

FROM THE FROMMER'S GUIDE

INTRODUCTION TO VENTOTENE

Forget international tourism – Ventotene is barely even on the radar of Italians. For those who have made it to this utterly relaxing and authentic island, Ventotene draws the same words of praise – *deliziosa*, *carinissima*, and more permutations of "delightful" – conveying the surprise of having found this *gioiellino* ("little jewel") of an island right here in Italian waters, mere hours from the chaotic cities of Rome and Naples. In an archipelago where the largest island, Ponza, is only 7.5 sq. km (3 sq. miles) with a population of 3,100, Ventotene brings new meaning to "diminutive," with only 1.5 sq. km (1/2 sq. mile) of surface area and year-round residents numbering 600.

Ventotene's isolation appealed to the ancient Romans, who established an exile colony here where they sent several embarrassing female members of the imperial family on extended "time-outs." The ruins of the sumptuous villa built for Julia, the wild-child daughter of Augustus, can be visited on the northern tip of Ventotene. But the Romans' most salient legacy on Ventotene is the port they built by hand, excavating a basin of tufa on the northeast coast. The *porto romano* was a triumph of engineering then as now; it's still in use for the small boats of Ventotene, and still the heart of the tight-knit seafaring community here.

The narrow squiggle of porous brown tufa that is Ventotene takes less than an hour to walk from end to end. Along the coast, the tufa drops off to create suggestive coves ideal for exploring by sea – and excellent diving – but only one sandy beach of any size, *Cala Nave*, which is crowded in July and August. Ventotene town, adorable and authentic though it is, is a one-piazza affair that offers plenty of charm but not a whole lot of excitement. Visible from the eastern coast of Ventotene is the former prison island of Santo Stefano, where after a 7-minute crossing (informally arranged with local boatmen) you can explore the defunct 18th-century Bourbon prison, as well as some Roman ruins, and marvel at the rampant vegetation on this panettone-shaped tufa spur.

Ventotene may be the best island in Italy for adopting the unhurried rhythms of real *isolani*. Stressed-out city folk and hopeless romantics love it, as will anyone looking to unplug and inhale the sublime isolation of this little Mediterranean paradise. If that sounds good, book a

weeklong stay. But if you're an action-and-amenities sort of traveler, 1 day and evening on Ventotene, before continuing on to Ponza or Ischia, will be just right.

ATTRACTIONS

Ferries and hydrofoils pull into the *Porto Nuovo* (new port), an artificial extension of Cala Rossano on the northern tip of the island. Although this is not the most picturesque introduction to Ventotene, you will immediately see the striking red-brown tufa walls that characterize the entire perimeter of the island. Much more interesting than *Porto Nuovo* is the *Porto Romano* (Roman port) to the south. The circular boat basin, lined with brightly painted fishing boats, was created in the Augustan era, 2,000 years ago, by excavating some 60,000 cubic meters (2,118,880 cubic ft.) of tufa from this section of the island. The Porto Romano is where most tourist excursion boats are moored, and is where you should come to arrange boat rentals and day trips around the island or over to Santo Stefano. On the inland side of the harbor is the Porto Romano's most distinctive feature, arches in the volcanic stone that served as offices and storage sheds during Roman times; today, they shelter fishing and boating gear for the *marinai* (seamen) of Ventotene. The waterfront Bar Mariposa (Porto Romano 22; tel. 0771/85144) is the collective hangout for one and all down here. By day, it's a coffee and gelato joint; by night, it's a piano bar that sees a fair amount of action.

The town of Ventotene lies directly above the Roman port. To get from sea level to the main square of town, everyone uses the zig-zagging *Rampa Marina*, a lemon-yellow switchback climbing three stories up to Piazza Alcide de Gasperi, also known as Piazza Chiesa for the presence of the Bourbon church of Santa Candida (1769). Along the *Rampa Marina* are a few "rest stops" in the form of boutiques selling sun and swim gear and faux-hippie island duds.

At the top of the ramp, walk south to *Piazza Castello*, the epicenter of Ventotene town and a textbook example of authentic Italian seaside village charm. The Bourbon *castello* that gives the square its name houses the *comune* (city hall) and the *Museo Archeologico* (tel. 0771/85193), in which finds from the Villa Giulia and other Roman structures on the island are exhibited.

From Ventotene town, *Via Olivi* runs southwest along the central axis of the island. End to end, the street is 2.5km long (1 1/2 miles), and it takes 30 minutes to walk the full length in either direction. Out on the island, you'll find a few guesthouses and hotels strewn among the fields of lentils, as well as some raggedy Roman ruins, including cisterns and a necropolis. The silence and sense of isolation out here, combined with rampant growth of agave, broom, and particularly fat ferns, is sublime.

