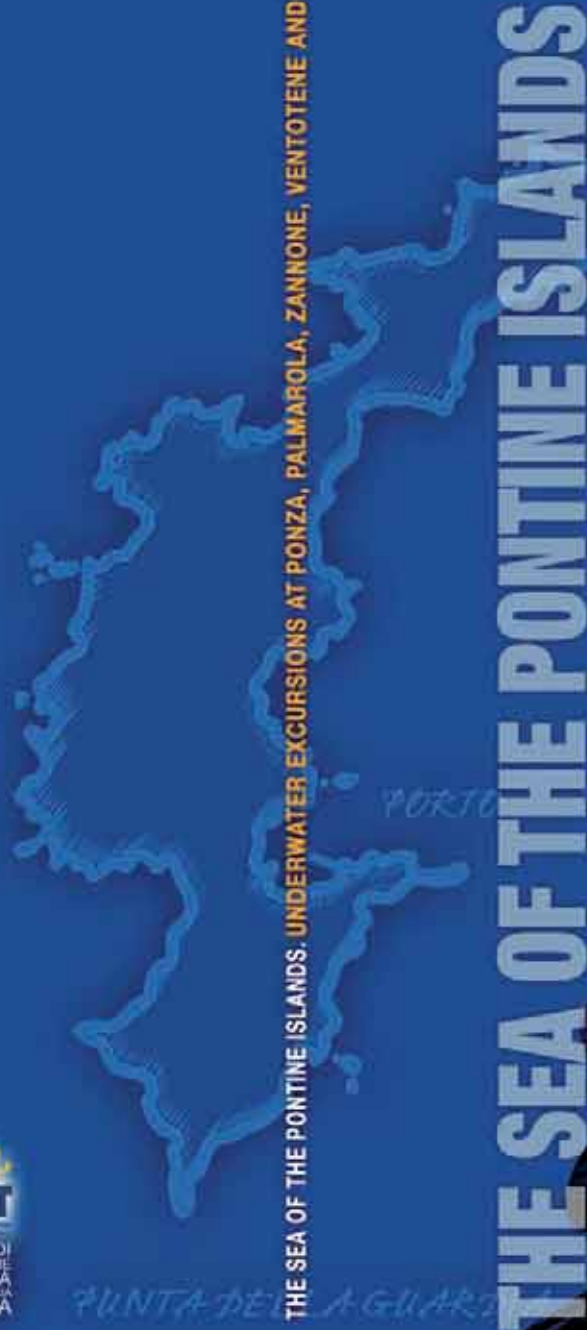


ISOLA DI PALMAROLA

PUNTA TRAMONTANA



PUNTA MEZZOGIORNO



PORTO

PUNTA DELL'AGUARDIA

ISOLA DI GAII

ISOLA DI ZANNONE



AZIENDA DI PROMOZIONE TURISTICA DELLA PROVINCIA DI LATINA

THE SEA OF THE PONTINE ISLANDS

THE SEA OF THE PONTINE ISLANDS. UNDERWATER EXCURSIONS AT PONZA, PALMAROLA, ZANNONE, VENTOTENE AND SANTO STEFANO.



ISOLA DI PONZA

UNDERWATER EXCURSIONS AT PONZA, PALMAROLA, ZANNONE, VENTOTENE AND SANTO STEFANO.



REGIONE LAZIO



AZIENDA DI PROMOZIONE TURISTICA DELLA PROVINCIA DI LATINA







The sea of the Pontine islands. Underwater excursions at Ponza, Palmarola, Zannone, Ventotene and Santo Stefano

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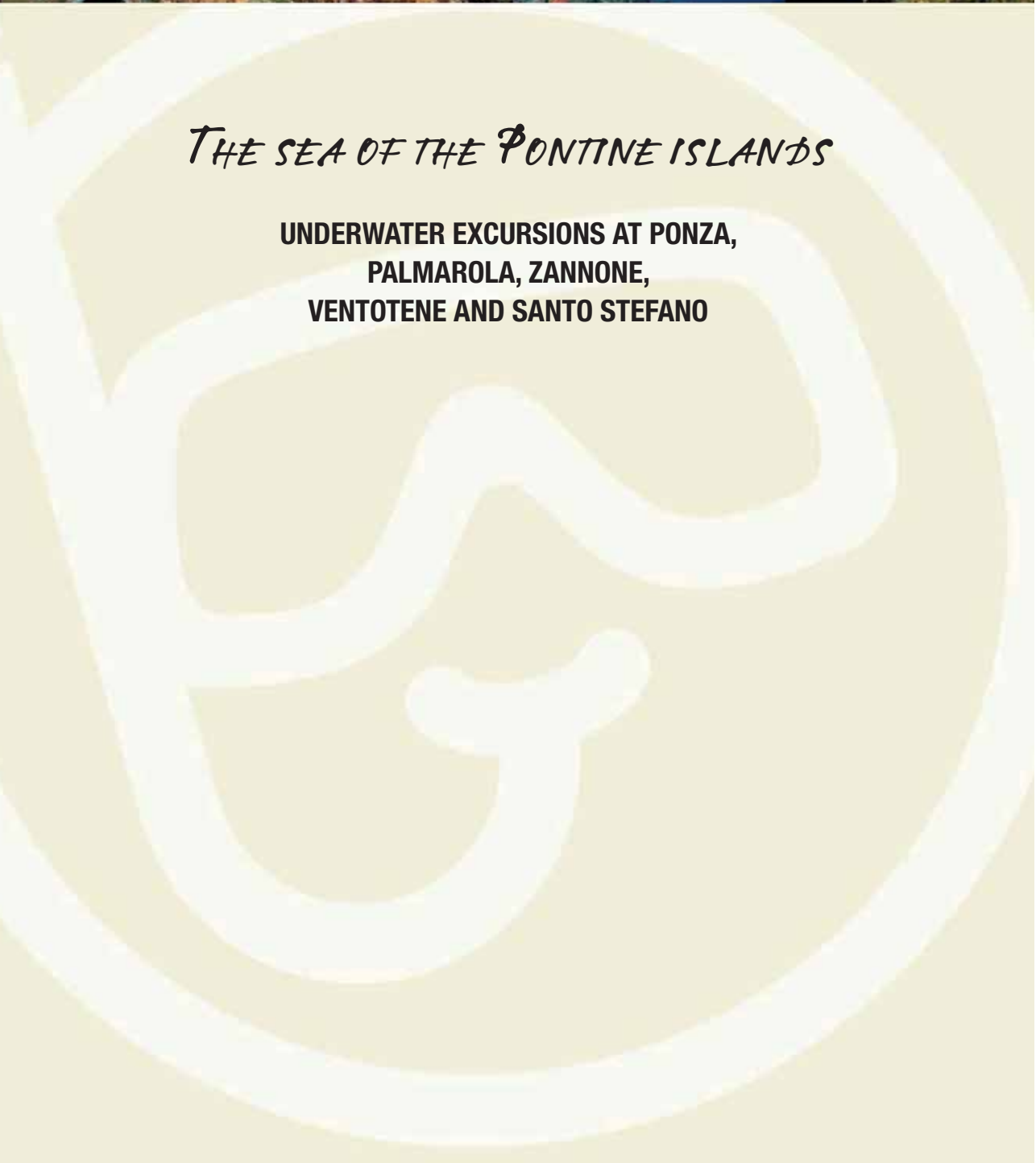
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THE SEA OF THE PONTINE ISLANDS

**UNDERWATER EXCURSIONS AT PONZA,
PALMAROLA, ZANNONE,
VENTOTENE AND SANTO STEFANO**





PONZA AND HER SISTER ISLANDS



I was born at Gaeta and as a boy had a boat named Camomilla, whose old and smoky engine did its job one way or another. Looking back I must have almost half a century's worth of diving behind me, including many outings to Ponza. At the time, with only a student's allowance in my pocket, Ponza seemed to my friends and to me a bit like our Tropics. To be honest, what do the Tropics have that Ponza and her sister islands do not? Their seas are a paradise today, yet imagine what it was like thirty years ago, when the cracks on the seabed teemed with lobsters and the shoals of tuna fish so enjoyed by the swordfish almost came into the port. I remember the large fish with big round eyes that the Span fishermen stored under the wooden benches of the ferry to get them to Formia and then on to all the markets in Italy. Ponza and her sister islands were and are still a Mediterranean paradise. People who have travelled the length and breadth of the planet describe Palmarola as one of the most beautiful islands in the world. How could one disagree?

In these pages we introduce the underwater world of the islands. These are the islands of the great divers of yesterday and today - Gavino, Zecca, Vailati, Quilici; islands where many pages in our diving history were written. They are also the islands of Ernesto Prudente, that wonderful mentor; the living historical memory of the inhabitants of Ponza, whom I thank for all the things that he tells me when we sit down for coffee at a table in his bar. Further, Ventotene is the island of the Santa Lucia whose wreck, with its tragic historical burden, lies freezing in the waters in front of Punta Eolo.

With my beard already whiter than fair, I returned to Ponza, Ventotene, Santo Stefano, to Zannone and Palmarola to refresh my memories and to take a few more photos to add to the thousands already in my archive. I dipped again into that pure, crystal sea and, with nostalgia, recalled something of my twenties. In this personal recollection of mine, some dear friends have accompanied me: Andrea Donati of the Ponza Diving Center and Valentina Lombardi and Dario Santomauro of Diving World Ventotene. The dives I recommend are the Archipelago's most beautiful. Enjoy them all, because they are worth it!

Adriano Madonna



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Legend

Dive suitable for:

All	 DIFFICULTY
Medium experts	 DIFFICULTY
Experts	 DIFFICULTY

The beauty of the dive:

Discrete	 BEAUTY ★ ★ ★
Lovely	 BEAUTY ★ ★ ★ ★
Very beautiful	 BEAUTY ★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Wonderful	 BEAUTY ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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Archipelago

