



Italy's
Ponza Island

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— *The Isle of Circe the Sorceress*



Red and yellow gorgonian sea fans on wall of reef off Ponza Island



View of Ponza's harbour. PREVIOUS PAGE: Diver with red gorgonia at Le Formiche

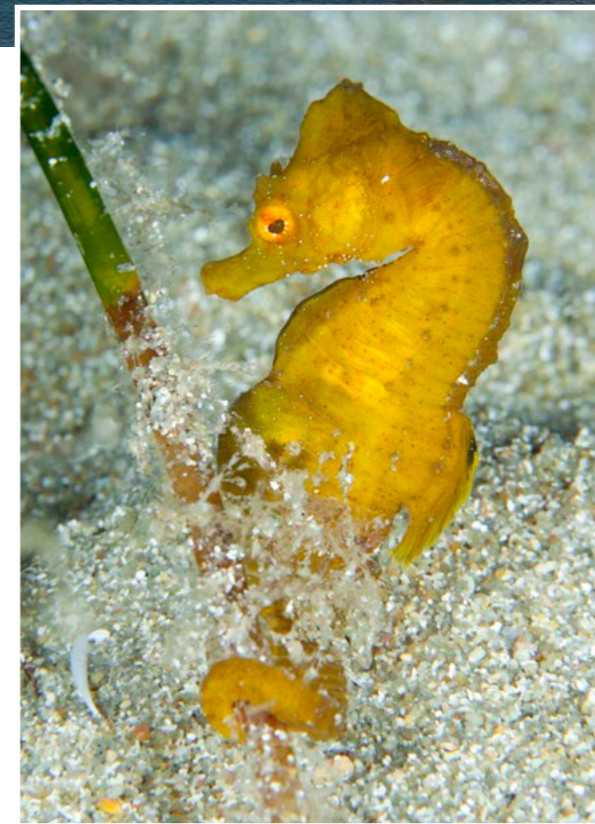
The power of the island of Ponza lies in its ability to preserve an intangible aura of magic, which nature has given it, in the marriage of heaven and earth, water and fire, in the racing of land and sea after each other, relentlessly.

The archipelago of the Pontine Islands is an inexhaustible source of surprises, with its extraordinary landscapes, cliffs, caves and laces of rocks. The island's coasts are very jagged, formed mostly by high banks of volcanic rock, tuffaceous and vulcanite structures of wonderful colours. The only exception is Zannone, which is formed by limestone and dolomite, and looks like a gem. It is so green, covered with Mediter-

anean shrubs. All are characterized by a succession of small coves, bays and inlets that give them a special charm.

The charm of the island of Ponza, one of the most beautiful in Mediterranean Sea, remains unchanged, year after year; at sunset, the sun colours the sky red and the rocks pink—a thin strip of rose on the horizon, a line dividing the turquoise of the sea from that of the sky.

When getting to Ponza from a city, it always seems a bit like a step back in time. A short ride on the sea and everything changes—the sounds, the smells, the atmosphere. Whenever one discovers Ponza from afar, one sees the same magic; its slim profile seems to be the gateway to an archipelago that doesn't exist. A crest of tuffaceous rocks that rises vertically from the crystal clear water, and climbs up,



Seahorse in seagrass



View overlooking the rugged and varied landscape and coastline of Ponza Island

running sinuous upon the sea, forming bays and inlets. It doesn't change while climbing through the narrow streets of the countryside, or on the heights of the island, towards the village of Le Fornaci, where the houses seem to be balanced on the sharp ridge overlooking the two sides.

Ponza should be experienced in autumn, when the time of the pink sunset comes earlier and lasts longer, or in spring, when the island is covered by yellow blooms. September is a wonderful month: the summer tourist chaos gives way to the tranquillity of the island; the sea is crystal clear; the water turns blue or emerald green, depending on the time of day and the depth of seabed; the creeks are almost deserted; and the rocks appear to have sunnier and warmer colours.

