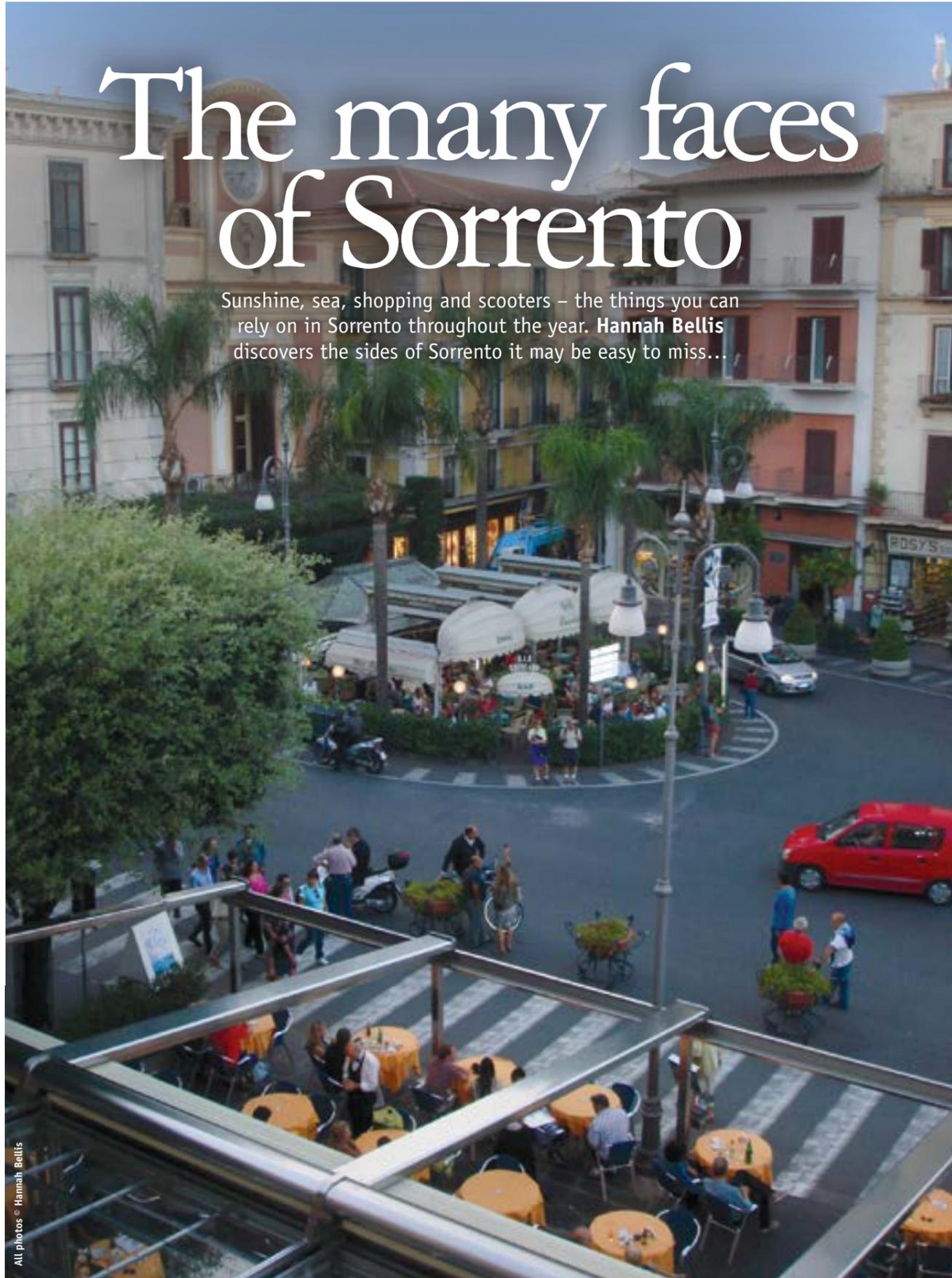


The many faces of Sorrento

Sunshine, sea, shopping and scooters – the things you can rely on in Sorrento throughout the year. **Hannah Bellis** discovers the sides of Sorrento it may be easy to miss...



