

IS CAPRI more than the BLUE GROTTO?

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Capri is a Mediterranean island to the west of the Italian mainland. It is situated to the south-west of the port of Naples and is accessed by ferry services from Naples and Sorrento. The island is known to have been inhabited since early Roman times, acting as a retreat for the nobility. Indeed, during the last 10 years of his reign, the Emperor Tiberius resided on Capri, leaving only occasionally, ruling the Empire from the Villa Jovis.

In more modern times, Capri has become a major tourist destination. In the late 19th century, a significant colony of northern European expatriates lived on the island, living (as some commentators describe it) a libertine lifestyle. It is, however, not the intention of this article to traverse salacious stories of those times. More recently, conventional tourism has become by far the dominant economic driver for the island. There are two principal focuses of this tourism. The first is the ruins of the Villa Jovis, Tiberius' palace, whilst the second, the Blue Grotto – *Grotta Azzurra* (known and visited since early Roman times), provided the trigger for this article.

The vast majority of tourist visits to Capri are undertaken as day trips by ferry. The advent in the last 15 years or so of high-speed ferries that supplement the more traditional slower-running ferries has meant that, with an early departure from either Naples or Sorrento, coupled with a return on a late afternoon ferry, a comprehensive visit to the two major sites on Capri can be undertaken in a day.

In December 2015, I visited Capri with my wife and our 13-year-old daughter and 11-year-old son. I had carefully researched ferry timetables, walking times to the Villa Jovis from the head of the funicular running from the ferry wharf to Capri village, boat availability to visit the Blue Grotto, opening times of the Villa Jovis and the other range of matters needing to be ascertained. I was satisfied that an early ferry on a Tuesday (departing Naples at 8.30 am) would give us ample time for a visit. I had, however, underestimated what might be described as “administrative flexibility” in the Italian bureaucracy - such “flexibility” leading to the Villa Jovis being closed on Tuesdays in December rather than on the advertised Monday closing day.

However, this article can be regarded as the beneficial outcome of that “flexibility” as it enabled us to charter a small boat to take us not only to the Blue Grotto but also on a circumnavigation of the island. What I observed during the three hours or so of circumnavigation caused me to pen this, my first submission in some 25 years' membership of the Association.

Conventionally, visitors to the island wishing to see the Blue Grotto travel the three kilometres or so to the west along the northern shore of the island from the main jetty in aquatic versions of a tourist bus. When they arrive outside the Blue Grotto, they are obliged to transfer, in groups of two to four, to small open rowing boats to be conveyed inside the cave. This is necessary because the aperture to the cave is quite small – 2 metres wide and 1 metre high – (its size being a contributing factor to the blue effect in the water within the cave). Entry into the grotto is also only possible in calm seas and from about three-quarter tide down.

Access is a quite regimented and highly commercially sophisticated process. First, it is necessary to pay a fee to the Commune of Capri for the right to access the Blue Grotto. Second, it is necessary to pay a fee to the individual boatman

(they all appeared to be men) conveying you into and out of the grotto itself. We understood, for our trip, it was also expected that, in addition to the formalised payment, there was also an unspoken (but impliedly mandatory) requirement to give a more than modest tip to the boatman upon return to the relevant mother craft.



