

VILLA BEATRICE

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Mr. Ripley's Secret Island

By Richard Pendelbury. Originally Printed by Daily Mail (London), March 11, 2006, Section: Ed. 1st, 04, pg. 64.

MY 12-year-old son, Will, like most boys of his age, loves the kind of computer game in which a series of fiendish obstacles stand between him and a magical destination.

I will be applying to patent my own version. Its provisional title is 'Ischia or Bust'.

Players will despair as an Italian air-traffic controllers' strike closes Naples airport.

They will grind their teeth over the discovery of a World War II RAF bomb on the main Rome-Naples railway line.

And then they will confront Super Filippo the taxi driver, who engages fifth gear

before leaving Rome airport and does not decelerate until his Mercedes is bouncing off the Neapolitan potholes, 140 miles further south.

Miraculously, however, you will then find yourself arriving unscathed, only yards from the hydrofoil to Ischia and with five minutes to buy a ticket before it leaves.

Super Filippo will kiss the large St Christopher medal which has been hitherto lost in his chest rug and then wave you off. Game over, almost.

My advisers in the computer software industry have only one quibble with what is obviously a winning idea - where the hell is Ischia?

In recent years, the place has slipped off the British holiday radar. For the record, Ischia (rather than Istria or Ithaca) is the largest and most outlying of the handful of isles which stretch into the Tyrrhenian Sea from the Bay of Naples. It's really near Capri.

The Italians call it the Green Island, because of the vineyards and orchards which, thanks to the year-round balmy climate, spill coastwards from the slopes of Mount Epomeo.

But for several glorious summers in the Fifties and Sixties, it was more famous for its glitz than its grapevines, as the international jetset came to play or re-

store their limbs in its high class volcanic thermal spas.

AFGHANISTAN'S last monarch was receiving treatment on Ischia when he learned that he'd been overthrown. British composer Sir William Walton lived and died here (Lawrence Olivier and Joan Plowright trusted at his place) and Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor were among a host of stars who passed through.

Before them all, that 19th century matinee idol Horatio Nelson dropped anchor to pound to rubble the local castle and, briefly, seize the island for the Crown.

Ischia's modern heyday was captured in Anthony Minghella's movie *The Talented Mr Ripley*, filmed on location here, in which playboy Jude Law and girlfriend Gwyneth Paltrow's holiday is interrupted by the arrival of Matt Damon's unexpected guest. Their idyll ends prematurely when Damon's character brains Law with the oar from a rowing boat. Such things happen in high summer when the villa gets a little crowded.

I took my wife, two children, the au pair and the in-laws to the same spot.

Would life imitate art I wondered, after altering our travel arrangements to accommodate the strike, the bomb and Super Filippo?

Or, could my mother-in-law survive our vacation unscathed?

Unlike rocky Capri, Ischia has sandy beaches and yet remains relatively unaffected by the modern mass tourism which has distorted the charm of so much of the Med.

Neapolitans visit all-year round and the Milanese flock here in July and August, as do a smattering of tourists from a number of northern European countries.

But even though Naples is only a budget flight away, Ischia attracts few Brits. 'This is what the French Riviera was like 30 years ago,' sighed my mother-in-law.

The 50-minute hydrofoil ride out of Naples is a treat.

Surging from the Molo Beverello, it hugs the shore of the Phlegraean Fields, to which Ischia was once joined, before breaking clear of the mainland and skimming past the tiny islet of Procida, with its tumbledown port front, fishing boats and lemon orchards (the film *Il Postino* was shot here).

Pietro Agnese was waiting for us at Ischia Porto's pretty harbour. For 35 years, this affable winemaker (Ischia is heaven for foodies and vinophiles) has been next door neighbour to and custodian of the Villa Beatrice, which can be found above a winding road on a hillside beyond the village of Fiaiano.

If this is, briefly, to be a love letter to Beatrice, then forgive me and so be it. Loll on the lip of the villa's infinity pool and you can gaze upon the Nelson-battered Castello Aragonese at Ischia Ponte, framed by trees, a mile below. Mount Vesuvius, destroyer of Pompeii, glowers on the mainland beyond.

