

ISLAND DREAMING

Flattened by pirates, rebuilt by a bank, stared at by Columbus, and frowned at by Napoleon, the 16th-century Fort San Giorgio has an impressive bio, writes Kirstie Bedford.

It would have been unimaginable to the locals of the Italian island of Capraia, who used Forte San Giorgio as a refuge from marine marauders in the 16th century, that it would one day be a place of refuge by choice.

That travellers would want to come from all corners of the globe to sit behind its walls. That this clifftop stronghold protecting against pirates in the Tuscan Archipelago would be a place of sanctuary and healing. A place where one could float in an infinity pool and stare at the bluer than blue sky. A place so beautiful it would be listed as a National Monument of Architectural and Artistic Merit.

If walls could talk

For years, the community hid behind these walls as it was raided by pirates, led on occasion by a warrior priest. By the late 1600s, it became more of a militarised boarding house than a place for protection, and is said to have been home to 11 soldiers, a handful of families and a few widows. It subsequently had a procession of owners, but none wanted to invest in what was needed to build it back to its former glory.

The then dilapidated building was run as a hotel in the 1950s, and by the 1970s it was the island's disco. At the end of the 20th century, steps were finally taken for its restoration when it was bought by the Forte San Giorgio Company, which could see its potential.

The restoration

It took a decade to transform the medieval citadel into a highly sought-after seaside getaway. Now, with 11 bedrooms and 10 bathrooms, it offers multiple spaces for those seeking sanctuary.

There are two infinity pools (one with a hydromassage corner), a yoga studio and courtyards and terraces perched over the cliff, where you can sit quietly contemplating life or sip an apéritif at sunset. The expansive kitchen, where you'll be whipped up gourmet meals from dawn to dusk, was designed in collaboration with Michelin-starred chef Riccardo De Pra.

The region

Wander from here to the excavated remains of the old Church of Capraia beneath the Sala Sant'Antonio, a space of ancient pillars, vaults, a stone altar and what is left of the medieval wall of the Pisan fortress.

Four Mediterranean gardens have each been designed to be ecologically sustainable and reflective of Capraia's unique ecosystem. Plants were chosen not only for their beauty, but also for their attractiveness to the local bird and honeybee population – and ensuing culinary utility.

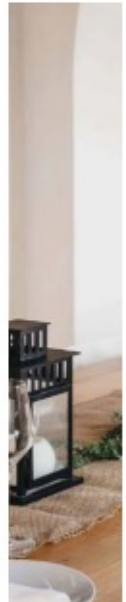
Leave your fortress and take the private path that winds down the cliffs to the sea. It's here you'll discover why this is called the 'wild island', such is the raw, untouched wilderness.

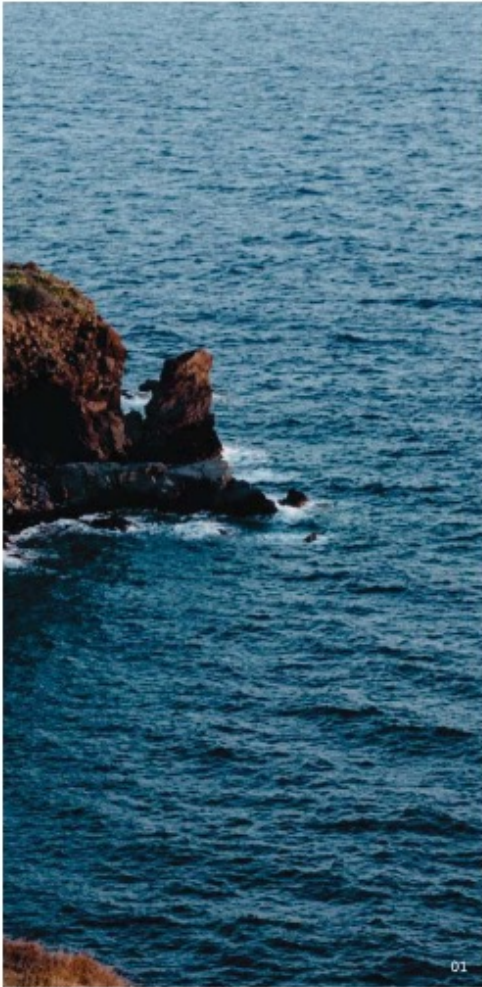
In fact, most of the island is completely uninhabited (there are just two small villages), and much of the surrounding area is a national park and marine reserve.

