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REPORT  
Border patrol: Lampedusa

# ABOVE THE WATER —Italy

## Preface

In the second part of our series on Europe's borders, we report from the Italian island of Lampedusa. Each year 20,000 immigrants enter the country illegally by sea and 70 per cent of them land on this tiny outpost with a population of just 5,000 locals.

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Standing onboard the CP 275, Benito Damanti, a captain in the Italian Coast Guard, takes a moment to check his boat's navigational system. After correcting the time on the GPS monitor, he calls up a map of the Mediterranean. With the aid of a mouse he zooms in on a stretch of water between Sicily and the North African coast.

"Here, in effect, is our border," he says, gesturing to the sea surrounding Lampedusa, the island that marks Italy's southernmost point. In place of barbed-wire fences and CCTV cameras, he and his crew monitor the area aboard their 50-tonne launch. In the past their main worry was keeping unregulated fishing in check. Today, they have their hands full rescuing illegal immigrants who risk their lives trying to make it ashore.

Thanks to its proximity to Africa – it is just over 100km away – Lampedusa is a favourite destination for migrants eager to find a way into Europe. Of the 20,000 people who entered Italy illegally by sea in 2007, two-thirds made landfall here. Fleeing war and dire economic conditions, refugees see the arid, windswept island as a stepping stone to a better life.

A successful landing in Lampedusa – last year nearly 500 drowned attempting to make the passage – means transfer to one of the country's processing centres in Sicily or on the mainland. Once there,



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The almost year-round arrivals are a major headache for Italian authorities, whose resources are already stretched



migrants can make their case for asylum. An estimated 4,000 submitted applications in 2007.

About two-thirds receive some form of protective status, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. If their appeal is not granted they are handed an expulsion order by Italian authorities. The document, known as a *“foglio di via”*, gives them five days in which to leave the country. However, most migrants are not accompanied to the frontier by police and so simply ignore the order. They are then free to move within the EU, as the Schengen Agreement has abolished border controls between member states.

The almost year-round arrivals are a major headache for Italian authorities, whose resources are already stretched due to the fact that they have to police the country’s vast 8,000km coastline.

In Lampedusa’s harbour, the wind whips steady at 25 knots and the waves push hard against the fishing trawlers at anchor. Onboard CP 275, the crew fight off boredom. The morning patrol for this late winter day has been called off.

The sudden turn in the weather suggests the coming days will be quiet. However, Damanti and his men know it will be short-lived. When the sea is calm, especially in summer, it’s not unusual to see half a dozen small craft in the vicinity of Lampedusa in a 24-hour period.

To get within reach of the island migrants pay traffickers operating in Tunisian and Libyan ports to organise a crossing. Refugees lucky enough to depart from the Tunisian city of Mahdia

make the journey in as little as 12 hours, should the motor not give out and the currents intercede. Many, however, arrive via Libya and often end up adrift on the high seas, out of fuel.

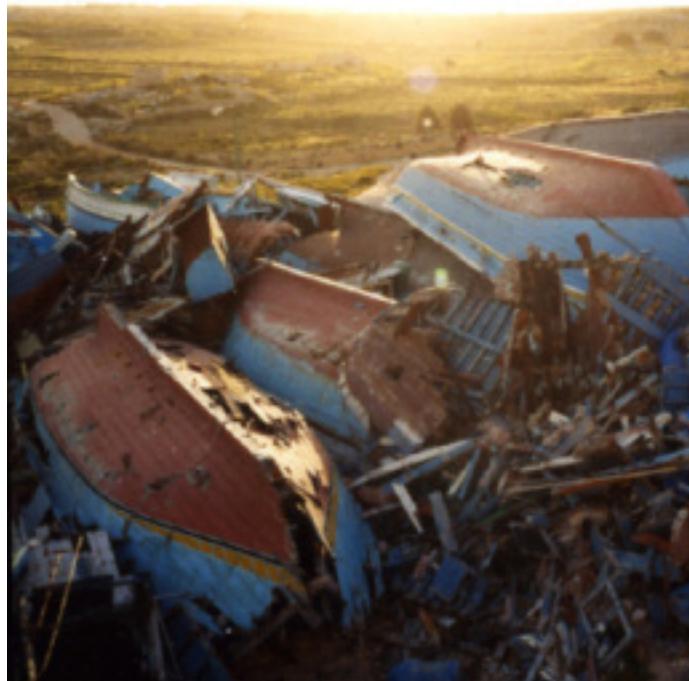
“These people have nothing to lose,” says Damanti as he shows some digital photographs taken during a rescue last year. One pictures a 7m-long rubber dingy, with strips of duct tape protecting the sides, which ferried 40 Somali refugees for three days. Boats this small present a challenge since they are difficult to locate as radar confuses their signature with the waves.