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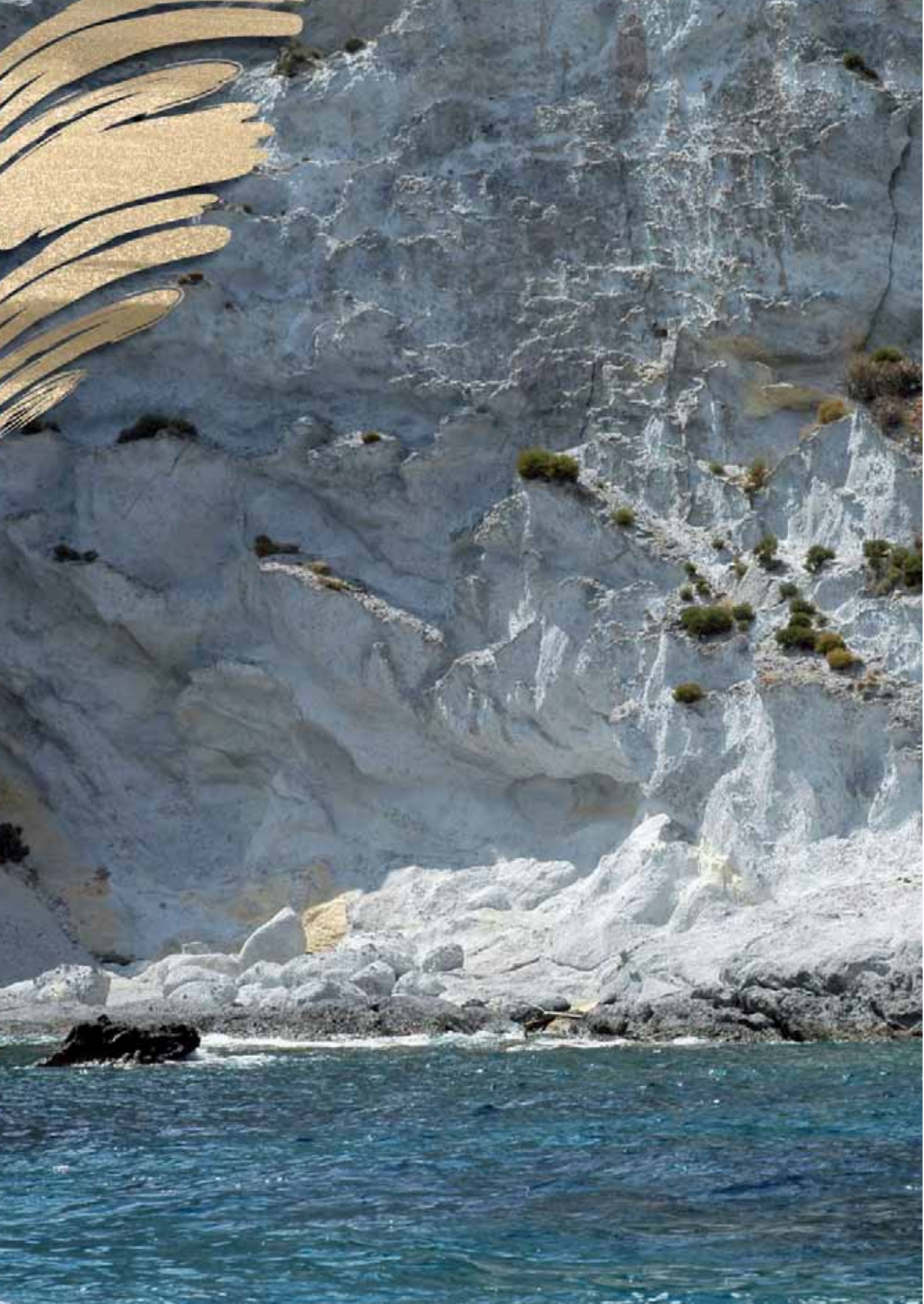


Santo Stefano



Ponza





UNDERWATER EXCURSIONS AT

PONZA



THE WRECK AT THE CALA DELL'ACQUA

Recommended: All levels

The Cala Feola (well-known for its natural bathing pool) and the Cala dell'Acqua are two contiguous bays on the north-east face of Ponza, separated by the cape of Punta Papa. Exactly at this spot, twenty metres down, is the wreck of an LST (Landing Ship Tank), an American disembarkation craft, which went down in a storm on the 26th February 1944. The wreck is in two segments lying some distance apart from one another on a bed of white sand. Close to the Punta Papa is a stack of protruding rock, a useful reference point for finding the wreck.

Twenty metres or so out from the rock, in the clear water, you will see the wreck with its main deck and bridge.

The upper deck is less than 100 metres away and is actually inside the Cala dell'Acqua. On the bridge of the forward deck, there was, until quite recently, a machine gun, which had come away from its mounting and fallen onto the bridge. Then, mysteriously, it vanished!



The wreck is badly corroded and can therefore be dangerous. Many bits have fallen away and others are about to do so. For this reason keep an eye out and do not go inside the wreck where there is a long corridor in which lorries, armoured vehicles, jeeps and tanks were transported. The upper deck, as noted, is less than 100 metres away, and still good for a few photographs. Twenty-five metres down, the battle emplacement and the bridge structures can still be seen. The dive is easy for everyone, including beginners, making a wonderful spectacle on a fine day, when the seabed is bathed in light.

PUNTA DELLA GUARDIA

Recommended: All levels

Many years ago Ponza was famous for its lobster and grouper. Of the latter, those of particular interest to the few divers of those times were from the Punta della Guardia. Whilst plentiful in number and large in size, these fish are cunning and hard to catch; so much so that even the strongest underwater fishermen were unable to cope in the waters of the steep escarpment below the lighthouse. Local fishermen, like the legendary Silverio Zecca and Pino Gavino, found a special way to catch the grouper off the Punta della Guardia. To the south, Ponza tails into the Punta della Guardia where there is the lighthouse called 'della Guardia'. A pathway winds along the edge of a high black cliff, remnant of the last eruption of the volcano, and leads you down to a marvellous view. Here the seabed is full of light due to the transparency of the water and the south-facing exposure. Below water there is a mass of collapsed rocks, amongst which are



grouper and also many white fish, in particular sea bream. The best experience is at depths of between thirty and thirty-five metres where La Guardia excels in terms of quantity of fish and visual impact. On the floor there is a big old fishing-boat engine swarming with cardinal fish. One must be watchful on the dive because around the Punta della Guardia, especially in the summer season, there is the danger of passing boats.





PUNTA MADONNA

Recommended: All levels

Coming out of the Port of Ponza and veering to the right, one is immediately confronted by that dark swathe of high and rocky concentrations, jutting out to sea and finishing at Punta Madonna. The impression given is totally different if one goes to see Punta Madonna and its ridge from the other side, in the vicinity of Punta della Guardia. Here one sees a tall cliff and, half way up it, a little pathway that leads all the way to the lighthouse of the Guardia. Anyone who has seen this evocative side of the island will remember it, as it is reminiscent of those illustrations for children's fables - the long sinuous path winding its way up to the enchanted castle.

From the opposite side, the enormous cliff makes a right angle before going on to form the rocky ridge of Punta Madonna. Looking at this from above, we notice that the cliff appears to fracture in places, because it is made up of a whole series of long, high rocks and not by a single massive one, as may appear to be the case. There are various points where one can cross from one side to the other, passageways that at times are passable by boat. Underwater, the face of Punta Madonna is similar to the long rocky outcrop one sees above water, and it eventually gives way to a beautiful sea grass meadow. Many night dives are made at exactly this point because even if the world of sea grass can be disappointing by day it is seldom so by night, the one at Punta Madonna being no exception.





The dive itself is if anything relaxing. It starts at around six metres and never goes below eighteen at its maximum. Keep a look out, not so much on the rock floor but in the sea grass. At night, there are some big surprises for those with eyes sufficiently attuned. Among the ribbon-like fronds, it is hard to spot the mimetic pipefish *Syngnathus acus* and *Syngnathus tyle*. As wrasses, their colour is green. You may also observe yellow sea lilies and a few seahorses. Where there is sea grass, the Maena species is never absent and you may also find croakers, fish that often live in this habitat and can easily be seen in all their silken splendour. Once you get to the Punta Madonna, you

can either change course or turn back; we do, however, recommend that you also explore the other face of the rock. Very close to the point itself there are some large, light-coloured stones, which make a hiding place for octopi and large red scorpion fish. There are also large crabs struggling along the bottom with their shells covered in cloak anemone (*Adamsia palliata*).

If you would prefer a simple night-time dive, perhaps in winter with the advantage of being only five minutes from the port, and which will allow you to perform long and



shallow dives over a wide area, then Punta Madonna is particularly satisfying even for more experienced divers. Moreover, you do not have to go back the way you came.

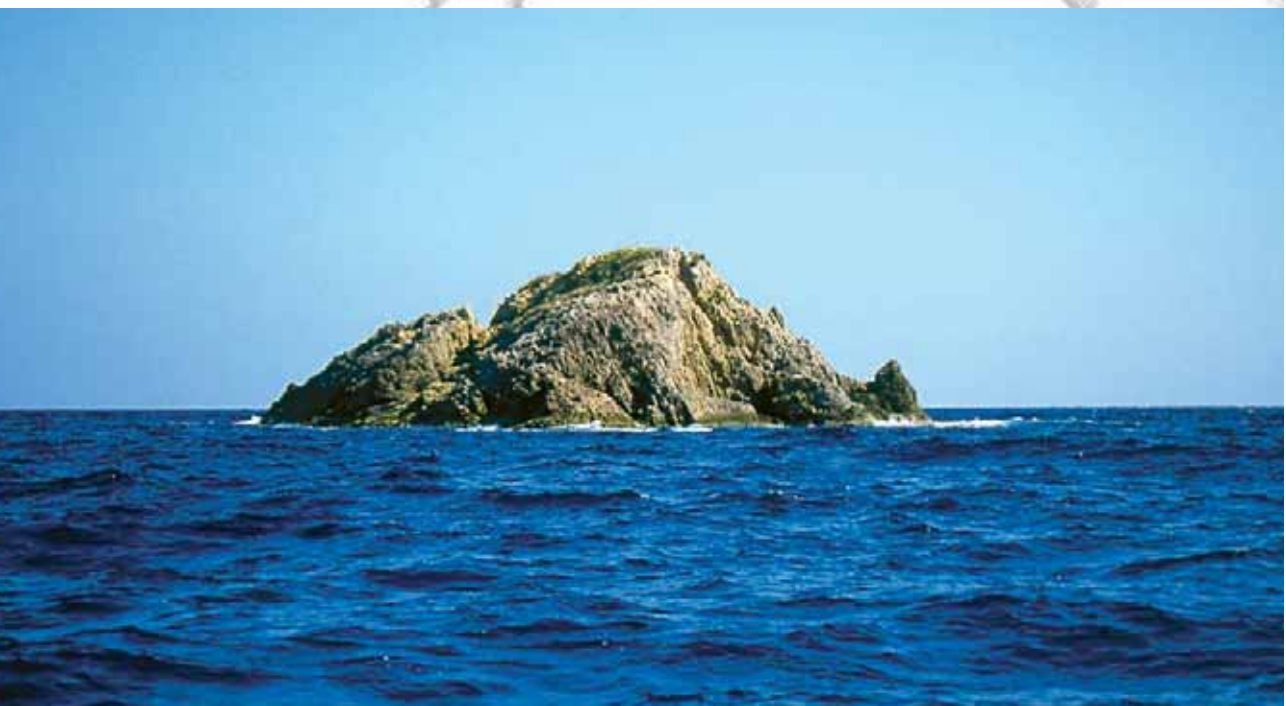
THE SCOGLIO ROSSO

Recommended: All levels

The Scoglio Rosso opposite the port of Ponza seems purpose-made for a night dive close to the port. With this in mind, I would like to recall an evening there not so long ago, with the help of some notes I made at the time. Thanks to these I can now tell you about the Scoglio Rosso

Making the most of some early spring weather, I borrowed a dingy from Andrea Donati of the Ponza Diving Center and with a favourable wind arrived at the Scoglio Rosso a little before midnight. The night was still and humid: there was no moon and the little signal lamp that I had attached to the 'roll-bar' made the dew-covered tubes glisten. As soon as I was submerged I noticed the extraordinary transparency of the water, but at Ponza this is normal! I knew I would be able to find everything: from sea lilies to sea horses, from octopi to squid, from the strangest of fish to all sizes of crab, to the mimetic syngnathiforms. I was in fact diving toward one of the most beautiful sea-grass meadows on Ponza, which runs from Punta Madonna to the Scoglio Rosso. I used that beautiful dive to add nature photographs to my archive. Knowing that I might encounter large subjects such as sea bream, or small ones like gastropods, I had a 28-70 zoom mounted on the camera, with an additional lens of 3 dioptries, so as to deal with the complicated choice of lenses, and to keep two possibilities going at the same time.

I began my search amongst the round, green leaves of the sea grass that grows tall and abundant around the rock. I quickly noticed an extraordinary quantity of picarel. It is true





that these fish are common sea-grass dwellers, but that night the floor of the reef literally bristled with them!

Picarel, even if insignificant by day in their dull and monochrome coat, can display marvellous colours by night. Sometimes they appear bright green from tip to tail whilst at others they just have green spots on their backs that stretch towards the gills, fading into vibrant silver. This is an example of that famous mimetic display that goes by the name of the 'pyjama effect'. In summary, the 'pyjama' is the only colour scheme

the fish adopt at night, to blend in with their surroundings and confuse their predators.

