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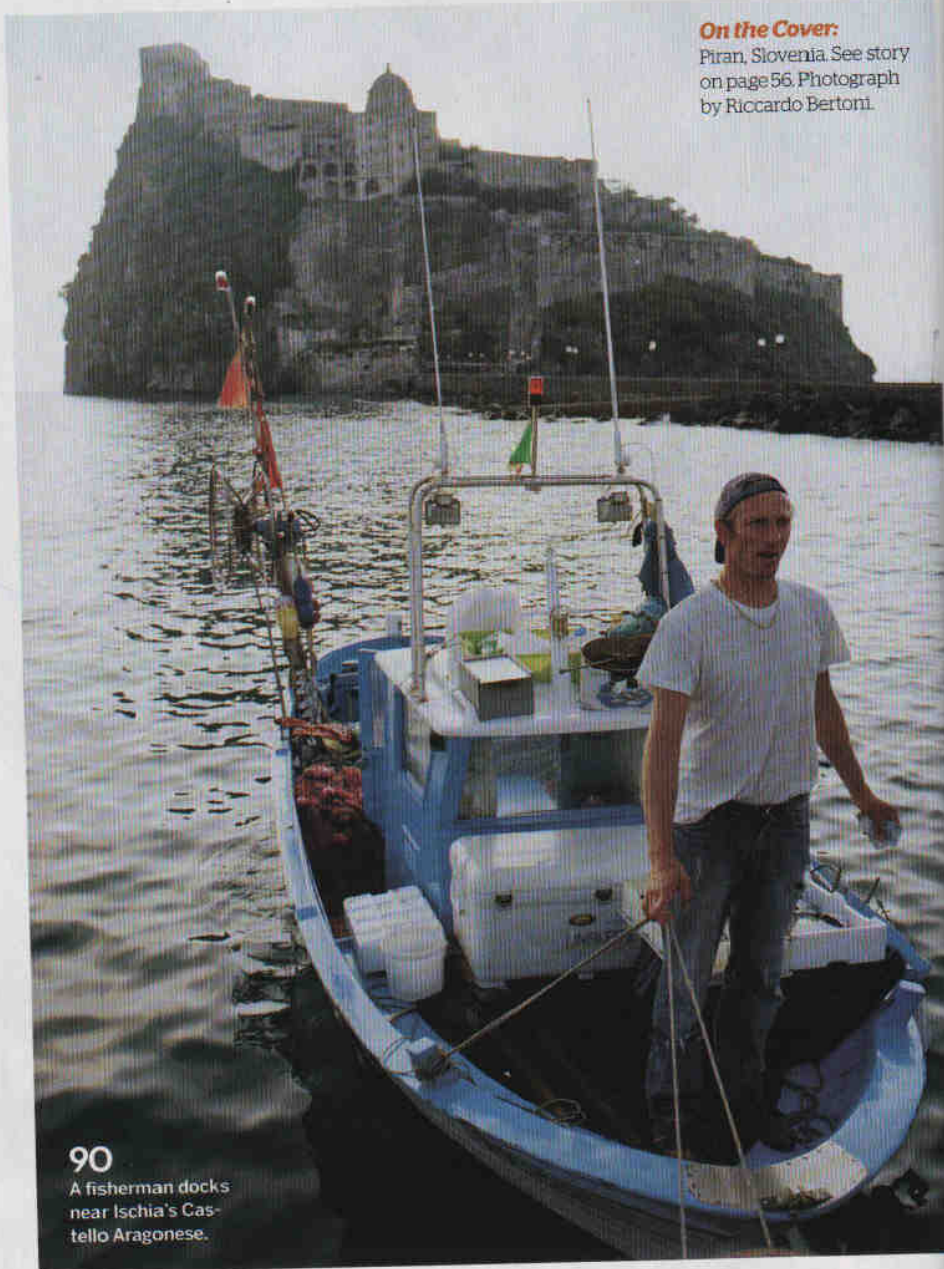
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