

Encounters at the Elba

ANY MEDITERRANEAN ISLAND COULD HAVE BEEN IN ITS PLACE:
CINEMATOGRAPHIC SUNSETS, SOLITUDE THAT PLEASURES THE MIND, AZURE WATER
OF THE BAYS. BUT SINCE YOU MADE IT TO ELBA, IT WAS MEANT TO BE

by RITA LEE



Translated by YEISENIA CHAIKOVSKAYA, photos SHUTTERSTOCK.COM, ALAMY.COM

Elba is one of the biggest Italian islands, but it is not the most obvious choice for a holiday. All the better! It means that even in the high season the ethnic composition of the island is not changing significantly, restaurants do not introduce long waiting lists, a stay in a suite in a hotel can be extended on the spot once you understand that a single weekend by the sea is a ridiculously short break. Street vendors do not chase you with offers to partake in the high art of the replica, and bohemian nymphs do not insist on immediately selling a whole bunch of necklaces and other colourful trinkets to unsuspecting tourists. The island is made up of a lot of air, water, sun, mountains, a rich soundtrack provided by crickets, and more water. It so happened that health benefits of local nature left the very first noble guest of the island, who spent almost 10 months there, with nothing but bitter disappointment about lost time. In order not to lose his management skills, Napoleon Bonaparte spent his time on the island doing breathing exercises, looking into the distance, and exercising his strategic planning. In the meantime he introduced a number of social and economic reforms on the island left temporary under his control. The Emperor left the island, but Elba did not lose its taste for hospitality. Two hundred years later the scenery is just as picturesque, the islanders remain sluggish and self-indulgent, Prosecco is always chilled to the right temperature, fish is served well-cooked and from the latest catch, clouds of gelato float in tall glasses, and the measured flow of time is only broken by sailing regattas. The island, which is not a common feature in the most popular lists, is not occupied by seagulls and not explored by people. All the more reason to come here. >>



Rio Marina. The tower at the entrance to the Old Port



Forno, Scaglieri, Fetovaia, Cavoli, and of course Biodola, one of the best and cleanest beaches on Elba

On the way

Having spent a few days on Elba, not every tourist will remember what the original purpose of the visit was. Some will start by checking the tour guide for medieval Spanish forts in Porto-Azzurro, but will leave exploration of the area for later attracted by the very first beach and a prospect of an afternoon tan. Others, while setting off on a ferry from Piombino, before even seeing land on the horizon, will consider a ceremonial visit to Napoleon's residences – Palazzina dei Mulini and Villa di San Martino. But like the great commander himself, having just stepped ashore, this guest will aim for the centre of the island, preferring the cool of the parks to ancient museum dust. These examples are not illustrating the laziness of the tourists that come here, or their indifference to the cultural heritage of the biggest island of Tuscan Archipelago, but

the magic effect Elba has on foreigners. It hypnotises – your eyelids are becoming heavier, you feel absolute calm and peace. You are surrounded by people you like, their presence does not bother you, tall cedars and sea views are everywhere. With the third strike of the bell for the Sunday mass you wake up and see the same quiet quays, the old marble of the statues, the sun-kissed city squares, narrow streets and faces. You feel good. It can be explained with the distance from the continent, a unique microclimate of the island, and calm that is almost visible in the air. A seagull flies past, a jellyfish straightens the creases in its colourful hood, a yacht is lying adrift, a day passes.

On the shore

Out of the eight communes of Elba founded by Cosimo de' Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Portoferraio is