Perhaps most satisfying was coming across some very large specimens of fan mussels, hidden amongst the sea grass of the Scoglio. These, the biggest Mediterranean bivalves, are an endangered species. For years they were fished as trophies, before they became still more rare due to the destruction of many square kilometres of sea-grass meadows along so many stretches of the Italian coast. This mollusc should certainly



be protected!

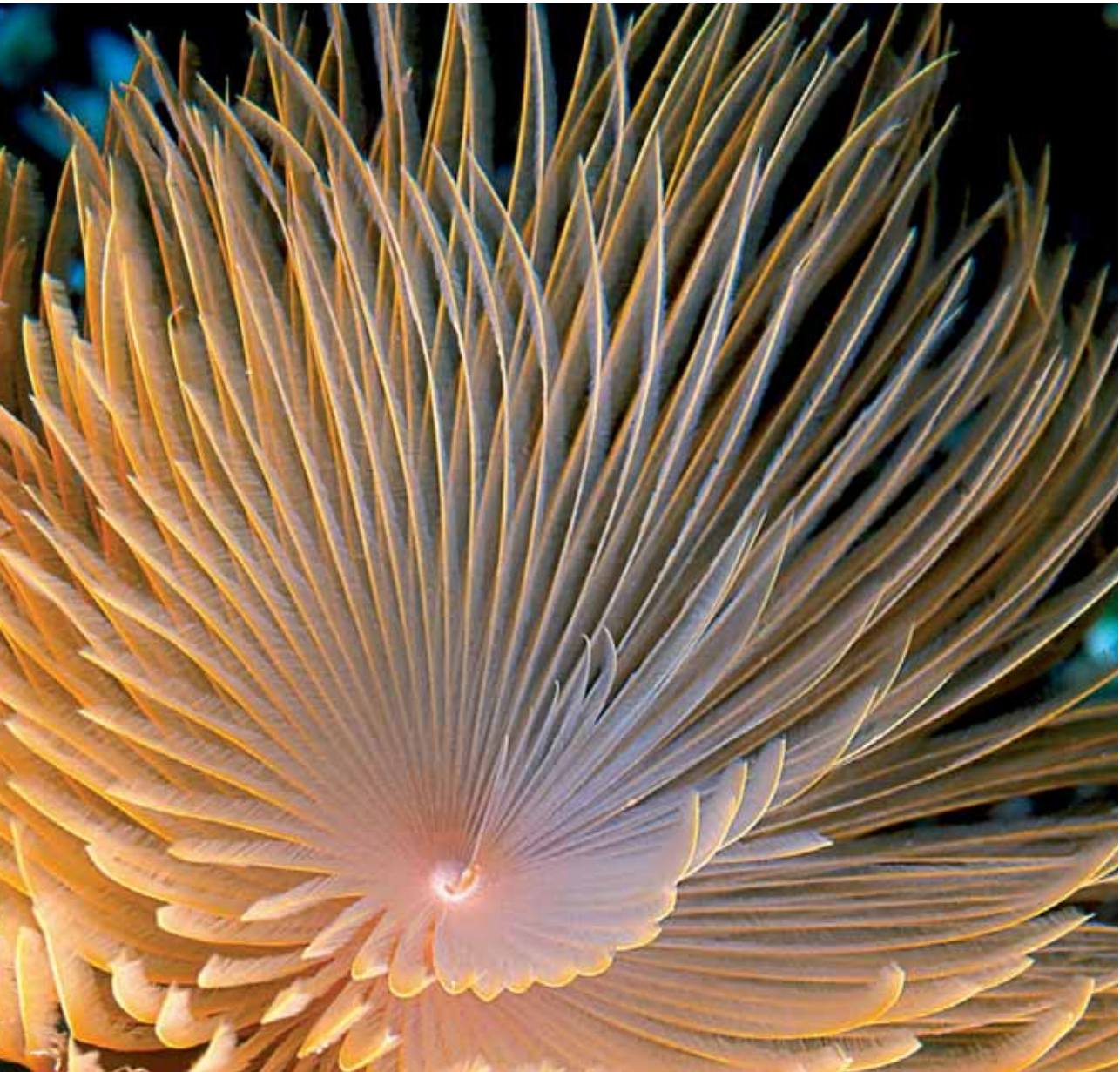
I moved along the edge of the Scoglio Rosso and found many interesting subjects, but sadly not a sea horse, also an endangered and seriously depleted species.

In the watery sphere between the



shallows and the depths I saw a school of Bogbe and the rapid movement of a close-packed group of cigar fish, with their slim tapering bodies, silvery bellies and short sword-like heads which gives them the appearance of snipe.'

From this story of an old dive of mine at the Scoglio Rosso one can easily appreciate that this place is there to be enjoyed at night. By day, in fact, there is little life; however, as is often is the case, fish life multiplies exponentially by night. The dive is easy and recommended for all. Be aware, however, that in the immediate vicinity of the port of Ponza, there is light boat traffic: stick to the rock and follow the requisite safety procedure.



POSIDONIA, LUNGS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

The oceanic sea grass (*Posidonia*), which produces fourteen litres of oxygen per square metre each day, contributes very significantly to the good health of our sea. At the moment, however, it covers only 0.2% of the Mediterranean seabed where once it was much more abundant.

The presence of sea grass is also indicative of the transparency of the water - in fact this plant struggles to survive in the deep, where sunrays do not penetrate with sufficient strength to support chlorophyll photosynthesis.

Posidonia is not seaweed but a fully-fledged plant that flowers and produces fruit. This normally happens in early spring, but not every year, and only where the waters are constantly warm. When there is no production of flowers, fruit and seeds, the grasses grow through expanding roots and rhizomes, from which new flowering shoots emerge. The fruit bears similarities to the acorn. This prompted Aristotle, 300 years BC, to advance the hypothesis that the seabed had once been covered in oak forests, having observed *Posidonia* fruits washed up on the coast and believing them to be acorns.

In spring, and most commonly in the southern Italian waters, one can see the fruits of the deep-water sea grass. These normally grow in pairs at the end of soft stems, detaching themselves and, thanks to their slight oiliness, rising to the surface. There, before long, they rot, open and release seeds that fall back to the seabed. At this point, if the seeds fall on a fertile substrate (an appropriate sediment well illuminated by natural sun-light), they can seed and produce new plants.



When the grasses die, the waves and currents push the fronds toward the coast. There, in great quantity, they form an efficient barrier that counteracts the movement of the waves and protects the beaches from the erosion of sand.



THE FORMICHE

Recommended: All levels (on the first dive) **experts only** (on the second dive)

If you face out from the Cala Parata 'terrace' of the Bellavista Hotel, you will see the Formiche immediately opposite. These rocks just manage to break the surface, and on a calm day they seem like a cluster of insects ('formica' means ant) on a surface of blue glass. The Formiche harbours a marine world all of its own, which in some ways is unlike the rest of the sea around Ponza. Below a certain depth the scenery turns to red, which divers love.

On the far side of the rocks are many fan-shaped sea plants. To be familiar with these and to discover a thousand other extraordinary manifestations of life, one has only to examine the intricacies of the foliage where the diminutive polyps open in the current. Red scorpion fish, octopi, and moray eels inhabit this forest and the spectacle is at peak splendour by night, when marine life teems. This small area of water is good for dives throughout the year if weather conditions permit, but the best periods are certainly spring and autumn. Because the rocks are positioned just offshore, and because they break the flow of the current, they are a thoroughfare for larger species – bonito, amberjack, albacore, tuna and others. All of these, before each long migration, race one last time along the coast of the Pontine Islands. As a sample dive, let us consider the largest rock, where there are the remnants of a red brick wall. On the shore side, at





a depth of some twelve metres, there is a meadow of sea grass and, facing out to sea, a large fissure in the rocks which at a certain point turns into a tunnel and has openings in its roof through which the light filters. Some way into the tunnel is an opening, which would lead back out but for the fact that it is

much too narrow to negotiate. Better by far to turn back and, on leaving the tunnel, to concentrate on investigating a rock wall to the right that culminates in an impressive arch coated with tiny benthos organisms, all worth photographing.

A further well-known dive in these waters explores a prominence rising out of the sandy seabed. This time we are on the eastern side of the Formiche, and again the dive starts from the largest of the emerging rocks. At a depth of about thirty metres is a rocky buttress cloaked in yellow sea fans, but if we dive deeper to about forty metres we find red sea fans forming a rich and intricate microcosm of fauna. Unlike the previous dive, and because of the considerable depth, this one is recommended for expert divers only.





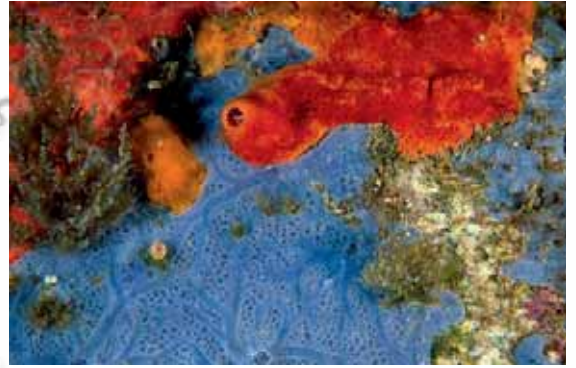
THE SCOGLIO GROSSO

Recommended: Medium level

The Scoglio Grosso is not to be confused with the Scoglio Rosso, which lies opposite the port of Ponza. It is instead the last in a series of three rocks that jut out from the sea at the Punta di Gavi, towards Zannone. The rocks all line up in a sequence: the Scoglietelle, the Chiana di Mezzo and the Scoglio Grosso. The last of these, like the others, is a steep protrusion of the underwater ridge that joins Ponza and Gavi to Zannone. Many divers consider the waters of the Scoglio Grosso as providing first- rate dives.

There are in effect two dives to be made off the Scoglio Rosso. The first starts from the northern extremity where there is a bank a few metres below water. There is no point stopping here so it is best to dive down quickly to thirty-seven metres and land on clear sand. Here, following the wall and turning round to the left, there is a cave. Once inside it, the vault opens up revealing crabs and prawns on the walls, amongst which the coral shrimp (*Stenopus spinosus*) with its long claws and the narwal shrimp (*Parapandalus narval*). Exploring the cave presents no great difficulty and the exit, on the other side, is clearly lit. If we go out and turn round we will find a canal abundantly covered with sea daisies among which are hidden small crustaceans and some gastropods. It is tempting to





ISOLA DI GAVI

take an underwater photograph of the coloured wall with its blue background.

The southern side of the rock also offers a beautiful dive. On the seabed slightly away from the foot of the rock, nearly forty-metres down, is the entrance to a cave in which it is possible, briefly, to observe some shrimps and other tiny forms of cave life. On leaving, it is a question of ascending the rock face.

The dives at the Scoglio Grosso are at challenging depths and one cannot therefore explore both the north and south side in a single dive. It is better to make two separate dives on different days.



THE SECCA DI PUNTA PAPA

Recommended: Experts

Half a mile from Punta Papa, on an axis with the eastern tip of Palmarola, there is a magnificent shallows known as La Secca di Punta Papa. Its ridge rises from a depth of fifty-five metres to thirty-three metres or so. It was discovered in 1994. Until then nothing was known of this underwater promontory off Punta Papa, though it might well have been some fisherman's well-kept secret! Its northern slope is spectacular, with a forest of coral, some big specimens among them, with magnificent scarlet fans caressed by the currents. These are adorned with catfish eggs and the long antennae of lobsters. Following the wall towards Zannone there is, at a depth of forty metres, the entrance to a cave inhabited by a large colony of narwal shrimps (*Parapandalus narval*).