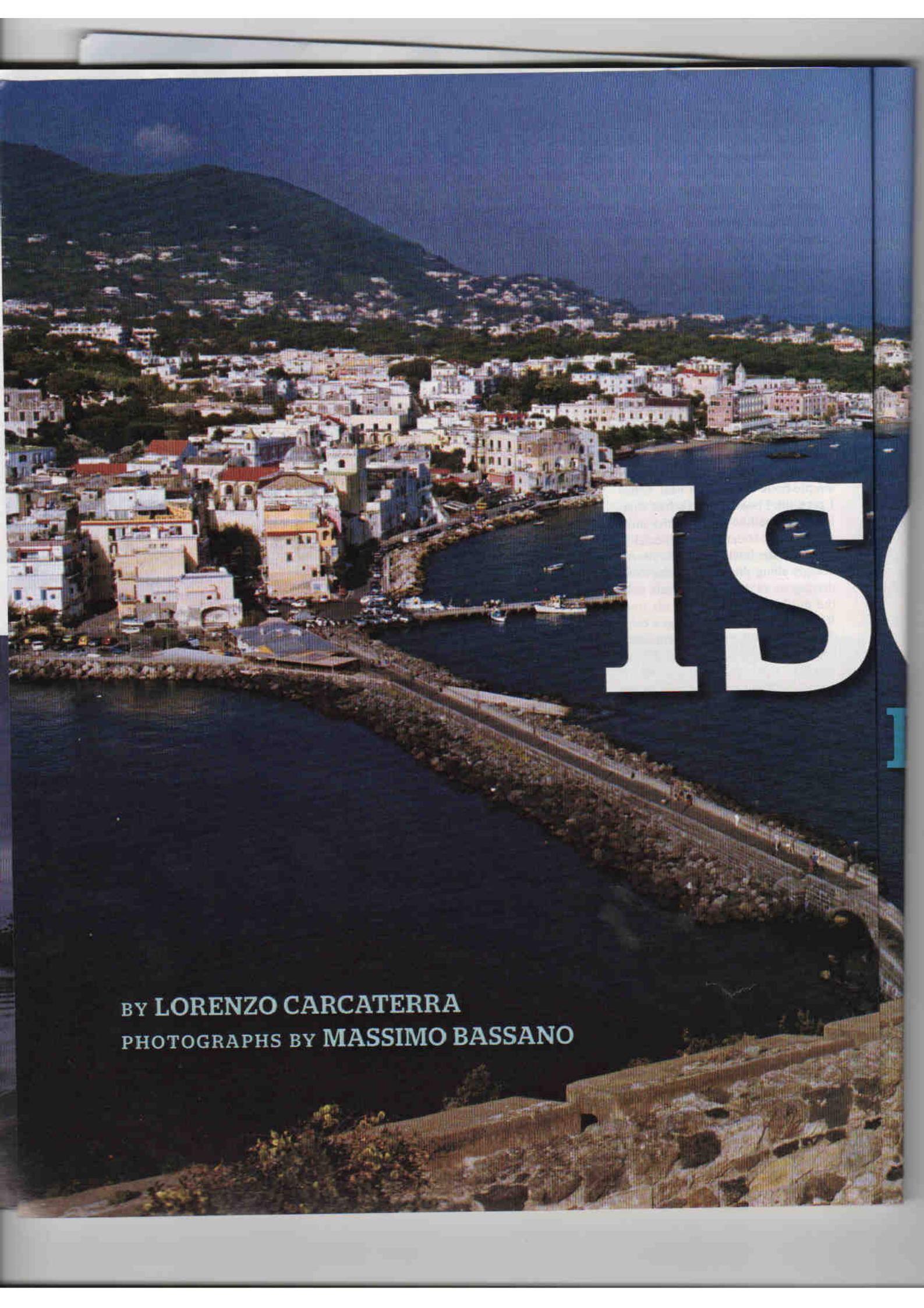
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A fisherman docks near Ischia's Castello Aragonese.

