

If you've ever been to Italy, then you're probably familiar with the concept of passeggiata; Italian for 'taking a stroll while watching the world go by'. And if ever there was a place to indulge in the pleasures of this pastime, Tuscany is it. Just the word Tuscany is enough to evoke a sense of languorous well-being, all at once conjuring up images of lush hills, vibrant orange groves, endless wine and olives. But one thing it probably doesn't make you think of is beaches, which is strange as the region famed amongst other things for being the birthplace of the Italian Renaissance, boasts over 400 miles of stunning coastline. This coastal area of Southern Tuscany is called The Maremma, stretching from the town of Cecina south to the border with Lazio. Its northern section is known as Maremma di Mare- the seaside Maremma- and is in the province of Livorno, where you can find the beautiful Gulf of Baratti; while the southern part, known as Maremma di terra, beginning just south of Piombino, includes not only some spectacular pieces of coastline, but also large swathes of wild and untouched terra incognita.

Looking out across these green coastal plains, it's hard to believe that just a few hundred years ago the Maremma was considered a dreaded and godforsaken place by the aristocrats and merchants of Siena and Florence: malaria ridden, swampy and good for nothing apart from eel farming. It was here that the tragic >>

The historic town
of Porto Ercole.

POLO IN PARADISE

*Perfect beaches, dramatic landscapes
and a polo club with a view.
Welcome to Monte Argentario.*

WORDS *Bita Taghavi*

heroine, Pia de'Tolomei met her death in the 13th century, exiled to the Castel di Pietra by her unfaithful husband who accused her of infidelity. Meeting Pia in purgatory, Dante immortalizes her legend in The Divine Comedy, where she tells the poet 'Siena made me, the Maremma unmade me', dealing the area a crushing blow from which it would take centuries to recover. Beginning under the Medici (and continuing under popes, Savoy kings and Mussolini), the lengthy process of land drainage eradicated the harsh malaria plagued existence that the Maremma had known since the Middle Ages; a time characterised infamously in the well known folksong of the region, 'Maremma Amara' or 'Bitter Maremma', which eloquently tells of the impoverished life to be had in Maremma not so long ago, where daily hardships, suffering and death from malaria were common place in a 'terra infida', 'treacherous land of bandits'. Now of course the air is sweet, there's not a bandit in sight and the charms of the Maremma are too many to count, but perhaps none more enchanting than the ruggedly wild and rocky peninsula, Monte Argentario.

Once an island off the coast of Tuscany, Monte Argentario is now connected to the mainland by three thin isthmuses. Two 'tombolli' or sandy strips: Tombollo della Feniglia and Tombollo della Giannella which formed naturally over 4000 years ago and the Orbotello lagoon dam, which was constructed in 1840. The lagoon is a protected wildlife area, lying on one of the most important migratory routes and providing one of the main wintering sites for many birds that



nest in Europe. Its serene tranquillity provides an intriguing contrast against the high, jagged Monte Argentario coast and for bird lovers there's a veritable feast for the eyes, including pink flamingos, mallard, black winged stilts and kingfishers. Orbetello itself is a lively town, located at the tip of the finger of land that juts out into the lagoon, where you can sample the local eels in one of the many trattorias and absorb some of its inimitable Andalusian charm; a pleasant remnant of the two centuries it spent under Spanish rule. Tombollo della Feniglia is a nature reserve, which has a healthy

population of roe deer and is out of bounds to all except walkers and cyclists. The famous beach here is what most beaches can only dream of being: with fine white sand, rich Mediterranean pines (providing welcome shade) and a gently shelving beach which warms the sea, Feniglia feels like a little piece of paradise. The beach on Tombollo della Gianella in the north of the peninsula is certainly the more crowded and action packed spot with an array of water sports to suit all tastes, from a bit of gentle snorkelling to sea kayaking and wind-surfing. Costa d' Argentario is a treasure trove of gulfs, capes, islets and spectacular bays to explore and discover, studded with gems like Cala Piccola; a secluded rocky cove with



a small pebble beach and the most translucent turquoise water you'll find on Italy's Western shore.

On Argentario itself, the two main towns of Porto Ercole and Porto Santo Stefano, whilst being equally rich in natural beauty and historical culture, have a remarkably different feel, though both fill up with the Prada clad smart set in July and August.