An entry ticket to the Blue Grotto

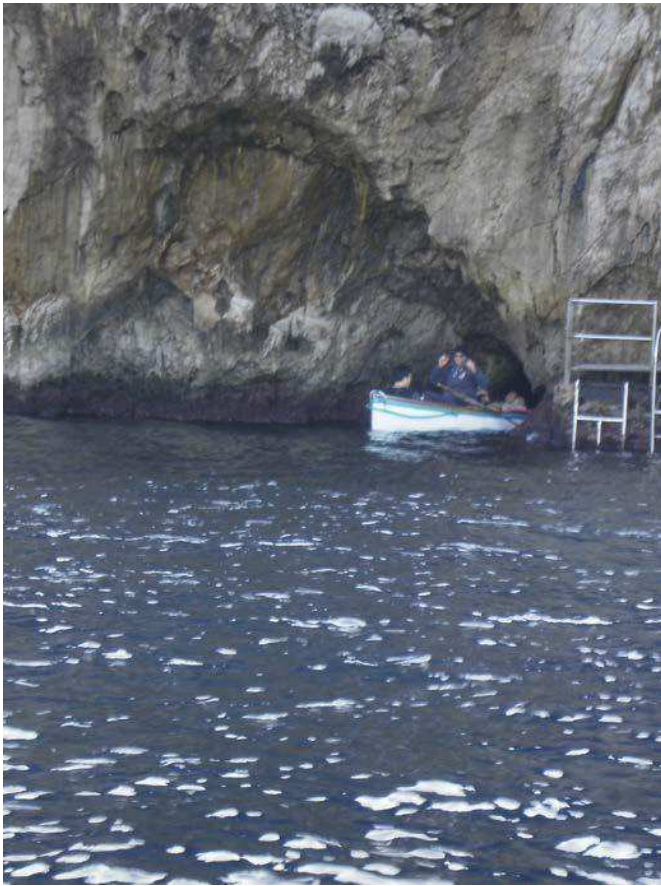
When we visited, we had to await the processing of the 20 or so tourists on each of the two aquatic tourist coaches that arrived after but at approximately the same time that we did – bulk customers getting preference. There appeared to be about eight skiffs operating with four or five of them in the cave at each time. A photograph of a skiff emerging after a visit to the cave is reproduced below:

After successfully transferring from our modest open boat to a skiff, we were rowed to the opening where entry was effected by pulling us through the narrow aperture using a chain affixed along the rock for this purpose, the chain extending for two metres or so on both the outside and inside.

Once inside the chamber (illuminated only by an occasional camera flash), the luminescent blue effect that gives the grotto its name was immediately apparent. This effect is caused by -

..., the light comes from two sources. One is a small hole in the cave wall, precisely at the waterline, that is a metre and half in diameter. This hole is barely large enough to admit a tiny rowboat, and is used as the entranceway. In photographs taken from within the cave, the above-water half of this hole appears as a spot of brilliant white light. The second source of light is a second hole, with a surface area about ten times as large as the first, which lies directly below the entranceway, separated from it by a bar of rock between one and two metres thick. Much less light, per square metre, is able to enter through the lower opening, but its large size ensures that it is, in practice, the primary source of light. As light passes through the water into the cave, red reflections are filtered out and only blue light enters the cave.¹

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_Grotto_\(Capri\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_Grotto_(Capri))



Emerging from the Blue Grotto



The author's daughter in the Blue Grotto

The effect is quite startling and entirely unexpected given the usual grey-green colour of the sea outside the entrance.

The internal dimensions of the cave are that it is roughly oval with a domed roof and walls that are almost, but not entirely, smooth. Its approximate dimensions are 60 metres deep; 25 metres across and 10 metres high, in the centre, at mid-tide. The water has a generally uniform depth of 150 metres with a sandy bottom. At the rear, on the southern side, there are two



Our craft

small apertures, said by our boatman to have led to the entrance to a staircase to a now disappeared Roman villa that had been located above it. However, I subsequently discovered that this was an urban myth and they are dead-end passages. There is, however, no doubt that the cave has been visited since Roman times (including, it is believed, by the Emperor Tiberius himself during his residence at the Villa Jovis). A number of broken elements of Roman-era statuary have been recovered from the floor of the cave.

To understand why a discussion of Capri, in a karst context, is more than an "oo-ah" description of a visit to the Blue Grotto, it is necessary to start with a description of the location, settlement pattern and landform of the island.

