



Elba

The pocket-sized island of Elba may be small, but it's big on rugged charm. We've been exploring this historic Italian gem...

The alluring forested mountains, brimming with wildlife and punctuated by villages and ruined medieval churches, ensure that Elba is a popular destination among trekking and cycling enthusiasts. But it is the coastline that attracts most visitors. There are numerous and varied beaches, some blessed with perfect golden sand and others cursed with knobbly pebbles, but all are lapped by a translucent blue-tinted sea, home to a colourful range of ocean fauna and flora. This wealth of ocean life is a draw for scuba divers and can even make off-beach snorkelling a rewarding experience. When an interlude from the beach and sea is the order of the day Elba has a sprinkling of fascinating historical sights well worth visiting.

GETTING THERE

Sited just off the Tuscan mainland, tucked between Italy and Corsica, Elba is an easy destination to reach. Easyjet and Ryanair have direct flights from British airports to Pisa, where you can either take the train (www.trenitalia.com) or drive the 60 miles to Porto Piombino. From Porto Piombino it's an hour-long ferry journey across the Piombino channel to Elba's Portoferraio. Ferry tickets can be bought at the ferry offices on the port side.

- **Easyjet** (www.easyjet.com) flies to Pisa from London Luton and Gatwick.
- **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com) flies to Pisa from Birmingham, Bournemouth, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool and London Stansted.
- The alternative route is an Italian domestic flight with **ElbaFly** (www.elbafly.it). There are one or two return flights each week throughout summer between Pisa or Milan and Elba.

Ferry companies:

- **Toremar** www.toremar.it
- **MobyLines** www.mobyLines.com

Tour operators

- **Abercrombie & Kent** www.abercrombiekent.co.uk
- **Page & Moy** www.pageandmoy.com
- **Kuoni** www.kuoni.co.uk

GETTING AROUND

International car hire companies have outlets at Pisa International Airport and Portoferraio town. Car hire comparison websites include www.travelsupermarket.com and www.opodo.co.uk.

- Trekking, bike hire and scuba diving information
- **Infoelba:** www.infoelba.com
 - **Eba tourist office** Tel: 0565 914 671, www.aptelba.it

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

Portoferraio

At the medieval heart of the city you'll find the ancient first port, pastel-coloured houses, a pretty main square and Napoleon's town house.

■ The Misericordia Church and Museum Via Carducci

This tiny museum dedicated to Napoleon includes his death mask and coffin.
Open daily 9.30am-2.30pm
Admission €4

■ Palazzina dei Mulini

Sensitively decked-out with period Empire furniture and decorated with *trompe l'oeil*, the house displays many of Napoleon's possessions.
Open July & August Mon-Sat, 9am-7pm; Sun 9am-1pm. June-Sept closed Mon/Tues.
Admission €6

■ Villa San Martino,

The interior of Napoleon's country pad mirrors that of his Portoferraio house, although it lacks some of its intimate character. An exhibition of largely anti-Napoleon cartoons is in the grandiose mid-19th-century neoclassical gallery.
Open Mon-Sat 9am-7pm; Sun 9am-1pm
Admission €6

■ Rio Marina

On the east coast, the old port was once a loading dock for ore from the nearby mines. These days this attractive town is gearing up to tourism. A guided tour by tourist (road) train, run by the town's mineral museum, takes you up to a series of disused opencast mines. The climax of the tour is the mineral hunt, when geologists' picks are handed out and everyone settles down to hammering the guts out of the rocks.
Museum opening times April-Oct: Mon-Sat 9am-12 noon & 3pm-6pm. Sun 9am-12 noon.
Admission €3
Train April-Oct daily: 10am, 3 pm & 5pm; €11.50

For the full magazine report on Elba, see p38 of the January 2009 issue of Which? Holiday

Monte Capannello

Above Rio nell'Elba – Rio Marina's pretty sister inland village – Monte Capannello is a favourite among trekkers. Easy-to-follow paths lead up to the peak and breathtaking panoramic views.

Le Sughere

www.lesughere.it

Wine producer, Le Sughere, selling a small but excellent range, is along a track off the Otano/Rio Marina road.

