

traveller

THE INDEPENDENT

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True North

Simon Calder's
Arctic adventure

Carefree in **CAPRI** • Motorbikes in **MILWAUKEE** • Fine flavours in **MONACO** •
Luxury living in **CORNWALL** • Great **BEACH HOTELS** • 48 Hours in **PARIS**

LYRICAL CHARM IN CAPRI

**Bellinis by moonlight, grand hotels filled with the ghosts of famous former guests, the bewitching Bay of Naples...
Brian Viner can feel a certain Noël Coward song coming on**

Just for fun, three young sailors from Messina bowed low to Mrs Wentworth-Brewster. She said, "Scusi", and abruptly goosed her. Then there was quite a scene, Her family in floods of tears cried, "Leave these men, Mama!" She said, "They're just high-spirited, like all Italians are" And most of them have a great deal more to offer than Papa In a bar on the Piccola Marina

I had wanted to visit Capri ever since I first heard Noël Coward's wonderful song about the matronly English widow "who discovered in the nick of time that life was for living". Specifically, I had wanted to visit a bar on the Piccola Marina, and opportunity finally knocked one sunny Saturday, when my wife Jane and I walked from Capri Town along winding lanes and down a precipitous flight of steps to La Canzone del Mare, the elegant restaurant once frequented by Coward, Gracie Fields and, of course Mrs Wentworth-Brewster, to whom we raised a glass of Lacryma Christi del Vesuvio (the local wine that tastes like nectar within a 30-mile radius of Vesuvius, and like the ropiest supermarket plonk a week later, on a wet Tuesday night in England).

Our admittedly rather overwrought guidebook had described lunch at La Canzone del Mare as an "iconic

Capri moment", and we were determined to do something "iconic", having been denied a boat trip to the Grotta Azzurra (Blue Grotto) because of choppy waters.

We dug in for much of the afternoon, cherishing the view of the Scoglio delle Sirene, the rock from which the Sirens supposedly seduced Odysseus and his crew in Homer's *Odyssey*. I confess that my eyes also rested, just for an iconic Capri moment or two, upon their modern incarnation - a bunch of excitable young Italian women in swimsuits, taking turns to push each other into the sea.

Afterwards, we chickened out of the stiff walk uphill and instead took a crowded bus back up to Capri Town, where the pavements were thick with tourists, not a few of them trudging after tour guides who sweetly held up velour flowers rather than umbrellas. We didn't linger in Capri Town, partly because the crowds evoked Padstow in August, but also because our allegiances were firmly with the rival settlement of Anacapri, located much higher than Capri Town, on the slopes of Monte Solaro.

I use the word "rival" deliberately: even though the island's only two towns are scarcely three miles apart, the centuries-old antagonism between the two sets of townfolk endures. The Capresans no longer routinely refer to the

Anacapresan women as *faticatore e puttane* ("drudges and whores") as they did only 50-odd years ago, but they still poke fun at the Anacapresan dialect. The Anacapresans, for their part, cling to the high ground both morally and literally, believing that even their air is superior.

We stayed just outside Anacapri at the Caesar Augustus, a swish hotel notable most of all for the astounding view over the Bay of Naples from its huge terrace, one end of which is dominated by a huge statue of Augustus himself. After dark he was illuminated by a spotlight aimed, rather disrespectfully we felt, right up his toga. Anyway, we lingered there for ages, agreeing that a Bellini in the moonlight on the terrace of the Caesar Augustus would have put the romance back into Paul and Heather McCartney's marriage; hell, it might even have done the trick for Basil and Sybil Fawcett.

There was, I should swiftly add, nothing remotely Fawcett-esque about the Caesar Augustus, where the food matched the sumptuous outlook, but on our second night there we fancied something less grand, so we walked into Anacapri and down an unlikely alley found Il Solitario. It looked like, and probably was, somebody's front room, was overlit, and a toddler called Luigi was trucking from table to table. It was almost inevitable that we would

have one of the best meals of our lives there, and we did.

The next morning we caught the chair-lift to the top of Monte Solaro, to get a 360-degree perspective of the island, and a majestic view of I Faraglioni, the three enigmatic, pale-ochre limestone colossi (according to our overwrought guidebook) that rise from the sea just off Capri's southern coast. Less poetically, we each had a cappuccino in the mountain-top café and decided, not for the first time, that we could do better at our favourite café in Hereford. If Italy offers only one disappointment to the hopeful traveller, and I've found no other, it is the quality of its cappuccino, which too often tastes of UHT milk.

Having watched a succession of elderly tourists making inelegant dismounts from the chair-lift coming down, most of them trying to look insouciant while being forced into a frantic downhill trot, we decided that we would walk the return leg. It took an hour but it was a good decision. We had the long stony path through the wooded slopes entirely to ourselves, and at the bottom we passed a cemetery where my eye fell on the grave of John Hamill of County Antrim, of His Britannic Majesty's Late Regiment of Malta, who fell while bravely resisting the French invasion of Anacapri on October 4, 1808. We toasted him with the mineral water we'd