Traffickers often procure ageing wooden fishing boats while the unlucky ones may have to gamble on skiffs and rigid inflatables not designed for travel over open water. All are jammed with

passengers and carry limited food and water. The passengers risk dehydration under the blazing Mediterranean sun in summer and hypothermia if they try to cross in colder months when the water temperature can drop as low as 8c.

Unlike at other border crossings, migrants heading towards Lampedusa hope to be spotted, at times relying on local fishermen to relay their whereabouts. In some cases migrants aboard the boats use a satellite phone to call for help once they get close to Italian waters.

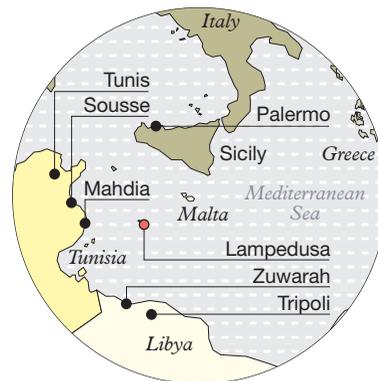
“They give us their position, longitude and latitude, from a feature on the handset,” says Lieutenant Achille Selleri, who is in charge of Coast Guard operations at Lampedusa. “As for our phone number, they can get it off the internet.” If a boat makes a distress call from



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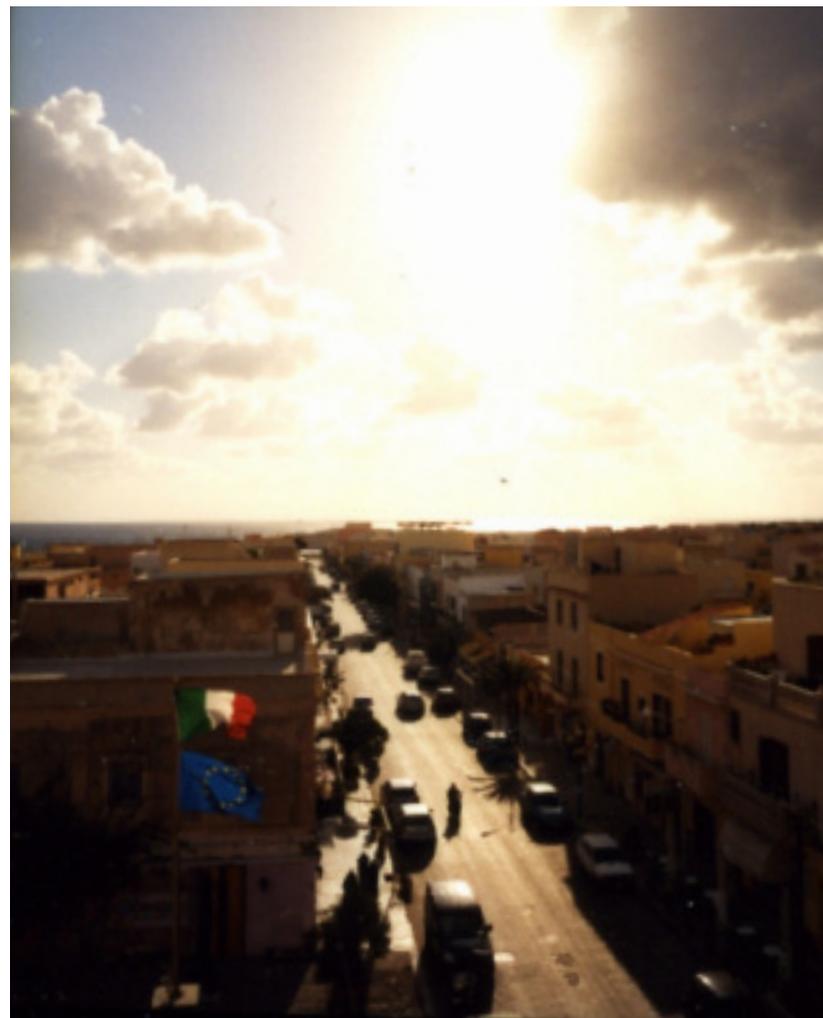
- 01 Guardia di Finanza crew and patrol boat
- 02 Each immigrant is provided with a €5 phonecard to telephone relatives
- 03 The Lampedusa Coast Guard crest. The Latin at the bottom translates as: “In Rough Seas, For Humanity”