Santo Stefano has been a fishing village for centuries and is still very much a bustling working port. Although much of it was bombed during the war, cleverly a lot of the old stone was used for rebuilding, making its newness almost entirely inconspicuous. Here oily, battered trawlers bob in the water next to the pristine craft of the international yacht glitterati and fishermen rub shoulders with Gucci men. Walking along the front you'll find incredible fish markets packed with the freshest seafood imaginable as well as a profusion of restaurants and fancy

bars. Porto Ercole, on the southern side of the promontory, has less grime and more glamour. Probably founded by the Phoenicians and after inhabited by the Etruscans and the Romans, the town received its current name from this latter civilization who named it after Heracles, the mythological hero, son of Zeus and Alcmena. It was here in Porto Ercole that the ill-fated genius Michaelangelo Merisi, better known as 'Caravaggio' died in 1610 of malaria. High up on the hillside of this port, the fortresses of La Rocca, Filippo, Santa Carolina and Stella, dominate over this small, picturesque harbour and are a strong reminder of a more unsettled time during the 16th century when the town was controlled by the Spanish. Of these, the massive and awesome Fort Filippo is not to be missed. Although

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LEFT The Coppa Italia F.I.S.E.



Porto Ercole is now associated with the glamour of the fashionable jet set, the old town has preserved its ancient historic architecture, with its snaking labyrinth of narrow winding streets and tiny coloured houses. Unfortunately, modern sensibilities have seen the end of one of the town's feast day traditions, the 'flight of the goat', an innocent festivity which involved a harness, a pulley, a long cord stretching from beach to castle and, of course, a goat.

Perfectly placed between the tombolli of Gianella and Feniglia on Monte Argentario is where you'll find the eponymous polo club. Famed for its idyllic setting and for being the epicentre of Italian polo, Argentario Polo Club was founded in 1987; the vision of a group of players from Rome, Milan and South America who had the dream of playing polo in this lush green land by the coast. This beautiful club is widely recognised as one of the best in Europe and it's easy to see why: the setting is classic Maremma Toscana and the view from >>

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LEFT La Mimosa Green Season are crowned winners at the 2010 Italian Championships BOTTOM The 2010 Pellicano Ladies Cup in action.

the pristine playing fields and stables of the turquoise Tyrrhenian sea is breathtaking. In the high heat of the summer, you'll find a much needed cold drink in the clubhouse- set amidst the dark green cypress trees flanking the fields- which is friendly and Maremma to the core with its ochre daubed walls and wooden beams.

It's here at the Argentario that some of the best Italian polo matches have been played and many of the world's greatest players have graced the fields, including Gonzalo and Horacito Heguy, Alejandro (Piki) and David Sterling amongst a host of others. During its twenty two years of existence, the achievements of this unassuming club have been both numerous and inspiring. Bolstering the international rise and success of women's polo, the Ladies Polo Cup (the first women's polo tournament to be held in Italy) was held here in 2009. It's clear to see that supporting the growth of the women's game both at home and internationally is paramount at Argentario and something the club is passionate about, making The Ladies Tournament one of the most significant events of the season. Last year, the second edition was sponsored by the local and beautiful Il Pellicano hotel, making it The Pellicano Ladies Cup, with La Mimosa Green Season storming their way to victory, after winning every single match they played. It was a doubly triumphant weekend for the team captain Stefania

Annunziata who also won the coveted title of Italian Champions 2010. The great success and acclaim the Ladies Cup achieved in its first year paved the way for the second edition to enter the most famous ladies tournament in the world, the Women's Championship Tournament. Apart from being the birthplace of women's tournaments in Italy, Argentario can boast other Italian and European records: it was the first club in Italy to organize a junior tournament (10-15 year olds) and every year the Coppa Italia F.I.S.E and the Summer Cup see a record number of Italian teams enrolling, second only to Sotogrande.

The high level tournaments at the Argentario are kicked off each season with the Silver Cup at the end of May,

but it's in July and August that the club really comes alive with a feast of sporting and social events. 2011 will see the third Ladies Cup from the 21st to 24th of July, as well as the International Tournament, the renowned Coppa Italia F.I.S.E and the Summer Cup. The season ends on a high at the end of September with the Monte Argentario Gold Cup, an exhilarating six day high goal tournament (12-15hp). There's something truly magical about the Argentario Polo Club; the speed and energy of a polo match set against such perfect tranquillity makes for an unforgettable experience. And watching a game, sipping wine with the sun setting in a pinkish sky, I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be. /après



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WHERE TO STAY

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Isola Rossa's stunning villa La Thailandia.

