

MY LIFE  
IN HOT PURSUIT OF THE  
WORLD'S MOST COVETED HANDBAG

# Bringing Home the Birkin

"The summer's most adorable chick-lit book. . . .

Smart, fizzy, and amusingly  
snarky, with attitude to burn."

—NEW YORK TIMES



MICHAEL TONELLO



I have fond memories of Capri: the spectacular stairs at the Hotel Villa Brunella, and the breathtaking via Camerelle with perhaps the tiniest Hermès store on the planet. One day I hope to return . . .

## A Yen for Hermès

Four or five months of madness whipped by—lots of tea drinking and eBay auction gawking and passport stamps and hotel directions lying in the passenger seat of my rental car. I had gone through all the bags from the Germany trip, naturally. I had also made another round of the south of France, looped Spain and Portugal a few times, dropped in at Serge at the Faubourg, and had the odd bag rolling in from Dominique (my Deauville connection), Pime, and Luc. I had fifty or more auctions running on eBay at all times, on the items that “financed” the Birkin purchases. I closed on half of them each weekend, and Monday was now shipping day. I scanned/responded to/refreshed my e-mail inbox a lot. I cherished the friendly, obscenity-laden updates from Sarah and Hermès hotline posts from Grace, which arrived nestled amid the monotonous stream of customer queries.

I read a lot of e-mails. I wrote a lot of e-mails. More e-mails than I personally believe a person should read or write. Especially if that person is me. Rather than seeing my BlackBerry as a shiny toy, I now viewed it as an electronic ankle bracelet for Hermès stores in Europe—I had to constantly be around one or risk a chance of missing a croc



dinner party summoned up the dream-fed scraps of my yearning: lemons gleaming the only true shade of yellow there is, the Mediterranean lapping on the shore, the sun deliciously too strong on my back, a silk shirt's caress on that sunburn later. Beautiful islands have always held this kind of sway over me—maybe because they are islands, and maybe because they are beautiful. And, of course, there is an Hermès there. Because, first if not foremost, Capri is the playground of the rich. Capri is the glint of priceless jewels worn with a cotton sundress, a meticulously kept lap pool overlooking an unswimmable rocky coast, a sweating crystal glass pressed against the tanned neck of an heiress. It was all this to me, and I hadn't even gone. Time to change that.

I spent one night in Naples, since there was also an Hermès there. Got a leather Birkin for my trouble, even though I had spent a little more money than average, crossing my fingers for a croc. I thought maybe there was something I was missing with the formula in Italy, some part of the script I didn't know. The salesmen always seemed to be wise to me somehow; they eyed me up and down, and looked at me suspiciously through their designer wire-rimmed glasses. I wondered if it was part of the Italian business culture—this assumption of dishonesty. Could be, since Italy remains the only country I've ever visited where I have to pay for my sandwich before they make it for me. I was likely being too sensitive. Still, I hoped for a more exotic bag in Capri; I hated to come out of a vacation behind.

The ferry ride from Naples to Capri was a little rough, but any feelings of discomfort quickly disappeared as we pulled up to the dock. The brightly colored boats and buildings of the harbor silently campaigned against one another for the title of most picturesque. (I was voting for the bright red fishing boat draped with nets; it made me reach for my camera immediately.) Behind and beyond the village right in front of me, sheer rock loomed, cliffs stretching up thousands of feet, interspersed here and there by stalwart vestiges of green and sprinklings of white houses. I refused to push and shove to get off the boat with the rest of the lemmings, so I waited and drank in the view and

rifled through my guidebook. Apparently, my next step was getting tickets for some kind of funicular. Oh boy. What about my Birkin and my suitcase? They would be a real pain in the ass. I scanned a few more pages to see how I could avoid carrying a huge orange bag on a funicular, and found a footnote about porter service up to my hotel for 40 euros. Works for me.

Bag-free, having handed my goods over to a hopefully honest porter (he didn't look like the Hermès type), I got in line for the funicular. I waited about ten minutes and then found out they didn't sell the tickets at the place you boarded. (That would make too much sense.) Went to a different building up the street, waited another twenty minutes, got my ticket, and I was good to go. The ride in the funicular was like Big Thunder Mountain crossed with a monorail crossed with a quad ski lift. It rode steadily up and up at a forty-five-degree angle, allowing a rather dizzying view downward at the harbor and the ocean. When I disembarked, I was in another town, this one the real center of life on Capri. There was another settlement—Anacapri—but that area was famed for its solitude and distance from hobnobbing masses of the island. Not really a tourist mecca, in other words. Not like the place where I stood right now, surrounded by restaurants, shops, inns, and my fellow travelers.