In autumn, the beauty of Ponza pervades the streets and the staircases

that climb to elevated places, along the lines of the hills, where the eye sweeps over a breathtaking horizon. And breath taking, too, because of the effort to climb up the steep stairs, the muscles of the legs groaning, the breath becoming short. But it's all worth it, because below, one can see a panorama of rocks sculpted by wind and sea, the wide expanse of the Tyrrhenian Sea criss-crossed by white trails of small boats of a few tourists and a few fishing boats. Gusts of wind carry delicate scents of Mediterranean flowers and play on the waves. When the winds turn violent, they rush through the lanes and stairways, sculpting the rocks as if they were smoothed by the carving and expertise of an artist.

A walk to the promontory of Mount Guard takes us to the homonymous lighthouse on the southern side of the island. It is one of the best sites to go

ISLE OF CIRCE THE SORCERESS

Suspected to be the mythical island of Aeaëa in Homer's *Odyssey*, Ponza Island is thought to house the cave of Circe, the sorceress who bewitched and seduced Odysseus, living with him for over a year, and turning his men into animals. Known today as Grotta della Maga Circe, the cave is located on the west side of the island, between Chaia di Luna beach and Capo Bianco. Apparently, there are archaeologists looking for evidence of Homer's *Odyssey* on Ponza today. □

SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA

to see one of Ponza's famous sunsets, when the calm sea becomes golden and the sun sets over the horizon.

Dive operation

Similar to the harbour of nearby Ventotene Island, the main harbor of Ponza is a blaze of joyful colours and history as well as the hub of life on the island. Here at the harbor, fellow divers and I are awaited by Andrea Donati and



Ponza



Faro della Guardia, lighthouse of Mount Guard; Church of Ponza (top)



Entry to Ancient Roman *murenaio*





Tanks and gear inside the dive center

LEFT TO RIGHT: Cave with encrusting red sponge; Ponza Harbor; Dive boat *Neptune*

the team of Ponza Diving Center: Daniela, Maria Paola and seasonal workers—a close-knit group of professionals devoted to and passionate about diving—who have made customer satisfaction a modus operandi, and safety and environmental protection a calling card, leaving nothing to chance. Last but not least, they offer delicious dishes from the kitchen of the dive boat *Neptune* during full-day dive trips.

The 16m-long *Neptune* is the flagship of the diving center—a fishing vessel that has been completely renovated and adapted for diving, with

a spacious, comfortable, furnished sundeck. Normally, it is moored in front of the door of the diving center, from whence guest divers discover the most beautiful dive sites of the island, with different characteristics and depths.

In recent years, Andrea Donati—the director and owner of Ponza Diving Center—has started specializing in rebreather and technical diving. Even in diving, as in all things, there is a trend, which has led to more and more divers going down into the water on CCR. Andrea firmly believes that beyond the high performance

that helps divers survive underwater on a rebreather, CCR's are much safer than open circuit. And he aims to encourage and help divers to try this different experience as well as support technical divers who like to play safer, longer and deeper.

Diving

The unifying feature of all the waters surrounding the islands of the Ponza's

archipelago is the extreme clarity, with backdrops that offer spectacular views and a set of colours and contrasts that are really unique.

While the natural world of the island has lost most of its native species, replaced by flora and fauna introduced by the inhabitants, under the surface of the water, nature has remained healthy, with an extraordinary richness of life that makes these



Ponza



Mediterranean fairy basslet at La Botte (left); Octopus on reef (above)

waters one of the most beautiful and important marine areas of the Mediterranean Sea.

The bustling coastal geography of the landscape, made up of cliffs, coves, craggy headlands, cliffs, islets and rocks, slopes underwater in a mo-

saic of environments that support the establishment of diverse benthic life. In the shadows, the rockslides are covered by bright orange-coloured colonies of *Astroides calycularis*, one of the few Mediterranean representatives of the Madreporite stony coral genus.

