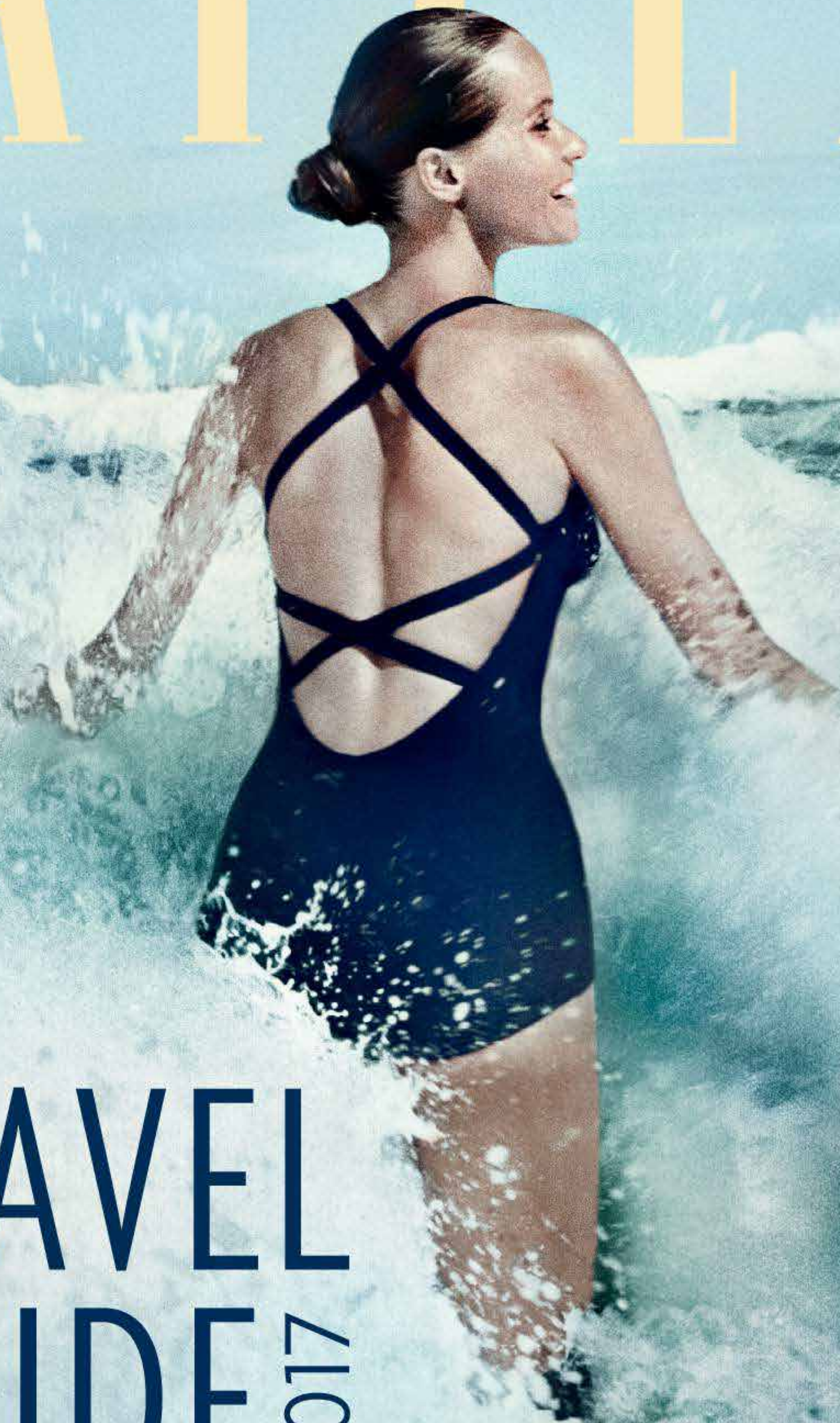


# TATLER®

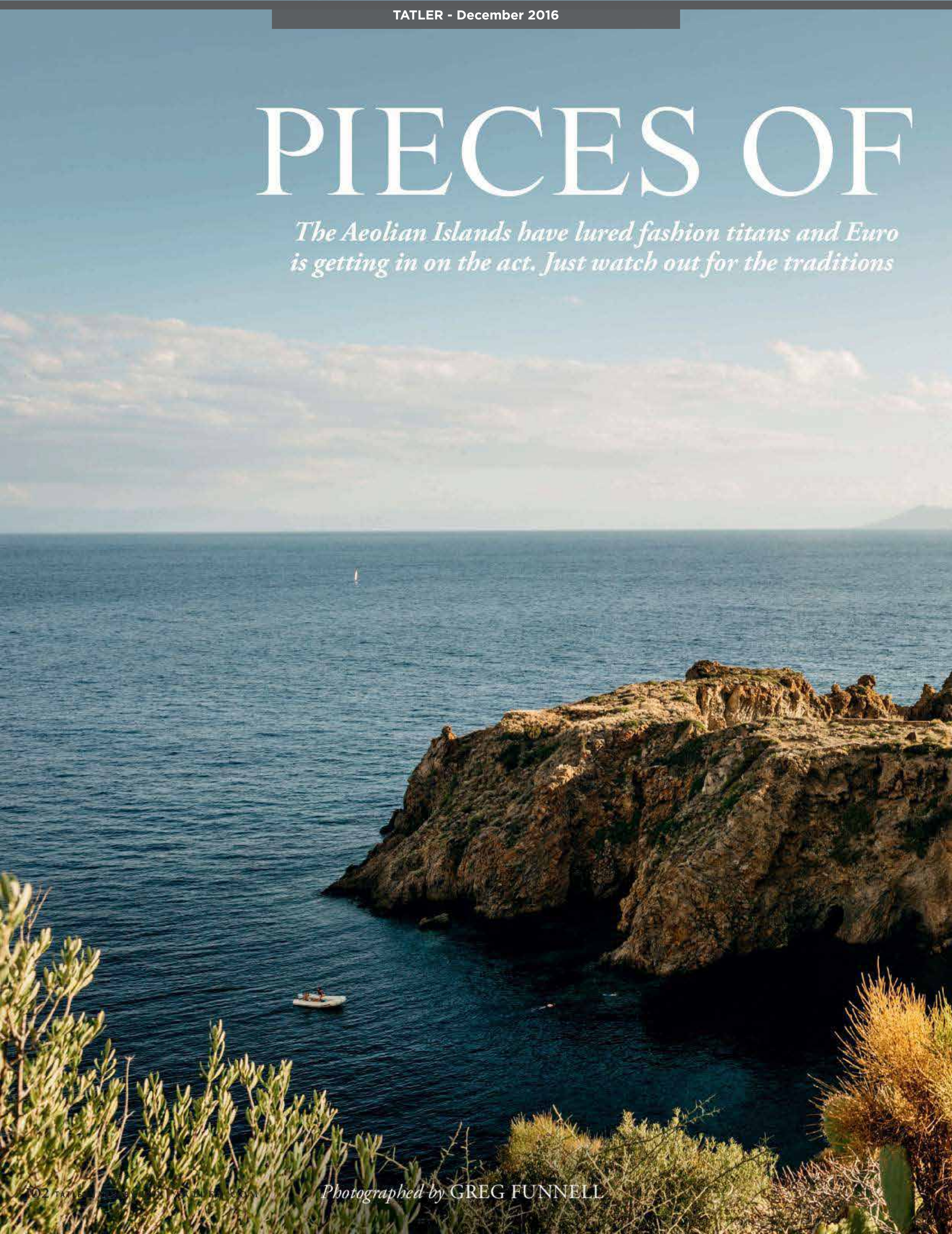


TRAVEL  
GUIDE 2017



# PIECES OF

*The Aeolian Islands have lured fashion titans and Euro is getting in on the act. Just watch out for the traditions*



Photographed by GREG FUNNELL



# HEAVEN

*royals since the Sixties, but now a new wave of Sloanes of those Italian aristos, says Sophia Money-Coutts*



MAIN PICTURE,  
VIEW FROM  
PANAREA.  
INSET, MICHAEL  
VON FREYBERG,  
WITH  
MARGHERITA







**L**ook, the water, it is perfectly turkeys,' says Pierre, my Italian boat captain. We are floating around the Aeolians, a cluster of volcanic islands just off the northeastern tip of Sicily. 'Turkeys?' I frown at him. 'Turkeys, turkeys!' he insists, flapping his hands at the sea beneath us. 'Ohhh, turquoise,' I reply. 'Yes, turkeys. That is what I say,' says Pierre, shaking his head sadly. 'You English.'

