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Behind the Scenes

Ischia: An Island of Memories

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LORENZOCARCATERRABLOG / IN UNCATEGORIZED



It began, as it so often does in Italy, with a love affair.

In the steamy summer months of 1960, a movie crew arrived on the Italian island of Ischia, 18 miles off the coast of Naples, to continue filming what would turn out to be one of the most expensive films ever made, “Cleopatra.” Soon after their arrival, the stars of the movie—Elizabeth Taylor (the Angelina Jolie of her day) and Richard Burton (the Welsh version of Brad Pitt)—began a love affair that caught the attention of paparazzi around the world. Photographers by the hundreds swarmed the island and followed the couple wherever they went. Since both stars happened to be married at the time (Taylor to then well-known singer Eddie Fisher), a world-wide romantic scandal ensued, complete with harsh headlines and, more importantly, photos of the madly-in-love duo.

The movie, a critical and financial fiasco, nearly bankrupted 20th-Century Fox. Taylor and Burton continued their tabloid-ready antics through two marriages and two divorces. But out of the ashes of a Hollywood disaster, the island of Ischia was re-born as a tourist Mecca.

As the paparazzi followed the film crew north to Rome, real estate developers and hotel owners took note of an island that offered year-round thermal spas, comforting cuisine and some of the finest beaches in all Europe. It would take six years for it to happen, but by the summer of 1968, the island of Ischia had gone from a struggling outpost with a few scattered visitors to one that played host to nearly one million tourists in the month of August alone.



The advertisement features a white background on the left with black text. The text reads: 'NYBG LILAC WEEKEND AND PLEIN-AIR INVITATIONAL', 'May 4-5', 'Painting - Tours - Music and More', 'NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN', and a 'GET TICKETS' button. On the right, there is a photograph of pink lilac flowers. An 'AdChoices' icon is visible in the top right corner of the image area.

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It was during that summer of 1968 that I first arrived on the island for a three-month stay to meet the members of my Italian family. It was also during that summer, on an island bustling with tourists from Germany, Great Britain, Northern Italy and the United States, that I changed the course of my life, and in the process saved it. I arrived there battered by an array of personal problems and parents who could not go a day without a loud argument or a financial crisis. I was not yet 14 and saw little in the way of hope for a future that would bring with it any promise.

But then I saw Ischia for the first time.

Like any visitor, I caught my first glimpse of the island as the hydrofoil from Naples backed into Porto D'Ischia. Hillsides dotted with homes surrounded the mouth of the port and the energy of an island in prime tourist season could be seen and felt even from a distance. From that very first viewing, it felt like home to me and the most beautiful place I would ever live to see. And I knew from that moment on it would always be a part of my life.

I fell in love many times that first summer and the subsequent summers that followed. It was on a beach in front of the Sole Mare Hotel that I spotted the young woman who would first capture my heart. She was 11 and I was 14 and whatever passes for love at such ages, was ours.

I spent many an afternoon with my Grandma Maria, sitting with her on a stone bench in front of St. Peter's Church, enjoying her stories and our quiet moments together. She was a warm woman who had lived through the painful and difficult years of a World War, losing a son and grandson in the process, staying true to her ways even as the island around her began its tender embrace of modern times. She served as a trusted guide out of my own personal wilderness, showing by both anecdote and example that despite the harsh curves of life, there was much still to be cherished. I will never forget my summers with her, which came to an end on a muggy August afternoon in 1975, when I stood near her bedside, surrounded by friends and family, and watched her take her last breath. It was the first time I had seen someone I love die.



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While Grandma Maria helped shift the direction of my life, it was two of my uncles— Mario and Benny—who took me inside the beating heart of Ischia.

Ischia is an island of character filled with a cast of characters and they were two of the best it had to offer, one born and bred there; the other a convert through marriage to my mother's sister, Nancy.

My uncle Mario was a beneficiary of the bustling tourist industry, his buses and cabs roaming throughout the island, always packed with eager faces, most pressed against cameras.