All photos © Hannah Bellis



Here is the heart of the city, tabled terraces, mopeds aplenty and long walkways of grey swirled paving with decorative shapes like tidemarks on a beach



Whatever time of year you visit Sorrento, it always seems to be sunny, from the cheerful yellow façade of the church of Santa Maria del Carmine in bustling Piazza Tasso to the equally bustling sun-dappled shopping streets around via Cesareo. Perhaps this is what makes the place feel sunny – it is frequently bustling but never hurried. The beautiful sea vistas and pedestrianization of the centre that bans cars from 7pm brings things back to a holiday pace of life. The crowds can fill the roads with no cars to worry about. The trees are full of citrus fruit and the terraces awash with holidaymakers enjoying a drink or a coffee and watching the world go by.

Any visitor will find this place charming – it exists as a holiday destination. On a map, it looks like two triangles joined by points at via Capo, so in reality it has six sides. It is certainly a city of different moods, all of them a treat.

Clockwise from far left: Dusk in Piazza Tasso; Hannah tastes a tiny lemon sorbet; wonderfully tatty Marina Grande; Vesuvius backs sunset views; produce on via Cesareo

I began as most visitors do at the Piazza Tasso of the *centro storico*, named after the 16th century poet Torquato Tasso, who was born in Sorrento. Most famous as the author of the poem *Jerusalem Delivered*, he suffered from mental illness and died a few days before he was due to be crowned King of the Poets by the Pope. The square is a fitting monument celebrating the city's most famous son – you'll find a statue of him in its northeast corner. When I visited, a Dalí festival was on and the square full of surrealist sculpture alongside his statue, vibrant and thought-provoking amid the crowds, not unlike the poetry of the man himself. Here is the geographical heart of the city, tabled terraces, mopeds aplenty, and long walkways of clean grey swirled paving with decorative white shapes like tidemarks on a beach.

Venture towards the sea to find the small but calm green space of the Villa Comunale park, overlooking the Bay of Naples and Vesuvius. It's another square



THINGS YOU'LL FIND IT HARD TO DO IN SORRENTO

➤ **SWIM**
The sea is all around you, and looks fabulous sparkling in the sun. But it's not easy to get to the water as you are so far above it, and when you do, it's expensive to swim. There is very little beach to speak off anywhere in the city – the best is the pebbles at Marina Grande, and you can swim from pontoons erected beneath Villa Comunale. You will have to pay for the privilege though, around €25, which includes use of a sun longer, so if you are going to take to the water, plan to make it worth your while.

➤ **EXPERIENCE CRIME**
Of course, there are pickpockets in Sorrento, just as there are along the whole of the coast, but it is far less of a problem here than it is in Naples. Tourism is what fuels the whole economy of the place, so petty tourist crime is not tolerated. It's not a reason to throw caution to the wind, but this is a relatively safe city, with very little serious crime and, with the evening pedestrianization, walking around is much safer here too.

➤ **RELY ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT**
The trains and bus network is good, and services cover a wide area. But don't expect them to be reliable or to stick to any published timetable – they are very unlikely to! The services are often very crowded too. Public transport will serve you well only if you are in full-on laid-back holiday mode with no deadline to worry about. Sadly you are not going to be able to avoid stress by hiring a car, as the drivers here have all the disregard for the rules of the road of their Neapolitan neighbours.

➤ **LOSE WEIGHT**
The local limoncello is essentially sugar and alcohol flavoured with lemon. It's fantastic on a hot day, but far from slimming. You can also find Crema di Limoncello too, with added cream, but I'd avoid this – and not just for the calories, as it is not really Italian. You'll find the amazing Neapolitan *baba* and *sfogliatelle* in abundance here, as well as local dishes like *scialatielli* egg pasta served with seafood. Sorrento can be quite hilly in parts and there is fantastic walking on the coast around the town – but it's not enough.

➤ **PRACTISE BEGINNER'S ITALIAN**
If you are struggling, Italians here will speak English to you. They are trying to be helpful, and they are keen to practise their English too. But it is almost impossible to practise beginner Italian here as the Italians are so used to foreign visitors.

Fishing nets hang like bunting between the ornate street lights and fishermen

mend their nets alongside sleeping stray cats curled up in the boats

➤ of statues, leafy and green this time with street musicians and strollers replacing the tables, though you can enjoy a drink at the Bar Villa Comunale as you take in the view. Or else continue along the via Marina Grande to enjoy the scenery as the sea drops away from you down towards the port.