Roman Ventotene. Outside of the simple pleasure of strolling Ventotene town and watching village life play out in Piazza Castello, there are some interesting ancient ruins that round out the cultural side of things on the island. Immediately south of the Porto Romano, below the lighthouse, is the *Peschiera Romana* (Roman fish pool). Here, the Romans devised an ingenious system of manmade “tanks” (like the Porto Romano, dug out of the existing tufa) in which they corralled and cultivated seafood to be consumed at the elaborate banquets held by the exiled imperial family on the island. This fascinating ruin, along with the *Grotte di Pilato* eel farm on Ponza, is one of the few surviving examples of Roman “fish engineering.” The *Peschiera Romana* is best visited from the water and, if possible, with a snorkel or diving gear.

The most extensive Roman remains, those of the 1st century A.D. Villa Giulia, occupy 30,000 sq. m (322,917 sq. ft.) at *Punta Eolo*, the northernmost tip of Ventotene. (The archaeological park is always open, free admission, no phone; to get there, take the ramp that leads from *Cala Rossano* toward Ventotene cemetery.) This was the principal residence for the exiled progeny of Augustus; in accordance with the Lex Julia – laws passed to improve morals in Roman society – adulterers were punished by banishment or worse. Julia, daughter of the emperor Augustus himself, was among the dissolute of Rome and promptly sent to Pandataria for her infidelity. When she got here, she lived in style. Though the structure is now reduced to skeletal brickwork, the villa was equipped with sumptuous nymphaea and baths overlooking the sea, and their foundations can be clearly discerned around the site.

SIDE TRIPS

The former prison island of Santo Stefano is the classic excursion from Ventotene. Tiny, 27-hectare (67-acre) Santo Stefano lies just 1 nautical mile east of Ventotene. There are many former prison islands in this guide, but what makes Santo Stefano a standout among them is the unique architecture of the penitentiary, built in 1795 under the Bourbon Ferdinand IV, king of Naples. From above, the entire structure looks uncannily like a handcuff. The prison architect, Francesco Carpi, designed the cellblock buildings (which are rather attractive, with three stories of arcaded loggias painted sunny yellow) in a horseshoe shape; the cells face an inner courtyard where the guards’ chapel-like watchtower had a 360-degree view of the inmates. Carpi was following prison design theory laid out by English philosopher and legal reformist Jeremy Bentham, who postulated that the panopticon (“all-seeing,” round and inward-facing) prison not only made for easy supervision but also that the very nature of the architecture exacted a psychological toll on the prisoners – “a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind,” as he

described it. A very deliberate feature of Carpi's architecture is that none of the cells has even a sliver of a sea view. The prison was closed in 1965, but during World War II it was used as a holding facility for such outspoken anti-Fascist "hindrances" as socialist Sandro Pertini, who went on to become president of the Italian Republic (1978-85). The prison is technically private property, not a museum or monument (no admission fee, no contact information), but visitors can get as far as the inner courtyard of the cellblocks.

The other must-do on Santo Stefano requires a bathing suit, so be sure you've brought one: At water's edge on the southeast part of the island, below the ruins of a Roman villa, is the *Vasca di Giulia* (Julia's Tub), one of the most memorable places in the Pontine archipelago for a swim. This circular pool was hewn into the smooth basalt in the 1st century B.C. and connected to the sea by means of curved canals in the rock. When the surf comes into the cove, the force of the waves is channeled into those narrow passageways, creating jets of water and a sort of Jacuzzi effect inside the tub. Roman hydro-engineering never ceases to amaze!

There are no regular ferries to Santo Stefano, but it's simple to arrange sea transport there and back with any of the boatmen down at the Porto Romano on Ventotene. They'll typically charge 10 to the island and back, or a few euros more if you want them to make a stop at the *Vasca di Giulia*.

ACTIVE PURSUITS

Ventotene is not an island of wide sandy beaches, but it has plenty of lovely places for a swim. All along the coast, the reddish tufa meets the crystalline emerald sea to dramatic effect. The best way to explore the perimeter of Ventotene is by boat, but there are a few beaches you can reach on foot. The main *spiaggia* here is the dark sand *Cala Nave*, immediately south of the *Porto Romano*. In high season, it's horribly crowded here, but otherwise, this is a gorgeous spot – a striking cove of striated tufa cliffs capped by lush Mediterranean vegetation. *Cala Nave* is equipped with a beach club, restaurant and bar, and kayak and pedal boat rentals. Nearby (between here and the port) is the swimming area known as *La Peschiera*, which consists of tufa platforms adjacent to the Roman fish tanks.

<http://www.frommers.com/destinations/ventotene>