Guardia di Finanza

Known for its efforts in fighting the Mafia and bringing Italy’s tax cheats into line, the Guardia di Finanza is taking the lead in fighting illegal immigration. Operating a dedicated border unit comprising five aeronaval squadrons, last year the agency picked up over 11,000 migrants at sea, and made 662 related smuggling arrests. Along with Lampedusa, the agency is monitoring the recent surge in migrants making the crossing from Annaba in Algeria to Sardinia.

Finanza expects to begin operations along the Libyan coast after a December accord was signed between Rome and Tripoli. This sees a deployment of six patrol boats – crewed by Italians and Libyans – and training of Libyan border guards: boats will be towed back to Africa. The agency has also lent its experience to European partners, including Spain in an operation last year in Senegal where air patrols intercepted boatloads of migrants heading for the Canary Islands, a journey that results in hundreds of deaths every year.



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*This spread*

- 01 Junkyard of boats used by migrants
- 02 Via Roma, Lampedusa’s main street
- 03 The island’s mayor, Bernardino De Rubeis: “Geographically speaking we are part of Tunisia but politically we are part of Italy.”

- 04 Guardia di Finanza’s Luigi Fusco
- 05 Federico Miragliotta, director of the Lampedusa immigration facility. He says: “Here is where the mix begins. On the boat the migrants are normally all from the same town, ethnic group or nationality.”



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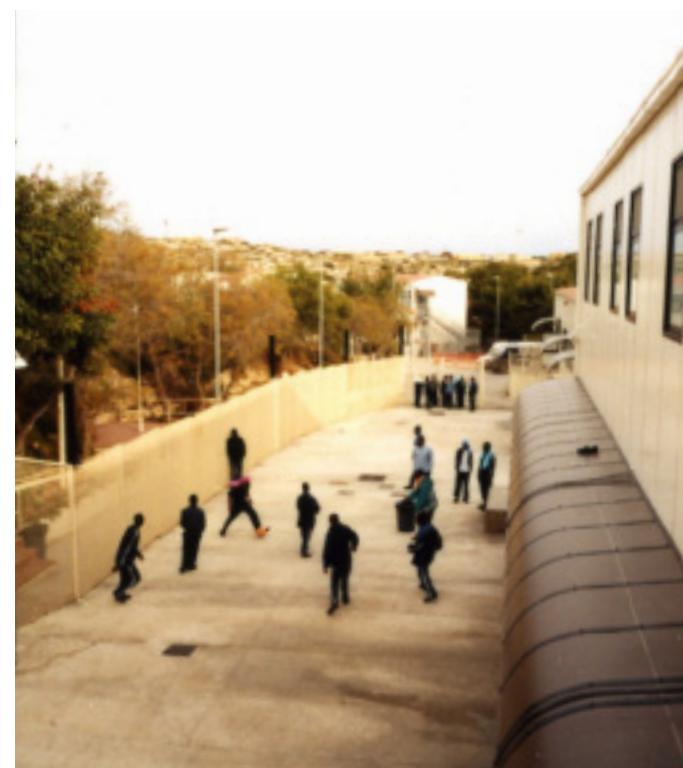
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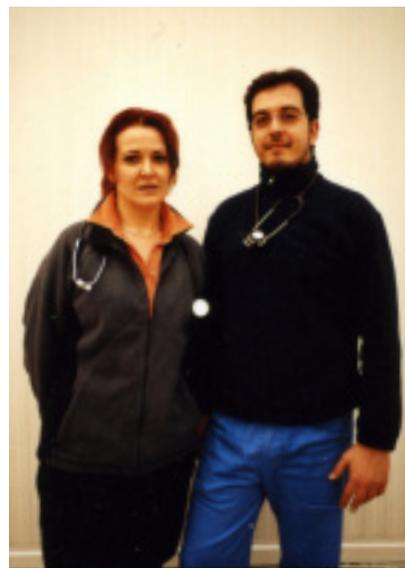
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01 Entrance to the immigrant detention centre. The facility has beds for 800.  
02 Stefania Bevanda and Marco Salvaggio, doctors at the detention centre, are on call at all hours to treat patients  
03 Coast Guard Lieutenant Achille Selleri, harbourmaster of Lampedusa port