Marina Grande itself is another face of the city. Descending from

Clockwise from top left: Sun-drenched limoncello bottles; decorations at Giardini di Cataldo; yellow church of Santa Maria del Carmine; fishing net bunting at Marina Grande; shopping on via Cesareo; view across Bay of Naples

the cliffs above you lose some of the otherwise ubiquitous sunshine as you are sheltered by the rocks around you. A little grotto of our Lady of Lourdes is carved into the rocks as you descend and statues and fountains grace the damp stone walls. In the marina you are enclosed by grey stone and coloured houses at your back, and the beautiful water of the cove in front. It is charmingly dilapidated. Fishing nets hang like bunting between the ornate street lights – this was the main port of Sorrento when it was still a small fishing village and fishermen still mend their nets alongside sleeping stray cats curled up in the boats. Because of the steep decent, and the peeling paint, this is a world away from the busy, sunny streets above, but still just as alluring. You can see it captured in celluloid alongside equally alluring Sophia Loren in the 1950s film, *Scandal in Sorrento*. Dining here is cheaper than in the main tourist area of town, plus you are in the right spot to get the freshest catch of the day!



WHERE TO STAY

► **PALAZZO JANNUZZI RELAIS**

Vico S. Aniello 39
 ☎ +39 081 877 2862
 www.palazzoannuzzi.com
 The Jannuzzi family have run the decorative art and craft store on this site for more than 100 years. The floors above, with spectacular views over Piazza Tasso, was a family residence, but they have now been updated and converted into a lovely design hotel. Black, yellow and white dominate the décor for a sunny finish with a stylish edge, and I've rarely had a warmer welcome from staff, with a fabulous breakfast on the hotel's roof terrace. Great location with a modern luxury finish. Double rooms with breakfast from €139.

WHERE TO EAT

► **CAMERA & CUCINA**

Via Correale 19
 ☎ +39 081 877 3530
 www.cameraecucina.it
 This stripped down eatery, bar and shop doesn't have a standard menu – dishes change every night, depending on what is in season in the restaurant's kitchen garden. Menus are written up on the large blackboard next to the kitchen. After dinner you can adjourn for a digestif in the restaurant's courtyard.
Price range € €

► **IL BUCO**

Za Rampa Marina Piccola
 Piazza S. Antonino
 www.ilbucoristorante.it
 For Michelin-style dining in Sorrento, this is the place. Far from being 'a hole', the restaurant is all white linen and sparkling cutlery beneath the brick archway colonnades of the cellars of an old convent. Or you can ask to dine on one of the outside tables leading down to the port. The food is traditional Italian, served exquisitely, and with a touch of theatre – I had *scialatielli* topped with fish sliced so finely that the heat of the pasta below made it undulate like a jellyfish.
Price range € € €

► **DI LEVA**

Via Marina Grande 31
 For fresh fish and pasta, simply served, this trattoria is one of the best options in Sorrento. Set by the water's edge on pretty but tatty Marina Grande, it's a great place to sit and watch the light fade to dusk over the water if you prefer not to eat – though once you are here, the tasty aromas from other diners' plates may well make you change your mind.
Price range €



This is the authentic Sorrento experience today – the fishing village is long gone.

But you can still find a slice of it tucked away in the Marina Grande

► Back in the *centro storico*, you can leave the open space and sea views of Piazza Tasso and the Corso Italia and enter the narrow cream streets around via Cesareo. The shopping and eating here is very appealing – lots of tourists shops interspersed with produce, clothing and jewellery stores, bars and restaurants. In some ways it is a touristy area, but look upwards – you will spot traditional Sorrento balconies, decorated in drying fruit and squash. There are still a good 15,000 inhabitants in Sorrento, and they often live right above the tourist hubbub.

Today the tiny fishing village of Sorrento has evolved into a prosperous town of 15 churches, which exists because of its many charms and its huge appeal to visitors. Most of the voices you hear in the street will be speaking English, or German, or even Chinese – the Italian language is not heard so often. But the welcome you receive and the safe friendly streets of the city more than make up for this. This is the authentic Sorrento

Clockwise from far left: Cloister of San Francesco; scooters line the decorated paving by day; cats in the fishing boats at Marina Grande; stylish kiosks in Piazza Tasso; grotto of our Lady of Lourdes on the steps to the Marina Grande; a baba embellished with lemon cream

experience today – the fishing village is long gone. But you can still find a little slice of it tucked away in the Marina Grande. It's impossible not to be charmed by this small city with its many faces – and amazingly you can discover them all on foot within a couple of hours. But you'll want to spend a lot longer here than that. ■

