

Island breaks

although unlike Napoleon, you may not want to leave the abundance of churches and chapels



little village of Capoliveri

staircase ripping a grandchild

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favourable impressions, the latter having devoted much of his 10-month exile to reorganising agriculture, transport and trade in his pocket kingdom.

His residence in the Villa dei Mulini has been preserved for those interested in musty mementoes of imperial adventures, but personally I found the sea views from the gardens more inspiring. Above the villa there is a less martial symbol

of past glories, a granite lighthouse.

One fiercely independent village that turned its back on *l'Empereur*, and every other foreign despot and swashbuckler that happened along, is Capoliveri, perched high above the sea in the east of the island. Its ancient piazzas and narrow streets have since fallen to the crafts and cappuccino brigade, who have brought a lively mix of art and pavement cafes to a

village that looks like a film set for *Romeo and Juliet*. There are invariably a few star-crossed lovers strolling hand in hand, along with cyclists on wobbly legs after the long climb up, old ladies hanging washing out of windows, and little boys in Juventus football shirts practising for the day they play for Italy.

It was in a small beach resort down a switchback road from Capoliveri that we encountered modern Italy in all its brash, gaudy, stylish élan, at an assembly of the 7th annual Elba international motor scooter rally. A swarm of classic, chrome-accessorised Vespas and Lambrettas in every conceivable colour was spilling out of a car park in a noisy cavalcade of rasping engines and voices enveloped in a cloud of fumes. We watched them snarling up the steep, winding road like a procession of asthmatic lawn mowers, and gave thanks that we were not driving near them.

There are no mad drivers on the way from the village of Marciana to Madonna del Monte, a sanctuary dating from the 13th century, because it is a footpath rising through a nature reserve. This is the way to see Elba — at a leisurely pace through forests, with vistas of sea and mountains all around, and the sun on your back.

In the church there is an impromptu shrine, a collection of crucifixes, charms, bracelets and a child's plastic sandal fixed to a wall with scrawled pleas for divine protection. Take away the family snaps among them, and it could be a scene from the Middle Ages.

Outside, we followed another path for a few yards, found a grassy spot among boulders with sweeping views of the coast, and settled down to a picnic of fresh prosciutto and local cheese sandwiches. The air was warm and still, suffused with the buzzing of insects and the sound of a church bell tolling far below. It was as if we had stepped back in time, and the builders of Madonna del Monte were taking a day off.

Another image of the past is Folgore, a wooden sailing ship that brought the first car to Elba in 1945. Refurbished

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as a gaff-rigged ketch, she is available for sailing and diving trips for up to nine passengers, who see Elba as it first appeared to generations of seafarers.

With her oak hull and decks of teak, this old sea ketch is a joy to sail around rocky headlands, and quiet coves where three people constitute a crowd. Her captain, Carlo Cavallo, is unquestionably the man for the job. "I love the sea, the wind, and freedom," he says. "This is my life." Lucky man.

As a weekend sailor, I am allowed to take the helm when the wind freshens on our way home, and Folgore comes alive and rides the waves like a thoroughbred.

I imagine we have left the noise and bustle of the 21st century far behind.

Wrong. We have attracted the attention of a Tornado of the Italian Air Force, which roars low off our starboard and wiggles its wings in salute. It was an incident that could have come from a Le Carré novel. Perhaps one day it will.

Gavin Bell



Elba basics

How to get there Ryanair (0871 246 0000, www.ryanair.com) flies to Pisa from Stansted. ElbaFly (www.elbafly.it) flies from Pisa to Elba from £86 return. Pisa is about 75 minutes' drive from a ferry port at Piombino, where Moby Lines and Toremar (www.moby.it, www.toremar.it) have apex return fares for the 50-minute crossing to Elba from £18.60 for car and driver.

Getting around A useful site for car hire on Elba and other information is www.apelba.it.

Where to stay La Chiusa (0039 0565 933046, www.tenutalachusita.it) has two- and four-bed apartments: £100 to £200 per week from September.

Sailing Day sails including lunch and scuba diving on Folgore from £40 per person (0039 338 8366384, www.gente-di-mare.it).

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