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IS

BY LORENZO CARCATERRA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MASSIMO BASSANO

A woman with dark hair and sunglasses, wearing a light blue shirt, is sitting on a high, weathered stone wall. She is looking out over a coastal town built on a hillside, with buildings and a harbor visible in the distance. The sky is a deep blue. The stone wall she is sitting on is made of large, rough-hewn blocks. The overall scene is a mix of natural stone and human-made architecture.

SCHIA

Island of Memories

International celebrities hide out here, but I came to call this Italian isle my true home.

IT BEGAN, AS IT SO OFTEN DOES IN ITALY, WITH AN AFFAIR.

In the steamy summer of 1961, a movie crew arrived on the island of Ischia, less than 20 miles off the coast of Naples, to film what would turn out to be one of the most expensive movies ever made, *Cleopatra*. Within days of their arrival, the stars of the movie—Elizabeth Taylor (the Angelina Jolie of her day) and Richard Burton (the Welsh version of Brad Pitt)—began a love affair that caught the attention of paparazzi around the world. Photographers by the hundreds swarmed the island and followed the couple wherever they went. Since both stars happened to be married at the time, a worldwide scandal ensued, complete with provocative headlines



From the shop-lined Corso Vittoria Colonna to a game of beach tennis at dusk (opposite), Ischia mixes star appeal with simple pleasures. Opening spread: Castello Aragonese's thick stone walls have repelled pirate raids but can't keep out current-day romantics.



and, more important for Ischia, photos of the madly-in-love duo romping in various island locales.

The movie that emerged was a fiasco and nearly bankrupted 20th Century Fox. Taylor and Burton continued their tabloid-ready antics through two marriages and two divorces. But out of the ashes of a Hollywood disaster, the struggling outpost of Ischia was reborn as a tourist mecca noted for its year-round thermal spas, robust Southern Italian cuisine, and some of the finest beaches in the world.

Charles Bronson, Alain Delon, Clint Eastwood, and Marcello Mastroianni all vacationed on the island in the late 1960s. Billy Wilder and Jack Lemmon liked Ischia so much they set a comedy, *Avanti!*, on its shores. Truman Capote rented rooms for the summer, referring to Ischia as "no place for the rush of hours."

Even now, celebrities—Hilary Swank, Gwyneth Paltrow, Jude Law, Matt Damon—still land there regularly, often to shoot movies on location, such as *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, or to attend the annual Ischia Film Festival.

When I came to Ischia in the summer of 1969, I didn't know anything about the island's glittery and romance-laden reputation. I was 14 and adrift, escaping an array of family problems back in New York. I was meeting members of my Italian family for the first time, but I didn't expect the three-month visit to change anything about my hopeless future.

Then I caught my first glimpse of the island.

Like many visitors, I arrived at Porto d'Ischia via hydrofoil from Naples. Homes dotted the hillsides that surround the mouth of the port, white walls and pink roofs gleaming under the late afternoon sun. The port itself jangled with energy: Drivers and tour guides shouted to one another, preparing to take boatloads of tourists to their hotels; bars and restaurants hugged the water, the savory aroma of grilled fish mixing easily with the scent of freshly brewed espresso. And through it all, through the chaos of arriving boats, the low groan of motor taxis and zooming motorcycles, and the snorting of old horses pulling elaborate carriages across cobblestone streets, I heard music and singing. The songs were old—the words a mixture of Neapolitan and Ischian dialects—and came not from radios or stereos but from the people. A young cab driver sang to any young woman who caught his eye, telling a tale of romance; a middle-aged woman working the counter of a bar sang of a lost love, gone but never forgotten; an elderly fish peddler, pulling his nets into his boat, sang of the strength and beauty of the sea.

Standing on the rear of the hydrofoil, next to a well-dressed man smoking a British cigarette, I felt finally at home.

"In Ischia, even in the bleakest of times, we always could put together a good meal, a decent glass of wine, and a song," restaurant owner Domenico Rumore later told me. "And sometimes, that's all you need to make it through."

My days in Ischia began early and ended late. I always made a

point to head out at sunrise for the action at the port. The local fishermen arrived with their catches, littering the docks with nets and live fish. Old women in dark clothes were quick to pounce and barter their way to a day's meal. Fruit peddlers drove past, in Fiat half-beds, running their engines low. "Who wants me?" they shouted. "Who wants what I have? The fruits are fresh and I'm even fresher." They flirted most often with the elderly women, knowing these matrons decided how much would be bought and for what price.

