

Pomp and splendour: Stepping back in time (through the ash) at the greatest ruins of all

By CLIVE ASLET

PUBLISHED: 10:19, 18 April 2012 | UPDATED: 10:19, 18 April 2012

Site Web Search

Fortunately, looking for holiday reading my 16-year old had spotted Mary Beard's Pompeii (an award-winning book that became a TV series), which is rich in absorbing detail and this helped to whet young appetites and arouse curiosity.

My own, rather bleak memory, was having flogged around the site as a student on parched expanses of parched road, beneath a baking sun. This time, I thought, we'd do it differently - in comfort and, most important, with a guide.



In the firing line: Two thousand years on, Vesuvius still broods above Pompeii

So no youth hostel: we stayed at Sorrento, at the other end of bite-shaped Bay of Naples from the city itself, within sight of Vesuvius. Around the corner of the promontory is the lovely Amalfi coast, offshore the much-sung Isle of Capri, and the Emperor Augustus had a holiday villa in Sorrento, part of it in the grounds of our hotel, the sedately magnificent Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria.

The Edwardians loved Sorrento and you can see why. The view across the bay to the volcano turned even a salty sailor like Horatio Nelson into a romantic - he wooed Emma Hamilton away from her husband, the British ambassador to the Kingdom of Naples.

The Mail Online

18th April 2012



Back in time: The Aslet family prepare for their Roman history lesson

The city - a confusion of washing lines and chic cafes, deliciously cool mozzarella shops, the occasional dead rat and a wonderful and under-visited archaeological museum - is just 40 minutes from Sorrento if you take one of the fast ferries.

Pompeii and Herculaneum are nearer, but the car journey is a battle on the southern roads, so don't take a taxi: the little train is more fun, less stressful and quicker.

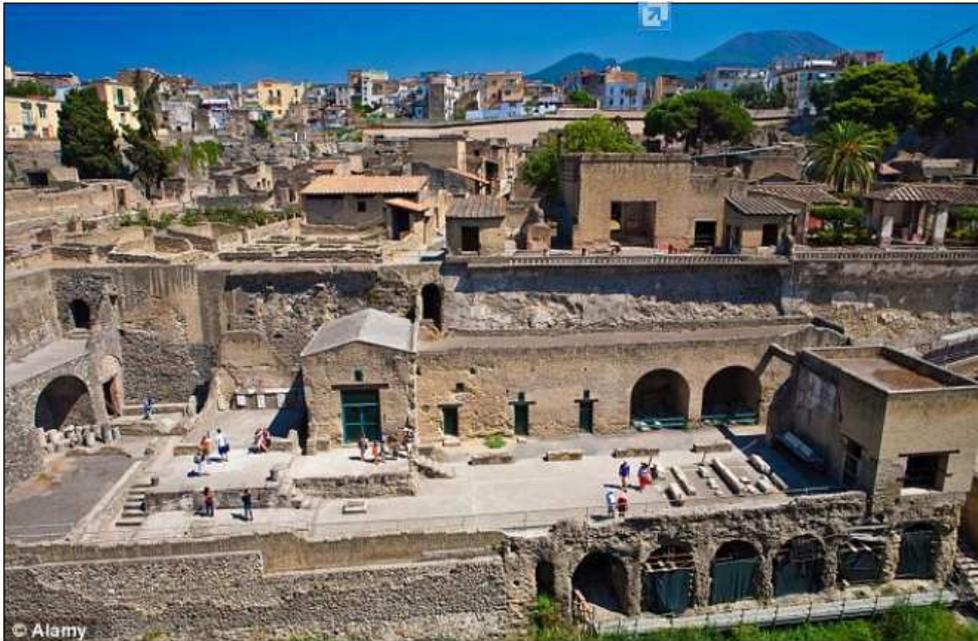
Recalling the summer heat of my previous visit, I thought it best to go off-season, though as luck would have it, we spent a couple of days locked in a low-pressure system that made us glad we weren't wearing togas.

But our guides, one supplied by the hotel, the other by the tourist office, made all the difference - we felt we could practically shake the long-dead Roman inhabitants by the hand as we walked round the ruins.

Herculaneum was nestled just beneath Vesuvius and when it erupted, its top third was blown into the air, sending up a plume of debris thousands of feet high and a bubbling, scalding tide of lava down its western flank.

Visit Herculaneum first: it's better preserved than Pompeii, because fast-flowing mud rolled down Vesuvius and in through doors and windows, filling up the buildings

18th April 2012



© Alamy
The ghost next door: Herculaneum is arguably better preserved than Pompeii - and is less crowded

Pompeii wasn't overwhelmed by mud or the pyroclastic flow of deadly gases which accompanies an eruption. Instead, the wind drove a hailstorm of tiny pumice fragments and hot ash that covered the town.

The ash formed a mould around bodies that ingenious 19th century archaeologists would fill with plaster, bringing us face to face with the Roman population in the last agonies of despair.

Not only are the excavations at Herculaneum more recent than those at Pompeii, but the site is less crowded and fewer areas are closed off. The houses of wealthier Romans have floor mosaics and wall paintings everywhere.

People from the tenements, which did not have kitchens, could feed themselves from the Roman equivalent of fast food bars - the boys were fascinated.

Twenty-five refugees tried to escape Herculaneum in a fishing boat, but their vessel was hurled back onto the shore by the tsunami-like waves that followed the eruption's earthquakes. There it was overturned, its occupants now trapped beneath it.

The refugees and their boat were soon engulfed by an intense heat that burnt away their flesh and turned the craft's timbers to charcoal. The boat and the skeletons were discovered in 1982, and after 18 years of painstaking restoration, they were put on show in a specially constructed museum.

The Mail Online

18th April 2012

The sheer scale of Pompeii is impressive, and visiting on a rainy day made us understand why the pavements were built up above the level of the roads: water sloshed down the causeways, possibly carrying away some of the foul-smelling detritus that was regularly thrown into them.

Unlike Herculaneum, Pompeii didn't have sewers: the clay waste pipes which allowed chamber pots to be emptied from the first floors of some houses issued directly into the street.



Past perfect: Clive managed to coax plenty of enthusiasm out of his kids after all

Elegance and squalor existed cheek by jowl. They still do. The South of Italy still hasn't solved the rubbish problem. Vesuvius no longer smokes, but don't be fooled; that only means that a cap of rock has formed on the top. The next eruption could be a big one.

Clive Aslet is editor-at-large of Country Life.

Travel Facts

Classic Collection Holidays (0800 294 9318, www.classiccollection.co.uk) offers seven nights for a family of four at the Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria from £4,668 including breakfast, return flights and private transfers.

For details on the activities available in Sorrento (0039 081 8074033, www.sorrentotourism.com).

For information on Capri (00 39 081 8370686, www.capritourism.com).