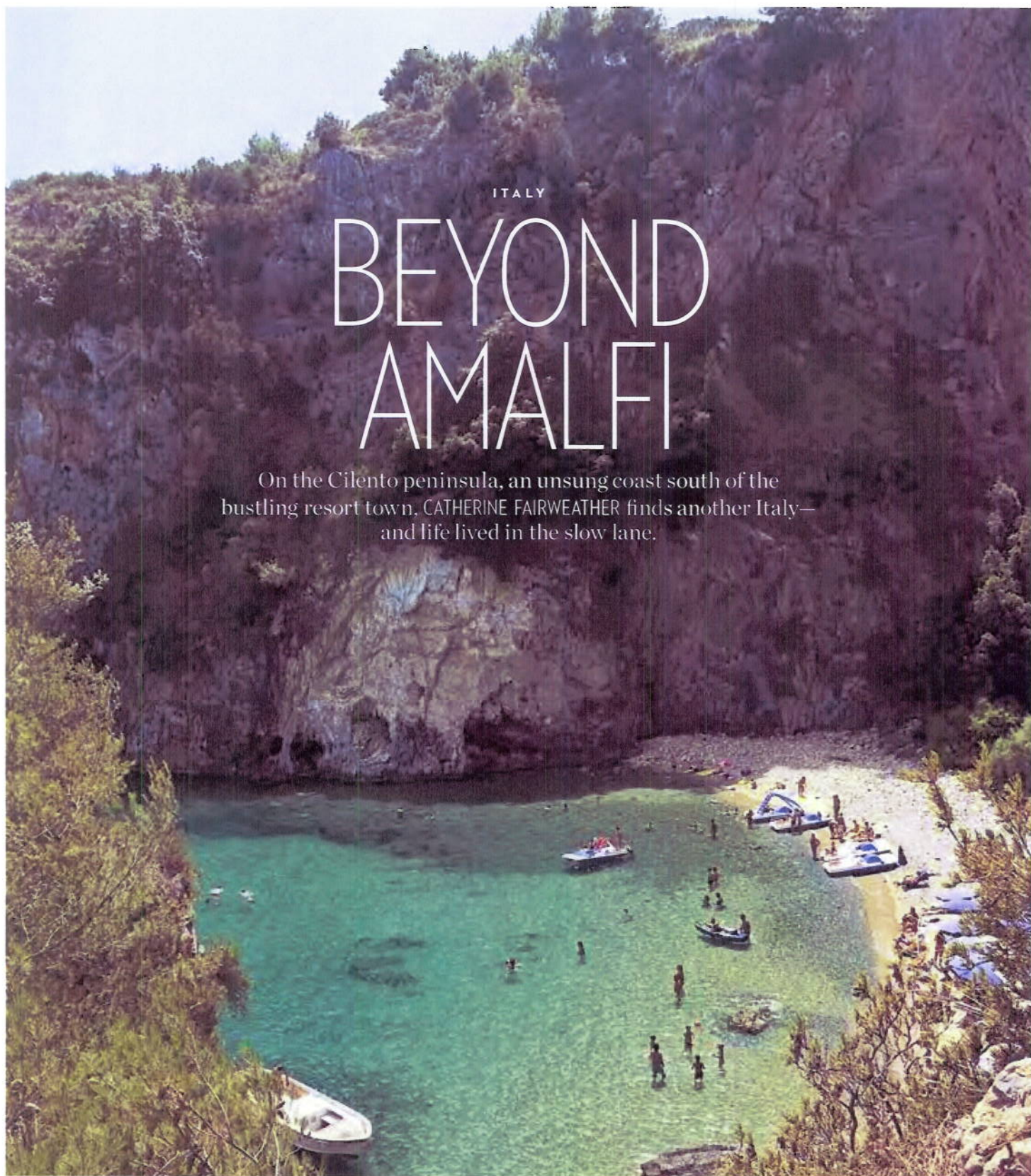


ITALY

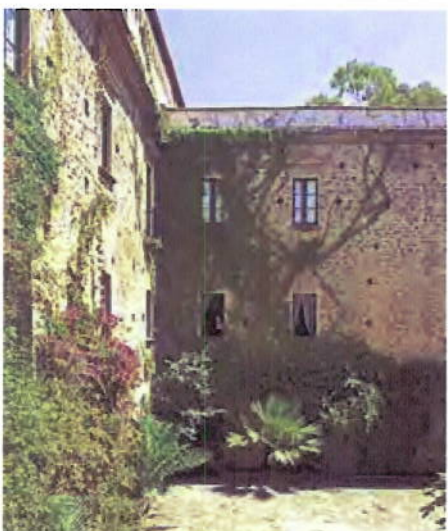
BEYOND
AMALFI

On the Cilento peninsula, an unsung coast south of the bustling resort town, CATHERINE FAIRWEATHER finds another Italy—and life lived in the slow lane.



A beach off Cape Palinuro, near Pisciotta, reachable only by boat

The Mediterranean



Clockwise from top left: The piazza at Pisciotta; pizza from Ristorante K; Palazzo Belmonte's Prince Angelo; sunset on Santa Maria di Castellabate; Palazzo Belmonte; seafood pasta at Ristorante da Carmine.

So delightfully familiar is the iconography of southern Italy, with its kitsch little Madonna shrines, lemons the size of grapefruits, carabinieri and Fiat *cinquecento*, I had forgotten this country's capacity to surprise. The Cilento peninsula then, some 70 miles south of Naples, came as a total revelation. One of the last great unsung shorelines of Italy, it has the same vertical drama of the Amalfi Coast, but with fewer crowds, cleaner seas and better beaches, cordoned off by 13th-century watchtowers built against the threat of a piratical raid.

For the more adventurous traveler, the Cilento coast is a taste of life lived in the slow lane, the real Italy. Here the allure of the Mezzogiorno hinges on simple pleasures: an unhurried café culture; an evening stroll, when there is a rush on Nutella-flavored ice cream, and the village youth congregate on the piazza to kick around a ball.

The tourist boom that locals were predicting is still a far-off dream. There are none of the glamorous destination hotels that define the Amalfi Coast (see "Meanwhile, Back in Amalfi") with attendant luxuries of air-conditioning, infinity pools, spas and Michelin stars.