You may not have heard much about the Aeolian Islands. For centuries they sat relatively undisturbed in the Tyrrhenian Sea, periodically belching smoke or bits of lava, with just a sprinkling of whitewashed villages between them. But tourism here has been on the up in the past couple of decades as word spread about their wild beauty – 'the Bahamas of the Mediterranean', proclaims one long-term visitor – and in 2000 they were declared a UNESCO World Heritage site. More recently, in 2015, Ben Goldsmith, together with Luca Del Bono, the Sicilian owner of the South Kensington Club, formed a preservation fund to protect the islands and the fish population. Ben, who proposed to his wife, Jemima, on one island, Stromboli, in 2014, calls them 'magical'. The 19th-century French writer Guy de Maupassant called them 'little pieces of heaven which have fallen into the sea'.

There are seven little pieces of heaven. Panarea, the 'party island', is the best-known,

but the others – Vulcano, Lipari, Salina, Stromboli, Alicudi and Filicudi – each have their own merits, as Pierre says with great enthusiasm over the course of several days aboard his 50ft motorboat, the *Barca Jost*.

All the islands are served by brisk, hop-on, hop-off ferries, but this isn't a romantic service. The vessels reek of diesel, and you jostle with Italian mammas and boxes of oranges for space. Better to board your own boat and drift between them, the sound of the Doors drifting from Pierre's Bose speakers. Either just for the day or overnight; his boat sleeps four guests in three cabins.

He had picked me up from Vulcano, a useful meeting point because it's the closest island to the Sicilian ferry terminal of Milazzo. But the trouble with the place is that it stinks. Literally. Thick, yellow, sulphurous clouds smelling of rotten eggs waft from the top of the island. You can wallow in the warm, volcanic mud bath like a hippo (marvellous for rheumatism, they say), but we didn't dally there. Just long enough to have a pistachio ice cream from Ritrovo Remigio – the best gelato in the archipelago, according to Pierre – and buy a branzino fish to cook onboard the *Barca Jost* for dinner.

Twenty years ago, Como-born Pierre Zucchi, 58, was running a successful swimwear company called Domani, stocked in Harrods and Harvey Nichols. But then someone – 'a man who was totally stupid' – made a very good offer for it, so Pierre sold the business and took over the *Barca Jost*. Jost, Pierre explains, was a Dutch pirate, which is fitting because Pierre has an air of Captain Pugwash about him. Vast and bearded, he walks straight through huddles of tourists gathered on the dock of Lipari the following morning, shouting, 'Sorry, sorry, sorry,' while not sounding remotely apologetic. 'Givenchy!' he barks at a surprised woman posing for







FROM FAR LEFT, COUNT RUDOLPH VON FREYBERG'S CITRUS FARM. SUNRISE ON PANAREA. SOPHIA MONEY-COUTTS SWIMMING BESIDE A FORMER PUMICE FACTORY, LIPARI



to the sea and are hemmed in by 2,500 bougainvillea plants, but the major selling point is the view from the terrace – it overlooks the glassy sea, with a lighthouse that flickers across the water in the evening. Salina is also famous for being the island where the 1994 Oscar-winning film *Il Postino* was set. 'I haven't actually seen it,' I admit to Pierre. 'You are really completely ignorant,' he replies.

Panarea is an entirely different kettle of swordfish. It's the smallest of the islands and there are no cars (only golf buggies), but every summer it transforms itself into a mini Ibiza, with rooftop dancing, bottoms bouncing in bikinis and the roar of helicopters overhead shuttling in

European royals (Casiraghis, Monacos) and fashion titans (Kate Moss, Giorgio Armani, Dolce and Gabbana).

Its transformation started when a couple of Italian hippies – artist Paolo Tilche and his girlfriend Myriam Beltrami – opened the Hotel Raya in the Sixties, with simple, white bedrooms. Boho babes flocked there in their tie-dye kaftans. The Raya remains the place to stay, and Myriam, a sprightly 84-year-old, still totters around the dining room at night calling '*Buonasera!*' to her guests.

Other visitors rent the various villas that dot the coastline. Sloanes have got in on the act, and fund manager Al Balfour married Martha Franklin here last May, watched by guests including Lord and Lady Lovat and Raffles partner Jake Parkinson-Smith.

If you're feeling energetic, you can nip over to nearby Stromboli for a march up and down its active volcano (five hours up, four down). The locals seem unbothered about the threat on their doorstep. According to Pierre, 'it has ejaculated only a few times in the last years.'

