



# Grotta Giusti

— *Diving & Dining in style*

Diver underwater in the thermal cave, Grotta Giusti, located in Tuscany, Italy



Text by Peter Symes  
Photos by Peter Symes and  
courtesy of Grotta Giusti Resort

**I felt thrust back a century or two, perhaps into the setting of the Count of Monte Cristo. Lounging in the majestic sitting room, in the stately old mansion that now houses Grotta Giusti Spa but was once the seat and residence of a family from the Italian gentry, I cannot help but ponder the history these walls must have seen. Outside I can see the Tuscan countryside, with its rolling hills and slender stone pines. We are nowhere near the ocean. Yet I am just about to go diving—inside the mountain. In fact, I am about to go to Hell.**

The spa gets its mineral waters from some hot volcanic springs that come out of the mountain right under the complex. From the ground floor, we go down a ramp that leads into a cavern draped in stalagmites and stalactites. After we pass through a curtain, it is already significantly warmer and quite humid.

I am being told that starting from the entrance through to the deepest part of the Grotta, three different zones are crossed, each one increasing in heat, which some humorous tradition has been named Paradise, Purgatory and Hell. These zones are like saunas with different temperatures, and other guests draped in robes heading in or out, as we are being briefed for the upcoming dive, give us the usual puzzled stares.

But yes, we are going for a dive in the pools and crevices beneath the chambers where the guests sit and sweat in natural steam baths. The thermal mineral waters flow at a temperature of around 34°C (93°F). The



THIS PAGE: Exterior and interior views of spa

COURTESY OF GROTTA GIUSTI RESORT





COURTESY OF GROTTA GIUSTI RESORT

The age-old cave is divided into three sections: Heaven, Purgatory – with its Lake of Limbo, and an average temperature – and Hell, where humidity reaches 98%. Each area has a different temperature, and allows you to enjoy the benefits of the thermal vapours to the full, providing a fifty-minute path to well-being.

For nearly an hour and a half I walk and crawl along dramatic formations, sliding through crevices as if I could levitate. It was easier and far more

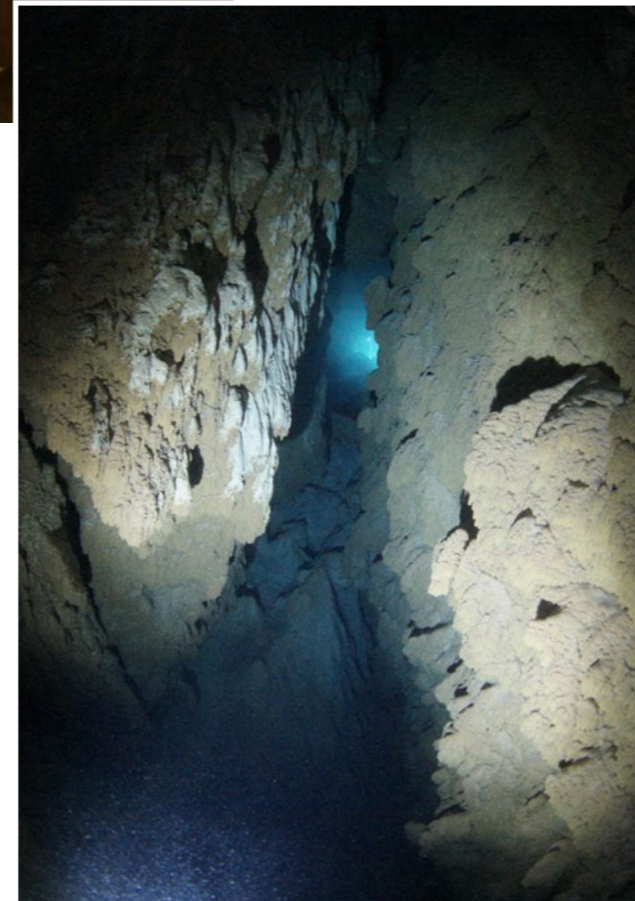


resulting vapours create a steam bath, which is said to be effective against respiratory, circulatory, gynaecological, osteo-muscular, nerve and skin complaints. Other techniques are also used, such as mud baths, inhalation, vaporisation and aerosol therapy.

**T-shirt & no fins**

Several factors make this an unusual dive. First of all the water is too warm to wear any kind of suit so we are all just wearing t-shirts. Secondly, we won't be wearing any fins as we essentially will have to walk and climb underwater.

