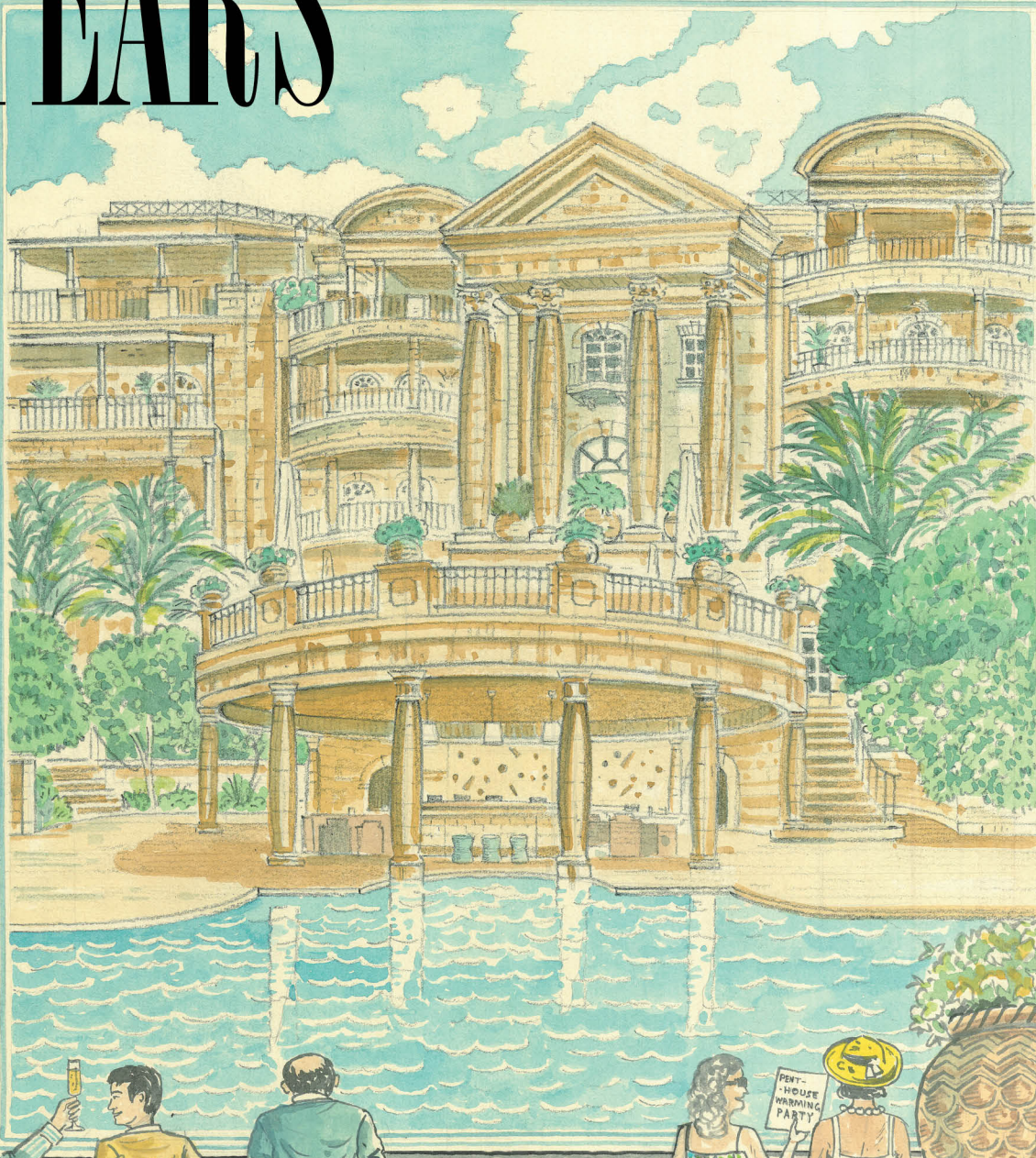


WEALTH MANAGEMENT, BUSINESS AND CULTURE: SHARP AND TO THE POINT

SPEARS



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SEA OF GREEN

A visit to the Aeolian islands, sailing in the shadow of two volcanoes, causes Andrei Navrozov to reflect on the pernicious influence of envy in shaping local politics and entire empires

It's a small world, as the boat's captain explained to me between puffs on one of the Antico Toscano cigars which my friends had been thoughtful to bring aboard. The African continental shelf is apparently in continual movement towards Europe, and consequent tension is responsible for the seismic uncertainty that is our lot in Palermo. The epicentre of tectonic instability was right here, he said, in the 'Aeolian Arc', extending for some 140 kilometres of the Tyrrhenian Sea and dotted by the Aeolian Islands, though the area of instability is much larger, encompassing all of Sicily, Calabria and Campania on Italy's mainland together with parts of Greece and the Aegean Islands.