Which just leaves Alicudi and Filicudi, two of the most remote islands. On Alicudi (population: 80, all of whom apparently hate one another), the air smells of wild fennel and oregano, and there aren't even golf buggies, let alone cars, to get around. Instead there are donkeys. And if you want to simultaneously namedrop and feel good about yourself, consider renting the eco-house

## EVERY SUMMER, PANAREA TURNS INTO A MINI IBIZA

million calories each) in the world, or to Kasbah, a restaurant owned by Luca Del Bono's brother, Alessandro, for pasta with prawns and pistachios. It's also the favourite island of Carlo Carello, the co-founder of South Kensington club Albert's, whose family has a house on the island. Tony and Cherie Blair stayed in it for a holiday in August.

Hotel-wise, there isn't much on offer. Instead, head to Salina, the greenest of the Aeolians, or to Panarea. Salina is quiet and covered with pine and chestnut trees and caper bushes. The two best options here are both family-owned: the Hotel Signum, or a vineyard and hotel called Capofaro. Signum has a Michelin-starred restaurant manned by Martina Caruso, the daughter of the owner, who doles out slivers of raw octopus and caper-flavoured ice cream. Plus there's a proper spa (rare in these parts), with geothermal pools and what looks like a medieval torture rack but is actually a wooden bed of rose salt, used to draw out impurities.

Once you feel like toxing yourself back up again, skip down the road to Capofaro – the hotel is owned by one of Sicily's grandest families, the Tascas – for a few glasses of sweet local Malvasia wine. The vines slope down

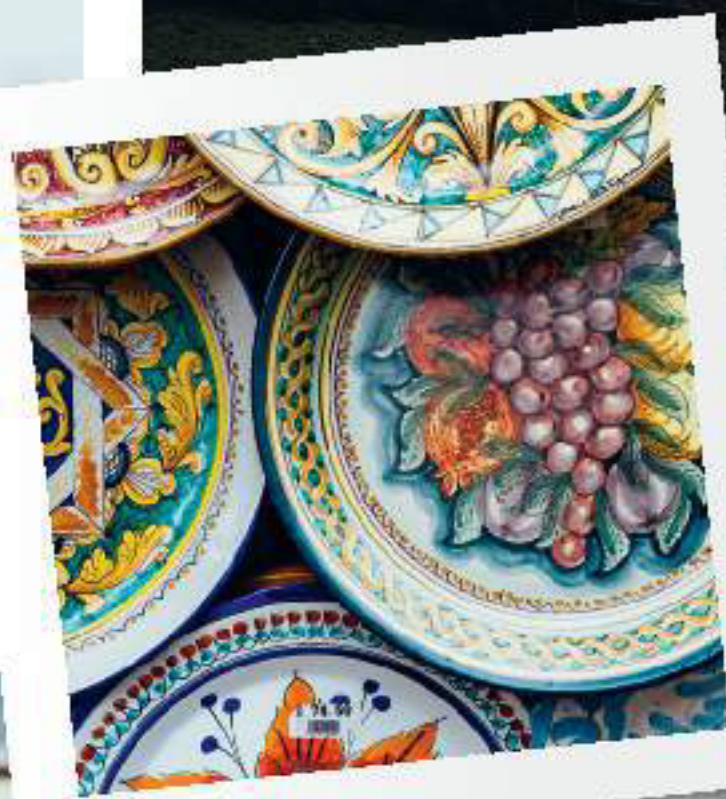


CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT, HOTEL SIGNUM, SALINA. GIORGIO ARMANI. KATE MOSS. THE COAST OF LIPARI

a photograph in cut-off shorts as we climb some steps to the top of Lipari for endless views of the sea and the apricot-coloured church beneath us. 'That is where they bury the dead,' he explains solemnly, pointing at a nearby cemetery. Who needs a jaded tour guide waving an umbrella?

Lipari, the biggest and most populated island, is busy. It's pretty for a day trip and a stop at the Pasticceria d'Ambra bakery to eat what its devotees claim are the best cannoli (biscuit-and-ricotta pastries that contain nine





CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT, PIERRE ZUCCHI, SKIPPER OF THE BARCA JOST. TRADITIONAL LIPARI PLATES; HOTEL CAPOFARO, SALINA. POOLSIDE AT CAPOFARO. LIPARI TOWN



– rainwater showers, solar electricity – on neighbouring Filicudi, recently restored by the granddaughter of the last king of Afghanistan, a jeweller called Belquis Zahir.

