

Italian Spas: Fango Mud and Wine Therapy

A hhhhh...how I love Italian spas! What amazes me is that most American travelers haven't joined in on these sublime treasures, while visitors from all over Europe flock to them. So listen up: Spas are one of Italy's best bargains, where hotel package deals for top-notch treatments cost a fraction of what they would back in the United States. Add to that wonderful food, wine and the warm, relaxed Italian atmosphere. These places become irresistible once you've tried one.

In addition to soothing baths, Italian spas feature Fango Mud, that precious, slimy volcanic substance loaded with minerals, that detoxifies and rejuvenates. This special mud promotes the

release of toxins and relieves muscular and arthritic pain, as well as aids in exfoliation. Because the minerals that make up this mud vary from place to place, curative properties differ



depending on where you try it. So if you're seriously in search of help with something specific, your best bet is to consult a doctor who can match your body's needs to just the right mud.

In general, the top Fango Mud spots in Italy are to be found on *Ischia*, the island off the coast of *Naples*, and in *Abano*, the town that lies east of *Venice*. Scientists are constantly perfecting ways to mature and treat the Fango Mud in these places to best enhance its amazing natural properties. Many

continued on page 2

"I floated back to my room, step
and watched the sun slide

contend that Abano's mud is best for anti-aging treatments, while Ischia's has properties which fight obesity.

Recently I experienced both places and came back with these reports:

ISCHIA: L'Albergo Della Regina Isabella Spa

Soaking in a *Jacuzzi* of warm mineral-rich water until your fingers get prune and your bones turn to rubber is a divine way to bliss out at *L'Albergo della Regina Isabella* in Ischia. Get a room with a private terrace, where from your outdoor tub you watch fishing boats float by and the only sounds are the lapping of the sea and the occasional church bell.



L'Albergo della Regina Isabella

Queen Isabella of Spain came to these springs in the 19th century, pregnant and needing R&R. Before her visit the waters were named after *Santa Restituta*, a Christian martyr whose body washed ashore nearby in the third century, but the Queen's stay was apparently such a major deal they became known as Regina Isabella in her honor.

Women have left their mark all over Ischia. As you ferry in from Naples, you'll see the castle of *Vittoria Colonna*, a beloved Renaissance poetess, who surrounded herself with an elegant court up there. She later moved to *Rome* where she became Michelangelo's soul mate and he wrote poems to her,

addressing her as "thou spirit of grace." In the town of *Forio*, Lady Susan Walton, who came to Ischia in the 1950s, welcomes visitors to her award-winning exotic gardens, *La Mortella*.

Anywhere you land you'll find places to luxuriate in hot bubbling pools and mud baths. My writer pal Maxine Albert (a woman of exquisite taste) insisted I head to *Lacco Ameno* and check into L'Albergo della Regina Isabella. The sprawling Spanish-style resort was built by film producer



Angelo Rizzoli in the 1950s over the ruins of ancient Greek and Roman baths.

It immediately became a hot spot for celebrities like *Ava Gardner*, *Gina Lollobrigida* and *Anna Magnani*. These days it still has a mid-century retro-vibe and is one of the island's most exclusive places, hosting a global



film and music festival every June, with outdoor movies and concerts.

The atmosphere is a comfy combo of laid-back resort by day and old-world formality at night. In other words, you pad around in your robe to the downstairs seaside dining room for lavish breakfast and lunch buffets between ocean dips, spa treatments, and lounging on the dock with a good book. If you're feeling more energetic, you can stroll through the sweet town or the

hotel can arrange a boat rental. Evenings get fancier, when ultra-attentive waiters fawn over you with French service, presenting refined dishes of fresh seafood.

The Regina Isabella Spa and Medical Center is rated as one of the best in the world because the waters of this particular area are highly radioactive. Radioactive sounded scary to me at first, but apparently this a good kind of radioactivity that makes the baths exceptionally therapeutic. Marine and volcanic mud is matured in pools for one year, and the staff of 50 true professionals gives the huge facility a crisp clinical feel. You can get anything here, from cures for respiratory or arthritis ailments to Reiki to anti-aging treatments. Also popular, the *Ultrashape* procedures, a non-invasive fat reduction and body contouring treatment.

