

HIDDEN GEM

ADRIENNE CULLEN

Matisse's favourite creation

THE CÔTE d'Azur, in southern France, is not a holiday location we tend to connect with chapels, but here's one reason why we should: Henri Matisse.

The artist regarded Chapelle du Saint-Marie du Rosaire – or Chapel of the Rosary – in Vence, inland of Nice, as his masterpiece, with its three magnificent stained-glass windows, its stations of the cross painted on a single wall as one cohesive composition and its powerful images of the Madonna and Child and St Dominic.

When you arrive it's easy to believe you're in the wrong place. Could this simple white building really be "one of the great religious structures of the 20th century"? Could it be that century's "greatest ensemble artwork"? Yes, it could.



Matisse (above, at the chapel) began the project at the age of 77, after having surgery for cancer. In fact, so crippled was he by various ailments that he could work only from a wheelchair, painting with a brush at the end of a stick strapped to his arm.

What led him there? While he was recovering from his operation, Matisse had been looked after by a young part-time nurse, Monique Bourgeois, to whom he became strongly attached. When she entered the Dominican convent in Vence in 1943, he bought a house in the town. And when she asked him to help design and decorate a new chapel, he agreed. It was built and decorated between 1949 and 1951.

Matisse was involved in every part of the work. He chose the warm brown stone of the altar because of its resemblance to the colour of bread. He designed the bronze crucifix on the altar, the candle holders, the small tabernacle and even the priests' vestments.

■ La Maison d'Accueil Lacordaire, Vence, France, 00-33-493-580326, <http://pagesperso-orange.fr/maison.lacordaire>

■ Do you know of a hidden gem? E-mail us at go@irishtimes.com

Walking on air in Capri

If the stunning beauty of this Italian gem isn't enough to set your heart racing, the steep walks certainly will, writes Amy Laughinghouse

CAPRI IS BEST known as a fashionista's paradise frequented by celebs such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Beyoncé Knowles. But if you wander beyond the labyrinth of lanes flanked by boutiques such as Dolce & Gabbana and Versace, you can exercise more than your buying power on a variety of challenging hikes.

This Italian isle's pulse-pounding potential is immediately apparent as our ferry from Naples approaches the port of Marina Grande. Wedged atop a rocky bluff, above the marina's narrow strip of trinket shops and pizzerias, perches the town of Capri – a relatively compact maze of exclusive shops and sidewalk cafes populated by beautiful people who have elevated sweater-draping to an art.

Visitors can surmount the slope on foot, but most opt for the funicular, which deposits passengers just below a gracious terrace where bougainvillea-draped columns frame views of stucco houses tumbling towards the coast. White sails gleam like giant shark fins slicing the surreally teal water, but more ominous still are the formidable cliffs to the west, scarred by a faint zigzag stripe known as the Phoenician Steps.

Until the 1870s these centuries-old stairs provided the only access between Marina Grande and Capri town's more relaxed little sister, Anacapri, where shops are more likely to stock authentic local wares than the latest runway fashions. These days a narrow winding road skirts the cliff face to connect Anacapri with Capri, providing an adrenalin rush of its own, particularly when riding one of the public buses at night, when the world is enshrouded in inky blackness, save for the marina lights twinkling far, far below. As we round a particularly harrowing bend one evening, even

Go there

Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com) flies from Dublin to Naples. From Naples it's a short taxi or bus ride to Molo Beverello harbour, where you can catch a ferry or jetfoil to Capri. Cars are severely restricted on Capri, but it's easy to get around by bus or taxi.

a jaded-looking local is moved to make the sign of the cross, though she coolly attempts to disguise the gesture as a hair toss.

Perhaps the Phoenician Steps aren't such a bad alternative after all, we reason – at least when attempted in broad daylight (and heading down, rather than up). So we find ourselves at the top of this daunting and seemingly endless staircase, with the colourful fishing boats of Marina Grande bobbing 200m below. Lizards scamper with enviable ease between the big stone steps, rustling among dried leaves and disappearing into weeds, but we're soon huffing and puffing, our thighs and lungs burning.

Towards the bottom, as the steps level out into an alleyway leading into town, we encounter a British couple, already red faced and panting as they begin the ascent. "How far to the top?" the wife asks plaintively. "Did you bring a packed lunch?" I reply. Her husband, clearly the instigator of this little adventure, stares daggers at me as I urgently attempt to blink a Morse message to his wife: "Forget what Nike says! Just *don't* do it!" But hubby, undeterred, sweeps her along, and if they made it they must have experienced a sense of satisfaction at least equal to our own.