What one finds, instead, is the unpretentious small-town charm of owner-run establishments where a dollar goes further and one is never too far from the old-fashioned charms of a lido and beach. And this year, on both ends of the peninsula, available for



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Just another day at the beach in Santa Maria di Castellabate

the first time, are two exclusive private countryside rentals, Villa Sirena and Locanda San Fantino, opening up areas that previously lay beyond our reach.

SANTA MARIA DI CASTELLABATE AND ITS ENVIRONS

Villa Sirena, 12 miles or so from the classical ruins of Paestum, forms part of the estate of the charismatic Prince Angelo, whose ancestral home, the 17th-century **Palazzo Belmonte**, is a much-loved 51-room hotel (rooms, from \$230; Via Flavio Gioia 25, Santa Maria di Castellabate; 39-0974/960-211; palazzobelmonte.com). The 1950s time-warp seaside charm of Santa Maria di Castellabate has drawn me for the past 20 years, with the Citronella Suite in the palazzo's Edoardo's House a favorite for its spacious rooms. The walled estate sheltered behind umbrella pines and palms is so secluded that Joe Biden celebrated his wife's birthday here last year. Yet for all its privacy, there is still a sense of village life going on beyond the palace. At the social epicenter is the trattoria **PerBacco** (Via Andrea Guglielmini 19, Santa

Maria di Castellabate; 39-0974/961-832)—don't miss the linguine with squid and fava beans—and its adjoining beach, where disco beats and the purr of Vespas are part of the weekend buzz.

