

The Mediterranean

decor are remarkable in their faithfulness to excavated classical models from Herculaneum and Pompeii. There are no labels or guards and minimal barricades, allowing you to wander at will. Notice the fragile embroidered curtains and the mosaic floor in Mrs. Reinach's bedroom, which mimics a carpet. Oh, and marvel at the *balaneion* (private bathroom) with the sunken octagonal Carrara marble bathtub. villa-kerylos.com.

VILLA EPHRUSSI DE ROTH-SCHILD, CAP FERRAT, FRANCE

Built by Alphonse de Rothschild's daughter Béatrice between 1907 and 1912, Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild, which overlooks Villa Kérylos, is not everyone's taste, with its girly *goût* Rothschild decor. That said, there are important furnishings from Louis XIV, XV and XVI (some of the seating is

understandably but unfortunately protected by distracting plastic covers); the paneling is from the Hôtel de Crillon; and there is the requisite amount of rare Sèvres paintings and drawings. The gardens are rapturous, with wraparound views and a delightful musical fountain. villa-ephrussi.com.

VILLA SAN MICHELE ANACAPRI, ITALY

Writer and doctor Axel Munthe put Anacapri on the map after he purchased the property in 1895 and welcomed European royalty, Oscar Wilde and Henry James to the artful idyll he fabricated, bit by bit, from Roman ruins and an abandoned chapel. Dark domestic rooms furnished with pewter and oak lead to a sunny courtyard and a snug sitting area with painted Venetian furniture reminiscent of Swedish designs.

Ancient fragments of sarcophagi, busts and columns are visual cues and fanciful ploys to structure the space and romanticize the setting. Migratory birds stop here as well and are monitored by the sanctuary founded by Munthe. villasanmichele.eu.

VILLA FERSEN, CAPRI, ITALY

Called Villa Lysis by Baron Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen, whose scandalous life was the subject of Roger Peyrefitte's 1959 *L'Exilé de Capri*, this cool, decadent, unfurnished 1905 folly perched on the side of a cliff is a shock and a delight to the senses. Its entrance has four Ionic columns encrusted with gold mosaics, but it's the yellow-blue-and-white-tiled opium den—where the drug-addicted d'Adelswärd-Fersen committed suicide—and the views that fascinate. capritourism.com.

VILLA CAMPOLIETO EROLANO, ITALY

The ancient Roman town of Herculaneum, modern-day Ercolano, is stepchild to Pompeii in terms of notoriety and tourism but is better preserved and was discovered earlier, in 1738. The archaeological site is steps away from four grand Vesuvian villas on the Miglio d'Oro (Golden Mile), which brought the rich and the royal to this Neapolitan Newport. Trompe l'oeil wall paintings are what distinguish Villa Campolieto, completed in 1775 for Prince Luzio di Sangro. The Sala dell'Incannucciata (a trellised garden room) is painted with a party in full swing in the palace gardens; a table of cardplayers, including the owner, occupies one wall, and on another, the architect Vanvitelli surveys his design, holding a monocle to one eye. 39-081/732-2134. ■



Dirk Hamer and his sister, Birgit, a few days before he was shot and killed by an Italian prince

We first noticed something peculiar about Cavallo, a startlingly beautiful island about a mile from Corsica and eight from Sardinia, when we checked into its only hotel, the **Hôtel & Spa des Pêcheurs**. The island is French, formally part of the commune of Bonifacio in southern Corsica. But most of the newspapers in the lobby were Italian, as were many of the women working at reception. There our mobiles roamed with a French cellular network, but in our room, which faced Sardinia,

they switched to an Italian one. The men tending the beach bar were Romanian and Spanish. The other guests were speaking either French or Italian. The menu in the mostly Italian, mostly seafood restaurant was in both languages, as well as English; our waitress was Roman; the maître d' Neapolitan; the chef Italian, too. But we were in France. We found ourselves speaking three languages at once. We were understood often enough that failures to communicate were a curiosity, not an annoyance.