The old women of Ischia were at their best during these mornings, arguing over the price of fish and peaches with men they'd known since childhood, taking as much enjoyment from the bartering as they would from the meals made with their offerings. At the height of the bartering, the vendors would smile and point at me. "Let him pay," they said. "He's American. They all have money."

"His money stays where it belongs," one of the women in the group would always shout. "In his pocket and out of yours."

I fell in love many times that first summer. On the beach in front of the Sole Mare Hotel I spotted the girl who would first capture my heart. She was 11 and I was 14 and whatever passes for love at such ages was ours.

I've returned many times to Ischia since then, growing to embrace my cousins as brothers, sticking with them through feuds and love affairs, marriages and divorces. In my darkest moments, I've sought the island as refuge and come to rely on certain constants.

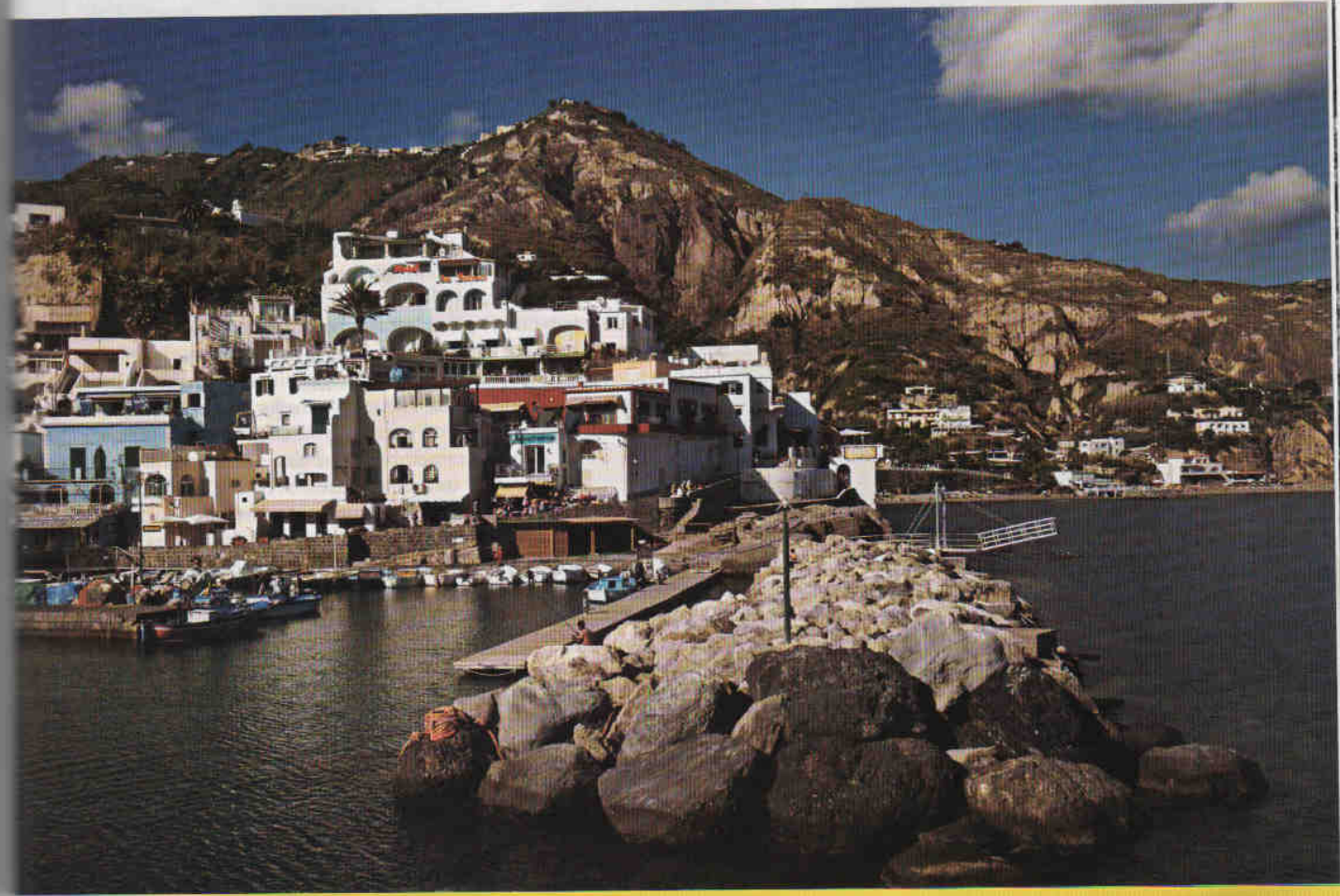
Like its limoncello. Residents claim to be the first to bring this popular after-dinner drink to the world (though locals of the rival island of Capri will gladly make the same argument). Ischia has kept alive the simple cuisine of its past; eating a meal there is like going back to another decade, sometimes another century. Specialties such as rabbit in a