Uncle Mario, dashing, a gifted salesman and storyteller, was always quick to laugh and even quicker to show the many facets of Ischia, and his tours were soon those drawing the biggest crowds. To this day, at age 78, he remains as much an island attraction at the volcanic mushroom jutting out of the bay in Lacco Ameno.



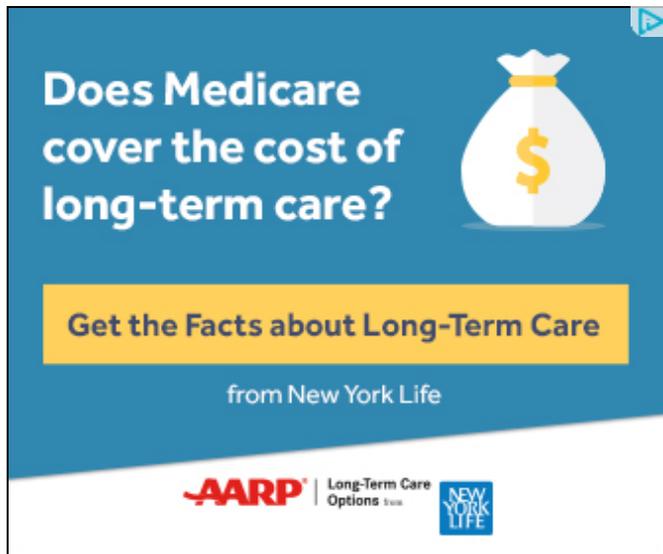
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Mario did business with all the hotels on the island, two of which rank among the finest in the world—The Regina Isabella in Lacco Ameno and the Excelsior, a 10-minute walk from the port. Both cater to celebrities who cherish Ischia for the freedom to roam it offers them. When I first arrived, Charles Bronson, Alain Delon, Clint Eastwood and Marcello Mastroianni would vacation there; more recently it has become a regular landing place for Matt Damon, Gwyneth Paltrow, Hillary Swank and Jude Law, among others. Damon loves the island so much he urged directors to film parts of four movies there—the three Jason Bourne thrillers and “The Talented Mr. Ripley.” Swank, a two-time Oscar winner, spends most of the month of August on Ischia and has never once been bothered by either strangers or locals. Ironically, since the island first gained world-wide notoriety due to the attention paid to it by the pesky paparazzi, these photographers are today kept at a distance, allowing any celebrity who seeks it complete privacy.

Billy Wilder and Jack Lemmon loved being on the island so much they set their comedy, “Avanti” on its shores. Truman Capote would often rent a home on the island and spend his summers writing and drinking, even publishing a short story about Ischia and referring to it “as nothing less than a jewel.”

Ischia mingles history with its romance, and often the tales were passed on to me by Uncle Mario. From him, I learned the island is where Michelangelo built a house of stone just so he could stare across the Bay at the home of Vittoria Colonna, the one woman said to have captured his heart. The house still stands and is visited by many a couple in search of a romantic rendezvous. It is an island once conquered by the Moors and occupied by both the Nazis and American forces during

World War II. It is also home to the Castello Aragonese, a setting so spectacular that you will often find a man asking for a woman's hand in marriage on its highest slope, usually with a setting sun at his back. Ischia also boasts of the beauty of San Angelo, its satellite island, the magical spa of the Poseidon and the glistening sands of the Maronti, one of the world's most stunning beaches.

An advertisement with a blue background. The main text reads "Does Medicare cover the cost of long-term care?" in white. To the right is a white money bag with a yellow dollar sign. Below this is a yellow banner with the text "Get the Facts about Long-Term Care" in blue. Underneath the banner, it says "from New York Life" in white. At the bottom, there are logos for AARP, Long-Term Care Options, and New York Life.

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Ischia is also crammed with quiet restaurants where the base of the tables literally brush against lapping waves and a meal can be shared by couples together for decades or two young strangers meeting for the very first time. It has loud clubs where the dancing and music doesn't stop until sun-rise and quiet streets where the sound of one voice mixed with a melody playing off one violin can melt the hardest of hearts.