Beatrice's garden was an arboreal and botanical riot: oak, orange, lemon, grapefruit, cherry, apple, palm, mimosa, magnolia, olive trees, roses, camellia, bougainvillea, begonia, dahlia, lavender and grape vines, all vied for attention.

Within the large, red-tiled stone villa was a library, filled with whodunits and guidebooks, which reflected the postings and taste of the Italian diplomat who built Beatrice 45 years ago (the villa is now owned by a New Yorker friend of the late ambassador).

THIS was how Dickie Greenleaf, Jude Law's character in *The Talented Mr Ripley*, enjoyed Ischia. And at Pounds 3,000 a week in high season, it is not cheap. But when you divide that amount by the eleven adults that it can sleep, Beatrice becomes a bargain.

For the first couple of days, we played in, or read idly by, the pool and ate dinner on the lamp-lit garden terrace overlooking the floodlit castle, as the cicadas sang. Occasionally, we were adventurous

enough to wander down to the village store to replenish supplies.

But there was a whole island out there. We could see it from our flower-covered hillside, and while two generations were happy lounging around the pool, the in-laws were demanding some sights. So, midway through our week, we held Culture Day.

Henrik Ibsen, the joyless Norwegian playwright, wrote much of his masterpiece *Peer Gynt* on Ischia, in the pretty north coast town of Casamicciola Terme, during the summer of 1867.

This seemed like a good start and so one glorious morning, famiglia Pendlebury set off for Villa Ibsen in a pair of locally-hired Fiats (it's much cheaper to hire on the island than take cars from the mainland).

I believe fiasco is an Italian word. Either way, it described the early part of our first day of sightseeing.

Apparently, the villa still stands, somewhere in the town's hinterland, though its presence was betrayed neither by roadsigns nor the interest of locals.

For half-an-hour, we rattled up street and down alleyway in accordance with each, conflicting, direction from the Ischianti.

Eventually, Will articulated the prevailing mood: 'Why do we want to go to see a boring house, where a boring Norwegian wrote a boring play, on a day like this?' Ten minutes later, we came round to his way of thinking and gave up. Next stop, Gardini La Mortella, the hillside house and spectacular garden a few kilometres along the coast from the (perhaps mythical) Villa Ibsen, where composer Sir William Walton and his wife spent their last years.

This we found without difficulty. The flowers were beautiful, but the midday heat was intense and the gradients on the upper pathways belonged to the Himalayas.

Yet at the peak was something signposted as the Cascada de Crocodilo, and

this encouraged us to press on upwards. We were rewarded with two fibreglass reptiles perching on a rock. 'You mean we climbed all this way to see that?'

Will seethed.

But from the summit of fake crocodile peak, we could see the most exquisite panorama of coast and sea, curving west and south beyond the pretty town of Forio. To hell with Walton Mountain, that was where we wanted to be.

Within half-an-hour, we were on the beach at Citara. All, without exception, enjoyed gelati and a paddle. Culture be damned, we returned to Beatrice happy.

ON ANOTHER day, we ventured down to Ischia Ponte and castle, a trip which pleased everyone.

And we spent another afternoon at one of Ischia's thermal spas between Ischia Porto and Casamicciola.

We covered a lot of ground and Ischia is relatively small - 18 square miles.

But even in a week of exploration, we failed to experience all of its attractions.

We didn't visit Sant Angelo, the car-free jewel of a fishing village. And our planned trip to Pompeii had to be cancelled because another RAF bomb had been discovered, by the main entrance, closing the site.

No matter. We loved our hillside and we will be back again next year, my mother-in-law included.

The holiday proved a balm to the soul. We had played the Ischia game and emerged unscathed and triumphant. -Independent villa holiday specialists, CV Travel (0870 606 0803; cvtravel.co.uk), offers a week's rental of the Villa Beatrice, for up to 11 to share, from Pounds 2,210 during May 2006, rising to Pounds 3,590 in high season. The company can also organise flights and transfers.