





Lookout in Portoferraio

The remains of Tuscany

On the island of Elba, our writer finds nothing but seafront views, quiet beaches and the rhythm of restful days

BY CRAIG TANSLEY

The first time I came to Elba it was to flee Florence. When I arrived at the Renaissance city I did so behind a convoy of cruise ship tour buses, which deposited hundreds of tourists on to the square in front of me. I immediately booked a boat, for a dawn escape the next day to Elba.

Even from across the water, six miles off the Tuscan coast, Elba's capital, Portoferraio, looked more like the Tuscany I wanted, with its marina full of old fishing boats. The distress of finding Florence overrun by tour groups in baseball caps, and shady merchants selling pirated designer sunglasses by the banks of the Arno River, disappeared with that first sunrise sighting. It was only early September, but the Toscani and Toscane who descend upon Italy's third-largest island in August had already left.

I hired a tired, old moped, which miraculously managed to splutter up the narrow winding roads that wrap around the rows of mountains running down Elba's spine. Once you're away from the towns, and the minor palaces and townhouses of Milanese and Tuscan nobility, parts of the landscape hardly feel like Europe – or at least there is nowhere else quite the same. Along the rocky coastline, the roads are dust-swept and lined by the sort of prickly peaks found in North America.

However, dreams of the Sonoran Desert are quickly interrupted by rows of olive trees falling down slopes to the sea, and the blooming green of vineyards waving in the wind. I might have travelled to Florence to find Tuscany, but I found it in Elba.

Eat, wander, repeat

I rented a room in a small family-run hotel on the north-west coast of the 550-year-old hamlet Sant'Andrea. This was where boats from the mainland would come to load up on wine to fill the cellars of Tuscan nobility. I didn't find any Tuscan duchesses or dukes; just a few beach bars and a beautiful 500-foot stretch of beach.

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Sant'Andrea is known as 'Isola nell Isola' (an island within an island), because it feels detached. Once home to fishermen and farmers, now the tiny hotels and restaurants cut into the cliffs around the town cater to tourists. But if this is a tourist town, it feels manageable. There are always seats available at the restaurants, and space on the sand. The water itself is so blue and calm, that from the cliffs I could make out fish swimming beneath. For my first three days I didn't leave Sant'Andrea. I did little but slip into the rhythm of a place that felt restful.

Each evening I sat on the deck at Restaurant da Sauro. I'd arrive an hour before dark, and watch the waiters light candles as the sun set across the gardens and the Med beyond. The perch stew was always good, with fish delivered straight from the boats that day.

When I did reluctantly check out, it turned out Sant'Andrea is the template for almost every other Elba stay. For two weeks, I moved my suitcase between tiny villas and hotels in ancient villages. These were the sorts of places where the locals would look up from their espresso and gazetta to stare when I walked in. Not with menace; they were just surprised to see a new face outside of August.

In Poggio, little more than a zigzag of houses on the slopes of Monte Capanne, I was as far from the sea as I could be on Elba. But from the village restaurant, Publius, with a glass of *ansonica* white wine, made just a mile or two away, I could still see the gulf of Marciana Marina far below. In Poggio's cobbled lanes and alleyways, built from granite in the Middle Ages, there is little to do but eat, wander among the chestnut trees and eat some more.

Secret beaches

Not that Elba need be dull, if you want a bit more adventure. There are still wild boar and mouflon (wild sheep) living around its hinterland, especially in the foothills surrounding Monte Capanne. Much

of the interior still remains too wild to reach for all but the hardiest hiker.

I stuck mostly to the coastline, which could have kept me occupied for months. There are more than 70 beaches on the island – some just tiny bays of sand or granite rock beaches; others wide and long, fringed by blue water and coral, and framed by palm trees and pink-purple bougainvillea.

What I liked most was that every good beach had a better, secret beach. Sansone beach is considered the island's most beautiful, but if you walk 10 minutes around the corner, Sorgente beach is even more appealing. It's just 250 feet long, slotted between steep, white cliffs, and you can have the warm blue water to yourself – bar the local children leaping into it from the rock stacks in the corner.

Rhythm of rest

Elba is ultimately a place to do nothing, with as few interruptions as possible. There are no real sights to see or museums to tick off – unless you want to learn about Napoleon's time here. Just fall into that restful rhythm.

It helps that English isn't widely spoken. My Italian is *male* (bad), but the lack of communication can often introduce more interaction with residents – an extended game of charades, mixed with dashes through my guidebook. In a world where English is almost ubiquitous, I'd forgotten how enjoyable it can be to try to guess what someone means from their gestures, shrugs and laughter. Of course, it helps that there are few people on Earth who can express more with their hands than Italians,

Nor are the repercussions of a conversation gone wrong ever too serious. One morning I accidentally ordered wine for breakfast, but, with the sun shining, I didn't bother returning it.

That's the sort of no-worry, lazy days that Elba helps to lull you into. And couldn't we all do with more of those lately?



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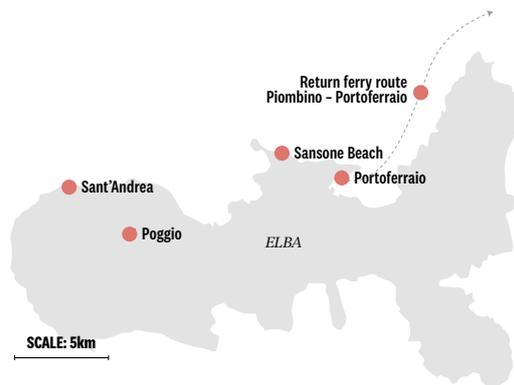


Clockwise from top left: Sansone beach. Narrow street in Poggio. View of Poggio. Wild mouflon.



How to get there

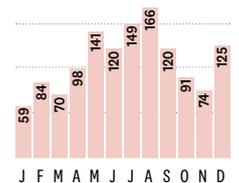
Fly to Pisa from London in 2hr 15min, then either fly direct to Elba, or take a transfer (1hr 15min) or a train (2hr) to Piombino and catch an hour-long ferry to Elba (four ferry companies operate from Piombino). At the time of going to press, travel to Italy had a green light. UK arrivals into Italy are not required to quarantine, nor will you be required to do so on return to the UK. Italy is exempt from the FCO advisory against international travel. The European Health Insurance Card (Ehic) is valid in Italy, and entitles UK residents to free emergency healthcare.



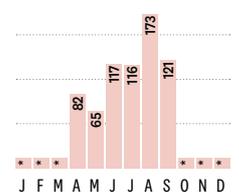
TRAVEL ESSENTIALS



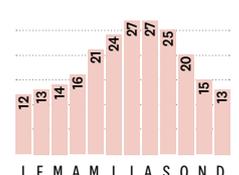
RETURN FLIGHT £ Pisa



HOTEL/NIGHT £ Elba



DAILY HIGHS °C Elba



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*Not enough visitors to provide an average for some months