Back within the citadel walls, you could easily forget this was once a fortress; but the property has remained true to its origins, albeit now a refuge you won't want to leave. ♦

Wellbeing retreat

The Thinking Traveller is offering a six-day wellbeing retreat at Forte San Giorgio from 25 September to 1 October 2022. Created in partnership with revered wellness institute, Ricari Studios, expect Ricari's signature massages to boost circulation, support lymphatic drainage, relax the nervous system and stimulate collagen production. There will also be fitness sessions, hikes, boat trips, sunrise meditation, exceptional Italian dining experiences and wine tastings. After all, it's all about balance. The partnership will be ongoing, with a spring retreat planned for 2023. thethinkingtraveller.com





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Alpine immersion

Deep in the Italian Alps is a five-star retreat where suites 'float' above a canopy of forest-clad mountains with front-row views of the jagged, limestone Dolomites.

Forestis is a former sanatorium-turned-alpine-escape where minimalist design rules, replete with windows for walls so you can soak up those mountain vistas.

Choose the two-storey rooftop Penthouse Suite with its floor-to-ceiling UNESCO-protected panorama, private pool with sun loungers, sauna and open fireplace.

Then spend days swanning around the resort's luxurious spa, where treatments

are based on the wooded surrounds. Try a mountain-pine body scrub or healing wood massage, followed by a forest salt bath. Practise centuries-old Celtic yoga or forest circle ceremonies. Dive into the indoor-outdoor pool enveloped by snow-capped peaks and filled with natural spring waters. Your skin will thank you for it.

Come evening, dine on dishes created by executive chef Roland Lamprecht, who

credits his childhood love of nature for his vast knowledge of the many culinary treasures of the surrounding meadows that you'll find in the dishes you eat.

In winter, you can ski-in and ski-out, while in summer diversions include hiking or cycling the alps, only pausing to fill your water bottle in a babbling stream.

We dare you to leave here not feeling completely transformed. forestis.it



MAGIC OF THE MALDIVES

As if the Maldives couldn't get any better, it's now home to a deeply reviving wellbeing retreat: welcome to Joali Being. Centred around 'weightlessness', the island paradise on Bodufushi in the Maldives' Raa Atoll is all about calm. Begin with a lifestyle assessment where a personal program is developed around four pillars – mind, skin, microbiome and energy. Then immerse yourself in anti-gravity yoga and sound healing. It wouldn't be the Maldives if you didn't end your day with a sundowner overlooking the gin-clear waters of the Indian Ocean. joali.com



Find your flow

Holistic hotspot Kamalaya Koh Samui offers transformative multi-day wellness programs that might include acupuncture, Ayurvedic medicine and Thai massage. This dreamy island perch of Thailand's west coast unites fairytale tropical gardens with a private beach and all manner of healthful facilities. Check in, bliss out and make the most of retreats that target detox, stress and burnout, gut health, emotional balance, fitness and resilience, and immunity. kamalaya.com



Regional respite

Victoria's Mornington Peninsula is famed for its artisans, wineries, markets and beachy vibes. Come spring, you can slip away to this bucolic region one hour south of Melbourne for another reason. Welcome to Alba Thermal Springs and Spa, a luxurious retreat with 31 natural pools. Choose from geothermal, cold plunge and herbal-infused botanical pools, along with 22 spa suites dotted among the 15 hectares of natural bushland. Partly embedded in the hilltop, there will also be more than 20 architecturally designed treatment rooms, Vichy showers, steam rooms and private baths. albaternalsprings.com.au