

how to spend it

A long weekend in the Pontine Islands with Achille Salvagni

The interiors and product designer divulges hidden coves and classic eateries in Italy's lesser-known archipelago to Christina Ohly Evans.

Portrait by Fabio Massimo Aceto



Achille Salvagni at the port of Ponza | Image: Fabio Massimo Aceto

When I was growing up my family had a home in San Felice, just across the Tyrrhenian Sea from the Pontine Islands, so Ponza has always been a big part of my life. I come every summer to these “Pearls of the Mediterranean” – special because of their authentic rustic character, and because they have remained unchanged for centuries. There are six islands in all, with Ponza and Ventotene inhabited year-round, while Palmarola is only lively in the summer. Santo Stefano and Zannone are little deserted isles with just wildlife, and while most people miss them, I think they are worth exploring by boat.

Mythology says that this is where Odysseus, on his way back from conquering Troy, was enticed by Circe, who later enslaved him. It's just an hour and a half from Rome, but really a world away. The Pontines are not at all like Capri; they have the DNA of the Aeolians, which means that they feel rural, pristine and real. The small villages are home to fishermen who still work very hard, and you can hear the sea from almost everywhere. Ponza was once a Roman island, so you still have many people coming here from Rome, but there are strong Neapolitan roots, so it draws people from there too.



Remote Palmarola, which Salvagni recommends exploring by boat

The Pontines have a very specific kind of natural beauty. Whereas the Aeolian Islands are volcanic and very rounded and full of vegetation, the Pontines are more sculptural; you'll find all sorts of hidden craggy grottos and secluded white-sand beaches. There are also incredible rock formations – almost gothic arches – that jut out from the sea. There are unexpected treasures at every turn, but the area remains amazingly untouched. And you will be treated like royalty here – the spirit of the people, who are very welcoming, is what makes it so special.

Ponza is the biggest of the islands and easily reached by ferry from Anzio, Terracina or Formia. The main port, Ponza Porto, is a very Mediterranean scene – whitewashed houses mixed with typical neoclassical 17th-century buildings and abundant vegetation, as well as quaint shops and restaurants lining the harbour. At the level of the sea you'll find local bakers and fishermen selling their catch, while fancier boutiques are located one level above. In Santa Maria there is a very special church that has some fine Ionic details, and it's also the setting for the island's ultimate seasonal celebration, the Feast of San Silverio, an all-day event that takes place every year on June 20 and features feasts and fireworks, and everyone on the island takes part.

There are many wonderful places to stay, but Gennarino a Mare is one of the most special. It's been run by the same family for decades. You arrive at this tiny inn by boat, and even a lunch of spaghetti alle vongole is worth the day trip. This is where Gianni Agnelli stayed whenever he came to Ponza; it's that special. Another spot nearby is the Chiaia di Luna, which means "moon beach" – when the moon goes down, the white cliffs and sand turn to pale pink or yellow, the colour of the moon's surface. The Chiaia di Luna hotel is the place to watch beautiful sunsets with an aperitivo. Villa Laetitia is the trendiest place in town – it's owned by the Fendi family, who have made it a chic boutique hotel with gardens overlooking the water, and it's a popular escape for Romans at the weekend.

Food is very important on the islands, and Pasticceria Napoletana on the central Piazza Carlo Pisacane on Ponza is a great place to start the day. It's on the promenade and serves a speciality called sfogliatella, which is a pastry with a ricotta and candied-lemon-peel filling – delicious.



The Pontine Islands are famous for their sculptural rock formations jutting out of the sea

The restaurants are excellent too. Acqua Pazza, overlooking the port, is a favourite. Tuna is a speciality of Ponza and here it's served either as a carpaccio or cooked with pasta and a side of locally cultivated lentils. It also serves a very specific, locally produced wine, Biancolella by Casale del Giglio. My father built 50 wineries during his long career, including this one, so I am very partial to their wines. The vintages are uniquely good because the grapes grow well in the clay soil, which absorbs the water and salt. The strong sun helps too.

One of the best spots for lunch on the island is Il Melograno, which is in the Grand Hotel Santa Domitilla. I really like the intimacy of the courtyard, with its fragrant wisteria and beautiful pergolas. It's evocative of an ancient island village. The chefs prepare these incredible dishes made with just-caught fish and vegetables, fruits and herbs that were picked that morning.