At the base of the walls, small tunnels and caves open up. Here, the darkness favours the establishment of typical biotic communities, with sciophilous characteristics that are usually seen in much deeper areas. Among the cascade of boulders and rocks full of holes and crevices, it is common to encounter octopuses and moray eels, blennies and damselfish, white bream and sea bream. There are huge and healthy fields of *Posidonia oceanica* seagrass.

Dive sites

Le Formiche. One of the most popular sites is definitely Le Formiche, a group of rocky outcrops that emerges in the southeastern side of the island, in front of the stacks of Calzone Muto. Le Formiche spreads out over a vast area of seabed and therefore offers different paths, allowing for multiple dives. Here, divers can swim among giant collapsed boulders that have holes where fish settle; or among lush meadows of seagrass, miniature forests where dozens of unusual and curious creatures rest, especially visible during night dives; or, if one prefers, the steep walls that descend to the sandy bottom at a depth of about 50m.

These walls, especially in deep and shadowy areas of the northeastern



Cleaner shrimp and moray eel (above); Small rockfish inside a shell (top)

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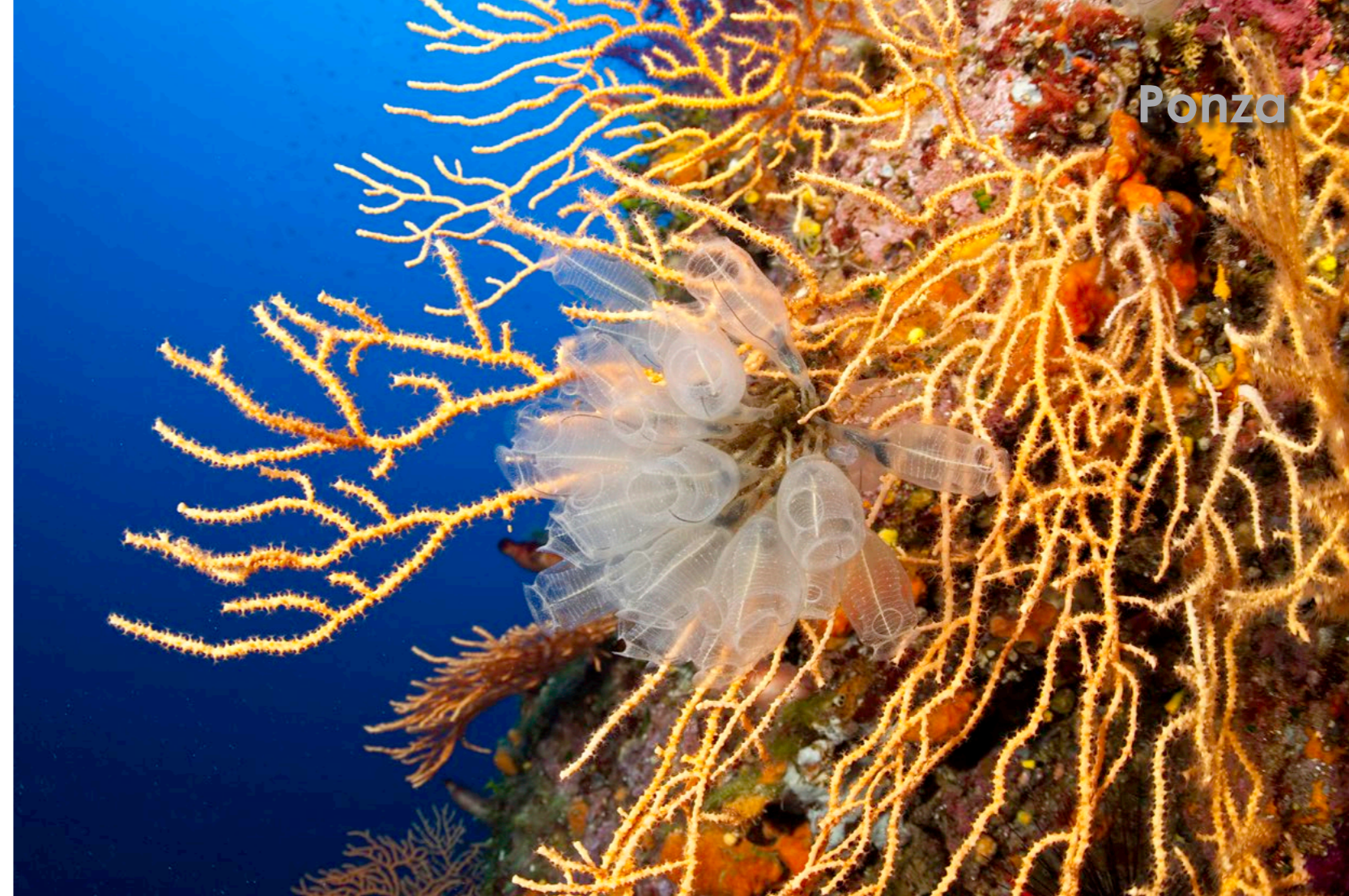
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Ponza