04 Benito Damanti, captain of Coast Guard launch CP 275  
05 African immigrants play football in the detention centre



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beyond the 12-nautical mile limit that delineates where the country's territorial waters end, international maritime conventions permit Selleri to intervene as part of a search-and-rescue effort. "Our main concern is for the safety of these people; we leave the immigration part to the Guardia di Finanza."

Indeed, if a boatload of migrants happens to reach Italian waters unnoticed, there's a good chance they will run into the Guardia di Finanza. They operate a marine service (*see box, page 063*) that deals with contraband and human trafficking. Restricted to patrolling in national waters, they conduct searches in hope of discovering who the trafficking ringleaders might be.

"Unfortunately, once they're spotted by a patrol plane or fishing boat, they free

themselves of the sat phones," says Lieutenant Luigi Fusco of the Guardia di Finanza. "Sometimes we might find someone with cash on them but usually it's hard to pinpoint who is behind this."

Once migrants are escorted ashore, medical staff at the pier provide first aid. Many immigrants are treated for burns from improperly stored gasoline that leaks and sloshes around the bottom of the tightly packed boats, coming into contact with people's skin.

"What most don't realise is that this is only the last leg of the journey for them," says Laura Rizzello, a nurse with Croce Rossa Italiana [the Italian Red Cross]. "They've already had to put up with a lot of hardship."

The odyssey for such migrants begins thousands of kilometres away

in the war-torn streets of Mogadishu and in economically depressed towns in Togo and Burkina Faso. They pay several thousand euros to trek through the Sahara and have been on the move for at least a year.

Having arrived safely to Lampedusa, the next stage begins at a holding centre. Individuals are fingerprinted and interviewed – usually with the help of translators in French, Arabic and English. They are supplied with a navy tracksuit, sandals, towel and T-shirt, as well as vouchers for daily meals in the canteen.

A former army barracks, the new centre is part of an initiative to improve Italy's image when it comes to immigration. The previous facility, a collection of maintenance shacks that abutted the island's airport, was roundly criticised by human rights activists for its cramped conditions that forced people to sleep outside on concrete.

Now, a new organisation is overseeing the centre, putting the finishing touches to a children's play park. Outside the two whitewashed buildings housing the men's dorm – roughly 85 per cent of arrivals are male – a game of football is being played, with rubbish bins being used as makeshift goalposts. Each day, a ration of 10 cigarettes is passed out to adults. And at one corner of the lot, a group of Muslim men kneel for sunset prayers, using their towels as prayer mats.

"I'm happy," says Peter, a refugee from Imo State in Nigeria. He has been on the move for three years, spending the last year washing cars in Tripoli to make enough to pay for his passage. "In my homeland I could not worship freely as a Christian. But here I have that freedom. Thank God." — (M)