LOCAL TIME

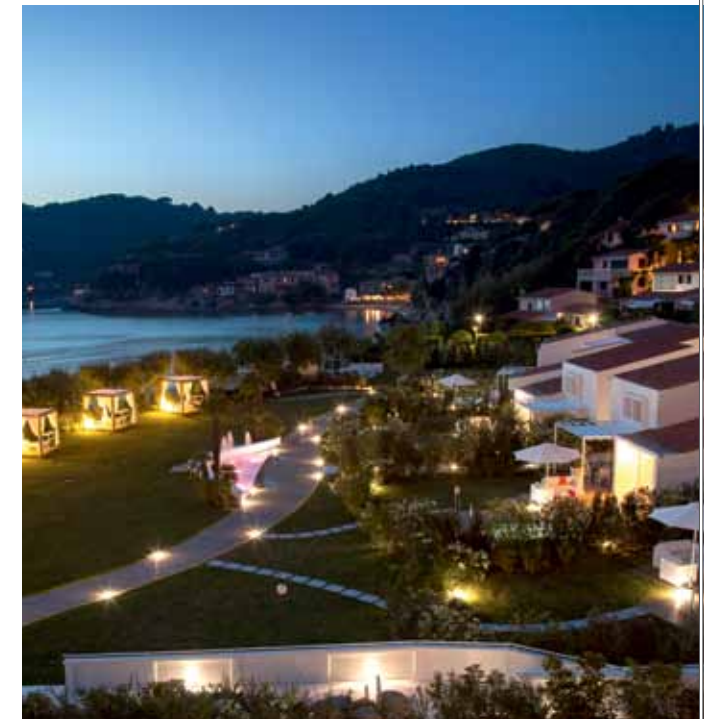
Consumers consider local watch manufacturer Locman to be the pride of the island. Marco Mantovani creates a special product, and his watches tell more about modern Italy than any sociological studies. Since its founding moment in 1986 Locman has presented several super-successful models, absolute bestsellers among niche brands. The company's headquarters are on Elba and it has branches in Milan, Florence, and New York. In 2006 the company set up an Italian school for watchmakers. By the way, Locman is taking its new collection to BaselWorld 2014.

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WATERS OF ELBA

Family perfume manufacturer Acqua dell'Elba is offering an alternative way of navigating by preserving the island's atmosphere in laconic glass bottles. The scents of the olfactive workshop reveal a sea breeze, stones heated by the sun, transparent waves that hit the beach. Local ingredients, Tuscan herbs, handmade limited editions turn Acqua dell'Elba from perfumers into portrayers of everyday life: an open bottle tells of timelessness and bliss – the two most precious resources on the island. As opposed to traditional souvenirs, the perfume does not lose its charm away from Elba's context.



Baia Bianca Relais Suites boutique hotel is the main hotel premiere in Portoferraio

the most prominent and tightly populated. Portoferraio acts as a starting and finishing point for island exploration: after the rustic Campo nell'Elba, Capoliveri, Marciana, and Rio Marina a return to civilisation is inevitable and very welcome. Hotels, villas, and apartments are available for rent right there, on the coast in Portoferraio. For the beaches, views, and beautiful photos tourists come to the Biodola gulf. Hereditary land owners – owners of Hotel Hermitage – tell how in the early 1960s the head of the family saw the bay for the first time. Having spent half an hour in pensive silence, he simply said: "It is the best place on Earth." A few months later the hotel construction started. Hotel Hermitage is still there today and it is the flagship hotel of the family business, an understandable and attractive resort tradition. Hermitage's neighbours Baia Bianca Relais Suites is a hotel of a new formation and the focal point of the latest trends. One- and two-storey villas, snow-white interiors, straight lines, spacious terraces, English lawns, a talented chef with unlimited powers and a bar on the roof that turned from the highlight of the hotel into the main centre of the island's nightlife. Despite their proximity, Hotel Hermitage and Baia Bianca Relais Suites keep friendly neighbourly relations: guests migrate from beach to beach, the smell of pizza baked in a wooden oven and a barely-noticeable trace of haute cuisine mix in the air above the restaurants in equal proportions. But of course everyone is invited to Yury Bashmet's annual late summer galas that take place in Hotel Hermit-

age. The International music festival on Elba is a big event for the island. The concerts are staged in Portoferraio and in Rio Nell'Elba ruins, performers include various European stars, Moscow Soloists, Gidon Kremer and his Kremerata Baltica are among regular participants. It is not difficult to find tickets, it is especially nice to combine doing nothing in the high season with some classical music.

HAVING SPENT A FEW DAYS ON ELBA, NOT EVERY TRAVELLER WILL REMEMBER THE ORIGINAL REASON FOR VISITING THE ISLAND

Forever

In the time spent on Elba, you will have to listen to the legend about the origin of the island and Aphrodite's necklace more than once. Be patient, the myth gains new details with each telling and differs with every narrator. However, a trip on a yacht along the Tuscan Archipelago convinces both sceptics and materialists of the correctness of the Greco-Roman epic. The small islands resemble pearls on a string. It is barely an hour of sailing to Corsica, but why bother, if it is perfectly visible from Elba in clear weather, which is 360 days of the year. You can be in Italy and look at France. You wait for the evening, for a slight change in the scenery and the third act. Eyelids are getting heavier. All the better. 💎