

ITALY

Giglio: the secret Italian island

Italy has dropped its quarantine rules for Britons, so try this Tuscan isle with its low-key charm that's pulling in a celebrity crowd



Torre del Campese, Giglio, Tuscany

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The Italian island of Giglio will for ever be known as the place where Captain Schettino steered the Costa Concordia on to a rock while flirting with a Moldovan dancer, killing 32 people and landing himself a 16-year

prison sentence. Today there are no cruise ships near by — they are mostly parked up in Civitavecchia. Instead the island is emerging as one of the most popular destinations to kick back and unwind in Tuscany. Even Harry Styles has been spotted here.

Giglio is one of seven islands that make up the Tuscan archipelago. It is the easiest to reach, lying eight miles west of the mainland, a one-hour ferry ride from Porto Santo Stefano, itself an easy 90-minute drive from Rome's Fiumicino airport.

Food writers such as Emiko Davies and Matthew Fort rave about Giglio's cuisine, which includes *panficato*, a dense figgy bread, and *tonnina*, thin slices of tuna. Wine lovers whisper in reverential tones about the Altura vineyard, where Francesco Carfagna makes natural wines on a precipitous cliff-face. On a hilltop just below, an old lighthouse has recently been bought by the Italian fashion designer Gherardo Felloni, who has turned it into a holiday home. I wondered if Giglio was a secret no longer. Living in Florence it is easy to hop in the car and take a look, so I did.



Spiaggia delle Cannelle, Giglio

The first thing that strikes you is how green Giglio is. Only 5 per cent of the island has been developed; the rest is a wilderness of

fig trees, ilex, eucalyptus and Corsican pines. It is a landscape of drama, rising steeply up out of the wine-dark sea, so that as soon as you leave the port, magnificent views open up on all sides. The pleasures of Giglio begin as soon as you board the hourly ferry, an old-fashioned chugger that they seem to be constantly painting, like the Forth Bridge. As it puffs into Giglio's port I admire the jaunty jumble of pastel-coloured townhouses, not one of which is remarkable on its own, but seen together provide the perfect backdrop to a chaotic Italian waterside scene. The port sits halfway down the eastern coast, and is the biggest and most vibrant of the island's three settlements, the others being Castello, a fortified town on the mountain, and Campese, a small seaside resort on the west coast.



My first stop is Hotel La Guardia, at the far end of the harbour. This became the focal point of all activity relating to the Costa Concordia in the aftermath of the accident, explains Flaminia Perez del Castillo, its energetic new owner. The hotel was built in 1956, when Giglio was becoming popular with glamorous Romans and escapees from the capital's booming film studios. A few grand families bought holiday homes here, including the Gaetani Lovatellis, who would invite Audrey Hepburn to stay. She is said to have loved Giglio's simple charms and went on energetic hikes up the mountain. Some waiters in the port still recall seeing her in their restaurant. But Giglio was never glitzy: it was low-key and unspoilt, and that's how it has stayed.

When it opened Hotel La Guardia was called Demo's, named after the father of the man who built it, a Gigliese born in America, where his family had made their fortune. It is the biggest building in the port and enjoys a prime position on the water, with a large restaurant terrace. "When it opened it had a certain prestige, I've been told," Perez del Castillo says.



A terrace at La Guardia, Giglio

"There were smart people, there was a whole world of actors and stars who came here to pursue *la dolce vita*. There was even a TV competition hosted here, and Adriano Celentano [Italy's Elvis Presley] came here when he was young and sang *24 Mila Baci* from the window. So it had this very glamorous reputation." As Giglio's glory days faded, though, Demo's settled down to being a fairly standard three-star hotel for modest Italian holidaymakers. By the time of the Costa Concordia, which crashed within view of the dining room, Demo's was distinctly tired. The biggest legacy of that night was the ship's physical presence; it was marooned directly in front of the port. Had it grounded any further forward it could have cut off the island, since Giglio only has one port through which goods arrive. Once the mammoth task of raising the cruise ship began, Demo's was turned into the operations headquarters and its bedrooms used to house engineers working on the salvage operation.



Righting the ship took two-and-a-half years, and was one of the most complicated operations in maritime history. After the Costa Concordia was finally towed back to its home port of Genoa in 2014, Demo's was abandoned, before being put up for auction in 2017. It was just the opportunity that Perez del Castillo and her husband had been looking for. They had fallen in love with Giglio 20 years before, when as high-flying Roman professionals they would escape here to unwind, eventually buying a holiday home.