If we survived these sadistic steps, then surely we have bested the biggest challenge that



StairMaster Island, as my husband, Scott, nicknames Capri, can throw at us. At least that's what we think until we undertake the Sentiero dei Fortini, a rocky path linking the ruins of several Napoleonic-era forts along Capri's wave-lashed west coast. We begin with lunch at Add'ò Riccio, a friendly little restaurant overlooking the Grotta Azzurra, a cave renowned for reflecting the ethereal blue light of the sea. We had hoped to take a boat tour of the cave, but the water is too choppy, so after

sharing a hearty plate of cheese ravioli and a super-sized Caprese salad ("Grande, like me," jokes our diminutive waiter), we set off towards the fort course a couple of hundred metres down the road.

Minutes after descending a short flight of steps to the dirt trail we're rewarded with a glimpse of Orrico, the most impressive, in my opinion, of the three forts along the way. This orderly stone semicircle seems to have grown out of the jagged precipice upon which it pre-

sides, like neatly ordered molecules forming spontaneously from natural chaos. Though the fort is open to the sky, intriguing features such as a brick fireplace remain, and it's easy to imagine British soldiers gazing pensively out to sea, eyes straining for any sign of the French fleet, which did indeed take Capri in 1808. (The island was returned to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in 1813.)

Continuing onwards, we pass through a cool forest, where pine needles deaden the sound of our steps. Soon thereafter we're evicted into a grey moonscape, clambering over rocks, in and out of gullies and past blue-fingered fjords and caves that pluck at the eroding limestone.

Painted ceramic plaques alongside the path illustrate the flora and fauna that hikers might encounter along the way, such as the rather unimaginative

“White sails gleam like giant shark fins slicing the surreally teal water, but more ominous still are the formidable cliffs to the west, scarred by a faint zigzag stripe known as the Phoenician Steps



Fergal MacErlan takes the aficionado's route up Mount Errigal: P6

FOREVER BLUE The waters around Capri.
Photograph: Joe Sohm/VisionsofAmerica/Getty



Where to stay, where to eat and where to go if you're visiting the island of Capri

Where to stay

■ **Hotel Caesar Augustus.** Via G Orlandi, 00-39-081-8373395, www.caesar-augustus.com. Balanced on a clifftop 300m above the Bay of Naples in Anacapri, this Relais & Chateaux property encompasses 55 rooms and suites, an elegant bar and lounge with a fireplace, candlelit restaurant, two-tiered infinity pool and alfresco fitness area. Cascading terraces offer spectacular sunset views towards Mount Vesuvius. Rooms from €430.

■ **Hotel San Michele.** Via G Orlandi, 00-39-081-8371427, www.sanmichele-capri.com. This neoclassical property in Anacapri claims the island's largest swimming pool. Its 65 rooms have balconies or terraces facing either sea or mountain, presided over by the 1,000-year-old Barbarossa Castle. Doubles from €150.

■ **Hotel La Tosca.** Via D Birago, 00-39-081-8370989, www.latoscahotel.com.

Centrally located near the Piazzetta, La Tosca has 10 simply furnished bedrooms, many with their own terrace. Doubles from €70.

■ **Hotel Punta Tragara.** Via Tragara, 00-39-081-8370844, www.hoteltragara.com. About a kilometre from the centre of Capri town, this pink stucco beauty boasts two swimming pools, a spa and 43 rooms and suites, most of which overlook the Faraglioni or Marina Piccolo. Children 12 and under not permitted. From €300.

■ **Grand Hotel Quisisana.** Via Camerelle, 00-39-081-8370788, www.quisisana.com. With its coveted cocktail terrace in the heart of Capri, a pair of swimming pools, tennis courts and spa treatments, this 150-room, 19th-century grande dame has wooed celebs such as Sting and Tom Cruise. Rooms from €320.

Where to eat

■ **L'Olivo.** Via Capodimonte, 00-39-081-9780111, www.capripalace.com. Located within the Capri Palace Hotel & Spa, L'Olivo is Capri's sole restaurant with two Michelin stars. Only chef Oliver Glowig could imagine a medallion of foie gras with smoked chocolate and tonka broad bean scented lemon jam.