CONTINUED »

FRANCE

REVERSAL OF MISFORTUNE

A royal killing in the '70s made Cavallo infamous, but a little time and money have helped the splendid island triumph over its sordid past.

BY MICHAEL GROSS

The Mediterranean

THOUGH ORGANIZED CRIME AND CORSICAN NATIONALISTS WREAKED HAVOC ON CAVALLO, WEALTHY ITALIANS CONTINUED TO VISIT AND BIG YACHTS PLIED ITS WATERS.

The people we encountered didn't get our curiosity about the island, though. Or else they preferred not to indulge it. Cavallo's history has ensured that this one-hotel island is among the least known of the bolt-holes Italians refer to as *molto particolare*, meaning "very special"—and perhaps, "not for you." And that's the case even though it has long attracted celebrities, from pop stars Petula Clark and Sylvie Vartan in the 1960s to the guests from Alicia Keys's Mediterranean wedding in 2010, though her publicist will neither confirm nor deny it. Curious.

Cavallo is the jewel in a chain of granite islands that form the Lavezzi Archipelago, which is otherwise uninhabited and makes up the southernmost stretch of Metropolitan France. In the '60s, Jean Castel, proprietor of a famous Parisian disco, bought the islands, hoping to turn Cavallo into a destination for his elite clientele. They started coming on boats and private planes that were met by donkey carts that brought Louis Vuitton luggage to houses designed to fit in with the island's dense maquis brush and the granite rocks once quarried for ancient Rome's statues.

"To be sophisticated and simple is the great challenge," says Petula Clark. "It was really quite primitive." And difficult. Castel brought electricity, and fresh drinking water flowed from Corsica—at least, it did when Castel's experiment wasn't being sabotaged by Corsican nationalists. The hotel began life as a fish market and restaurant, called Les Pêcheurs, where the chef from Castel's disco cooked sumptuous candlelit dinners.

"We lived like gypsies and washed in the sea," Clark says. "It was paradise on earth."

It is still that, despite what happened next. Castel sold the island to the predecessor of BNP Paribas, the French bank. It had its first moment of infamy in 1978, when Victor Emmanuel, pretender to the Italian throne,



Birgit, with headlines about the slaying, in 1979

shot and killed a young German man named Dirk Hamer while he was in Cavallo. (The shooting was ultimately judged an accident.) In the '80s, when the other Lavezzi islands and their waters were designated a natural park and taken over by Bonifacio, development rights to Cavallo were sold to an Italian company. It turned the restaurant into today's hotel and the primitive port next to it into a sophisticated marina village with hundreds of moorings, apartments, a yacht club, a small café and a grocery store.

Then Cavallo's dark decade began. Organized crime infiltrated the development company. Its head would later be convicted of money laundering, and reports surfaced that the Mafia had used the island's airstrip to ship drugs. The Corsican nationalists continued to wreak havoc, too; in January 1990, a violent faction bombed the island for the first, but not the last, time. Still, wealthy Italians—among them was future prime minister Silvio Berlusconi—came to Cavallo, big yachts plied its clear waters, architect-designed villas rose and an expanded Hôtel des Pêcheurs (there was no spa yet) opened in 1992. But inevitably, official investigations led to a dip in real estate values, the bankruptcy of the company and the sale of its land, dotted with the empty shells of villas and apartments.

Only then did the hotel's manager (an Italian who had come to Cavallo via French St. Martin) and some of the families who owned homes on the island make peace with the Corsicans. The marina was sold to a cooperative of shareholders. The Italian engineering company that had built and managed the hotel took ownership. And Cavallo finally became what Jean Castel dreamed of: an oasis for international cognoscenti. Berlusconi doesn't come anymore, but Emmanuel still owns a home. In our week there, however, no one would tell us where it was. Even when discovered, Cavallo keeps secrets. ■

The Hôtel & Spa des Pêcheurs is located at Cavallo, Bonifacio, Corse-du-Sud. Rooms start at \$370. To book or for more information, call 33-4/95-70-36-39 or go to hoteldespecheurs.com.