thick red sauce spread across a large serving of pasta, and simply grilled calamari, clams, and baby squid, date to the time of the island's barbarian occupations, when the only food available to the locals in hiding were what they could catch from either land or bay. Spaghetti *alla puttanesca* (whore's spaghetti), a mixture of capers, anchovies, and black olives also in a red sauce, is another specialty, supposedly named after the women who worked the back alleys for money during the dreary nights of World War II. The sauce takes less than 15 minutes to prepare and serve, just enough time for the women to enjoy a meal between customers. Pizza *alla Napoletana*, thick shards of basil and garlic floating over a bed of crushed red tomatoes, is served folded into four corners and covered by a thick wad of brown paper in a style much preferred by the young merchants who worked inside the dozens of high-end shops lining Corso Vittoria Colonna.

To gain a measure of peace, I escape to the white sand beach of Maronti in Sant'Angelo, where the only sounds beyond the lapping of the waves are the soft ballads sung by strolling musicians. When I need something livelier, I head to the beach at Cartaromana,

ON THE BEACH I SPOTTED THE GIRL WHO WOULD FIRST CAPTURE MY HEART.

The big sea: A fisherman gets in some social time while repairing his nets on the beach in the main town of Porto d'Ischia (right, upper). On the south coast, gleaming houses cluster around the harbor at Sant'Angelo (right, lower). All over Ischia, which is the largest island in the Bay of Naples, lives are shaped by the sea and the bounty it brings. But it's not all work. "The sounds of music always seem to mingle with the gentle lapping of waves," says the author.





From his slightly precarious perch, St. Michael the Archangel leads the procession during the two-day festival held in his honor every September in the fishing town of Sant'Angelo. *Opposite:* Fresh seafood is elevated to high art on a plate by chef Pasquale Palamaro at the Hotel Regina Isabella in Lacco Ameno.

packed with children frolicking along the shoreline and young couples reconnecting with friends, the background sound track cranked up to a louder beat.

In Ischia, ages-old history is often bound up with a love story of some sort. The Castello Aragonese, a majestic and imposing structure where the people of Ischia sought shelter from pirate raids and invasions, offers from its highest slope an expansive view of islands and water so magnificent that it has proven to be the ideal backdrop for countless marriage proposals. The tiny, white Church of Santa Maria del Soccorso, with its windows facing the clear blue of the bay, comforts loved ones waiting and praying for the safe return of fishermen and sailors. It's a popular church for local weddings. And legend persists that Michelangelo built a stone house just above the entry to the port so he could stare across the Bay of Naples at the home of Vittoria Colonna, the one woman said to have captured his heart. (Not true, but who cares?)

No matter where they start, the long evenings come to an end at the Bar Calise (there are four on the island). All serve the island's

best coffee and pastries (try the shell-shaped *sfogliatelle*) and are open from sunup to full moon. "Young or old, everything begins and ends at the Bar Calise," my cousin Paolo Murino says. "You have a date; you meet her here. The date goes well; you take her back here for a last drink. The date is a disaster; you come here to sit with your friends. You get older, you take your wife out for dinner and a walk and stop here for dessert. And, when you get to be as old as my parents, you come here, sit, have a Campari and soda and remember what it was like when you were young."