We anchored for a quick swim in the dazzlingly cold May sea within view of the Carasco Hotel on Lipari, the largest of the eight islands of which the Aeolian archipelago is comprised. The hotel, one of the first on these islands, was built by the parents of a London acquaintance of mine, Luca del Bono, an erstwhile professional gentleman who is now a force for the good, building as he is a new club at 50 St James's with a roof terrace for recalcitrant smokers. As one who quit Brooks's with an open letter in *The Spectator*, ridiculing the club's bureaucratic unwillingness to acknowledge tobacco as essential nourishment of the soul, I appreciate such high-mindedness. Not coincidentally, Luca is also the man behind London's first Russian restaurant, Mari Vanna in Knightsbridge, where a smoking room will likewise await key-holding members. None other than the Russian-speaking Penelope Girardet (née Bennett), formerly *Spear's*' managing editor, is helping him find his bearings in the open sea

of Slavic caprices. Yes, it's a small world, gentlemen, once you've got an Antico Toscano between your teeth.

I don't know that for a fact, but I have no doubt that every islander on Lipari hates Marco and Hermione del Bono. Myriam Beltrami, sole proprietor of the Raya Hotel on Panarea since the passing of her partner, the painter and architect Paolo Tilche, is thus hated, and not a day passes without some local villain going to the magistrates, the building authorities or the tax people to bring some imaginary grievance against her. The Raya, a breathtakingly beautiful cascade of bungalows drenched in bougainvillea descending to the sapphire sea, is where we were staying, so I've had ample opportunity to observe the insidious process at work.

Myriam and Paolo came to Panarea in the misty-eyed 1960s and fell in love with the island, a lava stone's throw from the smoking volcano on Stromboli and the snoozing one on Vulcano. They built their hotel from scratch, oblivious to the stark truth that they were singlehandedly creating a tourist industry in the Aeolian Islands to rival that of all Sicily. What does the visitor know of Sicily — today as 50 years ago — apart from a 'holiday destination' called 'Taormina'? Nothing. Yet today, 50 years after the launch of Raya and thanks to the lifelong love of two foreigners, Panarea is no less a yachting man's heaven than Sardinia's Costa Smeralda. Which makes Myriam Beltrami the unacknowledged Aga Khan of the Aeolian.

The Russian, *Doctor Zhivago* meets *Cherry Orchard* dimension of the tragedy is revealed when one contrasts the history of benign civic improvement in the Russian Empire from Alexander II onward with the brutal ingratitude



of the populace, and of the intelligentsia in particular. Two of Russia's three last tsars died a violent death at the hands of the people they tried to lead to a civilised life under a constitutional monarchy. Myriam and Paolo did not build a Holiday Inn, nor did they introduce motorcars and fast-food restaurants to the island; they brought fresh water, a sympathetic architecture and well-heeled or, rather, well-keeled visitors. They did not exploit labour, they created jobs — some 30 gardeners now tend that bougainvillea — and, quite literally, an island of absolute peace in a perennially crisis-ravaged Europe. Their enduring reward is universal hatred and a new safety, fire or tax inspector on the doorstep on the first day of every month.

It occurred to me on that trip to the Aeolian Islands that Marx did not invent communism, but that he simply gave voice to the politics of envy dormant in every man's bosom. Here the two volcanoes I saw from the deck at sunset and at sunrise, Vulcano and Stromboli, have come to represent for me the dual hypostasis of the soul, and of the Russian soul in particular. Vulcano, the dormant one, is the underhand resentment that has now given us the United States of Europe, with its inspectors, busybodies and denunciations. One day, when Europe collides with Africa, the volcano will awaken, blowing our civilisation to kingdom come and burying beneath its ash all the good that has been done here since Rome planted the first vine in Gaul.

And Stromboli? Well, Stromboli's just smoking. How like a man who wears his sins on his sleeve! All one wants is to pat him on the back and offer him an Antico Toscano. *J*

Two of Russia's three last tsars died a violent death at the hands of the people they tried to lead to a civilised life