While Mario introduced me to the sights through his many tours of the island, Uncle Benny allowed me to glimpse the flip side of Ischia's coin, showing me that it was not simply an island designed for the wealthy. In fact, it is a prime gathering place for working class families to vacation, either renting an apartment through one of the locals or finding affordable accommodations in many of the smaller hotels and pensions that are scattered throughout its 48 miles. Ischia never dozes in summer, choosing to relax during the quieter months of January and February, the locals catching their breath and gearing up for a fresh new season, which always begins in March.

Benny took me for long walks up steep hills toward the silent volcanic mouth of Mt. Epemeo, as we viewed small towns nestled between the five boroughs of the island.



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In Ischia I also discovered the simple cuisine that dates back centuries—rabbit in a thick red sauce spread over large bowels of pasta; Pizza a la Napolitano, with thick shards of basil and garlic floating over a bed of crushed tomatoes; spaghetti with baby clams served in a white wine sauce and then, for dessert, a stop back in the main hub of the port at the Bar Calise, a haven for young and old alike, that serves the freshest sfogliatelle—the traditional shell-shaped pastry—in all of Southern Italy.

The happiest and saddest memories of my life are all linked in some way to Ischia.

I have seen far too many friends and family die well before their time and grew to embrace my cousins as brothers. Now that we are older, most of us with families of our own, we still return, with spouses and children now by our sides, the bond among us stronger than ever. I have lived through feuds and love affairs, seen scores of marriages emerge and then fall apart and, in my darkest times, always sought the island as refuge.

Ischia has never let me down and I don't believe it ever will.

It doesn't matter if you go there for one week, one month or return year after year: it is an island of dreams and magical moments. Once you set foot on the island, it takes hold of you and never releases its grip.

The stories I have been told, both about the island and my family, are tales I will always cherish. They tell me as much about Ischia as any tour ever could. A special one that lingers with me involves my Grandma Maria and Grandpa Gabriel, a shepherd by profession and a tall, expressive man with a generous heart. He died the year I was born and yet I feel I have known him all my life. Gabriel met my grandmother on her side of the island, Ischia Ponte, and fell in love the second he set eyes on her. They kept that love until the day he died of a cancer than caused too much suffering and she held it close to her through the rest of her

years, wearing widow's black for the last two decades of her life. Together they raised six children and it was when that sixth child, my Uncle Giovanni Giuseppe, was born, that the story begins.

While in the clinic, waiting for my grandmother to get ready to go home, watching the nuns in the maternity ward wrap his son in clean clothes, Grandpa noticed a newborn in a corner of the room. "Is he ill?" he asked.



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The nun dressing my infant uncle looked at my grandfather and shook her head. "E abandonado," she said. "He is abandoned."

"What happens to him?"

"He will be taken to an orphanage in Naples and raised there," the nun said. "They will come pick him up next week."

"Can I take him home?" my grandfather asked.

Within twenty minutes, enough time for my grandfather to sign a few forms, he and my grandmother left the clinic with two sons in tow. It was that son, John, who touched my grandfather's heart more than any other. They were always together, laughing, sharing stories and jokes, dreaming up projects that would include the other children. They were inseparable.

Then came the war and Uncle John went off to fight, a member of the Italian Navy assigned to a submarine crew. It was in the spring of 1943 that a sedan pulled up in front of my grandparents' two-story home. Grandpa Gabriel saw the military officers step out of the car, one clutching a folded flag. "Keep your flag," he shouted. "There's no room for it here. No flag is worth the life of a son."

Years later, Grandma Maria told me, “Gabriel didn’t die for another 11 years, when the cancer took hold. But, I watched him die that day, that moment. In one day, with the arrival of one car, I lost a son and a piece of my husband. Days like that you can never forget.”



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The memories that bring a tear are always followed by those that come with a smile.

I was with my Uncle Mario while we were doing a tour of the island (which takes roughly two hours, including one scenic stop at a mountain top restaurant for a snack and a second, at a desert stand facing the bay, for a gelato). It was a British tour and I was working it along with my uncle, who speaks fluent German and sketchy English. One of the tourists, a prim and proper elderly woman, walked up to me and wondered if she could ask a favor. I nodded. It seemed she and her friends were huge Clint Eastwood fans and understood he had either rented or bought a home nearby and they would love to have a photo of the place to take back to show their friends. I asked my uncle and he smiled and said, “Consider it done.”

