

## FACTS ABOUT VENTOTENE

Few islands have as much history, ancient and recent, concentrated in such small piece of land. And even fewer have succeeded in preserving its character despite the tourism. Maybe it is because there is a special respect between the Ventotene and its tourists, a coexistence where each one tiptoes around the other. There are no neon signs, no fancy stores, no attractions for loud mass tourism, but instead a splendid bookstore. The island gives a feeling of belonging, and simple traditions are passed down seamlessly to the next generation. As an example, on your departure by ferry, keep an eye on the end of the pier, and you will see a bunch of youngsters jumping in the sea as the ferry goes by. They are saluting the ferry, just like the young people have been doing every day for at least the last eighty years.

Here are some notes about the island's history, about the beginning of farming on the island and how lentils – for which Ventotene is renowned – are still harvested nowadays. Information about the emigration and the immigration on the island and, more specifically, about the history of the Hotel Isolabella, is available upon request.

### ON VENTOTENE'S HISTORY

Ventotene gets its name from the prevailing winds that blow over the island (“wind” in Italian is *vento* and *tene* means “there is” in the local dialect). For many centuries it was unoccupied as it proved defenseless against pirates.

According to the legend, Ventotene was the island of the mermaids in the Odyssey. Under the name of *Pandataria* it was used as a prison island by the ancient Romans. People banished here were often eventually murdered or starved to death. During the Second World War Mussolini used the nearby small island of Santo Stefano as a prison camp.

**The Roman Times.** Augustus Caesar confined his libertine daughter Giulia on the island and the Roman emperor Tiberius later exiled Giulia's daughter, Agrippina, to the island for having instigated a revolt against him. Pandataria soon became the coveted site for many an emperor's luxurious summer villa but vacationing Roman rulers must have relaxed in luxury near many miserable exiles, confined to one of the island's many grottoes carved into the volcanic rock. Nero exiled to the island his first wife Ottavia in order to marry Poppea. Later Domitilla, grand-daughter of Vespasian, was confined here by the Emperor Domitian for refusing to renounce Christianity. In the following years, countless Christians “self-exiled” on the island, fleeing religious persecution (until Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 AD finally conceded religious freedom to the Romans).

**The Rousseau Experiment.** Centuries later, the Bourbon French kings ruling Naples exiled criminals and prostitutes here, providing them with tools to work the land, convinced that contact with nature would lead to “moral recuperation” (!). As lovely as the island is, the eighteenth century experiment failed.

**The First Settlers.** On June 15th, 1772, twenty-eight families landed in Ventotene: this marks the beginning of the history of the island in its current form. Although Ventotene is now in the region Lazio, the families were coming from different towns in the region Campania and their last names are still all those found on the island.

The settlers received from the King of the Regno delle Due Sicilie (“Kingdom of the Two Sicilies”) about 16’000 sqm of forested land, with a house and agricultural tools, arms and some money for each member of the family. The fishermen received boats and could obtain, in addition, the same land as the farmers. They all had some exemption for three years from the taxes to be paid to the common funds.

The choice of colonizing the island with people from Torre Annunziata and the other towns from the Amalfi Coast derived from the fact that these people’s property was completely ruined by the frequent eruptions of the Vesuvio. It was on the settlers’ part a very tough choice, between the eruptions on the one hand and having to adapt to live in a small island that was until then refuge of pirates and corsairs.

The Bourbons helped the process of colonization of the island providing a structure very organized from all points of view: administrative, military, sanitary, social and religious. The pastel-colored one-level homes, side by side and lining the few island streets, reflect the 18th century Bourbon architecture.

In 1774 the local church was consecrated to Santa Candida and it was decided by the Bishop Pergamo that the patron saint of the island would be celebrated on the 20th of September of each year.

However building its identity and its community was an arduous process for the island, made more difficult from the daily coexistence with a double population consisting of prisoners, delinquents, guards, spies, soldiers and confined people. In the middle of the 1800’s, there was in Ventotene a population of 1235 inhabitants, while the community of convicted people, prisoners serving life sentences and guards, consisted of 1100 people.

**More Recent History.** The twentieth century brought political exiles to Ventotene: the *confinati* or those exiled by the Fascists from the 1920’s on for their opposition to the regime. Here on Ventotene, two *confinati*, Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi, secretly wrote (1940 - 1941) *Il Manifesto di Ventotene*, the important document of social reform which first launched the idea of a united Europe and which would become reality some 70 years later. The main building of the European Parliament in Brussels is named after Altiero Spinelli.

#### FARMING IN VENTOTENE

In 1778 the settlement was not in a healthy state and it was required a review of the agriculture on the island. On the one hand, lazy and dishonest settlers had to be replaced with honest and laborious ones; on the other, it was discovered that there was a problem with the choice of crops planted on the island. In fact,

the settlers had cultivated on the island the same crop as they had cultivated on the mainland, specifically corn. This did not take in consideration the different conditions, for example the strong winds that run continuously over the island and that in few hours would destroy months of work. In addition, under a superficial layer of extremely fertile volcanic soil, there was in many areas an extremely hard layer of sand. As if this were not enough, the three sources of fresh water on the island had dried up due to the deforestation that the settlers do to transform forest into land fit for cultivation.

So the settlers had to learn to protect the crops with barriers against the wind: these were made with straw, with walls built in tuff, or with plants of prickly pears. In this way citrus plants, in particular lemon trees, could thrive and continue to symbolize life and light while accompanying the dead to their burial.

They also had to learn to collect the rain directly in cisterns, and in holes dug in tuff, that would collect the water channeled from the little canals that would bound the fields.

As a fertilizer, in addition to manure, they would use seaweed that had been fermented for at least a year.

Stock farming was very rare due to the lack of forage. Every clod of earth was cultivated, so the farmers had to lower themselves, tied to ropes, along the precipices, to collect some grass for the animals.

**The Lentils.** Lentils came to be one of the main crops on the island. Lentil plants are rather low and, planted in deep furrows, are apt to stand the strong wind. They are planted in December, in spring they are cleaned of weeds and finally harvested in June, when the plants are dry.

The planting of the lentils requires experience and the harvesting is an extremely arduous job. Lentils are harvested at sunrise, when the humidity of the plant prevents the seed from coming out of the pod and piled up in the furrows to dry in the sun. They are then transferred to the farmyard, where in the hottest time of the day they are “threshed”. The “threshing” is done by two or four men one in front of the other, who start threshing the lentils from one side of the farmyard with alternating synchronized movements. The tool used consists of two wooden sticks of different length and made of different woods (oak and mulberry), connected by a leather strip. The tool is held from the longer stick and the shorter one is made rotate in the air and then hit the pile of pods. The piles of pods are turned several times to help emptying the pods. Then there is the first removing of the leftover straw, followed by the removal of the chaff via the “ventilation”. This consists of throwing the lentils up in the air with a wooden shovel, thus allowing the wind to remove the chaff. This part of the process is done imperatively in the afternoon, when there some mild wind from northwest, without which it is impossible to proceed. Then the pile of lentils are gently brushed with a broom to remove the last impurities. The lentils are then collected in jute bags and, after two or three weeks, washed to avoid being attacked by weevils.

The lentils from Ventotene are renowned for the intensity of their flavor and are a precious delicacy.