

Oh Amalfi: Janet Street-Porter walks into a world of wonder on Italy's fabled coastline

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This was carb heaven.

I was eating a home-made pasta with a subtle creamy sauce, accompanied by a glass of the local red wine on a sunny terrace high above the harbour at Sorrento. I was feeling a million dollars, (OK, my nose might have been a bit sunburned) and this was my reward for a morning of walking.



What a cliffhanger: Positano is one of the jewels of the Amalfi Coast

I had just completed one of the most famous hikes in Italy - the Path of the Gods. There is nothing more inspiring than shimmering light combined with an exhilarating landscape - and the Amalfi peninsula offers both, with paths that curve round sheer cliffs offering glorious views in all directions.

The sea far below is a seductive, opal blue, with the beautiful island of Capri clearly visible offshore. Bisected by a dramatic spine of mountains rising to nearly 5,000ft, there are great places to stay in ancient hill towns, tiny ports and there's delicious local cuisine.

Every square foot of land is turned into a series of productive terraces perched in impossible locations, growing fruit, vegetables, vines, olives and the lemons used to make limoncello, the region's famous digestif. Ancient farmhouses overlook precipices, and well-maintained footpaths connect monasteries, churches and remote hamlets with the busy ports far below.

I was based in Sorrento, at the Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria, a favourite of Caruso, Sophia Loren and Luciano Pavarotti. The hotel (and the town) sits on top of a cliff around 200ft above the sea, with a lift to the port below. Its gardens are divine, the rooms beautifully restored.

Walking here is best in May and June or September - the high season is too hot and crowded.

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I took a taxi after breakfast to the start of my walk with my guide, Giovanni Visetti, who runs a local hiking company. In Bomerano, a small village on the north coast of the peninsula, we took the narrow road going left out of the main square signposted Sentiero degli Dei (Path of the Gods).

Blue and yellow butterflies fluttered overhead and little green lizards scurried out of our path underfoot. What a profusion of wild flowers!

I started making a list: pink and purple cyclamen, wild orchids, three different kinds of broom (Scottish, Spanish and Italian), myrtle, yellow and pink rock roses (cistus), pink valerian, wild rosemary growing out of the most inhospitable rocks, sage, thyme and white alyssum.

Heavenly sounds, sights, perfumes - no wonder it's called the Path of the Gods, with the song of the birds, the tinkling of bells on the herds of grazing goats and the chirping crickets for company.



The path to glory: Janet (and guide) explore the Path of the Gods (left) - and ever-sumptuous Sorrento (right)

After two-and-a-half hours, we reached Nocelle, where I felt as if I'd entered a secret world, one tourists never see from a car. Then a taxi back to Sorrento and it was time for a celebratory lunch on the terrace of the historic Foreigners' Club, looking down on the harbour.

Shrimps and chickpeas to start, followed by kneaded pasta in a cheese and cream sauce - delicious, but sinful. I decided on an afternoon perambulation to make room for supper.

At the end of the peninsula, the empty hilltop village of Termini is perched on the edge of the cliffs, far away from tourists, with the sea all around. I followed an old track all the way down to the lighthouse and climbed back up following the edge of the cliff.

If the Path of the Gods was extraordinary, this humble footpath was even better. At the top of the cliffs, a tree offered shade. As I rested my sweaty limbs, a man in baggy trousers and a blue workman's shirt was exercising his old labrador. We exchanged greetings, the only person I encountered that sleepy afternoon.

Later, strolling through the narrow streets of Sorrento at dusk, the sound of a choir practising in a library behind the church, competed with the noise of children playing.

Down an alleyway above the port I found Il Buco, a popular restaurant specialising in local dishes. It extends through whitewashed rooms, once the wine cellars of the local monastery.

I started with carpaccio of fish - tuna and squid with roasted fennel, prawns cured in orange. Then, lemon and mozzarella ravioli with scampi and sea urchin, served with pea shoots. Finally, sea bass cooked with lemongrass. A feast - and a fitting celebration of a wonderful holiday.

Travel Facts

The Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria, Sorrento (00 39 081 877 7845, www.exvitt.it) offers three nights' B&B from £749 per person, based on two sharing a classic garden room, including return flights and private transfers - through Classic Collection Holidays (0800 294 9318, www.classic-collection.co.uk).

Hotel opens March 29.

A good guidebook is Julian Tippet's *Landscapes Of Sorrento, Amalfi And Capri*, published by Sunflower Books.