Really, the only bore is getting to the islands in the first place, even now with two seasonal British Airways routes to Sicily: Heathrow to Palermo and Gatwick to Catania. From either destination, it's at least a two-hour drive to Milazzo, the most convenient ferry port.

But there are worse cities to hang out in. Catania has an ancient and rowdy fish market every day bar Sunday, which is worth visiting for a bowl of sea-urchin pasta. And should you wish to stay somewhere nearby, there's a marvellous German count, Count Rudolf von Freyberg, who owns a 250-acre mandarin and lemon estate. In the middle is Villa Aranjava, with its glistening infinity pool, which certain royals and British CEOs take for discreet summer holidays. Plus a pet goat called Margherita, who thinks she's a dog.

Rudolf is also the very best company. The day after I arrive, he and his handsome son, Michael, take me for a seven-hour lunch in a restaurant overlooking the bay of Syracuse. There we eat salmon tartare, prawns, seabass, cheese, more cannoli and little glasses of lemon granita, all washed down with prosecco, then white wine, then red wine. We head back to the count's villa in his Mercedes SUV, singing Dire Straits. 'Mafia money,' Rudolf says airily as we swing past yet another hideous pink or bright-orange housing development.

Or there's Palermo, a magnificent city and a reminder that Sicily hasn't been Italian for very long. It's been variously Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Norman, French and Bourbon, and only became Italian when Giuseppe Garibaldi, he of the squashed-fly

biscuits, unified Italy in 1860. This means that Palermo's architecture is a glorious mishmash – Islamic domes, Christian churches, Baroque palazzos, some of which are still in ruins, with creepers growing over them, after being bombed by the Allies in 1943. It was a foggy few days, the story goes, and the planes missed their German targets and managed to decimate much of the city instead. Sounds suspiciously *Blackadder Goes Forth* to me.

It's quite hard to focus on the buildings, though, when there's the matter of Palermo's food – it was recently declared the fifth-best street-food city in the world by *Forbes*. To see this for yourself, take a food tour with a chap called Giorgio, who looks like Luigi from *Super Mario*. It is not for the squeamish, I decide, as I bite down hard on a piece of calf penis (gristly) and chew on a lung-and-spleen sandwich (they're big on offal here). But, thinking positively, it makes a nice change from all that pasta.

If you want extra authenticity, you need to stay in one of the city's 1,500 palazzos. As in Britain, Sicilian toffs have started opening up their big houses for extra euros. So there's Villa Tasca, the sister palace to the vineyard on the island of Salina, where the owner will ply you with wine and liveried staff offer you pistachios from a silver bowl. Or there's Villa Chiaramonte Bordonaro, owned by a super-glam Italian called Gaia Palma Bordonaro, who changes outfits five times a day and has a Van Dyck in her dining room.

Or Villa Lampedusa, a 100,000-sq-ft palazzo lived in by the adopted son of Sicily's most famous author, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, who wrote *The Leopard*, an exquisite novel about the decline of Sicily's aristocrats. It was published posthumously in 1958, and the villa has a copy of his manuscript in a glass case for *Leopard* nerds.

There's something you need to look out for when mingling with Sicilian poshos, however. One night, Gaia took me to a concert in a cathedral which was swarming with *principesse* and *viscontesse*. There, she introduced me to a doge – a nobleman of Venice. I stuck my hand out to shake his, whereupon he took it, bent down and did a little bow. How sweet of him to bow, I chuckled to myself. I mean, I know I'm English and work for *Tatler*, but I'm hardly royalty. And then it happened again with the doge's son, who was about 10. 'What is going on?' I whispered to a music professor from Cambridge, who was over for the concert. 'Why are they bowing to me?'

'They're not bowing – they're kissing your hand,' he said, before explaining, quite slowly, as if talking to someone with learning difficulties, that this practice still goes on here. So whether you're on the islands or mainland Sicily, there are glimpses of a very old world. You should go before it catches up with the new.

*Bellini Travel* ([bellinitravel.com](http://bellinitravel.com); 020 7602 7602) offers two nights at Villa Tasca and five nights at either Capofaro Malvasia Resort or Hotel Signum, from £1,950, including a day's cruise on Barca Jost with lunch. British Airways ([ba.com](http://ba.com)) flies to Palermo from £126. Find out more about the Aeolian Islands Preservation Fund at [aeolianpreservationfund.org](http://aeolianpreservationfund.org). To book a Palermo street-food tour, visit [palermostreetfood.com](http://palermostreetfood.com).