Acqua Pazza restaurant overlooking the port in Ponza

The second largest island in the chain is the very small, very simple Ventotene. There are almost no cars here and it has a humble, almost ascetic feel, but there is also a lot of rich history to the place. It was once a jail for noble Roman adulteresses and, later, anti-Fascists. Emperor Augustus exiled his daughter Julia here too. One of the most famous prisoners was Altiero Spinelli, author of *The Ventotene Manifesto*, which was signed here in 1928 and called for a free and united Europe.

This is a place for thinkers, those who like quiet and reading. The village, with its fishermen's caves, is an excellent place to do this. There aren't many hotels, but you can stay in Spinelli's 18th-century apartment, which has a lot of charm. The food is excellent as well – simple lunches of fresh mozzarella and aubergine at the Mascalzone Village café, and dinners at Parata Grande, where the chef makes excellent swordfish and barracuda-stuffed ravioli and octopus with lemon and olive oil. Wherever you are in the islands, dinner is often followed by a shot of gelsino, a mulberry digestivo.



The hall of Ponza's Grand Hotel Santa Domitilla

The smallest of the Pontine Islands is Santo Stefano, which, until 1965 was a prison fortress full of criminals of all kinds. Today it's uninhabited; you can explore and tour the cells of the prison that sits at the top of the hill – the views go all the way to Mount Vesuvius. The best way to see this tiny island is by guided tour; Enrico Alleati sets off from Ventotene harbour regularly during the summer, and he's full of local knowledge.

Then there is Palmarola, which is best known for its pink-coral beaches and the Rifles, a collapsed rock outcropping that once formed a natural arch. It's a remote island, full of pristine beaches and I highly recommend a day of exploration by *gozzo* – a typical Italian fishing boat that's good in any type of sea. On your own boat you can access hidden nooks and go snorkelling in the crystal-clear water wherever you happen to drop anchor. Cathedral Cliff is another geological must-see as it's covered in tiny dwarf palms.



The harbour at Ponza

There is just one place to eat and stay on the island – O' Francese – and you can only access it by swimming, unless you have a tender. That means you arrive wet and sandy, but this just adds to the magic. You can also rent grottos here, former fishermen's houses, which are beautiful places to spend a day.

The last of the islands is Zannone, tiny and remote. Most people ignore it because there are no public places, but it's fascinating in its own right, for the incredible rocks and equally incredible colours of the sea. The only inhabitants are wild goats with these impressive horns, and the only structures are the ruins of a monastery and villa that can now be accessed by a long hiking trail.

WHERE TO FIND

Hotels

Prices are for a double room per night with breakfast where applicable. Casa Spinelli, Ventotene (+39347-148 7138), from €400 per week. Chiaia di Luna, Via Panoramica, Ponza (+390771-80113; hotelchiaiadiluna.com), from €101. Gennarino a Mare, Via Dante Alighieri 64, Ponza (+390771-80593; gennarinoamare.com), from €110. O' Francese, Palmarola (+39380-254 2553; ofrancese.wixsite.com/ofrancese). Villa Laetitia, Via Scotti 18, Ponza (+390771-809 886; villalaetitia.com), from €68.

Restaurants, cafés and bar

Prices are for three courses and a half bottle of wine where applicable. Acqua Pazza, Piazza Carlo Pisacane 10, Ponza (+390771-80643; acquapazza.com), from €75. Mascalzone Village, Ventotene (+39349-258 4397). O' Francese, see Hotels, from €40. Ristorante Il Melograno, Grand Hotel Santa Domitilla, Via Panoramica, Ponza (+390771-809951; santadomitilla.com), €45. Parata Grande, Via Parata Grande, Ventotene (+390771-85303; paratagrande.com), from €85. Pasticceria Napoletana, Piazza Carlo Pisacane 35, Ponza (+39339-636 1723), pastries from €8. Ristorante Gennarino a Mare, see Hotels, from €40.

Sites and activities

Carcere di Santo Stefano, Via Olivia 108; guided tour only - see Enrico Alleati. Da Coco Noleggio *gozzo* rentals, Via Banchina di Nazio (+39338-894 1314). Enrico Alleati, Via Rampa Marina, Ventotene (+390771-85122), from €10 per person per hour; sunset aperitivo at sea with wine and snacks included.

When to go

Most hotels and restaurants are closed from November to March; April to June and September are ideal. July is crowded and August best avoided.

How to get there

British Airways (0344-493 0787; ba.com) flies seven times daily from Heathrow and Gatwick to Rome, from £123 return. Trenitalia (italiarail.com) runs trains from Roma Termini to Formia-Gaeta, from £8. Laziomar (laziomar.it) runs ferries from Formia to Ponza, from €18.90.