The Punta Papa dive is one of the most beautiful in the sea of Ponza, some say the most beautiful of all. In any case it is a dive for experts: the depth is considerable, it is in the open sea and the decompression, if conditions are not particularly calm, can be uncomfortable.



THE SECCA DEL DITO

Recommended: Experts

Not far south of the little island of Gavi, off the southernmost tip of Ponza, one can see three large rocks standing out of the sea, all facing towards Zannone. These are the Scoglietelle, the Chiana di Mezzo and the Scoglio Grosso. To the left of the Chiana di Mezzo (eyes turned towards Zannone and with one's back to Gavi) is the Secca del Dito, which rises from a depth of sixty metres and on up to sixteen metres above the surface. The name Dito (finger) refers to the unmistakable shape of this spur of rock, which is used to pinpoint the shallows.

The rock certainly has a special shape, an absolute monolith rising starkly from the seabed. One is advised to descend immediately to a depth of fifty or sixty metres along the western side, and then to take advantage of the site as one slowly resurfaces. There is no need to spend much time below a depth of around forty metres where the habitat is very beautiful. Here are many lobsters and fish, and a dazzling choreography of yellow sea fans.

The descent is recommended for very proficient divers, not only because of the considerable depths but also because it is in the open sea, often with wind and strong currents. One last word: be on the lookout for trawling nets. Because of the abundance of fish in these waters, fishermen often lower their nets here. The floats should be clearly visible on the surface.





THE SECCA DELLE GROTTELLE

Recommended: Experts

The Secca delle Grottele, beyond the Formiche off Punta Madonna, is the highest point of an enormous sloping plateau of rock, looming out of the sediment in the shape of a donkey's backbone. On one side it falls sheer to over eighty metres, on the other to between forty-five and fifty metres. Situated some way out, the shallows are a passing point for the larger migrating deep-water fish. In these waters one can find anything, even the occasional blue shark, no rarity in the deep waters round Ponza, where the fishing boats net tuna fish, swordfish and even larger species. A fifty-metre dive is not a major challenge, but if undertaken in the open sea and some miles out from shore it should be taken seriously, with every safety measure in place. This dive is only for experts, and should be organised with the utmost attention to detail.

At the bottom one can see the rising plateau in all its splendour, though in muted colours as the scarcity of light produces only a suffusion of greys. However, the black coral fronds turn bright red the moment the beam of our lights touches them, brushing the thousands of cardinal fish with pink. The whole of the Secca delle Grottele teems with them, as if the rock were a giant wreck. I have observed that these fish proliferate in large shoals around sunken wrecks.

Great crags open along the sides, wide-mouthed caverns, long and deep fissures that break up





ISOLA DI GAVI

a conger eel.

On the reef one often sees grouper: they are very wary, as are all Mediterranean grouper, and if one gets close they disappear into their dark boltholes with a couple of flicks of the tail. Among the benthic fauna found there we should mention the sea star (*Sphaerodiscus placenta*) and the big yellow melon sea urchin (*Echinus melo*), an echinoderm rare in the waters of Ponza. The Secca delle Grotte gives one the impression of being isolated from the rest of that underwater world. Dives with oxygen tanks are rare, because it is a difficult dive suitable only for the most expert divers accompanied by guides who are fully familiar with the area. Before organising the excursion they should make absolutely sure that weather conditions are right even for the next few hours, because



LAGUA

that immense rock plateau, with its bare white features covered with encrustations and the prominent fronds of the sea fans. The area is full of little submarine caves, which give it its name. In one of these caves, years ago, I came upon a huge sea bass which, in the half-light, I took for



the descent takes place far from the coast and without the least shelter. One should also remember that the considerable depth makes decompression stages imperative. With a choppy sea these would be impracticable.

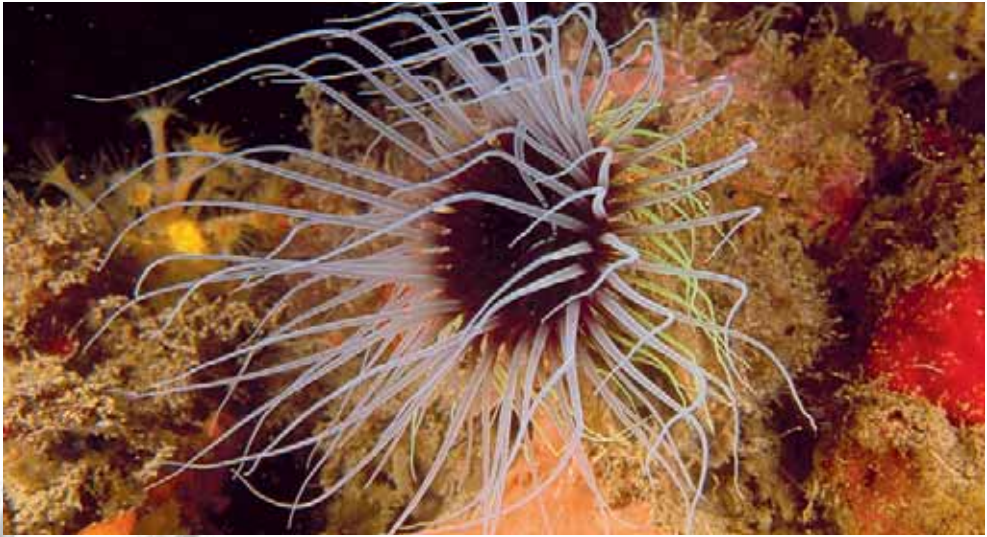
THE GROTTONI

Recommended: Experts

The Grottoni are not easy to locate. Those few who are aware of them will know that the rocks lie opposite Cala Fonte, but where exactly? Try going to the top of Cala Fonte on the main road that leads to Punta Incenso (the only road on Ponza that crosses the island from one end to the other) and look out to sea. The ridge is somewhere in that vast expanse of water, but it is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Divers need to turn to Andrea Donati, from Ponza, who knows the Grottoni well.

When one dives down along the anchor cable one finds a well-lit seabed of coarse white sand, and if we then look around us we will pick out a large dark shape. As we move towards this it gradually takes on well-defined proportions and the massive escarpment is suddenly upon us. Rising majestically from the seabed, this extraordinary rock face is perforated all over to create fascinating plays of light. If you were to dive with Andrea Donati he would surely lead you into a large cavity, whose sides are coated with colourful sessile fauna, particularly sponges that form a kind of undergrowth in which minute organisms can hide, among them prawns and small cave crabs. Our lamps might well pick out substantially proportioned but furtive sea bass. The last time I dived at the Orlata dei Grottoni I saw an abandoned net hanging right down from a pinnacle of rock. It looked like the scenery for a stage production. Two magnificent spirogyras were peeping out side by side from the folds of the net. The net





is certainly still there: it could make a backdrop for some stunning photos. There are many openings in the rocks and while one would like to explore them all there is quite a distance between each of them. Taken as a whole the Grottoni are quite extensive and one dive would not be enough for a comprehensive exploration.

We suggest more than one dive is needed to explore the whole reef and enjoy the full experience of this marvellous underwater adventure.





TO THE NORTH OF THE SCOGLIO GROSSO

Recommended: Experts

A couple of hundred metres to the north of the Scoglio Grosso and at a depth of forty metres there is an interesting underwater feature: a rock like a sugarloaf, some fifty metres in diameter, rising out of the dazzling white sand characteristic of the Ponza seabed. Here and there on its flanks are clumps of sea grass, brilliantly coloured and healthy, with long bright green ribbons on the yellowish stems. If we swim to the summit of the 'sugarloaf' (what the locals call its 'hat'), we will see a big canal on the other side. Seen this way, from above, it is a truly fascinating spectacle. One could be flying in a helicopter over some great canyon before gliding down and landing in the middle of it, the two high faces on either side of us, the white sand at our feet. Not a ripple of current here, because the deep part of the canal is surrounded by rocky buttresses that face each other across seven metres of calm water. The canal floor is forty-metres deep, and the top of the rock is twenty-three metres high. It was there that I once came face to face with a gigantic 'rancio fellone', which is what the people of Ponza call the spider crab (*Maya squinado*), the largest crab in the Mediterranean. The species, beside being large, is aggressive: if a photographer is intent on taking photos with flash the crab will take up a position which is both defensive and offensive, trying to attack with its claws wide open, jumping up in an attempt to nip its adversary, though the claws are not strong enough to be a danger. In spring, these large crustaceans begin to move inshore from the deeper waters, and can therefore be encountered more frequently. There are plenty to be found on the sediment-covered plateaus that surround the Scoglio Grosso, as well as flatfish such as sole, turbot and stingrays. Along the buttresses





on either side of the canal there are clefts in the rock face, some small and slim, others long and wide, as well as deep round passages and burrows. In the clefts and holes we find conger and moray eels. A lamp will also reveal quite sizeable fork beards, and the occasional red scorpion fish. There is



little coloured life in the canal to the north of the Scoglio Grosso even though in the darker corners, under the overhangs, we may come across an occasional cushion of sea daisies, because this seabed is above all a habitat for fish. At this point we are in the flow of a current coming from the northwest, and in spring, summer and autumn we can easily run into dense shoals of salt-water fish. It is here that the most skilled trawler fishermen catch amberjack with time-tested techniques and equipment of fantastic originality. The fishing method adopted by Don Gaetano, the king of amberjack fishing, relies on the “piombo guardiano” (the lead sentry), a block of lead melted inside a small bottle and

buried in the sand. It is no novelty in these waters to encounter a group of dentex, a file of barracuda or an entire army of tuna fish.





THE VANISHING AIRCRAFT

Recommended: Experts

There used to be an aircraft lying in the sea of Ponza at a depth of fifty-eight metres off Capo Basso, between Cala Feola and the little bay formed by the rocks of Lucia Rosa. Then in the year 2000 it disappeared under the sand. We hope the currents will uncover it again sooner or later, and in expectation of this will point to its whereabouts. The metal detector tells us that there is an object beneath the sediment on the extensive bed, and this must surely be our aircraft. The depth at that point is several metres less than it used to be, at some fifty-two metres according to one of the most recent soundings. The plane is a twin-engine two-seater Douglas A-20, which was forced down during the Second World War either by mechanical failure or because it ran out of fuel. The crew are known to have survived. The plane is well preserved, and a number of trawler nets have snagged on its fuselage and propellers. Fishermen who had had problems with their nets reported its position. The aircraft was explored in the summer of 1995 by the staff of the Ponza Diving Centre. In the pilot's seat in the cabin they found the remains of a map in a transparent plastic wallet. The last time I did the dive, before the plane was covered over by the sand, I found a big shrimp in the fuselage. The plane, lying on the white sand, could already be seen through the clear waters as



we descended on the anchor line. From up there it looked tiny, but when we got down near to it we realised that it was very big, with its tail jutting up. A surreal image that we hope to see again!

ISOLA DI ZANNONE





THE SCOGLIO DELLA BOTTE

Recommended: Experts

Just south of Ponza (Punta della Guardia) and Ventotene (Punta dell'Arco), some six miles from Ponza, is the rock known as the Scoglio della Botte. The rock did once resemble a barrel. Artillery bombardments by the navy, using it for target practice during manoeuvres, then altered its features. Today it is a tooth of black, smooth rock rising up from a cobalt sea. Looking at it from Ponza, from afar, it is like the prow of a ship standing out on the waters; then as one gets closer, the features become rather like those of a Christmas tree, though in reality everyone sees something different. Nevertheless, the Scoglio della Botte is at times a Mediterranean sanctuary, while at others it does not offer its maximum potential. This depends on so many factors, first of all the season. If you would like a piece of good advice, then go there during the migrations and you might easily come up against a wall of tuna fish. To go in winter or even in July might mean seeing very little. Wait at least until August, when nature organises itself for serious entertainment. Once into the water, the first thing to be noticed is its wonderful clarity – a hallmark of the seas around Ponza. The water is crystal-clear and from up above you can follow the escarpments down into the blue waters until they are lost to sight in the murky depths. A bare fifteen metres or so down you can pause on a small ledge, a means of gaining confidence with the Botte, which provides so much to see at varying depths.

