with relish Tiberius's bizarre orgies and cruelties. Local guides still gleefully point out the Salto di Tiberio, a towering cliff where Tiberius is supposed to have pitched victims of his vicious whims into the sea.

Although Capri has its evil emperor (perhaps historians now suggest, unfairly ma-

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