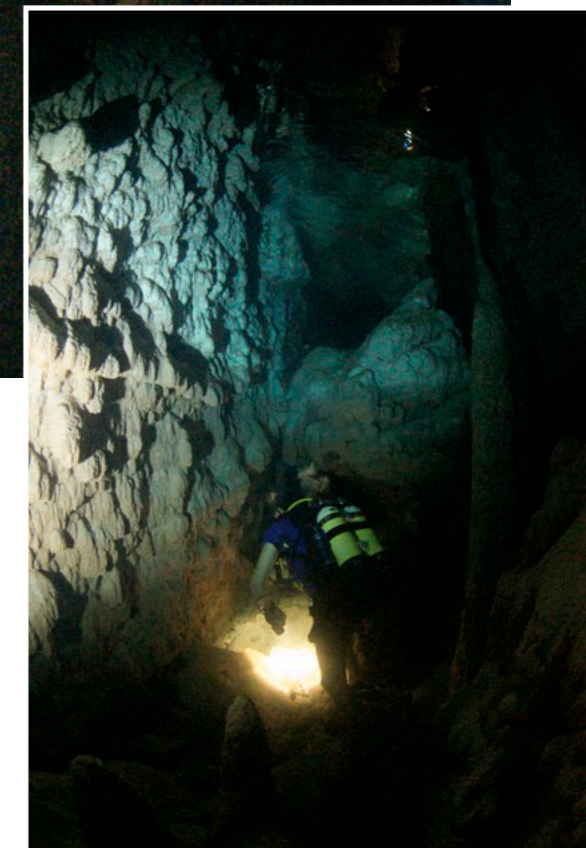
I am still not quite sure how cool I feel about the upcoming adventure, as I do have a bit of an issue with cramped spaces in overhead compartments as a result of once almost getting stuck in a wreck. But as it turns out it is not really an overhead environment, as there will be air above us at almost any given moment, and soon I surrender myself to what is turning into a surreal and certainly unique experience.



pleasant that I thought it would be. In fact, my biggest concern was not bumping my dome port into some protruding rock when going through some of the narrower passages.

**Massage**

We decided to give in to total indulgence and went for a massage afterwards. The therapists were very professional starting off with a short talk about my main issues, sore points and old injuries. As if any of all that talk was necessary, she found them all right soon enough—ouch, eek, aah! It was complete bliss afterwards. The long dive in warm water having already thoroughly warmed up my muscles and joints seemed to make the massage even more efficient



Spa entrance to the cave in the mountain

THIS PAGE: Underwater views in cave



The thermal outdoor pool where guests can enjoy relaxing underwater hydromassage, a waterfall and fresh fruit drinks, lunch and snacks from the poolside Bioaquam Café

as she could dig right straight in where it mattered.

After the session I wobbled—my gait hardly qualifying as walking—out of the massage room and went for a shower. Getting dressed I noticed that I had worked up quite an appetite, and having a quality restaurant just upstairs, I knew where I was heading next.

**Dinner**

The classy surroundings makes you want to dress up nicely and promenade down for dinner in style, although, as it turned out, it also acceptable to dine in your robes. As strange as it may sound it did not seem out of place, perhaps because even the robes were classy, and after all, it was a spa.

Italian cuisine shouldn't need any further introduction, and here we are, in the middle of Tuscany where they produce some of the best wine in the world. Needless to say, I was in for another treat and I had burned off the calories to make room.

As in any upscale restaurant, the menu was short and dominated by local specialties as it should be, and I found myself spoilt for choice. Under such circumstances, I usually ask the waiter for his recommendations, because even



Opulent entrance (above) to Grotta Giusti luxury resort and spa, where lavish floral arrangements adorn every space; In the hotel's restaurant, guests can enjoy a delicious menu of exquisite Tuscan dishes and original recipes by Chef Giuseppe Argentino, accompanied by an impressive selection of wine and aperitifs

though I am quite fond of Italian food and am familiar with many dishes, there always seem to be some new dishes to explore—often something that is just in season for a limited time.

We are clearly in good hands. Chef Giuseppe Argentino knows the secrets of

the Tuscan kitchen and how to combine fresh local produce to make light gourmet meals.

What I in particular favour about dining in the countries around the Mediterranean is that time seems to cease to exist once you are seated in a good restaurant. Dishes are never rushed but come in timely intervals, allowing one to more fully enjoy each one, and enabling the diner to have proper con-



THIS PAGE: Interior and exterior views of the resort, flora and fauna on the nature walks

experience in the cave for the non-divers of the family. There are many other activities to enjoy on the resort's nature walks, tennis courts, swimming pools and several nearby golf greens.

The resort makes a great base from which this historic county of Tuscany can be leisurely explored. Sitting inside the triangle between Bologna, Florence and Pisa, there are plenty of great excursions to



versations with significant others or friends, enjoying the evening in a relaxed manner without checking a time piece ever so often.