You can manage the dive as you wish, for example going deep down straight away and then coming back up



to swim around the rock, enjoying the nooks and crannies, the sea daisies and the sponge. Here and there you might come across a scudding grouper or a big crab hobbling along the bottom. Whatever the dynamic of your dive, keep looking around you because this sea is one for bigger fish. If, wisely, you go in late summer or late spring, you are likely to see something extraordinary through your mask. Remember that we are in open sea and it is from the great underwater 'canyon' of Ponza that something interesting might emerge.

According to the day, it may be that one side of the rock is showing more signs of life than another; or that on one side you might only see fish typical of this location. Yet again, on other faces, where the currents that create concentrations of feed particles and tiny fish, sea birds concentrate here in large numbers, intent on their incursions into the massed ranks of anchovies or saddled bream.



If you want the dive to go on for as long as possible, do not go too deep but stay at around twenty metres. Here, benthos life is vibrant. There are, for example, large red scorpion fish; and, peering out from the holes and cracks are the moray eels, like women gossiping



at the window. Using the lamp to lighten the darker corners as you proceed, you will see the watery eyes of large conger eels. These come out from their holes only at night, to fill their bellies with a good mouthful or two, like the



squid that slide from rock to rock, also in the small hours. At night, in the arc of the light, the strangest life forms can be seen – for example the many tiny jellyfish, only to be found at night in the cleanest waters. I recall the compelling image of a *Olinias phophorica*, a freshwater jellyfish that seems to come from other worlds, with its long, transparent tentacles.



UNDERWATER EXCURSIONS AT

PALMAROLA



THE SECCA DI MEZZOGIORNO

Recommended: Experts

Once upon a time there was the Arch of the Mezzogiorno of Palmarola. Enthusiasts (and even the young) remember it well and some still jealously hang on to old postcards in which one can see this magnificent rock archway standing out over the crystal sea. In Salvatore Perrotta's fine book 'Islands to discover' we learn that the arch collapsed in November 1966, after a very rough sea. The two remaining pillars were named Il Fucile (The Gun). Here, close to the Punta di Mezzogiorno of Palmarola, where the arch once stood (very near the Faraglione di Mezzogiorno, the Faraglione di Fuori and the Scoglio Cappello) there is a large underwater plateau. It is known as the Secca di Mezzogiorno. It looms high, rising from a depth of forty to thirty metres. On this ridge-like elevation there is a deep fissure, a trench of sorts, which is the most interesting part of the entire reef. It is in effect a long, open cave with side walls often running in parallel, at times converging and thereby vaulting the higher reaches of the canyon. All around are white rocks with traces of the purest sand and patches of green and shiny sea grass. On the shaded rocks are several varieties of sponge, among them the red and encrusted variety and the seakale variety (*Crambe crambe*) that grows over the primary ventricles of oysters and other



bivalves. There are also many benthic organisms to see and to photograph, and banks of silvery fish against the blue. A mile and a half from this rocky plateau there is an imposing wall, descending from forty-two to seventy-five metres. The dive is breathtaking, even if difficult, and you obviously have to start at the highest point. Here you will find several varieties of sea fan, some red, some yellow, like those at Scilla. The fauna is abundant, from lobsters to fork beards.



THE SECCA DEGLI ZIRI

Recommended: All levels

The Secca degli Ziri is a very comfortable dive to a depth of no more than fifteen metres and is located just 500 metres off the eastern point of Cala Brigantina, near the Scoglio Suvaceto to our right side. The rock plateau has no protruding columns and is very extensive. It would take several dives to explore it thoroughly.

There are no particular features to look for on La Secca degli Ziri: it is all the same yet so different. The seasons impose considerable variety. These waters teem at times with diminutive fish attracting the larger deep-water predators; at others we will be drawn to seek out the small benthic fauna, scorpion fish camouflaged among the algae and the rocks, octopi hidden deep in their bolt holes. This is the kingdom of the microscopic life forms, with its wonderfully colourful gastropods. Among the many wrasses we will find the 'donzelle' and the 'donzelle pavonine', then the perciforms and from time to time a grouper peeping at us from its bolthole.

All over, the rock is smooth and often bare, typical of the shallows of Ponza, and the water is crystal clear. These shallows are certainly a good place for enthusiasts, be they biologists or naturalist underwater photographers. And because the dive is in shallow waters it can last longer and be all the more fulfilling.

Some say archaeological remains of shipping have been discovered here, dating back as far as the fifteenth century. This is not surprising: the very name of the Cala Brigantina refers to the tall

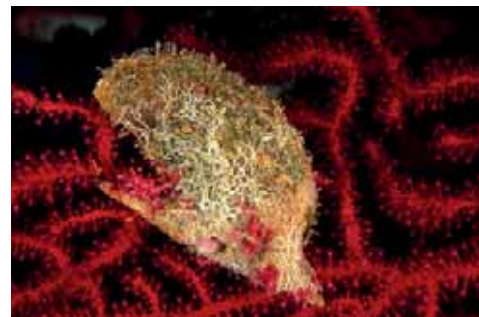
cliffs that would hide the many pirate ships carrying out raids up and down the Mediterranean coast. Palmarola, in the past as today a splendid expanse of uninhabited land, was often used as a meeting point from which to organise these coastal incursions or to regroup for safety afterwards.



THE SECCA DEI VRICCI

Recommended: Experts

The Secca dei Vricci at Palmarola was discovered in 2002 and is one of the most recent dives to be enjoyed in the seas of Ponza. Fishermen would mention it among themselves but were reluctant to give directions until... there it was. The rock rises from a depth of sixty metres and its summit is just twenty-seven metres below sea level. Starting from the summit and following down the north face we will find that the rock surface between thirty and fifty metres is completely coated with red sea fans. Anchored to their big fronds, polyps open in the current, are innumerable sea lilies, though we also find the most classical of the coral anemone such as the bivalve mollusc *Pteria hirundo* that only lives among the sea fans, and small anemone, bunches of *Clavelina lepadiformis*, bryozoans like the false coral (*Miryapora truncata*) and *Pentapora fascialis*. That is not all. Fish are often here in great numbers - not only the ever-present moray eels, but also swarms of anthias, dentex speeding by, big tuna fish, and amberjacks during the migrations and so many more besides. The Secca dei Vricci is indeed beautiful, but the dive is difficult and should be left to the experts.





THE CATHEDRAL AND ITS CAVES

Recommended: All levels

Palmarola never fails to astonish even those that have travelled its length and breadth. It is an island sui generis: an uninhabited stretch of land in the middle of the sea, even if a 'temporary population' inhabits it during the summer. In the cold season, there are only the ghosts, gulls and... Ernesto Prudente. This teacher and gentleman of leisure spends much of the year alone on this island. In Mediterranean tranquillity, it is here that the professor turns naturalist in order to reflect, remember, and to re-discover Palmarola day after day, as he writes his books. Monarch and subject combined, his is the only historical record of Ponza and Palmarola. It is well worth the trip to make a dive off Palmarola, if only to get to know the cave of Cala Tramontana described in Fabrizio Volterra's book 'Palmarola, guide to the underwater caves'. The rest of the island is rich in caves both above and below water. Those below are, for the most part, easily explored tunnels, free of dangerous currents and open to the skies, so much so that most can be navigated entirely in a little boat. The Cala Tramontana has seven caves, each romantically named: Regina, Lucilla, Morgana, Tramontana, Grimilde, Odessa and Rebecca. At seventy-five metres, Regina is the longest, and it is bursting with life. There are clear distinctions between the biodiversity near the well-lit entrance, in the half-light a few metres deeper and in the dark interior. Of the 'seven sisters' it is worth visiting





at least Regina, Lucilla and Grimilde and exploring attentively the sandy bed opposite the rock face where the cave openings are situated, as there are large swathes of sea grass, a habitat in turn for the typical 'invisible fauna'. This bed must be explored in the dark hours of the night to find the highest concentration of life, with organisms that are practically impossible to find by day, including some examples of *Alicia mirabilis*, the most beautiful polyp in the Mediterranean.

Before diving we should take a look at Cala Tramontana, a stupendous little bay where the 'Cathedral' is situated, a high and pointed rock wall that forms the inlet itself. The rock formation is unique and fascinating, and can be likened to a tight cluster of organ pipes emerging from the water and pointing up toward the sky. Very close to the neighbouring Punta delle Brece there is a large protruding rock that, together with the wall, forms a channel navigable in a small boat. On the other side, near the Punta Tramontana, is the Scoglio Scuncillo, with two small rock stacks alongside it. Cala Tramontana is a good mooring point, sheltered from the winds that come from the south, from the west and partly from the east. Leaving from the Punta delle Brece, Morgana is the third cave that we come across. Its ample vault cuts thirty-seven metres deep into the rock.

The dive in the Morgana cave is the essence of tranquillity, even for divers with limited experience. Again, a feature common to all the caves is the stark difference between benthos habitats according to whether they are exposed to the light, are in the half-light or in the dark. We pass from the

barely illuminated rock, covered in sponges and ochre sea stars, to the bare and clean substrate of the darkness. Then, at the back, where the caves contract to become a dead end, one finds other organisms, among them cave-dwelling fish and prawns. It is worth stopping a while in the half-lit space as there is a vast quantity of sessile life, amongst which are the large lemon yellow buttons of the *Leptosammia* polyp. The untrained eye can easily mistake the sunset star coral (*Leptosammia pruvoti*) for the warm-water coral *Astroides calycularius*, but they are not the same. The latter are sessile corals that form in colonies and build up in a dense and uniform way on the fairly ample surfaces of the substrata. The sunset star coral is, on the other hand, to be found in isolated specimens that have no contact with each other. Otherwise, notwithstanding the lemon yellow colour, the *Leptosammia pruvoti* polyp is the same as the warm-water coral. The substrate, pocked