When they heard of the auction, they decided to embark on a complete change of lifestyle, selling their two advertising agencies and home to put all their money into the hotel. The first year was entirely taken up with bureaucracy surrounding the purchase. The refurbishment took a further year, and La

Guardia opened in June 2019 for a short season. It is the first new hotel on the island in decades.

The decor is fresh and white, with an emphasis on simplicity. Luxury touches include Ortigia soaps in the bathrooms, while the restaurant menu is an ambitious exploration of island cuisine, not only Italian but also Greek and Spanish, with wines from Santorini and Ibiza. “This hotel is important for Giglio’s economy,” Perez del Castillo says. “The majority of people who used to come to Giglio would come for the day, but they wouldn’t really stay. What we wanted was to create somewhere where they might stay a bit longer.”

The only other place on Giglio that attracts adventurous travellers is Pardini’s Hermitage, a cliff-side retreat on the southeast of the island that has attained mythical status since opening in 1953. Part of its allure is that you can arrive only by boat, and guests are required to stay a minimum of two nights. I manage to arrange a visit for lunch (which is not normally allowed) and find a land of winding paths leading up to a small white villa surrounded by Roman pine trees, where guests are still finishing breakfast at 11am.



Pardini's Hermitage, Giglio

The hotel is run by three generations of a family who keep goats, donkeys and pigs, and whose books and musical

instruments are shared with guests.

Edoardo is the great-grandson of the original owner, Frediano Pardini, and grandson of the present owners, Ghigo Pardini and his wife, Barbara, who still run it. A bell at 1.30pm summons residents to a terrace where Edoardo serves a lunch of octopus, potatoes and homemade pizza prepared by Barbara, who I'm told one never sees. I drop into conversation with two French ladies, one of whom has been coming every year for 17 years. "Don't tell anyone about it!" she begs.

Back in the real world I resolve to find the best public beach. Most Italian beaches have a small *spiaggia libera*, which is free for anyone to enjoy, while the rest have sunbeds and parasols for which you pay about £20 for the day. After exhaustive research I can tell you that the best option is Spiaggia delle Cannelle, being wide and sandy and shallow, with green-blue water to swim in and a decent restaurant (Cannelle on the Beach), which serves tuna salads and bowls of homemade tomato pasta. Best of all it's easily reached by foot from the port. A bit further, and accessible only by footpath, is Caldane, a smaller and more private beach, but popular with those in the know.

You can cross off Giglio's sites in a day, partly because the single road doesn't reach much of the island. I vow to come back in the autumn to explore the many hiking trails. Campese is a typical middle-class beach resort, though for centuries it was a mining town, exploited for pyrite and ochre in the 1760s, and more recently for manganese. Activity peaked in the 1950s and the mine closed in 1962. Today the only reminder of those days is a metal tower in the bay, the sole surviving part of a pulley system that delivered the manganese to waiting ships.

Strangely for an island, some of the best restaurants are inland, high up in the town of Castello. From here you can see most of the other islands of the archipelago: Elba, Capraia and Pianosa, which until the 1990s hosted a high-security prison for mafia

members — and, most dramatic of all, the near-deserted crag of Montecristo (population: two), with Corsica beyond.

The best restaurant in town is Da Maria, but it's closed for lunch when I visit, so I take a chance on Il Trione di Meino on the main piazza. Giglio's most famous fish dishes are all here, so I try each one: fillets of mullet gently pickled with cider vinegar and apple; stomach of tunny (or tunny's tummy) with onions and tomatoes; stuffed swordfish rolls and *palamita*, a delicate white fish fillet that melts in the mouth, served with courgettes. And all of that was just for starters.

By the time I roll back down the hill to leave I am beginning to see why everyone seems to be talking about Giglio. Before I depart I have to nip into Da Nilo's ice-cream parlour down a tiny alleyway off the main drag. Perez del Castillo says it's the best in town, and as I board the ferry back home, a cornetto of peach and mint dripping down over a scoop of ricotta and orange, I am happy to report that he's right.

Matthew Bell was a guest of La Guardia. B&B doubles from £214 (laguardiahotel.it). Fly to Rome and take the ferry from Porto Santo Stefano



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