

# On an Italian isle, gardens of earthly delights

## ▶ ITALY

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ming pool (surrounded by lounge chairs where half the clientele sprawls in the sun sipping tall drinks), Poseidon features about 20 smaller pools that mix the thermal springs with either fresh or seawater to reach a range of temperatures between 82 and 104 degrees. Dipping our toes in the pools, we were reminded of Goldilocks: too hot, too cool . . . ah, just right.

The chemical composition of the pools varies depending on the spring waters; some carry high levels of sulfates, others are rich in iodine and bromine. "Nature cure" enthusiasts believe that the different minerals can treat a range of ills. Poseidon management recommends a dipping regimen that basically boils down to bathing in no more than four pools, starting with a 20-minute soak and decreasing the amount of time as the water gets hotter. After five minutes in the hottest pool you can stand, it's time for a chilling dip of 15 seconds in a pool at 59 degrees or a swim in the somewhat warmer ocean. As close as we could tell, everyone was too relaxed to follow the rules.

Poseidon offers a range of beauty and health spa treatments, but we demurred at getting a facial, a massage, an anti-aging treatment, or a pedicure in favor of the simpler pleasures of a day at the beach. The sheltered cove beneath the steep, rocky hillside has a long beach of tan sand. Two rows of canvas beach chairs stretch the length of the strand, each of them shaded by a thatched umbrella that rattles lightly in the breeze.

Even those of us unaccustomed to relaxing have to give in at Poseidon. The thermal pools wash away any residual muscle tension, and the gentle ocean waves make for good swimming that isn't even chilly by New England standards. The garden landscape that begins just above the beach invites indolent meandering through manicured lawns and floral plantings. At several points along the paths, steamy natural volcanic springs burble out of the ground.

Poseidon has taken clever advantage of its volcanic rock outcrops. The Roman-style sauna, for example, is carved into the mountainside. Unlike classical Roman baths, it needs no furnace. The chambers are heated super-hot by volcanic gases coursing inside the rock walls. After a short sit in the stone hot box, we cooled down in individ-



PHOTOS BY DAVID LYON/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Learn to relax in a chair, under an umbrella, or by the sea at a place named Poseidon Thermal Gardens. Elsewhere on Ischia, a water jet amid a showpiece landscape at La Mortella Gardens, and Sant' Angelo, a fishing village, straddles an isthmus.

ual flower-draped stone niches where we could lean back into the exhilarating gush of a waterfall. Pathways through the gardens and tall stands of Mediterranean pine lead to the wine grotto, a semi-secluded hideaway with both shady and sunny areas for hanging out and, well, sipping wine. We were definitely learning to relax.

In fact, the whole island of Ischia is a tonic to the spirit. Every turn in the road reveals another postcard vista and the soothing sound of water is never far away. When we couldn't hear the lap of waves on the shore, we heard the gush of fountains and the bubble and hiss of springs. All that water combines with the fertile volcanic soils and mild Mediterranean climate to create a lush island where flowering plants seem to spring up overnight.

No place is more lush than La Mortella Gardens, where British composer William Walton and his Argentine wife, Susana, transformed their estate of mostly barren rock into a botanical showcase. They imported dramatic tropical and subtropical plants from around the globe; like the Waltons, the transplants took to Ischia with a passion.

The gardens opened to the public in 1991, eight years after Sir William's death, and they be-



come more spectacular every year. Giant tree ferns overhang cool paths and fountains spurt into the air. At one point, a gentle waterfall tumbles off a hillside into a pond spotted with both blue Egyptian and pale white and pink Amazonian water lilies. It was easy to understand how this tranquil setting inspired some of the composer's finest work. In a way, Walton's spirit persists on the property. Not only are his ashes stored in the villa that he and Susana built, but the foundation that administers the property also sponsors more than 70



chamber music concerts a year.

It's true that Ischia has attracted its share of musicians, artists, writers, and film stars. Scenes of "The Talented Mr. Ripley" were filmed here, as well as segments of "Cleopatra" (Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton are said to have shared their first kiss on Ischia, captured on film by a paparazzo.) But Ischia remains less commercial and crowded than nearby Capri. Away from the main port community, tiny towns fill narrow coves along the coast. Ultimately, our favorite was Sant' Angelo,

which straddles a narrow isthmus on the south side of the island. The village has a smattering of tourist shops and there is a man who rents lounge chairs and umbrellas at the little strip of a beach. But the main employment here is fishing — and serving that fish in excellent casual restaurants.

Of course, eating and drinking is part of the relaxing experience on Ischia. In contrast to the often heavier food of mainland Naples, Ischian fare tends to be light — even the heavenly local egg pasta tossed with a little but-

## If you go . . .

### How to get there

Four companies offer frequent ferry service from Beverello at the Naples port for around \$26. Small buses run frequently on Ischia; a two-day ticket available at the port's bus kiosk costs \$8.40.

### What to do

#### Poseidon Thermal Gardens

Forio d'Ischia  
011-39-081-908-7111  
www.giardiniposeidon.it  
April 3-Oct. 31 from 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Single admission \$42; rates decrease for two or more people. Health and beauty treatments extra.

#### La Mortella Gardens

Via F. Calise 39, Forio  
011-39-081-986-220  
www.lamortella.org  
April-October, Tue-Thu, Sat-Sun  
9 a.m.-7 p.m. Adults \$16.80, ages 12-18 \$14, 6-11 \$9.80. Concerts extra.

### Where to stay or eat

#### Grand Hotel Punta Molino

Beach Resort & Spa  
Lungomare Cristoforo Colombo 23  
Casamicciola Terme  
011-39-081-991-544  
www.puntamolino.it  
Constructed atop thermal springs on the north shore, this modern hotel has a terrace restaurant and a spa. Doubles from \$375 with breakfast and dinner.

#### Albergo San Montano

Via Nuova Montevico 26  
Lacco Ameno  
011-39-081-994-033  
www.sanmontano.com  
San Montano features a natural sauna carved into volcanic rock. Doubles from \$280 with breakfast, \$335 with breakfast and dinner.

#### Ristorante Neptunus

Via Chiaia di Rose 11  
Sant' Angelo  
011-39-081-999-702  
Fresh fish off local boats headline the menu. Entrees \$15-\$22.

ter and the slivered peel and juice of Ischia lemons. Now that's our idea of spa cuisine.

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