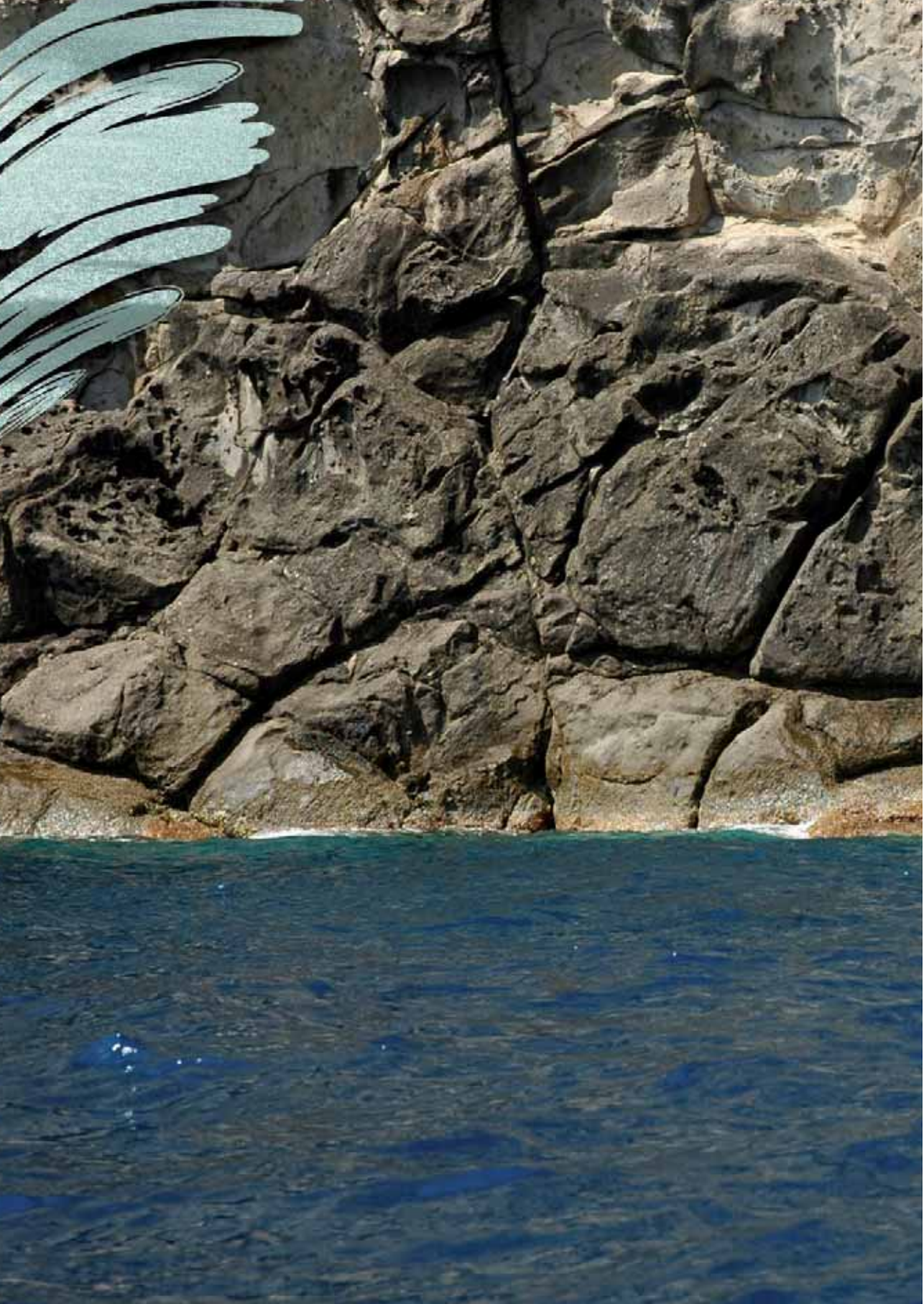
with the yellow buttons of the polyp, disappears beneath a mantle of other species of ochre sea stars and sponges. Amongst the latter, the red ones are very common, such as the *Crambe crambe*, known as a 'coastal sponge'. The *Petrosia ficiformis* is also common, with its perennial guest the mollusc *Peltodoris atromaculata*. The latter, known as the sea cow, has a round shape, sometimes oblong, and is characterised by brown-pink marks on the bottom of the skin. Other invertebrates,

besides the *Peltodoris atromaculata*, live amongst the sponges and molluscs of the caves of the 'Cathedral.' The information is valuable for biologists and close-up photographers who should make use of the best equipment. To my mind, the best lens for this environment is a normal (50 or 60 mm) close-up lens.

When the half light gives way to the dark, the rock of the three caves becomes smooth and bare: the consistency is hard and compact, the substrate is worn and coloured with greens, greys and yellows that jump out at you and are caused by the mineral content of the rock. Towards the floor of the cave are the inhabitants of the darkness including shrimps. In the caves of the 'Cathedral' the most common species of prawn is the edible *Palaemon serratus*, with its transparent and whitish body and dark lines on the underbelly. In the Lucilla cave, toward the back, I have found very many of them,



some fairly big. The females carry sacks of dark eggs secured under the belly. When one leaves the cave it is worth having a look at the sandy seabed with its islands of green sea grass. On the clear and extensive sand can be found lizardfish, turbot and red mullet. Large families of wrasse live in the sea grass: for example the green, the grey and the cuckoo wrasse, and some fine specimens of eel amongst the rocks. At night they come out in the open and are a real treat for the eyes.



UNDERWATER EXCURSIONS AT *ZANNONE*





THE SECCA DEL MARIUOLO

Recommended: All levels

Zannone is an enormous rock, covered by unmistakably Mediterranean vegetation, a place of forgotten fragrances mixed with the flavour of salt and dissipated by the wind as it lashes the shrubs at the foot of the Monte Pellegrino. The rare European mouflon sheep has lived here since 1950. On the summit, there are the ruins of a Benedictine monastery. The Scoglio del Mariuolo is close to the landing point of Capo Negro, though I do not know why it has that name. It comes up from the sea very close to the coast. It is all one can observe of a rocky formation that gets bigger below the water, dividing up into large blocks and ridges resting on a sea bed deep that is clear but full of sediment. These are what created the shallows, which bear the same name as the rock. If you point a lamp into the crannies around the Scoglio del Mariuolo, you may be in for some surprises: here prawns abound. Among them the coral shrimp (*Stenopus spinosus*) is frequently to be seen, as is the narwal shrimp (*Parapandalus narval*) and the common prawn (*Palaemon serratus*). It is always best to enjoy the shallowest part of the reef towards the end of the dive. Leaving the rock and diving down one of its sides, you quickly reach a plateau of thick, clear sediment. Let us focus attention on this huge swathe of sediment, which at times gives way to patches of slightly finer sand. In these soft circular islands are to be found the most mimetic of the benthic fish. Turbot are the most common among them: at times they simply rest on the bottom becoming almost



invisible, at others they rise up a hand's breadth, swimming with imperceptible movement of their large circular fin - like eagles wheeling in the water. The rock itself is the highest point of the Mariuolo shallows. It consists of great slabs of rock on a bed twenty-five to thirty-five metres deep. At the centre is a cave, easy to enter, two by three metres. Here we find the classical cave-dwelling specimens – in particular many types of prawn, a few hake (*Phycis phycis*) and cave crabs. The reef, with its vertiginous wall, makes for a fascinating diving location, not to be missed. Furthermore the dive is easy to organise, and therefore recommended for divers of all standards.



THE SECCA DEL VARO

Recommended: All levels (provided there are no currents)

Leaving Gavi and carrying along on the straight line between Scoglietelle, La Chiana di Mezzo and Scoglio Grosso, and just before reaching Zannone, we come to the Secca del Varo, whose floor rises to within three metres of the water's surface. The location is about 500 metres from the Punta del Varo, towards the southwest. Thanks to the clarity of the water, one can easily pick out the shallowest stretch of the reef, covered with dark seaweed. The northeast side is the most spectacular for exploration, immediately plummeting to thirty metres or more. Here, in incredibly limpid waters, are grouper and other resident species that live in holes, and myriad tiny silvery fish swarming all around attracting voracious and fast-swimming deep-water predators. On the bed it is common to find

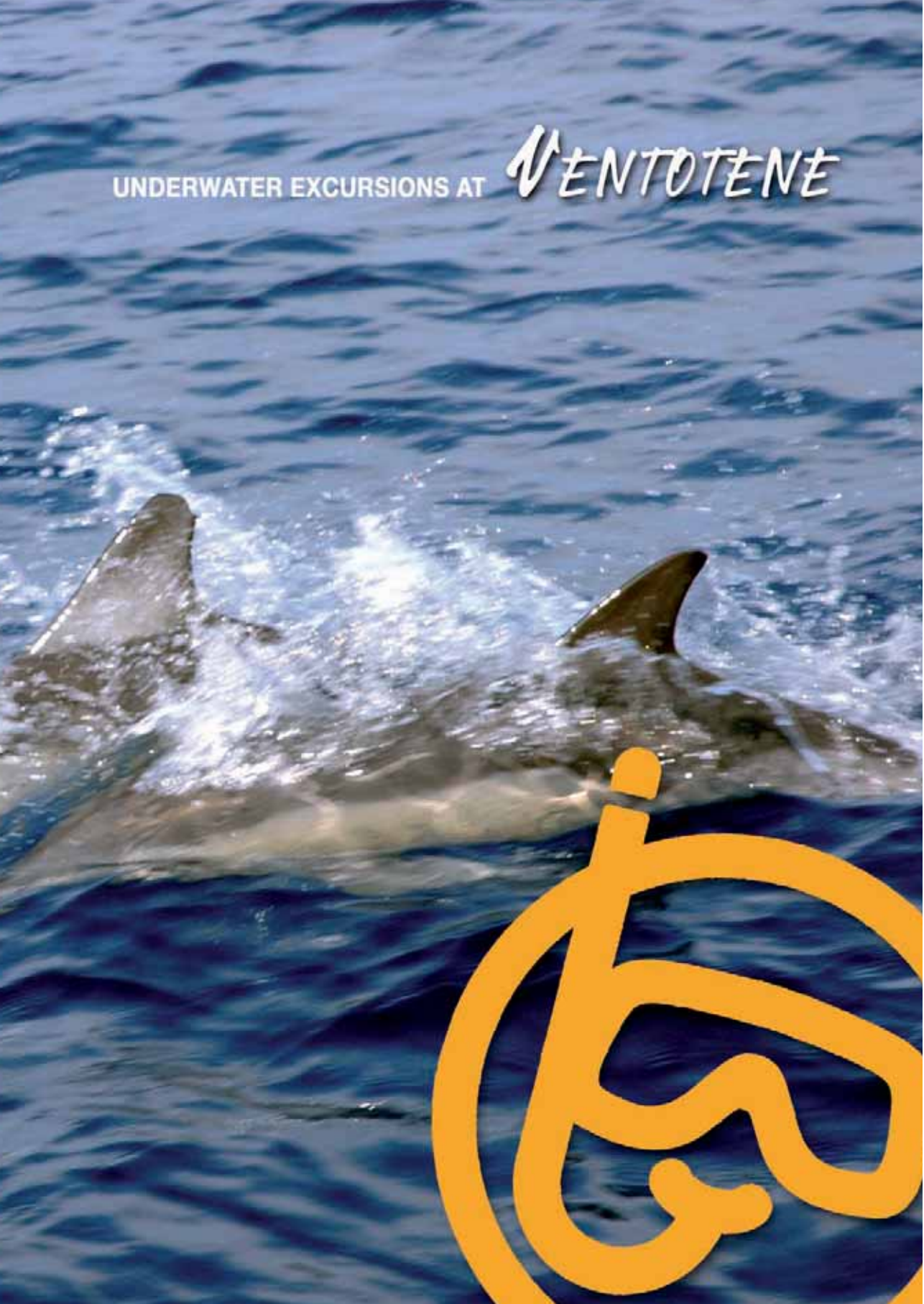


octopi, moray and conger eels, which by day can be observed in their holes because such species, as previously noted, come out only by night. A dive onto the reef is recommended to all divers, at any level of experience. When there is a current, however, it is only for experts.





UNDERWATER EXCURSIONS AT *VENTOTENE*



THE MARINE RESERVE OF VENTOTENE AND SANTO STEFANO

The islands of Ventotene and Santo Stefano make up a marine conservation area, in three zones: A (integral reserve), B (general reserve) and C (partial reserve).

Access to zone A is only permissible to authorized vessels whose purpose is to provide services or carry out scientific research and, otherwise, vessels that are in difficulty, awaiting rescue. Swimming is, however, permitted. Guided dives are possible without breathing apparatus.

In zone B the following are allowed: dives with or without breathing masks, subject to permission; mooring to buoys expressly placed in the areas indicated by the managing entity; fishing with a line and other equipment authorised by the managing entity; professional fishing for residents subject to authorisation.



In zone C the following are allowed: swimming, dives with or without breathing masks, subject to permission; access, navigation and anchorage for boats and swimmers of any kind in the areas indicated by the managing entity; sports fishing with a line as authorised by the managing entity; professional fishing for residents, also subject to authorisation.

