

# **1. Vincenzo Aprea, boatman, Ponza**

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and learned never to challenge it, because  
it’s in charge”.



**Vincenzo Aprea is a boatman in the Ponzesi Boatmen's Cooperative. It is the leading company, that runs tours around the Pontine islands. He was born on the island of Elba in the Tuscan archipelago in 1968 and moved to Ponza with his family as a child. He was a fisherman and tried several other sea-related professions before finding his calling. He sincerely loves what he does, which means he is good at it. People sense this. He is as calm as the sea on a windless day. But he has weathered many storms and, as he himself says: "I'm still here". There is confidence in his steps. This is precisely what a ship's captain should be, because we literally trust him with our lives, even if it's a relatively short tourist trip. We talked about navigation at sea, intuition and the psychology of communicating with tourists, Ponza's history and future, and the passing on of traditions in maritime families.**

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**— Your working season runs from April to October. What do you do in Formia during the winter?**

— That's on average. If we receive requests, the service may start before and end after this period.

The cooperative has been around for 26 years, since 1999. We are 12 partners with 10 boats — a small fleet! We started with five units. Then we added more [Ponza is visited by 100,000 travelers annually]. It provided job opportunities for new boatmen. I believe the cooperative will continue to grow.

I stayed on the island constantly until four years ago. Now I only live there during the summer. In the winter I go back and forth to do maintenance work on my boat “Poseidon”, which is dry-docked at the shipyard in Gaeta [in a suspended state], and because my two children are studying in Formia.















**— I think there are two types of people: those who choose their job and vice versa, for example, in a town like Ponza, where there isn't much choice. Which type of person are you? Did you study or did you just gain experience?**

— This job chose me. I like it very much.

I gained experience by working. Little by little, I tried to learn more and more. Others helped me a lot.

My mother told me that the life of a sailor is hard. She tried to get me to study at a hotel school in Formia, in the kitchen. The problem is that I only like eating! I received a few good marks, but I didn't pass. I only finished eighth grade [Vincenzo said: terza media]. My first occupation was as a waiter.

At almost 14 years old I started working as a fisherman. I went away from Ponza, to sea area between Anzio and Civitavecchia [ports in the Lazio region south-west of Rome]. I stayed there for two months: in good weather and bad, with two people I didn't know. They kept me under their wing because I had to grow up.

I continued with fishing until I was called up for a year of military service in Italy. After it I found myself a bit lost in Ponza. I rented out umbrellas and sunbeds, and organized boat trips and scuba diving.

But family life brings changes. I left my job in tourism for 10 years. I started again with the cooperative in 2016, where I have been ever since.

**— What exactly does a boat captain do compared to the captain of a yacht or a ferry, such as Laziomar (Laziosea) between Formia and Ponza?**

— All captains are the same: from the smallest boat to the largest, in the sense that they are responsible for everything that happens on board. Safety is the most important thing at sea.

My job is to stick to the schedule and show guests the most beautiful spots on our islands, while paying attention to navigation.

**— The Pontine Islands archipelago is relatively small. How do you come up with your routes?**

— We visit all three largest islands in one day: Ponza, Palmarola and Zannone, for most of the season. We leave at 11 am and return at 5:15 pm.

The tour only around Ponza is shorter by an hour. It includes stops for lunch and visiting a beautiful Frontone beach. For those who want to spend more time there, we offer continuous shuttle service from 9 am to 7 pm.

The Palmarola tour is from 11 am to 5:30 pm. During it we also make stops for swimming in the sea and land on the namesake Palmarola beach for a couple of hours.

There is a two-island tour, “La doppia” (“The double”), which includes Ponza and Palmarola.

Finally, twice a week we go to Zannone. It has been part of the Circeo national park since 1978. There is a forest, an old Cistercian monastery [the Cistercians are a Catholic religious order] and other points of interest.

We don’t go to Ventotene and Santo Stefano. They are 22 nautical miles from us [40.7 km; a nautical mile is 1,852 meters. The last, sixth island is a small Gavi, just near Ponza].

Our itineraries and schedule may change depending on the weather forecasts.

**— You have memorized your program well. How often do you use your intuition?**

— It is always with me, even though I rely on various tools.

On the compass there is the line of faith, which helps you set off and return home. It isn't needed on every trip, but with it you'll better understand the waves and how to approach a coastline.

However, to assist a colleague or any other boat, you need experience. Instruments alone are not enough to prevent passengers from suffering if something goes wrong or to find the right course.

Nothing serious has ever happened to me. I've been in the middle of the sea in bad weather many times with boats that were not equipped to handle that type of situation. We had a good captain. I've been in a storm as a captain, and I'm still here!

Once we set off in good weather and with a relatively calm sea. In the afternoon the wind picked up and with it the waves, which reached over 2.5 meters [wind is the main reason for waves; rough waves are up to 4 meters and high waves are from 6 to 9 meters, according to the Douglas sea scale]. We had to change course to get back to Ponza from Palmarola. It was a slightly longer but calmer route. We let the sea guide us. This is where experience and intuition come into play.

I know all the coves. If there is a bit more wind, we can hide in one of them, where, even if the wind blows from the hills of the islands, the sea remains quiet, and you can swim in peace.

**— The same is written on your website: “Why a cooperative? For safety at sea: all members are in contact with each other to resolve problems or requests”. Give us an example of a time when you helped someone in a difficult situation.**

— We help each other all the time. My colleagues are like brothers to me. If I’m not feeling well, someone will offer to take my place. If I need a sailor, I am likely to find him. There’s a sailor’s saying: “At sea you should never look to see if someone is a friend or foe; you should lend a hand”.

In one season I helped a family who had problems with the engine of their dinghy (inflatable boat) when the sea became a little rough. These things can happen at any time, even when it is calm. They had two little girls, and the woman was pregnant with the third child. I remember them well because after some time they found me to thank me again. They were very friendly.

You have to keep your eyes open. The danger can happen to others, just like it can happen to you.

Over time, as I gained experience, I got to know the sea well and learned something important: never challenge it, because it’s always in charge.

**— You have to be a bit of a psychologist. What have you learned about travelers in Ponza over the years?**



— The main thing is that no one is the same. Everyone thinks or feels something, even if they don't say it. Therefore, there are always those who don't like some part of their experience.

We're not talking about two or four tourists: some ships carry fifty or eighty! I've had a hundred on my boat. It's not often, but it has this capacity. I've also found that ten individuals can make more noise than a hundred.

Anyway, I try to make sure the passengers are happy. Then we, the staff, are satisfied too. You have to put passion into the work you do!