I decided to go straight to the hotel to get settled, then I could explore at leisure. I started in the general direction of downtown, which meant I basically followed the crowd. The people around me were mostly gawking day-trippers. I assumed when the last ferry left, it would clear out the island quite a bit, like it did on Nantucket. That would be good, because it was a bit claustrophobic downtown at present. There were hordes of people seated at the tables in the Piazzetta, although why you would spend your day sitting and drinking at a hot, crowded town square was beyond me. Stucco and stone buildings crowded together and formed charming little alleys and walkways, even more winding and narrow than average, because there are no cars on this part of Capri. Between the labyrinthine paths of whitewashed



seemingly defying every law of physics in the process. I was suitably awed by the Blue Grotto—the color inside the ocean-bottomed cave a shade of blue I had never seen, and likely would never see again (unless I braved the queue of boats bobbing endlessly and waiting their turn for a *second* time, which I wasn't 100 percent sold on. Once really did the trick, I think). I was entranced by the I Faraglioni, limestone stacks rising right off the coast, soaring to hundreds of feet, one of them the exclusive home of a blue lizard. How could you resist a place with blue lizards that make their home on one particular gigantic rock? Huh? You can't, that's how. You succumb. And succumb I did, reveling even more in every aspect of Capri. I loved the downtown area as well, and made it my habit to walk to town around seven every evening and have a glass of Krug Champagne at the Quisisana, a venerable old hotel. The Quisisana was an island legend, its patio both the best vantage point to see and the best venue in which to be seen. Seven P.M. was the hour of reckoning—after the last ferry but before dinner—and it was then that I could best survey the boutiques' wares parading by on tanned bodies. It was like watching *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* in real time—cheap voyeuristic thrills. I amused myself further by counting the Hermès items that made the scene.

Inevitably, my reverie and revelry on Capri came to an end, and I miserably packed on my eighth morning, vowing to come back as soon as possible. I sent my luggage down the hill with another transport team of one, but decided to carry the two Hermès shopping bags myself. Better safe than sorry. As I walked the Via Tragara for one last time that week, my mind was on nothing at all but the journey ahead of me, and the week behind me. I hit the outskirts of town, hardly breaking stride. Then, as I rounded the last curve into the white-awned boutique runway, I spotted a familiar face that had no place in my farewell moments. It was, improbably as could be, the salesman from the Naples Hermès, standing under the awning of the Capri Hermès, languidly smoking a cigarette. Huh? I did recover quickly, though, realizing that he must cover the Capri saleswoman's day off, or something

to that effect. And here I was, strolling by bold as a rooster, with two giant Hermès bags. It must be said that the *size* of the bag I had was a dead giveaway—you really only got the giganta-version for Birkins or Kellys. Plus, I had implied strongly I was en route to Florida, with the birthday Birkin for Mom. I was potentially screwed, so I moved fast. Ducking behind a fragrant bush, I stood there sweating and waiting for his eventual retreat into the storefront. I also stacked the bags atop each other best I could, figuring I could carry both on the far side of me as I passed the windows of the store. I couldn't do too much else, except muss my hair a bit and wait for a cluster of people to walk by. Which they did, eventually, long after he had stepped back into his cool, leather-scented cave. I alternately hustled and loitered as I passed the storefronts, trying to keep pace with a window-shopping quartet of British women (no easy task). Apparently, I was successful, because I wasn't halted in my Hermès tracks—not then and not for a long time after, either.

I stood on the ferry, watching the island retreat, feeling then as I always do at such moments—that I was in a movie of my own making, a maudlin scene of which I was the only participant and the only onlooker. The view was legitimately cinematic this time; Capri was nothing if not that. I couldn't help but trace the rises and falls of the landscape with my eyes, willing my mind to capture its every nuance for time immemorial. It had restored me, this place, and I knew that, whatever story my blood test next week would tell. My body had echoed the vitality of the island, I could tell that much without a physician. I could sense it, in my color, my energy, my pulse, myself. Me as me, full-out me again, not a wan or sickly me. The crocodile bag it had yielded paled in comparison to that . . . no pun intended.