Monte Capanne

Elba's highest mountain is perfect for a day's outing. Two semi-ruined 13th-century Pisan churches (San Lorenzo and San Giovanni) nestle in dappled glades off the mountain road. Pleasant walks and picnics can be enjoyed on the fresh windy top of the mountain. Lower down, enjoy an evening stroll and an apéritif on the belvedere bar terraces in the villages of Marciana and Poggio.

Marciana

Marciana Archaeological Museum

The museum just below the village's castle reveals much of Elba's past. Angela Wilson, who runs the museum, is a font of Elban knowledge.

Cableway

For a quick way up to Monte Capanne's summit, take the cable lift from Marciana. It operates four times daily, and a return ticket is €17.

Capoliveri

Ancient twisting streets, charming little squares and spectacular views make this hilltop town a tourist honey pot.

GOOD PLACES TO STAY

Recommended hotels are in, or close to, the resorts we visited (see Which Coastal resorts on page 38 of the January 2009 issue). Prices are for the cheapest double room for two people, including breakfast and taxes, in June 2009. All hotels have pools unless otherwise stated.

La Biodla

La Biodola

Tel 0565 974 812

www.biodola.it

This appealing apricot-stucco villa is just above the western end of the beach on a low knoll. From the pool terrace the gardens of shrubs and colourful flowerbeds drop down to the hotel's beach. Tastefully furnished within, the smart vibrant bar extends to a superb terrace that overlooks the sea and the appealing restaurant looks out to the pool and garden. Large, blue-tiled bedrooms come furnished with ornate wrought-iron queen-size beds and have wide balconies.

Price €240 (£204) half-board

Rooms 80

Open April-mid October

Facilities pool, kids' club, private beach (guests are able to use the facilities at the adjacent Hermitage, La Biodola's sister property)
Disabled facilities lift (not suitable for wheelchairs)

Hermitage

Tel 0565 97 40

www.hotelhermitage.it

Rich in sophistication and loaded with activities, upmarket Hermitage appeals to a sporty crowd looking for a seaside break. Purpose-built in 1956, the low-rise, rambling stone and stucco building reclines among the trees in extensive and well-maintained gardens at the western end of the beach. The understated, chic interior is kitted out with tasteful, comfortable furniture. The sizeable restaurant, alongside a wide terrace, overlooks a pool and the beach, while the breakfast room sits above the sea on the first floor of a beach-side chalet. Comfortable bedrooms have large balconies and are tastefully furnished without being excessively swanky.

Price €388 (£318) half-board

Rooms 130

Open April-mid October

Facilities two pools, six-hole golf course, nine tennis courts, five-a-side football, volleyball, spa, kids' club, private beach
Disabled facilities Ground-floor rooms, lift, (contact the hotel about wheelchair accessibility)

Near Capoliveri

Pareti

Stella Maris

Tel 0565 968 425

www.albergostellamaris.com

Sheltering below a high cliff, this agreeable low-slung hotel, run by the friendly and ever-helpful Claudio Della Lucia, is perfectly positioned on the beach front. The pleasant crazy-paved marble-floored restaurant extends to an extensive terrace and the bar is housed within a small, attractive 1885 stone villa. The pleasing bedrooms are large and simply furnished, and the small balconies overlook the beach.

Price €152 (£124)

Rooms 56

Open April-October

Facilities tennis, mini golf (no pool)
Disabled facilities three modified rooms on the ground floor.

Morcone

La Scogliera

57031 Capoliveri

Tel 0565 935 205

www.lascogliera.com

Reached by the winding beach road, this crow's nest hotel, perched on the cliff edge, has superb views of the cove below. The wide terrace that faces the sea leads to a small café to the rear and a many-stepped path to the front drops down to the beach. Extensive bright and light bedrooms are well-maintained and come with kitchenettes.

Large balconies overlook the sea. No pool.