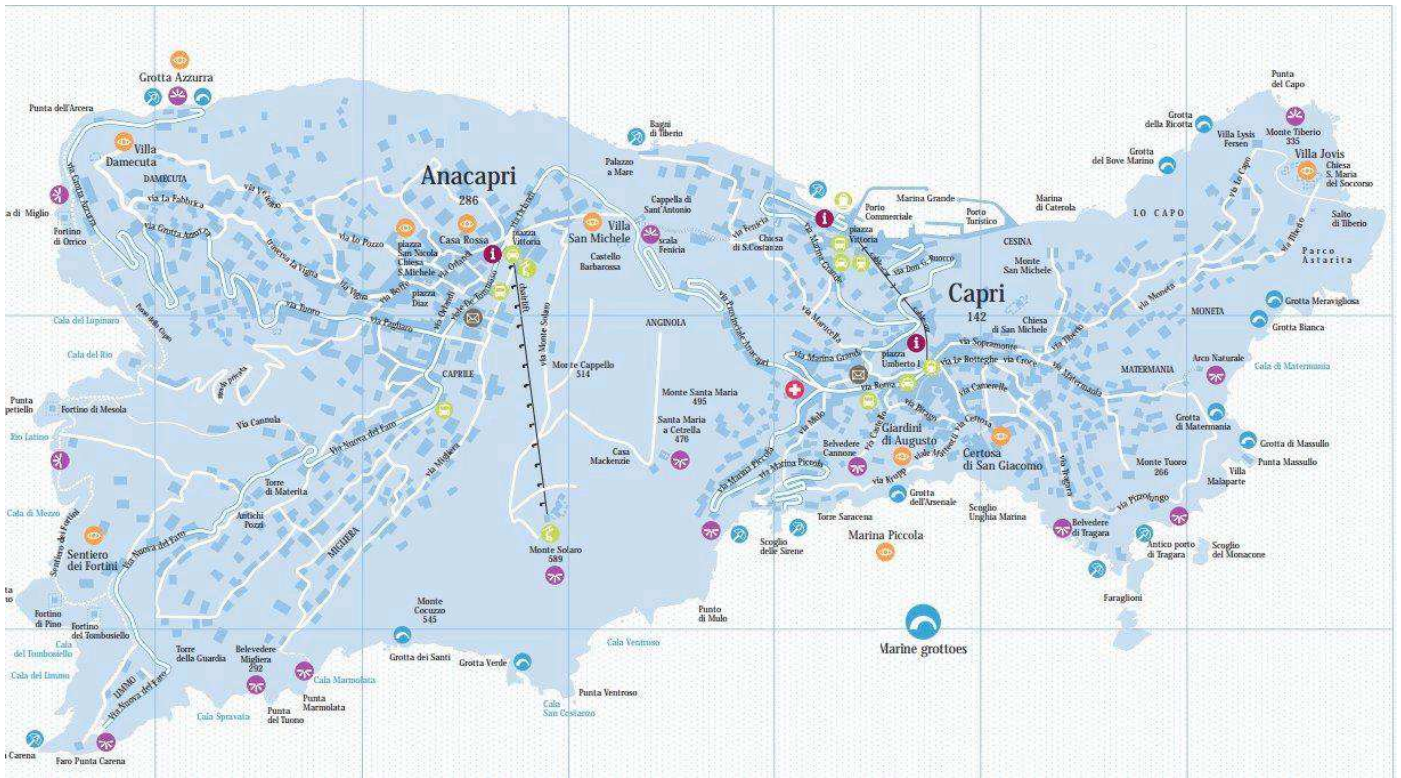
"Capri lies 31.5 km due southwest of Naples, and 4.8 km out from the Sorrentine peninsula. It is 6 km long, varies in breadth from 1200 m to 2.8km and covers an area of 1036 ha, of which Capri occupies 400 ha and Anacapri 636 ha. The high land in the west, which rises 590 m to the peak of Monte Solaro, and the less elevated area in the east, rising to 335 m at Monte Tiberio and there plunging precipitously into the sea, are formed of whitish-grey limestones. The intervening depression is filled by sandstones and marls. Capri abounds in natural grottoes; most are at sea-level, but a number are found at a considerable altitude. Capri was not always an island. It probably shook itself free from the mainland during eruptions which convulsed the whole Neapolitan region and left the deposits of volcanic tuff which occur above the limestone and immediately below the present land surface."