As an alternative, **Villa Sirena** (from \$5,540 a week for up to 14 people; book through Palazzo Belmonte, 39-0974/960-211; palazzobelmonte.com), on nearby Punta Licosa, will fit the bill. These former hunting grounds, stewarded by the Belmonte family since the 16th century, are a UNESCO-protected nature reserve. Camouflaged by a forest of pines and an avenue of carobs, the villa itself is a spacious, traditional shuttered building, conservatively decorated, with three bedrooms on the upper levels and four below, accessed by an external staircase. Cable TV and WiFi provide a window to the outside world, but that is hardly the point of this cocoon with an almost tangible sense of peace broken only by the sawing of cicadas, the liquid call of a nightingale or the rasp of the waves on the rocky shore.

It's an area soaked in myth and history: The seawater pool is in the lee of a ruined

Roman tower. Just offshore for divers are the remains of a submerged Roman settlement, with more watery explorations possible from the villa's private launch. The rocky beach overlooks an island lighthouse it's possible to swim to. Alternatively, one can stroll the two-and-a-half-mile mule tracks to the adjoining fishing villages of Ogliastro Marina and San Marco di Castellabate for simple but memorable pasta dishes at **Ristorante da Carmine** (Via Provinciale 37, Ogliastro Marina; 39-0974/963-023) or the more chichi **Il Cefalo** (Via Mons. Passaro, Ogliastro Marina; 39-0974/963-019; ilcefalo.it) and **Ristorante K** (Piazza G. Comunale, San Marco di Castellabate; 39-0974/966-394; ristorantekcilento.com), which serves excellent fish.

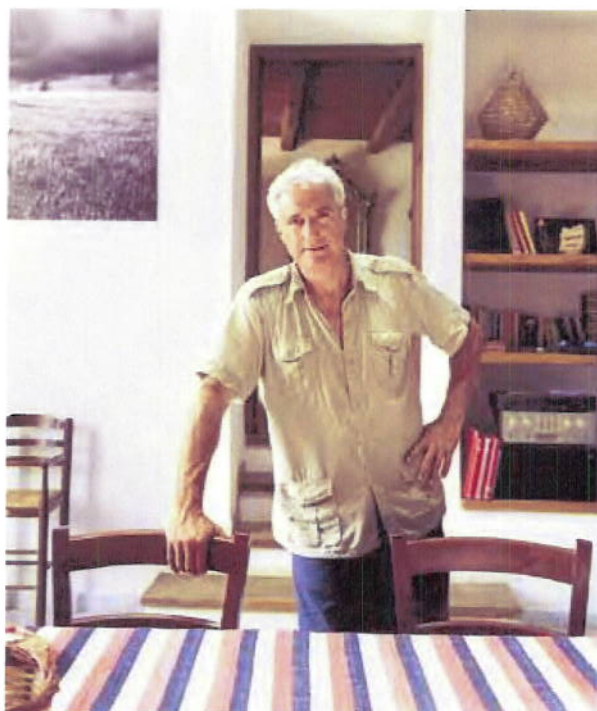
While in the area, it's wise to pick up mellow **Punta Licosa olive oil** (puntalicosaeate.com) produced from the trees grown at Palazzo Belmonte. For mozzarella, there's the new **Il Granato** (S.S. 18 km. 96 500 Spinazzo, Capaccio Paestum; 39-0828/722-712; caseificioilgranato.it) or the more atmospheric 18th-century surroundings of **Tenuta Vannulo** (Via G. Galilei 10, Capaccio Scalo; 39-0828/727-894; vannulo.it). **CONTINUED »**

The Mediterranean

PISCIOTTA

Outside Pisciotta, a lovely limestone medieval hill town strangely bypassed by guidebooks, Vito Puglia, former vice president of Italy's eco-conscious Slow Food movement, offers us a lingering lunch beneath the vines of his rustic but romantic **Enoteca-Osteria Perbacco** (Contrada Marina Campagna 5; 39-0974/973-889). Specialties like *fiori di zucca con ricotta e alici* (zucchini blossoms with ricotta and salted anchovies), plus sea views and Puglia's collection of music, literature and Italian wines, make this a complete experience. In Pisciotta itself, the **Marulivo Hotel** (suites, from \$160; Via Castello; 39-0974/973-792; marulivohotel.it), a converted monastery, is a series of vertiginous verandas with rooms attached, high above cobbled streets that remain off-limits to cars. We make the pilgrimage on foot down to **Ristorante Angiolina** (Via Passariello 2; 39-0974/973-188) in Marina di Pisciotta, where *nonna* Angiolina is still stirring the pot at 90 years old, serving the best fish soup this side of Naples.

