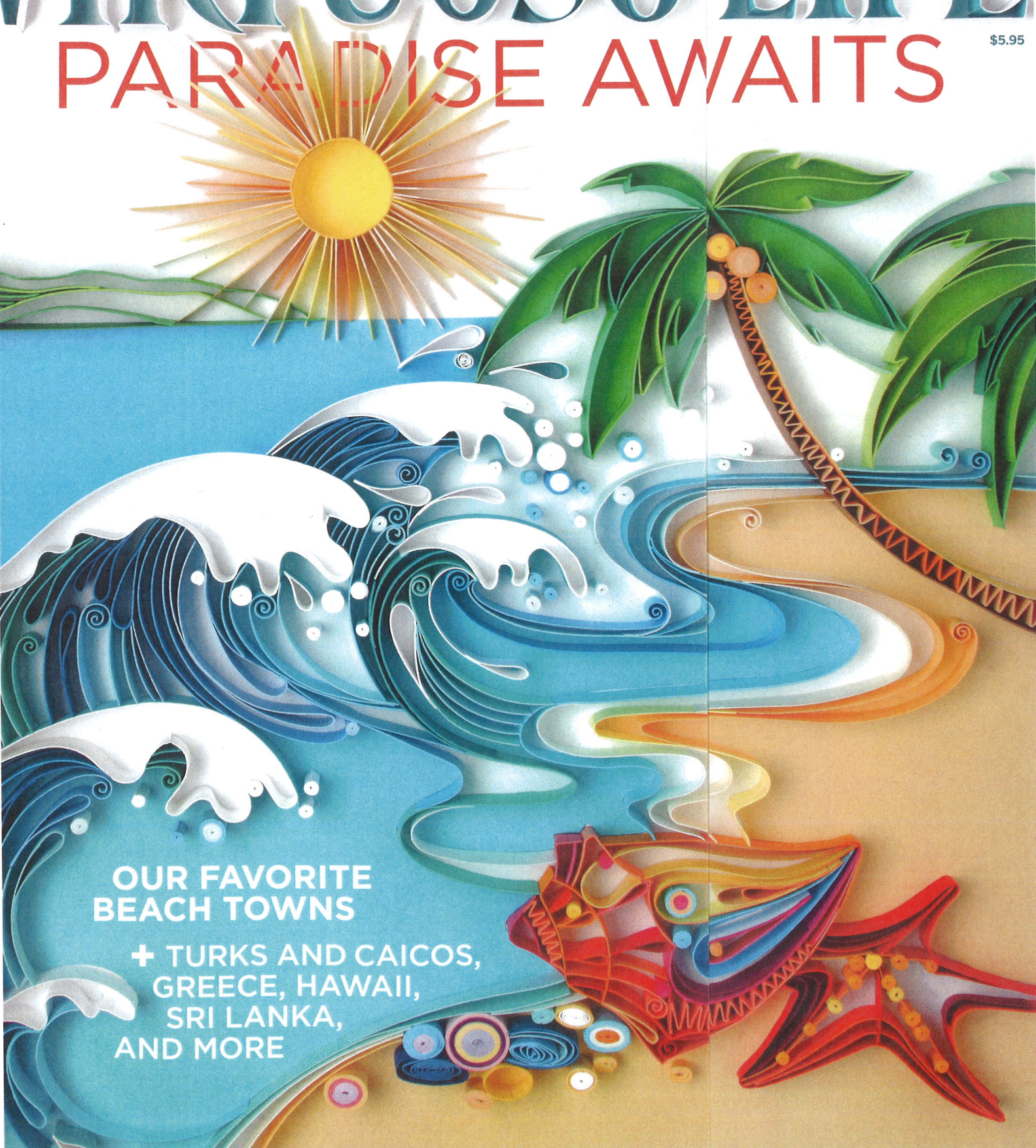


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SWEET NOTHINGS

Spring off to Ischia – Italian for health.

BY SUSAN VAN ALLEN

THE MEDITERRANEAN SPARKLES, STRETCHING OUT across the Bay of Naples from Sorgeto, a cove on Italy's island of Ischia where thermal springs transform the sea into a bubbling hot pool. As the sun dips behind the rocks, a vague memory surfaces: I had planned to stay here for just an hour. Suddenly, the entire afternoon has slipped away among a group of happy Germans and Italians.

Similar experiences have played out for thousands of years on volcanic Ischia, whose mineral-rich springs and smoking plumes of air turn caves into curative saunas. Much of this goodness is channeled into 300-plus spa hotels and thermal parks, making Ischia the larg-

est thermal-water destination in Europe. Italians, Germans, and Brits have long loved the island's waters and mud treatments, as well as the port villages, sandy beaches, and grottos lining its 23-mile coastline, yet Ischia remains largely unknown to Americans. Less crowded than its neighbor Capri, it's perfect for a taste of what the Italians call *il dolce far niente* – “the sweetness of doing nothing” – and taking part in the ancient spa tradition is key to experiencing its essence.