Music may underline much of life in Ischia, but the island's renowned thermal baths may be the one place where it isn't heard. Nothing disturbs the restfulness of the Giardini Termali di Aphrodite and the Parco Termale Aphrodite-Apollon, both in Sant'Angelo, and the most famous one of all, the Giardini Poseidon in Forio. Thousands flock there for a day of hot mud baths and soothing massages. Longtime visitors spend weeks on end at the hot springs at Scura, hopeful for a cure for ailments ranging from arthritis to bursitis to simple stress.

"I have never been," my Grandma Maria once told me. "I don't need to have other people give me a bath. From what I hear, though, they do help those who go there. They help wash

Traveler Bonus: Find three chapters of Lorenzo Carcaterra's new book, *Midnight Angels*, on our iPad edition (available through the Zinio app).

ay their pain, clean away their aches. But if you go, make sure bring money. The miracle of the mud bath comes with a price." I spent many afternoons with Grandma Maria, sitting beside her on a stone bench in front of St. Peter's Church, enjoying her stories and our quiet moments together. A warm, big-hearted woman, she lived through the painful and difficult years of a world war, losing a son and grandson in the process, staying true to her ways even as the island around her began its embrace of modern times. She served as a trusted guide out of my own personal wilderness. I will never forget my summers with her, which came to an end on a muggy August afternoon in 1975, when I stood near her bedside, surrounded by her friends and family, and watched her take her last breath.

While Grandma Maria helped shift the direction of my life for the better, Uncle Mario took me inside the beating heart of Ischia. On an island of great character filled with great characters, no one has impressed me more than my uncle, Mario Carcaterra. He was a struggling tour guide with a cab in 1960. Nine years and one Taylor-and-Burton scandal later, he had four partners, and together they owned and operated a squadron of buses and taxis, tour boats and hotels.

"Americans have a fondness for Capri because of Jackie Kennedy," he said. "It was where she shopped when she came to southern Italy. Germans, on the other hand, had occupied Ischia during the war and remembered the thermal baths and beaches. They would rather spend a quiet day dealing with muscle aches than pass their time shopping. As years passed, the British began to arrive, then the rich Italians from the north, and then slowly, very slowly, the Americans. Now, we have an antipasto of countries coming, Japan and Russia joining in with the always reliable Germans, English, Americans, and Italians from up north."

His buses and cabs roam the island, always packed with eager faces, most pressed against cameras. He is a gifted salesman and storyteller, quick to laugh, eager to show off the many facets of Ischia. To this day, at age 78, Uncle Mario remains as much of an island attraction as the volcanic mushroom jutting out of the bay off Lacco Ameno.

I once helped him with a British tour group he was leading around. Mario, who speaks fluent German and sketchy English, was short a few guides that day. One of the tourists, an elderly woman, walked up to me and said she and her friends were Clint Eastwood fans. They understood the actor had either rented or bought a home nearby and they would love to have a photo of the place to take back with them. I asked my uncle. He smiled and said, "Consider it done."

We all loaded onto the bus, and my uncle directed the driver up one winding road after another until we came to a magnificent villa, adorned with flowers and olive trees. "Take as many photos as you like," Mario

told the happy tourists in his best English. "There is no rush."

While the tourists snapped away, I stood next to him. He had his arms folded and a smile on his face. "I'm glad you were here," I said. "I would have never found Clint Eastwood's villa."

"This isn't Clint Eastwood's villa," he said with a laugh. "My friend Fabio lives here."