PUNTA DE



PUNTA DELL'ARCO

Recommended: Medium level

Punta dell'Arco is the southernmost point of Ventotene, a great rock dropping vertically into the sea, shaped like the head of a whale. This, in fact, is what Ventotene resembles when seen from a distance and with a degree of imagination. It is believed that the volcanic eruption that formed the island began exactly here, at Punta dell'Arco.

The underwater plateau of rocks, ranging in depth from sixteen metres near the shore to forty metres further out, is very extensive and has many caves as well as great rounded boulders and splinters of rock. To explore it all would require at least three diving expeditions. The big amphora that can be seen in the archaeological museum of Ventotene was found here at Punta dell'Arco. During our dives we will come across shards of amphorae, ancient tiles or fragments of anchors. We must remember that they should not be disturbed, or else they must be handed in to the island's authorities. The site is also interesting for nature studies since there are specimens of fan mussel (*Pinna nobilis*), some of the largest to be found in the sea around Ponza, and many yellow sea fans. Here, to the delight of the trawl fisherman, there are quantities of amberjack, tuna and sea bream. Diving onto the vast seabed of Punta dell'Arco is not unduly difficult: it is recommended for divers with a medium level of expertise. Obviously they need to be accompanied by a guide who knows the site well, if only to organise a well-planned excursion and avoid covering the same ground. Not far from Punta dell'Arco there are other worthwhile dives such as the Grotta dei Gamberi and Il Nardone.



THE SCONCIGLIE

Recommended: All levels

To begin with, what are “sconciogli”? This is a term found in Italian dialect throughout the regions of Campania and Basso Lazio, and it refers to that mollusc with the spiralling shell, which was not only enjoyed as a food but also played a significant part in our ancient history. Our forefathers the Romans used them to obtain the purple dye for the togas of important men.

At Ventotene, the Sconcioglie (one wonders why ‘sconcioglie’ is given the feminine form!) are those two rocks that emerge next to one another off Punta Eolo (on the left as one leaves the harbour). Could it be that these rocks actually resemble the molluscs? Perhaps so, in the case of the tallest of the two; however, looking closely at the smaller rock it would seem more like a fish swimming with its back out of water (the end of the rock close to the shore of Ventotene being like the upper lobe of a fish’s tail).

The Sconcioglie is a fascinating dive, and I suggest it be explored particularly by night, when the underwater world offers its greatest abundance of sea fauna.

The depth is no more than twenty metres, so the dive is accessible to all. The most beautiful feature of Le Sconcioglie is a vault whose walls are covered with sessile marine fauna, particularly the yellow buttons of sunset cup coral (*Leptosammia pruvoti*). As we swim away from the shore we come across a flowering bank of sea grass where we may find an occasional sea horse, now extremely rare if not actually extinct elsewhere in the Mediterranean. The green leaves of the sea grasses hide croakers and cuttlefish, and by night some large specimens of sea bream. Picarel are also here in numbers, and in this environment can often be as big as their species allows.

On the left of the gallery are some small cavities with characteristic microfauna, rewarding for those who enjoy close-up photography.

We should return by night to the seabed of Le Sconcioglie after an initial ‘daylight rehearsal’ to familiarise us with its ins and outs. We will then recognise that this location in the sea round Ventotene combines the advantages of safe and easy entry with the pleasure of a truly interesting underwater world where even experienced divers will derive great satisfaction.



THE SECCHITELLA

Recommended: Medium level

The Secchitella is the broad top surface of a great rock plateau where our dive will take us to depths of between twenty and thirty-two metres. We are off Punto Eolo, and as soon as we are underwater we can see clearly below us the rugged shapes of the bottom, the boulders and crests that seem like the pimpled, knife-sharp backbones of a mythical creature at rest. Here and there we may see islands of sand and clusters of sea grass, with seabed-dwelling fish in a white livery that blends with the colour of the coarse sediment, or spirogyra protruding from the rims with huge fans, grouper poking their heads out of cracks and large red mullets resting on the rocks. From time to time clouds of sea bream and shoals of salpe drop down to "browse" among the weed on the seabed. We may also glimpse silvery shapes in the blue distance. Indeed, in the warm season and in spring or autumn, we often meet large species from the open sea such as amberjack and swordfish, tuna and nowadays even barracuda, since they have taken to colonising the whole Mediterranean and are perfectly at home in Ventotene. To the east there is an extraordinary bank that drops down for more than thirty metres. Following it down one can suddenly be entranced by the sight of a grouper caught in the lamplights; by the gaping maws of moray eels framed in their holes; by the crazy colours of the tiny gastropods found among the sponges and the ochre sea stars; and by the flashing reds of cardinal fish and the faint pink markings of anthias swarming all around. 'Ciliegina sulla torta' refers to a sort of syphon, several metres long, the sides of which are covered in sponges. If we follow it along we end up facing a small aperture that leads to the outside and lets in a dazzling light. Valentina Lombardi of Diving World Ventotene calls this syphon 'the cave with the window'. We are advised not to attempt to squeeze through the aperture as it could well be too

tight for us, but just beyond is a rocky archway, likewise cloaked in colourful benthic fauna.

This dive, because of the clear waters, is all colour and light and displays some magnificent sea roses. It is nevertheless a dive in open seas, so a guide is recommended who will lead you back to the top of the mooring line.

Beware of the currents that can sometimes be strong.



PUNTA MEZZOGIORNO



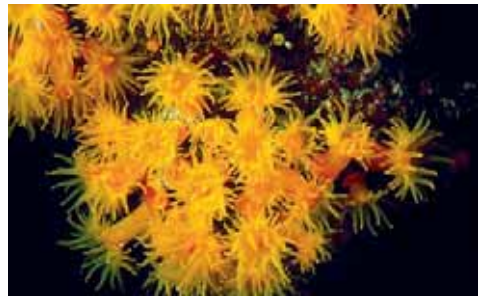
PUNTA DEL

THE NAVE DI FUORI

Recommended: All levels

Two rocks jut out of the sea opposite the beach of Cala Nave. They are picturesque not least because they are formed of yellow tuff and are pared away, like all the tuff rock formations on Ventotene, due to past exploitation of raw materials. The larger of the two rocks is furthest out to sea, and is known as La Nave di Fuori. It is a popular destination for holidaymakers in the high season. For those wanting to make easy night dives it is close to shore. It is a well-known fact that most fish, crustaceans and molluscs prefer to feed during the night. That is why certain fish that are impossible to find by day in open water are found far from their boltholes by night; for example conger eels, moray eels and croakers, as well as crustaceans such as prawns and certain types of crab. The Nave di Fuori is no exception to this rule. We can dive to the shallow seabed and follow the shape of the rock face. This extends from the coarse sand bank to the sea-facing elevation. Here a cluster of small rocks provides boltholes for many types of white fish and for the ever-present picarel. By lamplight they resemble tropical fish, resplendent in their enchanting livery of blues and greens, all speckled with sky-blue dots. There are so many it is almost like seeing tiny bream.

Large crabs lumber along the seabed, and various gastropods move about among the encrustations of the rock substrate. It was right here that I had the chance to see and to photograph a splendid specimen of *Bouvieria aurantiaca*, a lobster red and rounded like a tomato, by no means an everyday find. The concavities of the rocks also hide octopi, some respectably large.





THE GROTTA DEI GAMBERI

Recommended: Experts

We are now in the waters of Punta dell'Arco, the tall dark rock face where Ventotene falls into the sea. Punta dell'Arco overhangs deep clear water, and in spring and autumn plays host to varieties of fish that underwater fishing enthusiasts dream of.

Punta dell'Arco and Punta Eolo are Ventotene's most open stretches of sea, where any surprise can become commonplace. It was here, some years ago, that Dario Santomauro of Diving World Ventotene discovered what he later baptised the 'Grotta dei Gamberi'. In fact there are two caves, one at a depth of forty-two metres and the other close by at forty-four metres.

In the shallower of the two caves we find another opening to the outside. This takes us along the opposite side of the rocky ledge where the cave entrances are located. The two caves still come under the single name of the Grotta dei Gamberi, which refers to the thousands of narwal shrimps (*Parapandalus narval*) to be found inside, a species characterised by a finely indented mouth, red colouring with clear stripes running from head to tail, and by long white filaments. Using their legs, the females hold clusters of sky-blue eggs against



their bellies, which explains the blue colour of certain rice dishes enjoyed in our seafood restaurants. The seabed around the Grotta dei Gamberi is interesting for the quantity of marine fauna that clings there, for example beautiful sea roses along the crests of rocks and clinging to strands of abandoned netting. On a good day one can see schools of migratory fish in this liquid universe, big solitary amberjacks and, as autumn turns to winter, shoals of small tuna fish.

ISOLA DI GAVI



THE NARDONE

Recommended: Experts

An underwater site is sometimes found quite by chance. In most cases the discovery can be traced back to information given by a local surface fisherman who may have lost a net or had a hard time retrieving it even though he had spread it on a seabed considered to be free of what are known in seafaring jargon as “snags”, those irregularities, rocky reefs, wrecks or objects of one kind or another that can interfere with a trawling net. This happened in the case of the Nardone rocks. Fishermen drew attention to the location because their nets were bringing up rock-dwelling fish even though the seabed was considered to be sedimentary. Armed with this information, a dive was made which revealed, at a depth of forty metres, an isolated rock surrounded by white sand. Another flank of the Nardone descends to about seventy metres but the shallower part at forty metres or so is the most beautiful.

The Nardone is located just before Punta dell'Arco as one follows along the western side of Ventotene, not far from the Grotta dei Gamberi. The site is not very extensive, but because of the abundance of sea life that surrounds it a dive is well worth organising. One will find various species of rock dwellers such as grouper, big scorpion fish, moray eels, crabs and sea bass.



THE GAUDIOSO

Recommended: Experts

Some way out to sea off Punta Eolo, in the same waters where the wreck of the Santa Lucia can be found, are two rocky outcrops forming a sort of underwater canyon filled with beautiful red sea fan, at a depth of between forty and sixty metres. Until the discovery of the Gaudioso rocks, the only sea fans known in the Ventotene seas were those of Punta Cannucce, referred to as the “sea fans of Jetty 4” because of their proximity to this second underwater excursion point. The red sea fan beds at the Gaudioso are not there in great numbers, but display copious and splendid fronds, full of flowering vitality. This is because the underwater currents provide a constant abundance of plankton to nourish their polyps. Why the name Gaudioso? The reason is simply that one of the onshore landmarks for aligning this group of rocks is the house of the Gaudioso family near Parata Grande, on the western side of Ventotene.



THE WRECK OF THE SANTA LUCIA AND ITS BOILER

Recommended: Experts

On the 25th of July 1943, the Santa Lucia ferry steaming between Gaeta, Ponza and Ventotene was sunk by a torpedo dropped by an English bomber. The Santa Lucia went down with all hands and passengers. There were only two survivors. The Santa Lucia is thus a burial ground in the open sea to the northeast of Punta Eolo. Some expert divers explore the wreck, curious to see the protagonist of that painful episode of World War II history. The wreck itself is upside down on the seabed, broken into two sections, with its keel facing upwards and its upper deck lying on its side. The area between the two, where the torpedo exploded, is a great tangle of distorted metal. The surrounding seabed is part sand and part rock, at a depth of between forty-three and forty-six metres.

Recently, during a visit to Ventotene while I was writing up these notes, Dario Santomauro told me that the hull of the Santa Lucia has collapsed. The prow, keel up, has dropped down, so it is now hardly possible to risk brief penetrations of the wreck, as some foolhardy divers used to do. It is now decidedly dangerous to enter that part of the wreck and this should under no circumstances be attempted. In any case, the most interesting part is the upper deck, with the bridge still intact and its metal structures and propeller pushing out of the sand. The wreck is covered with colourful encrustations and fauna. It has attracted a rich variety of underwater life, some established there like conger eels, croakers, a few lobsters and banks of anthias; others coming in from the open sea. At times one can see tuna fish, amberjack and sea bream swimming speedily by.