Price €71 (£58)

Rooms 39

Open April-beginning October

Disabled access not suitable for wheelchairs

Pomonte

Sardi

Tel 0565 906045

www.hotelsardi.it

In one of the prettiest seaside villages on the island, this attractive and well-maintained villa occupies a scenic position below mount San Bartoloméo on the inland side of the beach road. A compact front garden terrace leads to the glass-sided bar and restaurant with picture windows with sea views. Most of the snug bedrooms have balconies or terraces. No pool.

Price €89 (£73)

Rooms 25

Open April-October

Disabled facilities not suitable for wheel chairs

Marciana Marina

Gabbiano Azzurro

Tel 0565 99 226

www.hotelgabbianoazzurroelba.it

Off the town's main road, the friendly family-run B&B is 450 yards from the town centre. Built in the mid-19th century, the smart apricot and white villa has a compact parking area at the front; to the rear is a pleasant small garden with a pool and a loggia breakfast terrace. Inside there is a pleasant lounge bar. Bedrooms are comfortable and come with balconies.

Price €88 (£72)

Rooms 42

Open April-October

Disabled access not suitable for wheelchairs

Marina di Campo

Tre Colonne

Tel 0565 976 320

www.hoteltrecolonne.it

On a quiet street corner the family-run Tre Colonne is 200 yards from the beach. Most of the mid-20th century hotel's front garden is taken up by the pool and surrounding sun terraces. Inside, the bright restaurant overlooks the pool terrace and the adjacent bar has comfortable bamboo-framed chairs on a terracotta tiled floor. Modern white and blue bedrooms are simply furnished with small balconies.

Price €135 (£110)

Rooms 30

Open April – October

Disabled access not suitable for wheelchairs.

Portoferraio Bay

Fabricia

Tel 0565 933181

www.hotelfabricia.com

At the end of a long private avenue off the coast road, and set within its own extensive grounds, lies the unobtrusive tiered villa that fronts a

low-rise accommodation block. Mature gardens extend to the large pool and down to the beach. The modern interior is open-plan. A chic bar and the spacious columned restaurant have picture windows with a pleasant outlook to the garden. Agreeable pale green and cream bedrooms are simply furnished and beds are queen-sized. All rooms have balconies.

Price €194 (£165) half board

Rooms 92

Open April-end October

Facilities pool, tennis courts

Disabled access not suitable for wheelchairs

■ Villa Mare

Bagnai

Tel 0565 961 009

www.bagnai.com

In the pretty seaside village of Bagnai, at the eastern extremity of Portoferraio bay, this pleasant cheap-and-cheerful option is on the inland side of the quiet coast road a few yards from the beach. The four pink and white two-storey buildings are set within tiny gardens. The snack bar doubles up as small shop that sells guidebooks, postcards and more. Spick-and-span bedrooms are white and modestly furnished. Each room has a balcony or partitioned terrace. No pool.

Price €78 (£64)

Rooms 25 apartments

Open Easter-mid October

Disabled access ground-floor rooms and two rooms modified for wheelchairs

■ Villa Ottone

Tel 0565 933 042

www.villaottone.com

Set in attractive landscaped gardens, this superb hotel is divided into two distinctive parts. The understated 20th-century tiered Hotel houses a smart restaurant in its conservatory. But it is the 19th-century villa that is the property's glorious centrepiece. Surrounded by trees, the beautiful three-storey mansion stands proudly upon a seashore ledge. The bar terrace, overlooking the ocean, leads to the villa's ornate bar. Bedrooms are bursting with character: four-poster beds feature in some (the smaller rooms under the roof tend to be gloomy). Rooms in the main hotel are contemporary, light and attractively furnished. Most rooms have balconies.

Price €98 (£80)

Rooms 25 (25 cottage apartments in grounds)

Open Easter-mid October

Facilities pool, tennis court, private beach

Disabled access two modified rooms

Portoferraio inland

■ Park Hotel Napoleone

Tel 0565 911 111

www.parkhotelnapoleone.it

At the end of a lush wooded valley, just below Napoleon's Villa San Martino, this huge 19th-century Neo-gothic pile is set within pleasant

terraced gardens. The large pool occupies a lower terrace with an extensive lawn peppered with soaring pines and flowering shrubs. A raised eating patio leads to the large restaurant and on to two bar lounges. Bedrooms in the villa are comfortable, although they tend to lack the opulence of the public rooms and don't have balconies. Single-storey garden rooms come with a small terrace.

