

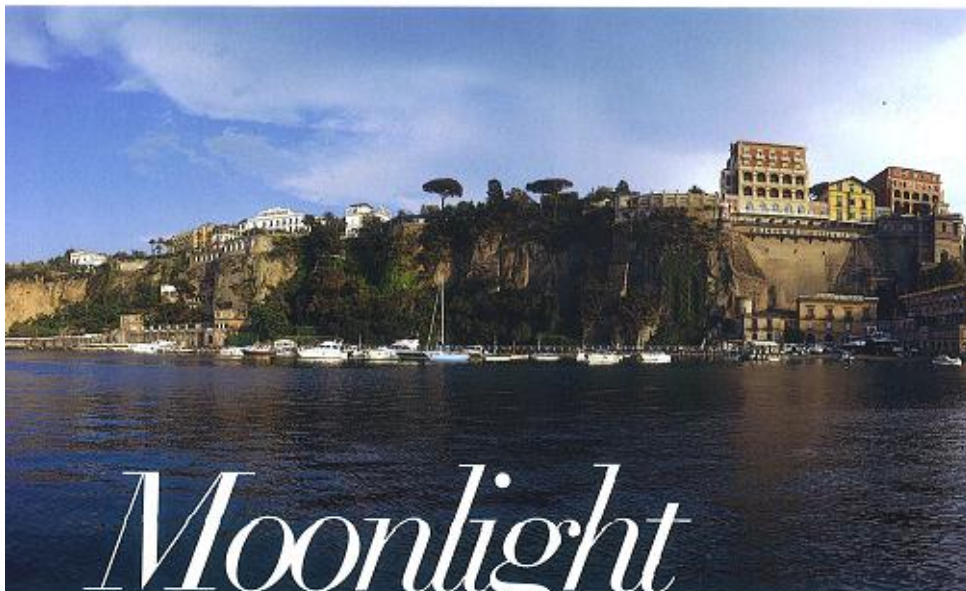
Client: Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria

Source: The Mayfair Magazine

Date: September 2014



Exploring
Amalfi



Moonlight sonata

Host to luminaries from around the world, as the Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria celebrates its 180th anniversary, we find out why this historic hotel is still Sorrento's cliff-top jewel and explore the area's revered food and culture

WORDS: KATE RACOVOLIS

You may have the universe if I may have Italy,' said famed Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi. So many parts of Italy conjure this same passion that Verdi implied – the country's food, fashion, art and history are all so rich and vibrant, even the thought of taking a sojourn there can feel truly indulgent.

And in a few places, all of Italy's best features come together – especially around the coast and in particular, Sorrento; the slightly less

ostentatious cousin of Capri – but equally as elegant and glamorous. Upon first glance, the sparkling bay beneath the iconic cliff shimmers as if it has been peppered with diamonds, filling the sea between there and Naples.

Mount Vesuvius sits dormant, yet formidably, overlooking all of Naples and the peninsula of Sorrento, as well as the well-preserved ancient Roman ruins of Herculaneum, the structure of which was enveloped by the volcanic eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD.

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The narrow, winding cobblestoned streets are lined with vendors selling lemon-flavoured everything (the citrus fruit is particularly abundant in this region), but even this tourist-packed part of Sorrento still retains a certain charm. Few establishments characterise this place quite as much as the Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria, which stands at the heart of this busy but small town on the clifftop overlooking the bay.

The black iron gates to the Excelsior Vittoria sit on one of the main streets of Sorrento, but the entrance is deceptive. The gates lead to a long, extended driveway surrounded by a leafy five-acre park, which abounds with lemon and orange trees. The grounds are also dotted with archaeological remains, as the hotel is said to have been the site where a villa belonging to the Roman Emperor Augustus once stood.

The hotel itself is a local icon and a historic landmark in its own right, and this year, celebrates its 180th anniversary. Since the hotel's inception, it has been managed by five generations of the Fiorentino family, and from the moment you arrive, it's immediately clear that this is a special place that could not be replicated. The hotel has a strong sense of identity, which is deeply entrenched in its long history, which has seen luminaries from around the world pass through its classical rooms. Countless members of various royal families are counted among the hotel's list of past guests, including the Prince of Wales who visited in 1874

and again in 1910 when he was King of England, Queen Victoria of Sweden and the Grand Duchess Catherine of Russia, to name but a few. Sophia Loren and Pierce Brosnan have also stayed, as well as Lucio Dalla, who wrote his famed song *Coraso* at the establishment.

Staying at the Excelsior Vittoria is like travelling back to a less fast-paced way of life, and a glamorous one at that. All of a sudden, technology seems somewhat redundant. It certainly helps that everywhere you look, including the room in which you are staying is decorated with original masterpieces from the

'Staying at the Excelsior Vittoria is like travelling back to a less fast-paced way of life'

18th and 19th centuries, Louis XVI as well as Art Nouveau pendants and frescoes. The Belle Époque Winter Garden, the centrepiece of the hotel which leads on to the terrace overlooking the bay, is a place where you could easily spend an entire afternoon, taking in the views and indulging in tea and crostata, made with marmalade from the hotel's oranges.