After a mud facial, my skin felt soft as a baby's. The hot stones massage was sublime. "You slept for an hour," the *signora* whispered as I got up from the table in a most pleasant fog. I floated back to my room, stepped out on the terrace into that bubbling hot tub and watched the sun slide into the sea, turning the sky pink.

VENETO: Grand Hotel Abano Terme

I came here for the "wine therapy." Wine therapy is not downing a bottle, having a good cry, and healing your inner child; rather it is a super ingenious body treatment invented in this place east of Venice. While all the region's winemakers are using the vineyards to produce such favorites as *Prosecco* and *Amarone*, these spa scientists have different ideas about the grape.

Parts of the film *The Talented Mr.*

ped out on the terrace into that bubbling hot tub into the sea, turning the sky pink.”



Grand Hotel Abano Terme

Which is why I am lying here as *Lianna* paints me with slick goo from toe to neck. The goo is made from fermented grapes and contains a *prezioso* ingredient: *resveratrolo*. Resveratrolo that will exfoliate me, anti-inflammatory me, re-collagenize me, pump up my serotonin so my mood will be lifted. It's the "aroma-emotional path" of *The Grand Hotel Abano Terme* and I am on it.

"Your miracles, Abano, give speech to the mute," sang *Claudian* when he soaked in the waters here thousands of years ago. Roman Emperors, thrilled to find 130 thermal springs in the surrounding Euganean hills, built baths. They slathered themselves with mud and sang the praises of its miraculous healing properties. They indulged in their own version of Wine Therapy, guzzling it and honoring Bacchus. They named this spot Abano, from the word *aponos*=without pain.

Now what you find here is *Termalismo Moderno*=Modern Thermalism—that puts a cutting-edge style on what Romans adored in olden days. Thermal waters pump through hydro-jets in curative Jacuzzis. Mud is treated

like wine, maturing in tanks so it develops algae that have unique anti-inflammatory properties. And as for the grapes, it's all about extracting that miraculous resveratrolo.

The Grand Hotel Abano Terme is the only 5-star amidst the many hotel/spas to choose from in Abano. Here the focus is anti-aging treatments. I winced as I put my 51-year old self in for it, being from Los Angeles, land of the obsessive quest for eternal youth, where places like this can get terribly expensive and pushy. But there's a kinder, gentler spirit to it here. The three-hour high-end wine therapy, that went from that resveratrolo to mud packing to massage, cost me about a third of what I'd pay for anything that would come close to it back in the states.

Why haven't we Americans heard of this place, when the Germans and Russians are joining the Italians to fill it up? Because the town of Abano gets a grade of charm-minus. The forested hills that surround it are lovely, but it was built up for tourism in the 1970s. Its streets are lined with concrete-block multi-storied hotel/spas, like a low-

key Vegas.

Everything is neat and tidy, prettily landscaped with palm trees and other tropical plants. But there's zilch old world ambience or fabulous art like you'll find in abundance everywhere else in the *Veneto* region. The appeal here is the bargain deluxe digs, extraordinary spa treatments, and lovely service every step of the way.

It's a great place to relax after an adventure in Venice, or to use as a base to explore the treasures of *Padua*, which is ten minutes away by train. Also, the hotel can arrange for you to get to prettier places in the nearby countryside to go horseback riding or golfing.

continued on page 8

DREAM OF ITALY®

Kathleen A. McCabe
Editor and Publisher

Copy Editor: Stephen J. McCabe
Design: Leaird Designs
www.leaird-designs.com

Dream of Italy, the subscription travel newsletter covering Italian travel and culture, is published 10 times a year. Delivery by mail is \$99 in the U.S. and Canada and \$109 abroad. An Internet subscription (downloadable PDFs) costs \$79 per year. Subscriptions include online access to over 70 back issues and regular e-mail updates.