A tourism map of Capri shows the location of a number of caves around the coastline of the island. The map describes them as "Marine grottos". Virtually all of these are only accessible by sea and, with the exception of the Madonna Cave and the Matermània Grotto, are features primarily caused by wave erosion and/or collapse at water level.

The features, other than the Blue Grotto, listed by the Tourism Authority where a cave has been regarded as especially notable appear limited to three locations.

The first of these, the Matermània Grotto, has been heavily modified for habitation/religious purposes with changes such as excavation and wall construction dating to Roman times. It is accessible from land and by sea and is described by one travel writer as follows:

In antiquity, this had been a nymphaeum, or shrine to water



Map of Capri

nymphs, decorated with marble statues and glass mosaics, artificial pools and seashells. Legend holds that the grotto was also a place for the worship of Cybele, the pagan goddess of the earth, known as Magna Mater, or Great Mother, who gave it its name.

The second of these, what our boatman called the Madonna Cave, is a cave with a significant, conventionally created karst feature of a single large stalagmite. This cave is only accessible by sea and only at higher tides and in calm seas. The title, the Madonna Cave, is given as an interpretation by locals in the anthropocentric naming practice still, unfortunately, used in some cave guiding.



Landing point for the Madonna Cave



Madonna Cave and "Madonna"

Our boatman on our circumnavigation informed us, however, that there was no particular (at least contemporary) religious significance attached to the feature or its location. Photographs of the aperture of the Madonna Cave and its landing platform from the sea are reproduced below.

²Money, James, *Capri: Island of Pleasure*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1986, p xv – note all measurements have been converted to metric.

³<http://www.capri.net/images/download/Capri-Island-Map.pdf>

⁴OED: "A grotto or shrine dedicated to a nymph or nymphs" – not a place of debauchery as some might assume!

⁵<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/the-lure-of-capri-1003163/#EDSVXaTW1udPvyXJ.99>

Although the sea conditions were suitable for landing at the time we passed it on our circumnavigation, the tide was unfavourable and landing was not possible.

The third is the Arsenale Grotto which "was used as a temple and nymphaeum in Roman times. Its name is derived from the military use to which it was put during the Middle Ages". However, Wikipedia also records:

It measures 4m long by 3.5m wide by 1.5m high. Excavations made in 1777 in the shingle, which still covers the floor to a depth of from 1.2-1.5m, showed evidence of traces in the walls of two or three rooms which were of Roman workmanship, along with a floor of coloured marbles, and some iron fragments, which have been identified as part of the plant of the ancient naval station, or perhaps of a Roman galley. Although the floor of the cave is 2.4 m above the sea, in southerly gales, waves hit it so forcefully as to render its use as a storehouse out of the question. The walls unearthed here indicate, therefore, that at the time they were built, this cave stood higher above the sea than it does at present.

After our circumnavigation, an enquiry at the Capri Tourist Office brought the response that, with the exception of the Maternània Grotto, the only caves that were of any tourist interest were those that were approached by sea, dominantly the Blue Grotto and, are less frequently, the Madonna cave.

There was no tourist value in any of the other known caves. As far as the staff of the Tourist Office were aware, there was no interest in exploration of any of the readily visible cliff caves and there was no present (or to her knowledge past) interest in examining any of the non-maritime limestone cliffs or other karst areas on the island.

Thus, the point of writing is not merely to describe what is identified by Capri Tourism as cave features of the island. It is to speculate what might be there and remains to be discovered if there were to be any determined speleological exploration of the island. This question crossed my mind during our circumnavigation as a consequence of the quite frequent appearance of apertures, shallow or otherwise being unknown, on the cliffs that were readily observable as we progressed in our journey. These features clearly showed aspects consistent with conventionally known karst formation processes with stalactites readily visible at the mouth of these apertures. A photograph of one such feature observed from our boat is reproduced below.

I could only ask myself what I might find had I had more time; several hundred metres of quality rope and proper climbing gear; and a wife and children prepared to indulge my folly. I suppose, to be brutal, I probably would have needed to have been there 20 years earlier as well!



Cliff-face feature showing stalactites