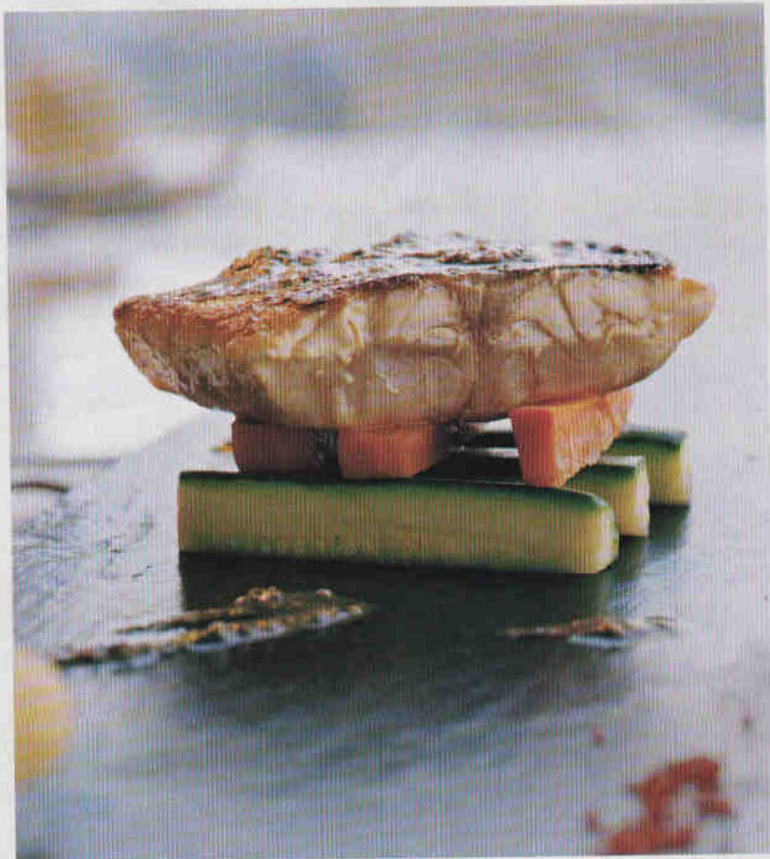
"But they think they're taking pictures of Clint Eastwood's villa," I protested.

"They'll show those pictures to friends and family back home,"

he said. "Everyone will be happy. They have had a great day out in the sun and a terrific meal. They'll leave with warm memories, photos of a movie star's house—and a smile. What better way is there to remember an island?"

You don't need to have family on the island or to spot a celebrity in order to come away from a visit to Ischia with warm memories. You can find them in a chance encounter: A pizza and a beer at Da Raffaele restaurant in Porto often leads to couples at different tables mingling over conversation. Or you may be on a day trip on Antonio Rumore's tour boat, listening to the lifelong resident spin his tales of history and mystery. "There's only one place like Ischia in the world," boasts Rumore, a sea captain who has docked his boat in ports around the

**"THIS ISN'T
CLINT
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HERE."**



globe. "It's as simple as it is beautiful. And the greatest pleasures grow out of that."

On my most recent trip to Ischia, I stopped by the ancient cemetery with my cousin Angela to visit the graves of my grandparents. The sun was resting just above the horizon, the sea glistened, warm breezes flowed through thick rows of pine trees. My grandparents were buried together, side by side in death as in life.

"You can see as far as Procida and Capri from here, if it's clear enough," Angela said, the setting sun highlighting her unlined face. "They loved this island as much as they loved each other."

"Grandma told me that I was born in America, but I was made in Ischia," I said. "No matter where I went in life, this would always be my home."

"You think she was right?" Angela asked.

I nodded. "The older I get, the more truth there is to it."

"They say, 'See Naples and die,'" Angela said. "We say, 'See Ischia and live.' That's why we get more tourists than Naples."

We sat on a stone bench in the company of my grandparents, watching the sun set over the most beautiful island in Europe, both of us at peace.

Both of us at home.

Best-selling novelist LORENZO CARCATERRA also writes film and TV scripts. His latest novel is *Midnight Angels*. Milan-based photographer MASSIMO BASSANO shot *Traveler's* Amalfi Coast feature (April 2010).



Preparing for the day's wave of tourists, a worker cleans a privately owned patch of beach. Visitors pay a fee to access the lounge chairs and umbrellas. Eventually, most visitors end up at one of the volcanic island's famed thermal baths, such as the Giardini Poseidon (opposite), with 22 pools in lush gardens.