Hypselodoris fontandraui nudibranchs (left) Tunicates on yellow seafan at Le Formiche (above); Yellow cluster anemone at La Botte (below)

side, are exposed to the currents of the east and colonized by red gorgonian sea fans and dense colonies of yellow gorgonians (*Eunicella cavolinii*). They are home to an exceptionally rich ecosystem, colonized by crinoids anchored on gorgonians, as well as sea slugs, forkbeards and groupers.

Ascending to shallower depths, divers pass through a natural arch

covered by *Parazoanthus axinellae*, or yellow cluster anemone. The arch is on the threshold of a wide canyon that narrows gradually. Divers swim in single file, being careful not to damage the walls, and arrive in a beautiful round cave. On the return, halfway into the canyon, divers come to a tunnel con-

connected to the rocky plateau from which they started the dive, and find themselves under the dive boat, *Neptune*.

Secca of Punta Papa. On the western side, beyond the Faraglioni of Lucia Rosa and the cape of Capo Bosco, there is a fascinating spot—the Secca of Punta Papa. It is a challenging

dive, recommended only for experienced divers.

Here, divers dive into absolute blue waters and follow the anchor chain down to the top of the bank, at a depth of 34m. The long descent offers one a feeling of total aloofness from the known world





THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the LST 349

and prepares you to enjoy the marine life that lurks beneath.

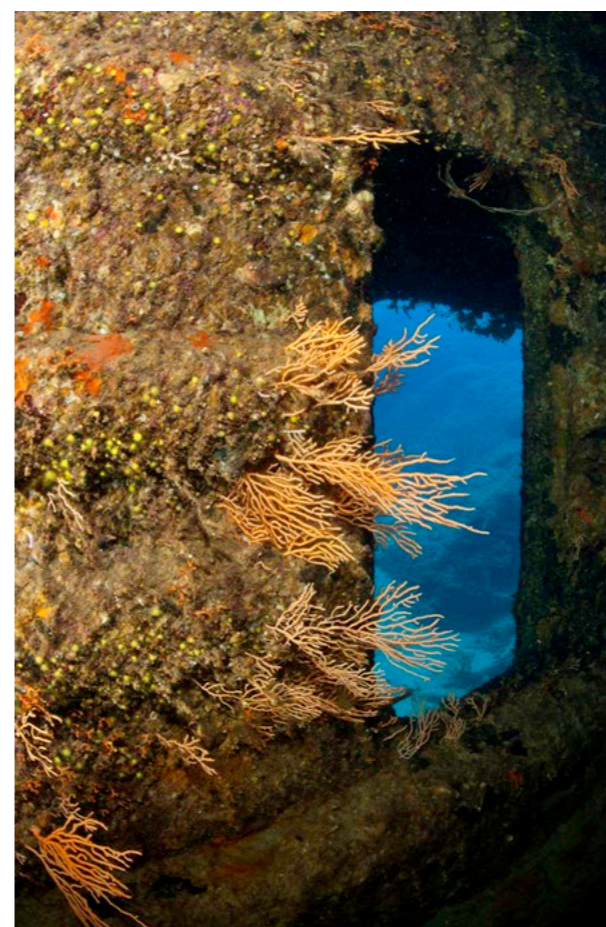
A cloud of frantic damselfish greeted our group. We passed over them and stopped at our ascent point. Now we needed to reach the depth limit as soon as possible, down along a wall that ended at a depth of 56m on a sandy bottom.

