

Mongibello and The Talented Mr. Ripley

One of the great pleasures of film location tourism is the opportunity to visit places which don't exist. Take 'Mongibello', for example, the setting invented for Patricia Highsmith's 1955 novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.

Writers - or screenwriters - can conjure a world from their imaginations, but when it comes to putting that vision on screen, it's up to those unsung heroes of the film industry, location managers, to find the perfect representation in the real world. Italy's visa policy is very lenient for most travelers; meaning a visa is not needed for short-term travel to Italy. However, a Self Declaration Form will be needed.



Though there have been two film versions of Highsmith's story (the first was René Clément's 1960 *Plein Soleil*, which cast Alain Delon as Tom Ripley; the second, in 1999, saw Matt Damon take on Highsmith's ambiguous anti-hero), both films chose the same island to portray the fictitious Italian resort.

That place is the island of Ischia, largest of the three volcanic islands in the Bay of Naples, about 30 km from Naples itself.

The regular hydrofoil service will take you from Naples to Ischia's main port, Ischia Porto, and from there it's a 20-minute walk, or a short bus ride, east along the coast to Ischia's most striking landmark. A single narrow causeway from the picturesque coastal town of Ischia Ponte leads to the 12th century Castello Aragonese, perched dramatically atop a huge rocky outcrop rising sheer from the sea.

The castle towers over the tiny seafront piazza, which you'll instantly recognise as the spot where Matt Damon's Ripley alights from the bus on arriving in 'Mongibello'.

The 1960 Ripley film also used Ischia Ponte, as well as Sant'Angelo on the south coast, but the island and its spectacular castle were already screen stars, having provided the 'Caribbean' backdrop to Robert Siodmak's colourful period romp *The Crimson Pirate*, with Burt Lancaster, back in 1952.



Castello Aragonese, and the ancient Torre di Michelangelo which stands opposite, can even be seen during the sea battle in the 1963 epic *Cleopatra*, starring Elizabeth Taylor.

Anthony Minghella's more recent film ranges across Italy to take in Venice, Rome and Palermo, but the most seductive location remains 'Mongibello'.

By 1999, the use of locations was becoming more sophisticated, and the glamorous resort, where rich boy Dickie Greenleaf (Jude Law) idles away his time with girlfriend Marge (Gwyneth Paltrow), is represented not just by Ischia, but by its tiny neighbour, Procida.

On the coast, between Ischia Ponte and Ischia Porte, you'll find Bagno Antonio, which is the private beach where Ripley contrives his first meeting with Dickie and Marge by passing himself off as an old college pal.

Dickie's seaside villa is Palazzo Malcovati, on Ischia Ponte's main street, Via Luigi Mazzella. It's a private house, but you can see the terrace, where Tom Ripley reveals his musical tastes by 'accidentally' dropping a stack of jazz albums, at the end of Largo Stradone, which runs north to the seafront from Via Luigi Mazzella.

Much of the town centre of 'Mongibello', though, can be found on the tiny neighbouring island of

Procida. A regular boat service leaves from Ischia Porte, but, if you're feeling adventurous, you can take a boat taxi and bounce across the waves from Ischia Ponte to the Marina di Chiaiolella, on the island's southern coast.

Procida is small enough to cross easily on foot - though there's a good bus service - so head northeast to the fishing village of Corricella, a near-vertical warren of pastel-coloured houses linked by a zig-zag of scalatinelli (staircase streets). It's simply one of the most striking places you're likely to visit.

It's here that Dickie rides his scooter along the steep Via San Rocco, dominated by the domed Church of Our Lady of Grace. At the top of Via San Marco, Piazza dei Martiri is the town square, where he adamantly refuses to return to New York - and this is also one of the settings for Michael Radford's irresistible 1994 tragi-comedy, *Il Postino*.



On this same Piazza stands the building which doubled as the post office from which postman Mario (Massimo Troisi) collects post for exiled Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (Philippe Noiret). Judging by the brightly restored exterior, it looks like the location fee was put to good use. Via San Rocco itself becomes the village in which the corrupt politician exhorts the locals to "Vote for Di Cosimo".

Also on Procida is Spiaggia del Pozzo Vecchio, one of the two beautiful beaches featured in the film (just ask directions to the 'Postino beach'), which can be found in the Cottimo district on the northwest coast.

After your sightseeing, reward yourself with a beer or a cappuccino in the little bar on the seafront below Corricella, where Mario shyly romances barmaid Beatrice. Don't worry - the shabby interior seen in the film was created in the studio. The real Bar La Taverna del Postino, as it's now called, boasts a sleekly sinuous Fifties Marine design.

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