■ **Add'ò Riccio.** Località Grotta Azzurra, 00-39-081-8371380. Relax on the vine-draped terrace with a bountiful carafe of house red as the friendly staff plies you with heaped portions of pasta and salad.

■ **Le Grotte.** Via Arco Naturale, 00-39-081-837-5719. Among pilgrims to the Arco Naturale, this is a popular pit stop serving traditional Italian fare, with a dining area carved into a cave as well as a sea-facing terrace.

■ **Capri's.** Via Roma 38, 00-39-081-8377108, www.capris.it. The seasonal menu is complemented by a well-stocked wine cellar and a chic, sleek atmosphere with a postcard panorama of the Gulf of Naples.

■ **Caffè Caso.** Piazza Umberto I, 00-39-081-8370600. Come for an espresso or a cocktail – but most of all, come to see and be seen at Capri town's most popular piazza.

■ www.capritourism.com, www.capri.com



Piazza Umberto: the place to see and be seen in Capri. Photograph: Amy Laughinghouse

Where to go

■ **Via Krupp.** Viewed from above, this route, with its hairpin turns carved out of a steep stone slope, resembles a mouse maze as it winds down to the beach at Marina Piccola.

■ **Monte Solaro.** You can hoof it to the peak of Monte Solaro, the highest point on the island, in about 90 minutes – or take the chairlift, which hoists you to the top in just over 10 minutes. You'll be rewarded with 360-degree views of Capri.

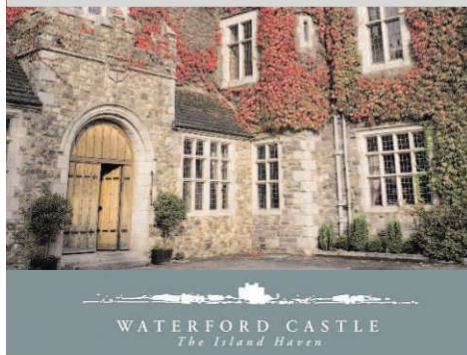


■ **Villa Jovis.** The route to this crumbling Roman villa, built for the emperor Tiberius, leads through a quiet residential area on the outskirts of Capri town. The 45-minute walk becomes quite steep at the end, but the ruins command a panoramic vista of the Amalfi Coast that is well worth the effort

When to go

■ Visit between April and October, as many hotels and restaurants close in the winter.

Reader Competition Waterford Castle Hotel



The prize

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The question

How old is Waterford Castle?

- A) 400 years old
- B) 600 years old
- C) 800 years old

How to enter

To be in with a chance to go along with a friend, telephone 1515-444141, or from Northern Ireland 0901-2930521, stating your name, address and daytime telephone number.

To enter by SMS simply text IT1 with your name, address and daytime telephone number to 57000 (ROI) or 81108 (NI).

Lines will remain open until midnight on Monday, August 17th.

Winner will be selected at random. The Irish Times does not accept any liability if this event is cancelled for whatever reason. Over 18s only. €1/£1 per entry. Calls from mobiles cost more. Standard network charges apply. SP Phonovation, PO Box 6, Dún Laoghaire, Co Dublin. Helpline 0818-217100.

tively named "wall lizard", the western whip snake ("not poisonous, but prone to bite") and, somewhat improbably, the Moray eel. If I find myself face to face with an eel, I think, something will have gone drastically, horribly wrong.

Cringing at the unwelcome sound of thunder, I observe that a storm must have been coming. "Or," Scott whispers ominously, "could it be cannon fire?"

Thankfully, the storm (or the French invasion) holds off, and we live to hike another day, choosing a trek to the Arco Naturale, a huge natural stone arch on the east coast, as our grand finale. It's possible to reach the arch via a relatively short walk from Capri town along the Via Matermania. But we're seduced by the more scenic, albeit longer and more arduous, Via Pizzolungo, which flirts with the south-east coast.

This undulating route proffers fantastic views of the Faraglioni, an array of thrusting pinnacles just offshore, and winds past the Grotta di Matermania, a horseshoe-shaped cave that may have played host to ancient fertility rituals. After a final ascent and a jog past the strategically placed Le Grotte restaurant, we descend one last staircase to view the arch itself.

Rough and unpolished, it shines golden in the sun, offering a keyhole view of the aquamarine sea. As the grey skies that had beleaguered us begin to clear, a rainbow forms just beyond the arch – a celestial confirmation that we're gazing at one of Capri's greatest treasures, a priceless view on an island of big bucks and bling.