The wall was colonized by large red and yellow sea fans, oriented in the direction of the current, where the long antennae of lobsters could be seen peeping in and out. Among the crevices, we saw some moray eels and a pair of octopuses.

Unfortunately, at these depths, the minutes of decompression stops builds up fast, and our bottom time was penalized. For us it was time to go back, a journey that gave us some opportunities for long views into the blue in search of some pelagic fishes that often frequent the bank.

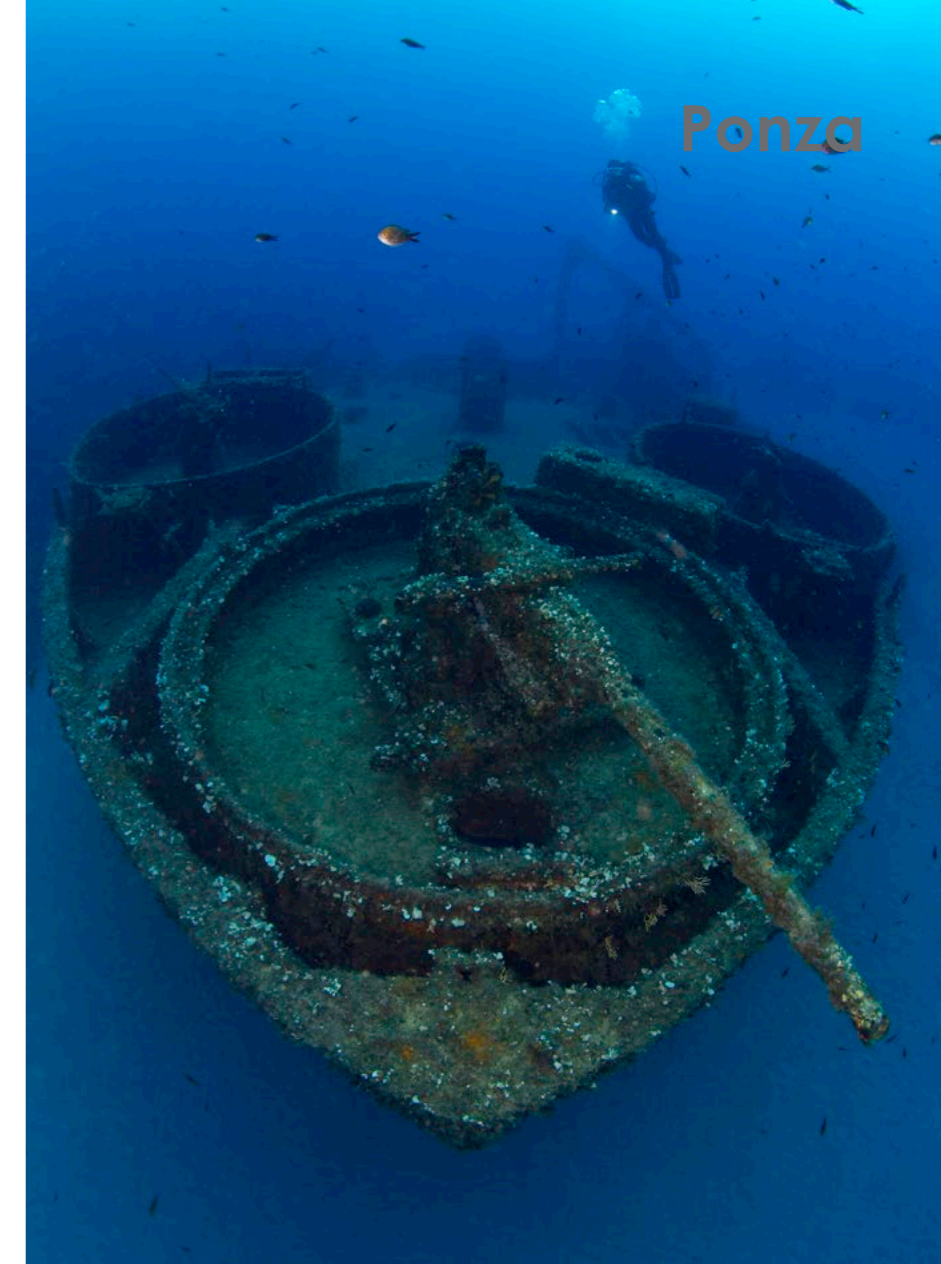
This is probably one of the reasons why Andrea, a TDI Instructor, is now specializing in technical diving with Inspiration and JJ rebreathers. Sometimes he whizzed by us with an underwater scooter, a comfortable Zeuxo, with which we admired his twirls and excellent agility.