Ten minutes away, the best swimming is around the bay of Cape Palinuro. The five



Locanda San Fantino owner Sebastiano Petrilli

farmhouse available for rent or as a B&B, is the first really decent place to stay in this, the loveliest corner of the peninsula. Returning to his ancestral roots, landowner Sebastiano Petrilli has given up the London social whirl for weeding and exchanged Champagne for the signature Miraculous Soup (made of local herbs and medicinal plants) he brews.

the estate. Indeed, everything bar the vodka, says Petrilli, is sourced from his land and neighborhood.

And if the simplicity of the interiors inspires, one can even buy, with Petrilli's help, the terracotta tile flooring from nearby Camerota. **Saverio Scanniello** (Via Ciardelle snc, Massicelle; 39-0974/953-772) produces the authentic olive-wood salad bowls that Petrilli uses—great gifts to bring back home.

Olives, indeed, define the region. The Petrilli family fortune was made cultivating them for lamp oil in the days before electricity. Today, on this wild 12-mile coastal stretch, Petrilli is restoring the old stone agricultural buildings for use as picnic arbors or yoga platforms, where one really gets the full impact of a landscape in which rock, sea and sky collide.

Below one's feet, empty beaches sparkle, accessible only by boat. Six dollars buys a shuttle out of Scario to the little coves. At **La Tana del Lupo** (39-339/507-5564), Saverio the shepherd serves simple country grills and salads. There is no shortage of honest pizzerias like **Lo Scoglio** (39-0974/986-747) and **Ristorante Pizzeria da**

HERE THE ALLURE OF THE MEZZOGIORNO HINGES ON SIMPLE PLEASURES: AN UNHURRIED CAFE CULTURE, A GENTLE EVENING STROLL.

miles of sandy beach peter out on the promontory, where the Arco Naturale leads into a concertina of coves with grottoes that reflect the sea's every shade of green and blue. For a retro beach experience, \$12 will buy parking, two sun beds and umbrellas at **Spiaggia da Peppe** (39-347/856-5596), between Palinuro and Camerota.

SCARIO AND BEYOND

At the southerly end of the Cilento, high above the elegant fishing port of Scario, **Locanda San Fantino** (8 rooms, from \$230; Via San Fantino 8; 39-0974/983-442; sanfantino.com), a rustic

Guests can join his hunting-gathering (and cooking) courses on the trail of wild asparagus, mushrooms, walnuts and saffron or seek out the 70 types of wild orchids on nearby Mount Cervati. The views from here and from the Locanda San Fantino are dizzying: On clear days one can see the 72-foot statue of Christ in Maratea across the bay. Giant hammocks invite lounging on the many terraces. Inside, the whitewashed farmhouse walls keep out the heat and light, making air-conditioning unnecessary in the bedrooms (the nicest of which are upstairs). The luxuries are simple: rough woven linens and homemade yogurt, wine and jams from

Gigginio Il Pirata (Via Principe Amedeo 27; 39-0974/986-117). The charming **U Zifaro** (Via Lungomare 43, Scario; 39-0974/986-397) serves the best hake, sea bream and lobster, for which this coastline is famous.

In the height of summer, Petrilli will direct guests to the quieter turquoise waters of the Bussento River. A few minutes on the rutted, spine-jarring unpaved stretch of the farmhouse's private drive gives new meaning to "off the beaten track," and Locanda San Fantino, basking in the rearview mirror in a haze of butterflies and dragonflies, is just about as far from the well-traveled Amalfi Coast road as one can go.

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