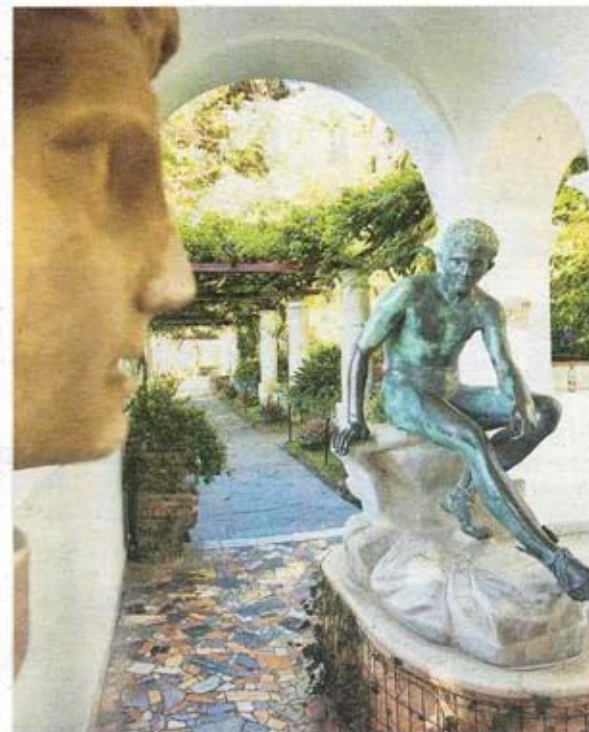
bought to douse the taste of the cappuccino.

Apparently, and despite being inland, Anacapri was hit harder by invaders than Capri Town (another source of competitiveness). The Saracens dragged the menfolk off to sell as slaves, and raped the women, the consequences of which can still be seen today in the faintly Moorish features of many Anacapresans. Their "smouldering looks" and "wild beauty" were certainly appreciated by the visiting German historian Ferdinand Gregorovius in the 1850s, and his enthusiastic, not to say libidinous reports helped to fuel an invasion, this time peaceful, of northern Europeans.

Anacapri became a colony of artists and writers, and still has a bohemian vibe, even if

mass-produced tourist tat (I confess that we almost succumbed in the case of the Limoncello bottle in the form of Elvis) is far more in evidence than original art.

The best art in modern Anacapri is in the Villa San Michele, once the home of the Swedish doctor, philanthropist and ornithologist Axel Munthe, who crammed it with antiquities. We spent a beguiling hour in the villa's lovely colonnaded garden, and were delighted to learn that, in 1907, Dr Munthe married an Englishwoman with the stout English name of Hilda Pennington-Mellor. Better still, their two sons were called Malcolm and Viking. What we didn't find out was a) whether Hilda Pennington-Mellor knew Mrs Wentworth-Brewster; and b) whether



Bella figura: Capri by night (left); Marina Piccola (below); and Villa San Michele in Anacapri (above) GETTY; CORBIS



Malcolm and Viking were hacked off when Munthe, who died aged 92 in 1949, left the Villa San Michele to the Swedish state to promote cultural relations between his homeland and Italy. Still, it was good news for the rest of us.

We left Capri as captivated as we had hoped to be, and caught the ferry to Sorrento, where we spent the last night of our long weekend at the fabled Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria, along with the ghosts of Otto von Bismarck, Oscar Wilde, King Edward VII, Princess Margaret, Enrico Caruso, Richard Strauss and Luciano Pavarotti, all of whom stayed at one time or another, and must be having a heck of a celestial party.

The hotel was built in 1834 on the site of the Emperor

Augustus's villa; we felt he was beginning to stalk us. It is a remarkable place, full of enormous potted palms and mottled mirrors, although most remarkable of all is its location: right in the heart of town, it is insulated by magnificent gardens from the bustle of tourists, disgorged in their hundreds all day long from the ferries and cruise ships.

We had lunch in the Piazza Tasso, the main square, and eavesdropped with relish as a gregarious couple from Pennsylvania tried to befriend a taciturn couple from Doncaster, who smiled wanly while the Americans insisted that, as they were cruising on the same ship, they ought to spend the rest of the afternoon together. There is no point, I have

found, in lamenting the crush of fellow-tourists in the world's most beautiful towns; you simply have to make the most of the people-watching and listening opportunities it affords. Later, walking along the Via San Cesareo, we heard an English voice exclaiming: "Ooh, it's just like the Shambles in York."

Of course, there comes a point when you need to escape these reminders of home. So we walked down to the harbour, sat outside a little bar in the fading afternoon sunshine, quaffing from yet another bottle of Lacryma Christi del Vesuvio, and decided that the faded terracotta of the old buildings looking out over the bay - "Sorrento Red", as Mr Farrow and Mr Ball might call it - was the very colour of *la dolce vita*.

TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

Getting there

The nearest airport is Naples, which is served by British Airways (0844 493 0787; www.ba.com) from Gatwick; by easyJet (0905 821 0905; www.easyJet.com) from Stansted; and by BMI (0870 60 70 555; www.flybmi.com) from Heathrow. Hydrofoils operate regularly between Capri and Naples (00 39 081 428 5555; www.snav.it).

To reduce the impact on the environment you can buy an "offset" through Abta's Reduce my Footprint initiative (020-7637 2444; www.reducemyfootprint.travel). Citalia (0871 664 0253;

www.citalia.com) offers three nights at the Hotel Caesar Augustus in Capri and three nights at the Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria in Sorrento, with

private transfers and British Airways flights from Gatwick airport to Naples, from £1,318 per person.

Staying there

Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria, Sorrento (00 39 081 8777 111; www.exvitt.it). Doubles start at €30 3 (£252), including breakfast. Hotel Caesar Augustus, Anacapri, Capri (00 39 081 837 3395; www.caesar-augustus.com). Doubles start at €430 (£358), including breakfast.

More information

Italian State Tourist Board: 020-7408 1254; www.italiantouristboard.co.uk