The Greeks discovered the island in the eighth century BC, followed by the Romans, who built baths and temples to honor the gods that gifted them such riches of nature. Cut to the 1950s and '60s, when

Beach time at Mezzatorre Resort & Spa.



Medieval Aragonese Castle and a thermal park near Sant'Angelo. Right: Mezzatorre's lobby.

tip
Giardini La Mortella is also an Ischia must-see. This lush, terraced green paradise with a lovely tea garden (perfect at sunset) was the dream project of Susan Walton and her husband, British composer William Walton.



Ischia became a destination for Anna Mag-nani, Liz Taylor, Richard Burton, and the like, who inspired a spa business boom that continues today, just a quick hydrofoil from Naples.

Set on a secluded promontory on the outskirts of the village of Lacco Ameno, 57-room Mezzatorre Resort & Spa is a stylish, creamy-white affair scented of jasmine, where a willowy spa director, Signora Rosy, customizes programs for guests – perhaps a body wrap of mud that’s been matured in tanks for six months to enrich mineral content, followed by the thermal water circuit, an indoor system of pools with massage jets that progressively target different areas of the body from your shoulders down to your feet, as in my case. Completely rubbery, I stretch out in the Turkish sauna, unaware of the program’s torturous ending: Kneipp therapy, wading through two pools filled waist-high with water ranging from warm to frigid. “It’s excellent for circulation,” Rosy says, beaming as I cringe. After a few rounds I surrender to it, feeling a welcome lightness in my legs.

In contrast to Mezzatorre’s isolated perch, Terme Manzi Hotel & Spa sits tucked into the green hills of the village of Casamicciola Terme. It’s designed as an homage to

the island’s history, with Roman-inspired statuary, Arabic mosaics, vibrant paintings of dancing Neapolitan peasants, and the two-Michelin-starred Il Mosaico restaurant, where dinner is a fabulously entertaining culinary experience; reserve one of the kitchen tables to watch chef Nino Di Costanzo and his staff create *crudos* served on glimmering Murano-glass blocks or a dessert presented with earbuds and a Nea-

politain soundtrack. Along with treatments such as an Ischian-herb scrub, Terme Manzi’s modern spa is known for its mosaic-tiled pools fed by the Gurgitiello thermal springs, which have been praised since Roman times for their antiaging properties.

Minerals and muds have their moments, but perhaps there’s no better way to turn back the clock on Ischia than an island tour by Vespa, which the hotel gamely arranged

RELAXATION THERAPY

Ischia’s hotels open mid-April and close mid-October. Here are our top two picks on the island.

A former fifteenth-century watchtower turned tranquil oasis, 57-room **Mezzatorre Resort & Spa** offers spectacular sea views, a heated seawater swimming pool, a spa with thermal pools and mud treatments, a private rocky beach, and two excellent restaurants. *Doubles from \$375, including breakfast daily,*

lunch or dinner once during stay, and, for three-night stays, a thermal water treatment.

Terme Manzi Hotel & Spa’s eclectic decor and 58 guest rooms invite travelers to immerse themselves in the spirit of Ischia through its heated indoor pool, outdoor pool facing Mount Epomeo, fitness

center, and personalized spa treatments using Terme Manzi products. Guests enjoy live music at one of two lounge bars, a patio with a wood-burning pizza oven, and the two-Michelin-starred Il Mosaico. *Doubles from \$320, including breakfast daily and a massage or cooking class for two once during stay.*

for me. Up pulled my guide, an Ischian gentleman in his thirties, and off we went with memories of riding through California mountains in my younger days pleasantly playing through me. We stopped at the port of Ischia to stroll pedestrian-only lanes flanked by trattorias and admire medieval Aragonese Castle looming on a nearby islet, then wound up curvy mountain paths, past bougainvillea and vineyards that produce Ischia's wines – from crisp white *biancolellas* to fruity red *pedirossos* – and pulled over for a closer look at a fennel-studded wall of the *tuffo* rock that gives Ischia its nickname, the Green Island.

Finally, we reached the tiny fishing village of Sant'Angelo on the southern side of the island. Tourists and locals relaxed at café tables in its idyllic piazza. Fishing boats bobbed in the distance. A waiter set down a plate of bruschetta, covered with ripe cherry tomatoes that burst with astonishing freshness. I settled in and gazed off to the horizon, doing nothing, and everything going just right. VI



Ageless beauty:
The indoor pool at
Terme Manzi's spa.


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