We all loaded onto the bus and my uncle directed the driver up one winding road to another to another until we came to a magnificent villa, adorned with flowers of all types and pine trees filled with cones. “Take all the photos you like,” Mario told the happy tourists in his best English. “No need to rush.”

While the tourists snapped away, I stood next to the bus, alongside my uncle. He had his arms folded across his chest, a smile on his face. “I’m glad you were here today,” I said. “I would have never found Clint Eastwood’s villa.”



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"This isn't Clint Eastwood's villa," he said with a laugh. "My friend Fabio lives here. The one who keeps the books for the company."

"But they think they're taking pictures of Clint Eastwood's villa," I said.

"And they'll show those pictures to friends and family back home," he said, "and everyone will be happy. They've had a great day out in the sun, a terrific meal and will go back with warm memories and even pictures of a movie star's home. They will leave here with a smile. What better way is there to remember an island?"

On summer nights, out for a long walk, there is music playing in all quarters. Most are soft, lyrical decades-old Neapolitan love ballads kept as fresh as the island's fruits and vegetables. The songs are always about loves found and lost, a woman once glimpsed and never forgotten, an affair gone tragically wrong. The sounds of the music always seem to mingle with the slow pounding of lapping water from the Bay.

The day begins early, with the arrival of fishermen with their catch, littering the docks with their nets and still live fish, old women in dark clothes quick to pounce and barter their way to a day's meal. The fruit peddlers drive past, sitting inside Fiat half-beds, running their engines low. "Who wants me?" they shout. "Who wants what I have? The fruits are fresh and I'm even fresher." They flirt most often with the elderly women, knowing they are the ones who decide how much will be bought and for what price.



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My mother was at her best during those mornings, arguing over the price of fish and peaches with men she had known since they were children, taking as much enjoyment from the bartering as she would from the meals she made from their offerings. On the mornings I would venture out with her, partly to watch her and my Aunt Francis in action, the vendors would always point to me. “Let your son pay,” they would say. “He’s an American. They have money. Let them spend it.”

“His money stays where it belongs,” my mother would say. “In his pocket and out of yours.”

You don’t need to have family on the island or be a celebrity to come away from a visit to Ischia with such memories. You can find them in a chance encounter—a pizza and a beer at Rafael’s restaurant often leads to couples at different tables mingling over conversation and becoming life-long friends. Or on a day trip on Domenico Rumore’s tour boat, listening to the life-long resident of the island spin his tales of history and mystery. “There’s only one place like Ischia in the world,” Domenico’s nephew Antonio told me. “It’s as simple as it is beautiful. And the greatest pleasures often grow out of that.”

On my most recent trip to Ischia, I stopped by the ancient cemetery with my cousin Angela to visit the graves of Grandma Maria and Grandpa Gabriel. The sun was resting just above the horizon, the sea glistening, the waves silent, a warm breeze flowing through the thick row of pine trees that offered shade from the heat of the day. My grandparents were together, side by side, in death as in life, never to be separated. Next to them was a marker for my Uncle John.

“You can see as far as Procida and Capri from here, if it’s clear enough,” Angela said, the setting sun highlighting her unlined face. We were both now in our 50s and had known each other since we were in our teens. “They both loved this island,” she said, “as much as they loved each other.”



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“Grandma Maria told me that even though I was born in America,” I said, “I was made in Ischia. And no matter where else I went in life, this place, this island would always be my home.”

“Was she right?” Angela asked.

I nodded. “The older I get, the more truth there is to that,” I said.

“They like to say ‘See Naples and die,’” Angela said. “But we go one better than that. Here we say, ‘See Ischia and live.’ That’s probably why we get so many more tourists than Naples.”

We sat on a stone bench, in the company of my grandparents, watching the sun set over the most beautiful island in Europe, both of us at peace.

Both of us at home.

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