Three ways to subscribe:

1. Send a check to *Dream of Italy*, P.O. Box 5496, Washington, DC, 20016
2. Call 877-OF-ITALY (toll free) or 202-297-3708
3. Subscribe online at www.dreamofitaly.com (Visa, Mastercard and American Express accepted)

Editorial feedback is welcome.
E-mail: editor@dreamofitaly.com

Advertising opportunities are available.
E-mail: ads@dreamofitaly.com

Copyright © 2010 *Dream of Italy*, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Reproduction in whole or part without permission is prohibited. Every effort is made to provide information that is accurate and reliable; however, *Dream of Italy* cannot be responsible for errors that may occur. ISSN 1550-1353 www.dreamofitaly.com

Ripley were filmed on Ischia.

The Grand Hotel Abano Terme is grand in an Empire Louis XIV meets a Sheraton of the 1970s type way. There are chandeliers dripping with crystals all over the place, my room is humongous with all mod-conveniences and a beautiful bathroom done up in marble. The meals are lavish buffets, loaded with fresh fish, lots of nicely prepared vegetables, and the finest Veneto wines.

There are also corny details to add an

amusing touch. Right off the lobby is a formal glassed-in smoking room — yes, in a spa! Opposite is a matching room furnished with felt tables for card games, where I got a nostalgic hit, thinking of my mother's bridge club when I peeked in to see a senior-citizen foursome enjoying themselves. At dinner, there was a fashion show, where sleek-haired goddesses with legs up to their ears strutted around modeling furs—a big business for designers of the area.

The stellar thing about the Grand Hotel Abano Terme and the other spas in town is excellent treatments for excellent prices. When I arrived home a week after my wine therapy, and met my friend Monica for a welcome back glass of wine, the first words out of her mouth were: "You're glowing!"

—Susan Van Allen

Frequent Dream of Italy contributor
Susan Van Allen is the author of the new book, *100 Places In Italy Every Woman Should Go*. Visit her Web site at www.susanvanallen.com

The Details

Note that many Italian spas are closed from November through February.

ISCHIA

L'Albergo della Regina Isabella

Piazza Santa Resitutata, 1

Lacco Ameno

(39) 081 994322

www.reginaisabella.it

Rates: A double room, with breakfast and use of the pools and fitness center, ranges from 250 to 800€ per night depending on the season and the view. Treatment packages start at 130€.

Also consider —

Mezzatorre Resort & Spa

Via Mezzatorre, 13

Forio d'Ischia

(39) 081 986111

www.mezzatorre.it

Rates: The "Speciale Lui & Lei" offers couples four nights of accommodations and a handful of spa treatments each, as well as special discounts on further spa services. The package ranges from 930 to 1,434€ per person, depending on the room type and time of year.



Mezzatorre

The Mezzatorre Resort & Spa is a more expen-

sive and exclusive option nearby. It's much smaller than the Regina Isabella (59 rooms as opposed to Regina Isabella's 128), and is set on a promontory overlooking the sea, so you're in a beautifully landscaped haven. At the Regina Isabella you are just steps away from the village of Lacco Ameno, whereas at the Mezzatorre you take a shuttle bus from the property to mingle with the natives in the village.

Or if you're taking a day trip from Naples or the Amalfi Coast, check out Negombo Spa Park, a lush oasis featuring 16 different pools, where you can spend the day soaking and being pampered —

Negombo Spa Park

Baia di San

Montano

(39) 081 986152

www.negombo.it



Negombo

To stay longer, get in on a bargain deal next door at the modern, sleek hotel whose half and full-board rates include entrance to Negombo—

Hotel della Baia

Via San Montano

(39) 081 986398

Rates: A double room with half board starts at 135€ per person.

ABANO

Grand Hotel Abano Terme

Via Flacco, 1

(39) 049 8248100,

www.abanograndhotel.it

Rates: The sample package "Magical Moments" includes accommodations and half board for two people as well as a bottle of Prosecco, anti-stress massages and a thermal spa card for 780€.

For a beloved bargain, try —

Antiche Terme Ariston Molino

Via Cornelia Augure, 5

(39) 049 8669062

www.aristonmolino.it

Rates: A double room with half board and use of the pools ranges from 59 to 97€ per person. The guest rooms at this family-run 4-star are smaller than the Grand Hotel, the level of service is also not as high but the package deals are much less expensive than at the Grand.



Ariston Molino

1 € = \$1.36 at press time

The international dance festival *Abano Danza* is held every summer.