Price €114 (£97) half board

Open all year

Facilities pool, private beach

Disabled access ground-floor rooms but not suitable for wheelchairs

■ Relais delle Picchiaie

Via Le Picchiaie

Tel 0565 933 110

www.relaisdellepicchiaie

With a crow's nest position on a steep forested hill overlooking Portoferraio bay, this is the ideal location to unwind, sipping a cool drink at the poolside while admiring the view and listening to the songs of the many melodious birds in the surrounding woods ensures total relaxation. The 19th-century stone and stucco villa has a spacious rustic restaurant (see Good places to eat) off the attractive open-plan lobby and bar lounge. Simple, comfortable bedrooms are reasonably sized and have balconies.

Price €158 (£129)

Rooms 47

Open end of April-end of October

Facilities pool, two tennis courts, wellness centre

Disabled access not suitable for wheelchairs

GOOD PLACES TO EAT

Portoferraio

■ La Zucchetta

Tel 0565 915 331

The historic square, plaza della Repubblica, in the island's capital, is lined with trattoria offering traditional Italian dishes, but you could do worse than eat at La Zucchetta. With a pleasant outlook to the square from the two front terraces, the restaurant serves a wide selection of dishes. Mouthwatering thin-crust pizzas are baked in traditional brick ovens and cost around €10. An Alba d'Estate pizza (topped with fresh shrimps mozzarella and a generous pile of rocket) with a beer and a coffee costs €11.

Outside Portoferraio

■ Picchiaie (at Relais delle Picchiaie, see

Good places to stay)

Tel 0565 933 110

It's always a good sign when locals choose to go out of their way to track down a restaurant, and they certainly do when they dine at Picchiaie. The large rustic-style restaurant nestles at the end of a narrow lane at the top of a steep hill. A friendly and discreet team of servers work their way briskly around well-spaced tables to deliver the succulent dishes. A plate of fried reef octopus

on a bed of diced roast potatoes, followed by aubergine-filled saddle of lamb filled with rosemary sauce and a fresh fruit dessert comes to around €40. Half bottle of local wine is €13.50.

Rio Marina

■ La Ganocchia

Via Paletro 1/3

Tel 0565 962 432

A snug old-fashioned restaurant just above the harbour offers traditional fare served by friendly waiters. A three-course meal of anchovies with lemon, seafood risotto (for two people) and fruit cassata comes to €34. Wine starts at around €15.

Marciana Marina

■ Scaraboci

Via XX Settembre 29

Tel 0565 996 868

Fish lovers will relish this small, chic restaurant just off the centre of town. A delectable antipasti seafood selection; fish-filled pasta parcels with cherry tomatoes and fish sauce; aubergines with baked fish and squid pieces with diced vegetables and rosemary sauce, and finally, pineapple sorbet and fresh pineapple with a pastry-base, all comes to €58. A bottle of golden-hued Elban white wine is around €17.

■ Borgo al Cotone

Via del Cotone 23

Tel 0565 904 390

The night setting of twinkling town lights, backed by the shapes of dark craggy mountains and the shadowy profiles of bobbing yachts from the harbour – quayside Borgo al Cotone occupies the most romantic location in town. If the everyday food doesn't match up, it is at least passable and it's worth dining here just for the exquisite scenery. Two courses with a half bottle of wine is around €45.

USEFUL INFORMATION

When to go

The holiday season starts in April and ends around mid-October. Spring and autumn are the best seasons for walking and cycling, while the summer attracts the beach and sea crowd.

Money matters

£1 = €1.20 at time of going to press.

Recommended book and map

■ *Cadogan Guides Tucony* £12.99

(ISBN 1-86011-317-6)

■ *Carta Touristica Dei Sentieri*

ISOLA D'ELBA

Idizioni multigraphic-Firenze £9.95

Further information

■ **Eba tourist office** Tel 0565 914 671,

www.aptelba.it

■ **Infoelba** www.infoelba.com