The wreck of the Santa Lucia is a dive for experts because of the considerable depth and frequent strong currents. It is therefore best to undertake it with the help of a diving centre.

THE BOILER OF THE SANTA LUCIA

The boiler of the Santa Lucia was found in 2003, just a couple of hundred metres from the wreck itself. Dario Santomauro of Diving World Ventotene came across it by chance while he was exploring the surrounding seabed. The cylindrical boiler is lying on the bottom surrounded by a lot of tubes and steam fittings. It is home to groupers and moray eels and is constantly enveloped by a cloud of anthias. The depth varies between forty-two and forty-six metres.



PUNTA PASCONE

Recommended: All levels

We are on the northwest shore of Ventotene about halfway between Punta Eolo and Punta dell'Arco, not far from the impressive cliff face of Parata Grande. Punta Pascone is a diving point that offers exceptional descents of no great depth and for all abilities including beginners. The seascape is ravishing and it is peaceful. The depth is some eighteen metres at the foot of the cliff face, and the site, with its rocks covered in the brilliant colours of sessile fauna, is also perfect for night underwater photography. One will find small lobsters, all kinds of crustaceans, and rock-dwelling fish like moray eels and large grouper. Like icing on a cake, here are two very easily explored caves that by day offer fascinating plays of light that are bound to tickle the creative fancy of photo enthusiasts. For the most part the dive follows the cliff face.



THE SCOGLI D'ISCHIA AND THE SCOGLI DI CAPRI

Recommended: Medium level

The groups of rocks, known as the Scogli d'Ischia and the Scogli di Capri, lie close to one another and are located off Punta Eolo about halfway out towards the wreck of the Santa Lucia. Though they are two different diving points we will deal with them together because they are close to each other and share certain similarities. One such is the current, which can be of medium strength here as indeed all along the waters facing Punta Eolo. This again is a good reason to enjoy one's underwater holiday in the company of capable guides fully familiar with the dives and, critically, who can choose them according to the prevailing sea and weather conditions. The Scogli d'Ischia, at between thirty and fifty metres in depth, are a very colourful rock face which exhibit many species of sponge. There are also passing sea squirts, with an abundance of cave fauna composed mainly of prawns, particularly red prawns and sea bass.

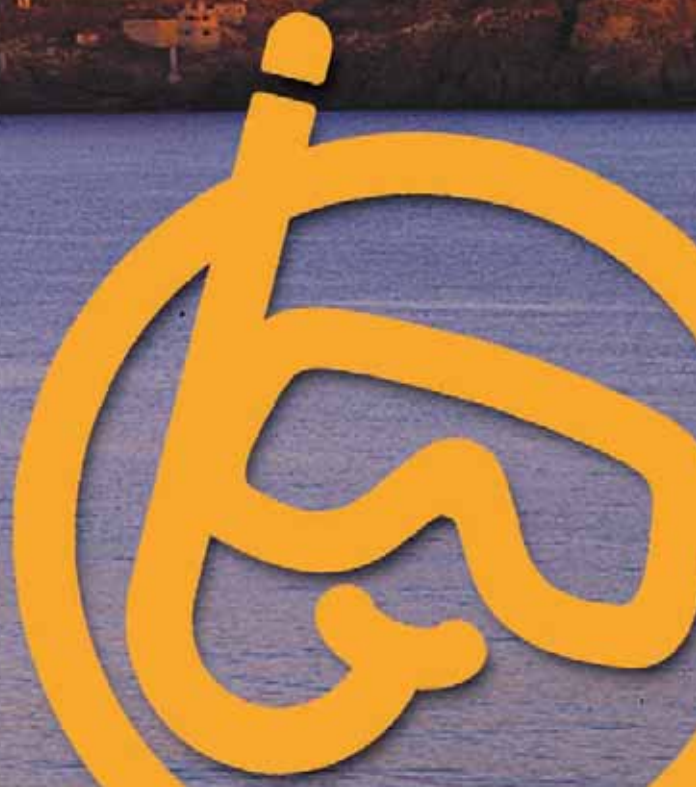
At the Scogli di Capri the depth ranges from twenty to forty-five metres. Unlike the Scogli d'Ischia, the focus of this dive is a 'canyon' whose sides are covered in yellow sea fans (*Eunicella cavolinii*), and other colourful sessile fauna. In the deep, off both the Scogli di Capri and the Scogli d'Ischia, one can suddenly come across big migrating fish, either alone or in schools. At the end of summer in particular, one will meet large amberjack in these waters, and shoals of bream, so that it is exactly here, opposite Punta Eolo, that Ventotene's most talented underwater fishermen will foregather.





UNDERWATER EXCURSIONS AT

SANTO STEFANO



PUNTA FALCONE

Recommended: All levels

The Punta Falcone on Santo Stefano, a short distance from Jetty No 4, derives its name from a strange sculptural formation which nature cut from the rock, using a knife consisting of a thousand years of corrosive seawater. High above, on the slope at the centre of a little bay, there is a rock whose shape once resembled the head of a bird of prey. More recently this fine sculpture broke up at various points and the resemblance was less, though the name given to the cape by the inhabitants of Ventotene has obviously remained – the Falcon!

At Punta Falcone one can make a splendid dive down the face, with the advantage of being able to control one's maximum depth all the way down the incline to fifty metres or so. However the Punta is consistently interesting from minimal depth right on down to more difficult conditions. At twenty metres the light is very good, revealing rocky substrate abundantly covered with encrusted life. In the large cavities are big clusters of warm-water coral (*Astroides calycularis*) and sea anemones (*Parazoanthus axinellae*). The polyps are large and colourful, with intense yellows.

At about twenty metres there are caves that were originally formed by the movement of large rocks. This is where there are the largest concentrations of fish, an impressive bustle of fins on a good day. One can see large and solitary groupers swimming between hideouts and open water, and swarms of perciformes and migrating fish in the appropriate season. Going below thirty metres makes the dive trickier, with vertical rocky overhangs towards the bottom, at about fifty metres. This is the kingdom of the yellow sea grass (*Eunicella cavolinii*). Nearby, towards Jetty 4, are the most notable red sea fans, the typical *Paramuricea clavata*.

Even if diving off the Punta Falcone can be considered in some respects difficult because of the depth in various places, technically this is an easy excursion, with a convenient re-entry to the surface up along the rock face with innumerable handholds to facilitate correct decompression.



PUNTA MEZZUGIORNO



PUNTA DEL

THE SECCA DE LA MOLARA

Recommended: All levels

The Secca de la Molara, more simply known as the Molara, lies in the straits between Ventotene and Santo Stefano, decidedly closer to the latter, near its south side. The name derives from the existence of millstones, part of the archaeological patrimony of these waters. A large colony of barracuda now lives peacefully in this stretch of reflective water. In such clear waters, these silver fish are visible in the hot season, making a superb spectacle. They are a reason, among others, why this dive is so rewarding. The ridge, formed by massive piles of rock, rises from a white bed of sand thirty metres down. It points south-southwest, coming up to within a few metres of the surface. At the centre are three fifteen-metre peaks.

Among the boulders of the shallows there are some notable sea fauna, including some rock-dwelling and open water species. In periods of migration there are many deep-water fish to be observed, among them swarms of tuna, Liche and amberjack. The micro fauna is fascinating and a boon for those enjoying close-up photography. On the bottom of the southern slope lies a large anchor, now welded to the rocks and well known to divers in these waters.

The waters of la Molara, being shallow, are often influenced by sustained currents, due to that phenomenon known as the 'Venturi effect', which explains how a liquid increases its flow when it is passed through a bottleneck.





JETTY 4 AND PUNTA CANNUCCE

Recommended: All levels

Jetty 4 at Santo Stefano is one of the landing points on the little island that were once used to reach the penitentiary. Today it is one of the most beautiful dives possible in the Pontine Archipelago. To go to the bottom provides an opportunity to see one of the few red sea fan colonies in the waters of Ventotene and Santo Stefano (there are others on the rocks of the Gaudioso, not far from the wreck of the Santa Lucia: vide the appropriate excursion). This is not an extensive colony, nor is it abundantly vegetated; however the fans are large and colourful and show the sea roses and dogfish eggs tethered among the millions of stems. At times dogfish eggs can be very numerous. Those deposited some time ago are full of incrustations; the other more recent ones reveal the transparent embryo of the tiny dogfish. The sea fans of Jetty 4 are actually further out, nearer Punta Cannucce. To avoid covering the distance that separates the two locations, which means swimming with flippers forty metres below the surface, the dive can be conveniently split into two. The first is 'Jetty 4 straight down' and the second 'Jetty 4 and its sea fans'. This last excursion, in fact, takes place at Punta Cannucce, whose characteristics are the same as Jetty 4 - similar gigantic rock formations, significant sea fauna and vivid colouring. If such a dive in these waters is beautiful by day, it is incomparable by night when the seabed, at up to forty-metres deep, is enriched by





fish: perch, rock-dwelling fish of all shapes and sizes, grouper, picarel, sea bass, and red scorpion fish. Fifteen metres down is a ledge covered with sea grass, a wonderful source of images for enthusiasts of close-up pho-



tography. Then, along a seemingly interminable range of massive and slippery piles of rock, one comes down onto a seabed of white sand where one can find everything, even perhaps a plump monkfish sitting immobile on the sediment, ready to be admired and photographed. The rock is heavily carpeted with red-encrusted sponge, and in the shallower depths there is a considerable prevalence of yellow starfish.





TRANSPORT

The islands are reachable from various ports:

PONZA:

from **Anzio** (hydrofoil and ferry throughout the year);
from **Formia** (hydrofoil and ferry throughout the year);
from **San Felice Circeo** (motor boat in season);
from **Terracina** (ferry throughout the year);

VENTOTENE:

from **Anzio** (hydrofoil and ferry throughout the year);
from **Formia** (hydrofoil and ferry throughout the year);
from **Terracina** (ferry in season).

There are hydrofoil and ferry services between **Ponza** and **Ventotene** and in the summer private and other local services are available.

In the summer period there is a catamaran service from **Fiumicino (Rome)** and a ferry service from **Naples**.





CONTACT OFFICES AND GENERAL ASSISTANCE

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Via Duca del Mare 19, Latina - tel.0773695404 fax 0773661266

www.apllatinaturismo.it - e-mail: info@apllatinaturismo.it

Ufficio Informazioni Piazza del Popolo (LATINA) - tel.0773480672

In nearby towns

Uffici Informazioni e Assistenza al Turista (I.A.T.)

Formia, Viale Unità d'Italia 30

tel.0771771490 fax 0771323275

Gaeta, Via E.Filiberto 5

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Minturno-Scauri, Via Lungomare 3

tel.0771683788 fax 0771620829

Terracina, Via G.Leopardi

tel.0773727759 fax 0773721173





On the Islands:

COMUNE DI PONZA Piazza Pisacane,

tel.077180108 fax 0771809919

COMUNE DI VENTOTENE Piazza Castello 1

tel.077185014 fax 077185265

ASSOCIAZIONE PRO LOCO DI PONZA

Molo Musco - tel.077180031

ASSOCIAZIONE PRO LOCO DI VENTOTENE

Via Roma 2 - tel.077185257

COMUNITÀ ARCIPELAGO ISOLE PONZIANE

Via Roma 10 (PONZA) - tel.0771809893



NOTES

ISOLA DI PALMAROLA

PUNTA TRAMONTANA



PUNTA MEZZOGIORNO



PUNTA DE

NOTES

ISOLA DI ZANNONE



ISOLA DI GAVI



PORTO



ISOLA DI PONZA

LAGUARDIA