**Health and well-being**

The Spa also has a fitness centre, offering Pilates and Qi-gong, and outside there is a golf course and an exercise track in the nearby landscape so you can both please your inner health nut and enjoy being a foodie. Grotta Giusti is surrounded by 45 hectares of parkland, a natural environment of incomparable beauty characterised by age-old trees, fertile hills and fragrant flowers.

One can reach the spa building directly from the hotel, and thus access the extensive facilities providing traditional treatments such as mud baths, respiratory therapies and massages, and a

modern health farm featuring an oriental area, a well-equipped gym, numerous recreation areas and a centre for aesthetic medicine.

The complex is completed by the cave and the outdoor thermal pool with a surface area of 750 m<sup>2</sup> – complemented by underwater massages – and a spectacular waterfall. The water supplying it, containing minerals such as bicarbonates, sulphates, calcium and magnesium, maintains a temperature of 35°C.

It is possible to receive traditional treatments such as mud baths, ozonised baths in thermal water, thermal showers and respiratory therapies carried out under the constant supervision of specialist medical staff. These services are carefully targeted towards physical and psychological well-being

and the improvement of one's physical appearance.

**Escape**

It is a great escape for some days either as a conclusion of a business trip or en route to or from some of the many great dive sites along the Italian coast. A combination with diving the nearby island of Elba springs to mind, or as a pleasant stop-over on the way further south. The resort offers one- to three-night or weekend packages of diving and spa services, appealing to both divers and non-divers alike, as there is the option for a 'floating'

historic places within a relatively short distance, not to mention a range of good dive spots. While the place may come across as being a bit on the posh side, you also get what you

pay for, and I find all the indulgences that come along with a little splurging will make for a most pleasurable and memorable stay. I am quite inclined to pay another visit next time I am in Italy. ■

*For more information, or to book a stay, visit: [www.grottagiustispa.com](http://www.grottagiustispa.com)*

# The Underwater Project goes global with X-RAY MAG

Our new concept, the world's first perpetual underwater shootout competition, started half way through 2014 as an evolution of the popular Underwater Festival established eight years ago. Now the Underwater Project is announcing a partnership with X-RAY MAG.

And with the international scope of X-RAY MAG in mind, we decided to expand the horizons of the Underwater Project to a global one. From

the 1st of January 2015, you can shoot globally to become part of the growing Underwater Project, says Tim Hochgrebe, organiser of the Underwater Project

The Underwater Project is much more than a competition. As the name suggest we have taken the best of the Underwater Festival and have evolved it into a continuous event. A project that continues to share the beauty and the issues of the underwater world and shows the world what we have to lose.

The Underwater Project will create

and support unique local events across the globe throughout the year. Any dive centre, resort, liveaboard or dive club can become an Underwater Project Fringe Event host.

## New features

- A great new fully featured Underwater Project Snapshot Map with entries from past years included (2013 and 2014 now)
- Every member has their own stunning portfolio site with personal snapshot map and personal gallery. If you have been participating in the Underwater Festival in previous years, your past entries are part of your portfolio.



JAN ANTHONY ACOSTA

All images on this page are from 2014's contest

*We aim to again offer up to \$100,000 in prizes!*

per month. Premium memberships are available.

Submitted entries will be screened by the Underwater Project team. Entries that pass this first



- Collect and display awards and achievements (coming soon).
- Your Underwater Festival login and password will work on the project website.

## No more entry fees —just a simple annual membership

There is no charge for individual image or video uploads, instead a simple annual membership fee of U\$50 to join the Underwater Project. Standard membership entitles to 5 photo or 2 video uploads

round of judging will appear on the official Underwater Project Snapshot Map and in your portfolio.

Screened images will be judged annually by the established Underwater Project judging panel including Mathieu Meur, Gary Bell, Stephen Wong, Takako Uno, Kevin Deacon and David Warth, and we aim to again offer up to \$100,000 in prizes.

**Two step judging —Participation is what matters**  
All year round you can upload

*Get Involved!*

## Spread the word

Please help us spread the word about the Underwater Project with our fantastic new banners and logos and link them back to the Underwater Project site. We are looking for social media marketing volunteers to help spread this project across the planet. If you know your way around social media and have some time to give, please get in touch.

See you underwater!

— Tim Hochgrebe, Peter Symes and the Underwater Project Team

your images and clip links to the Underwater Project website.

Photos and videos have to be uploaded in the month AFTER the month they were taken—you no longer need to change the camera date to participate.

Please help us to create all the amazing features we have planned for the Underwater Project and JOIN NOW!

The Underwater Project formerly known as the Underwater Festival™

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*Share the Passion!  
Join the Underwater Project!*



VANESSA MIGNON