Punta Papa wreck. Not far from the Secca of Punta Papa, there is a dive suitable for



everyone. It is the wreck of Punta Papa, the LST 349 (Landing Ship Tank)—a flat-bottomed boat used for the transportation of the troops and trucks of the Allied forces during World War II.

She was launched on 7 February 1943



Ponza



Wreck of the LST 349, a British Landing Ship Tank sunk in 1944



Ponza



TOP TO BOTTOM: Nudibranch, seaslug and tubeworms

Cuttlefish (left); Invertebrate (above); Diver with scooter at rock with yellow cluster anemone and bryozoans, La Botte (above)

subsequent explosion of her boilers caused the ship to brake in two.

The bow lies in a perfect position for navigation to a depth of 26m. Its dark shape, which stands out on the white sand, offers a truly evocative scene. On the main deck, winches and machine guns are still present, while below deck divers can explore the holds that now provide shelter to some conger eel, small moray eels, scorpion fish and other marine life. The surrounding sandy bottom is littered with wreckage. Unfortunately there is not much left of the stern. It lies not far away, at a depth of 20m.

Punta Madonna. Another easy dive, suitable for all, is Punta Madonna, which is a fascinating site for

a night dive. It is only a few minutes from the port, behind the Grotte di Pilato.

At dusk, we moored the *Nep-tune* behind the stacks of the Punta della Madonna cape and dived to a depth of only seven meters—a dive which gently sloped down towards the sea. Along the wall we saw small groupers, very colourful sponges and tubeworms. On the sandy bottom, millet butterflyfish sifted the sand in search of prey.

At about 18m, we encountered some rocks around which a group of striped white bream swam. The light of day gave way to the shadows of the night and the sessile fauna, illuminated by our torches, fascinated us with its bright colours.

The vault of an arch was com-

pletely colonized by beautiful orange *Astroides calycularis* coral. A curious cuttlefish, with the characteristic w-shaped eyes, watched us trying to go unnoticed, making its mantle quiver with the rhythm of the surf, suspended above a prairie of Mediterranean seagrass. We climbed back into the boat that was now dark, but the lights of the harbour welcomed us as soon as we turned the corner around the Cape and the Red Rock.

Topside excursions

There are many topside adventures to enjoy on Ponza Island. Bring comfortable and light casual clothing, a sweater for cooler evenings, comfortable walking shoes and a map if you want to hike and



and assigned to military operations in the Mediterranean. The vessel sank a year later, on 26 February 1944 at Cala dell'Acqua because of a storm that caused the ship to break on the rocks. A



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP CENTER: Sea urchin; Cnidarian on seagrass; Stingray resting on sandy seafloor; Diver with sidemount investigates sea fans on reef

Inside Ancient Roman *murenario* (left); Piana Bianca rock formation at Ponza Harbour (above)

ty of tourists.