Here, breakfast is a grand affair, as you can take your morning meal in one of the most beautiful spaces in the hotel; the Ristorante Vittoria, a breathtaking →



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ballroom, while you are soothed by the sweet notes of a baby grand piano.

To truly unwind, the spa, La Serra, is also not to be missed, and it sits in its own conservatory-style enclave next to the hotel. Here you can select from a series of treatments, both energising and relaxing. The Lemon and Orange Garden signature treatment will give your skin a proper dose of vitamin C and contains anti-oxidants, using the lemons and oranges that Sorrento is known for.

This is the often difficult-to-achieve balance that the Excelsior Vittoria strikes perfectly; the meeting of history and a museum-like place with the amenities that we have come to expect of a five-star hotel. This makes for an altogether wonderfully authentic and memorable place to stay. The hotel has also recently refurbished some of its rooms to suit more contemporary tastes. Antique furnishings have been replaced with more minimalist style interiors, yet still, the historic charm of the hotel is never lost.

While it's easy to forget there is a world outside of the hotel's beautiful interior and surrounding park, Capri is just a 30-minute boat ride away, as

is the Neapolitan riviera. A climb up Mount Vesuvius is not as daunting as it sounds, but rather, mysterious and intriguing, as you can still see small plumes of volcanic gases gently rising from some parts of the volcano. Best of all, there is a beautiful view overlooking Naples and the bay towards the island of Capri. Closer to sea level, stop by Pastificio Gentile in Gragnano to visit the Zampino family, who own one of the best pasta factories in Italy (which, incidentally, is used in many of Mayfair's best restaurants). This small but picturesque town is where pasta was originally made using a technique called *Metodo Cirillo*. This dries the pasta at a slow, low temperature, akin to how it was originally dried in the streets under the sun (before automobiles were introduced into our lives). As you are served a plate of its pasta, cooked perfectly *al dente* with just a touch of tomato and basil, you need only fill your nose with its fresh, simple scent to appreciate this beautiful part of Italian culture.

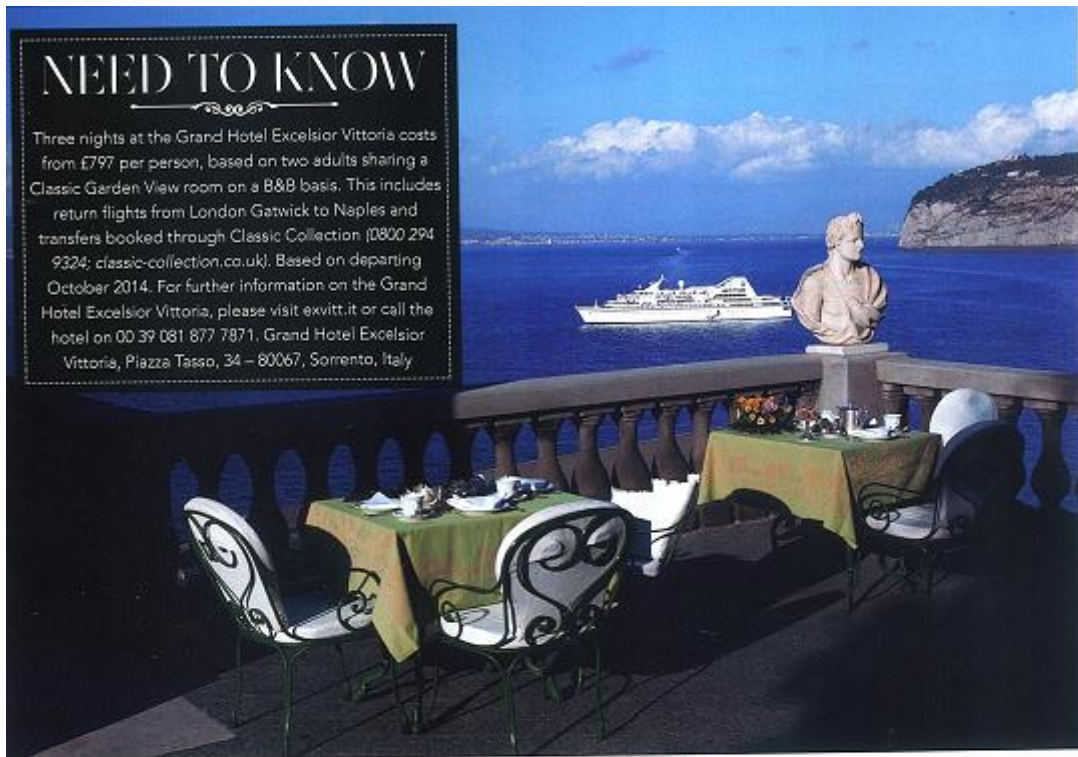
Regardless of what you choose to do in Sorrento, you may come to see just how easily you would trade the universe for this part of Italy, and the Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria at that, even if only for a little while. ■



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NEED TO KNOW

Three nights at the Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria costs from £797 per person, based on two adults sharing a Classic Garden View room on a B&B basis. This includes return flights from London Gatwick to Naples and transfers booked through Classic Collection (0800 294 9324; classic-collection.co.uk). Based on departing October 2014. For further information on the Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria, please visit exvitt.it or call the hotel on 00 39 081 877 7871. Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria, Piazza Tasso, 34 – 80067, Sorrento, Italy

