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Sorrento in estasi

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NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE

Sorrento

Shaney Hudson finds a few surprises on a trip to a holiday resort dating to the days of the Roman empire.

Each time I open the wooden shutters to our patio, I get a little kick of breathlessness. From our cliff-top nest, we look kilometres across the wide blue dish that is the Bay of Naples to the cauldron of Mount Vesuvius. The Mediterranean stretches to infinity.

To our right are the red-tiled rooftops, hidden gardens and church domes of Sorrento, perching on steep white cliffs. Below us, where the ocean laps the cliffs, a jetty juts into the shallow aquamarine blue, where the water is so clear I can see fish swimming lazily around above the seabed. Behind the village, hills filled with citrus groves roll hazily towards the horizon.

I spend a lot of my time in Sorrento simply sitting on this oversize terrace, splashed in sunlight, drinking in the view. I have lists of places to see and things I want to do all over the Amalfi coastline, but my room, this patio, this view, is making me do the one thing I needed to do most on this holiday - stop, and take a deep breath.

We arrived in Sorrento by ferry from Naples, two cities that stare at each other across the Bay of Naples like beauty and the beast, united only by the common enemy of Vesuvius, the active volcano best known for burying the ancient town of Pompeii under volcanic ash.

Since the time of the Roman empire, Sorrento has been a favourite holiday resort for aristocrats and nobles, with its easy access to the Amalfi Coast, the island of Capri and the city of Pompeii. Today, it still thrives on its resort tag - there are hotels along every cliff, cruise ships in the bay and day-trippers visiting on the local SITA bus.

At first glance, it's easy to be intimidated by this Italian resort town, where a battalion of deckchairs and matching beach umbrellas are lined up in formation on every beach, ready to do battle for the euro summer set. Even the fireworks that buzz overhead at night from the cruise ships moored offshore appear like canon fire between pirate ships. And what they are fighting for is pretty clear - it's a fight to the death for the tourist dollar.

But move beyond the crowds and you'll find Sorrento has many redeeming features - it would be far too easy to dismiss it as just another overexposed Italian resort. There's a reason why the people flock here, and the town still has the ability to surprise.

One of the most magical spots has to be the Artists Alley, a historic place where Sorrento's joiners, inlayers and carpenters had their studios, a part of the city where the mediaeval streets are pinched in towards each other. An old Greek gate marks where an ancient fortification once protected the town, and a steep path leads down to Marina Grande, a tiny harbour with seafood restaurants and a free swimming beach.

Inside one of the artist's workshops I fall



Trip notes

Getting there

Emirates flies from Sydney to Rome via Dubai, priced from \$1862, 1300 303 777, emirates.com. There are hourly rail connections from Rome to Naples, priced from €10 (\$14), with connections by rail or ferry to Sorrento.

Staying there

Hotel Minerva GD (Via Capo, Sorrento) has 63 rooms (52 with sea views), with doubles from €100 to €300 a day, including buffet breakfast. +099 081 878 1011, minervasorrento.com.

More information
sorrentotourism.com

in love with a work of art - a piece of smashed terracotta, hundreds of years old, recovered from the bottom of the seabed and covered in barnacles and shells and delicately painted with mythical mermaids based on local legends. But the owners won't sell it to me. It hangs in the store because they are proud of this piece, created on such a rare canvas. I respect the fact that in a town so thirsty for the tourist dollar, money can't buy you everything.

Money can, however, buy me one of the most satisfying meals I've had in Italy, and I find it at L'Antica Trattoria. One bite of my main course - handmade pecorino tortellini with granules of Sicilian paprika, fresh green beans and butter - and I have no regrets on blowing the dining budget out of the water. And after my partner takes a mouthful of his whitefish baked in lemon leaves, he's in agreement. Afterwards, we stroll back to the hotel by the Corso Italia, Sorrento's main street, which is blocked off to traffic and is filled with local families taking their post-dinner stroll.



SWOON



On our last afternoon, a friendly local points out an unmarked mass of green on our map - an oasis in the city not mentioned in my guidebook: a lemon grove that occupies a city block in the middle of town and which we're amazed we missed. Walking inside the shady grove, the city noise fades and birdsong takes over.

Here, lemons the size of softballs hang from trees, and in the fading afternoon light the fruit glows like yellow orbs. Wild yellow buttercups fold up their delicate leaves as the shadows lengthen and the sun begins to go down.



There's a reason why the people flock here.

A small stall is set up in the middle of the grove, offering free tastings of limoncello, the home-made lemon liqueur the town is famous for. A father and his daughter are packing up for the day, but insist on us sitting down on the rotting picnic tables to try some. The teenager pours us small shots as her father proudly watches on. It tastes like lemon gin, strongly stripping down our throat.

While bottles of the aperitif are available all over town, we end up buying a few bottles here in the grove, the father filling our bag of goodies with fresh lemons from a nearby tree. Our tiny 100ml bottles of limoncello are not really a purchase - they're part of a good memory.

The next morning, we're sad to leave. It's a less-dramatic departure by train than our ferry ride over. But as the train pulls out of the station, it passes through a lemon grove and the scent of citrus wafts into the humid carriage. Our heads snap up and we breathe a deep lungful of Sorrento's air - cold salty sea breeze with the fresh scent of lemons. It helps us to breathe out one last time.

Shaney Hudson travelled with the assistance of the Italian Government Tourist Office.



Baywatch: (Clockwise from above) a glimpse of Sorrento; the Amalfi Coast; umbrellas line the beach; the old trattoria sign. Photos: Getty Images