The boat tour continues to Punta Santa Maria, which welcomes visitors with its many coloured houses that give the island its unique character. The tour continues past a rugged coastline and arrives in the Baia del Frontone.

After passing the famous rock known as “La Foca” in the bay of Punta Bianca, the tour boat will reach the Cala del Core, which has a wide pebble beach. Here, visitors arrive at the Scoglio del Parroco and the unsettling Cala dell’Inferno, named for the famous remains of a wrecked ship.

After Punta Nera and Faraglione of Antonio Aniello, the tour boat reaches Cala Spaccapolpi which lies next to a natural arch.

Further on, visitors can see Cala Felce, Cala Caparra, Capo Rame, Punta Beppe Antonio, Cala Cecata, Cala Cavone, Punta di Papa and Cala dell’Acqua, where ships procure the island’s water supplies.

Turning around Punta Corte, visitors see a wonderful show: the Cala Feola, one of the most fascinating corners of the island. You have to explore the beach of Lucia Rosa, Punta Capo Bianco, with its caves, and Chiaia di Luna, a wide sandy beach surrounded by a wall of clear rocks.

The tour of the island ends with the Punta del Fieno, Punta della Guardia, the inlet of Bagno Vecchio, the Faraglioni del Calzone Muto and Punta della Madonna.

Afterthoughts

Ponza Island has some of the most beautiful and wild dive sites of the Tyrrhenian Sea. There is an ease of access to the diving; with just a few metres from the diving centre to the dive boat, trips are run by a professional dive team and a functional dive center. And the diving is suitable for rebreather and technical divers, with relatively cheap dive packages. Honestly, I didn’t find any minuses to the place except perhaps that while English is spoken, German is not. However, this is Italy after all, and in town, there are superb restaurants, pizzerias, pubs and wineries serving excellent fare at decent prices. □



explore the island.

The tour around the island by boat requires a few hours. The boat tour passes by the two beaches of St. Anthony and Giancos outside Porto. They are very easy to reach and because of this reason, unfortunately, there are plen-



continues to Formia and Anzio Harbour. By train, you can get to Ponza Island from the railway stations of Formia and Anzio. Reaching the station you will walk (5 minutes), following the signs to the harbour. By car, you must get to the harbour of Anzio. From Rome, you can take the highway, then the mainroad Pontina towards Latina, exit at junction Anzio-

Nettuno, continue on the road following the signs for Nettunense Anzio. By boat, the season to reach the island of Ponza on a ferry are mainly in the summer. Check with the ferry service for times of departure.

From Anzio and Formia: Hydrofoils Vetur www.vetor.it Motorboat Laziomar www.laziomar.it

From Terracina: Motorboat Snap Navigation www.snapnavigazione.it

From Naples: SNAV hydrofoils www.snav.it



Parmesan cheese wheel and sausage (far left); Red chili peppers in shop window (lower left) and fruit and vegetable stand in Ponza (below)

Diving and lodging

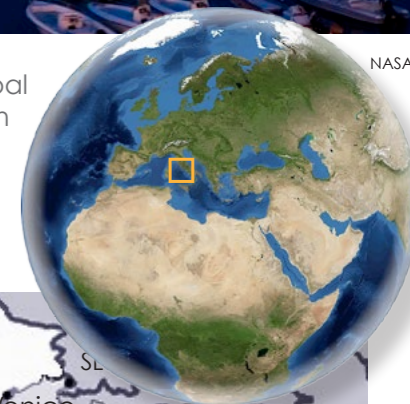
The center rents out Mares equipment, Santi drysuits, JJ rebreathers, and Teseo and Zeuxo underwater scooters. Write an email to the diving centre to get advice on travel, accommodations, restaurants, etc. Apartments are also available to rent, and the dive centre can help you find what you are looking for. As for telecommunications, hand phones with national operators work properly. Visit Ponzadiving.it or email: info@ponzadiving.com

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RIGHT: Global map with location of Ponza Island
BELOW: Location of Ponza Island on map of Italy



NASA