

a tale of 2 cities

Sorrento and neighboring Positano offer a contrast in paces for exploring Italy's coastal charms

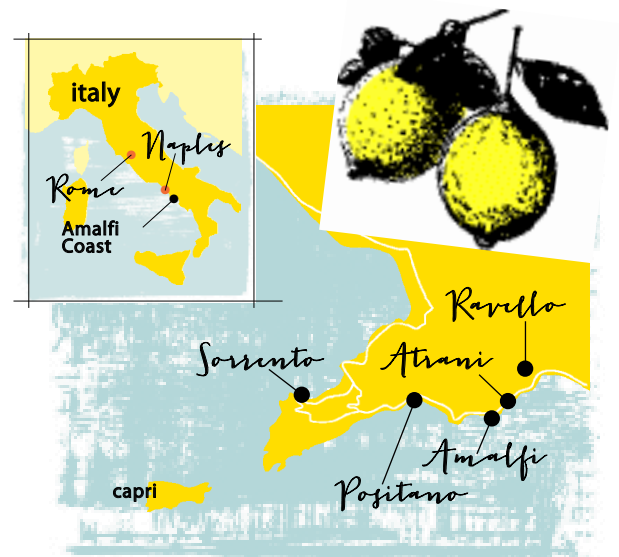
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TRAVEL
ISSUE

Positano's Spiaggia Grande is among the Amalfi Coast's most scenic—and beloved—beaches.



Clockwise from opposite page: Ride-sharing in Positano; say “yes” to gelato; and Sorrento’s Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria, perched on a cliff overlooking the Bay of Naples.



When my friends invited my husband and me to join them at the Rifugio degli Dei above Positano, I knew I was in for a very different sort of vacation. The B&B’s website advised that it was “around 240 stairs” from the road above this buzzing town, nearly 40 miles south of Naples on Italy’s Sorrentine

Peninsula, but I’m sure that I counted at least 360 steps to our aerie on the night we arrived. ¶ In the morning, though, with the sun shining brightly into our little apartment, I understood why they’d chosen this place. From our window and from the spacious terrace, we could gaze out over the humped peaks of the Amalfi Coast, rising like a Jurassic beast from shimmering blue water, with the cascading rooftops of Positano nestled in its folds. ¶ Twice during the past year, I have been lured to the Sorrentine Peninsula, a stony spur that juts defiantly into the Tyrrhenian Sea, nearly mid-shin on the Italian “boot.” The first time, I based myself in Sorrento; the second time, I was stationed among the stairways of Positano. Though the towns are separated by barely more than 10 miles, my experiences were worlds apart. This is how I came to appreciate that, in addition to nature’s generous gifts, the beauty of this golden coast comes from its ability to appeal to a variety of travelers. If 6-inch stilettos are your style and your idea of exercise is to “shop ’til you drop,” choose Sorrento. If your definition of R&R is “ready and raring to go” and your “good shoes” are the pair least caked with mud, you’ll probably prefer Positano. Read on for tips on finding la dolce vita, however you define it.

PREVIOUS SPREAD AND THIS PAGE: IAN SHIVE/TANDEM STILLS + MOTION

sorrento

I began my Sorrentine sojourn last May, strategically ensconced in the Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria. This 19th-century grande dame, encompassing three architecturally distinct buildings, as well as a pool and a spa, presides over 5 acres of gardens between the Bay of Naples and the Piazza Tasso, one of Sorrento’s buzziest squares.

The sprawling terrace of the Fauno Bar on the piazza is one of Sorrento’s best places to see and be seen—and enjoy a tippie of *limoncello*, a liqueur produced locally from the lemons that grow like weeds here. If you like what you taste, check out the Fattoria Terranova shop next door, which sells not only limoncello but a whole variety of products grown on the Ruoppo family’s organic farm: lemon biscuits, lemon marmalade, lemon olive oil, dark chocolate with lemons. Yep. The Ruoppo’s have all your lemony needs covered.

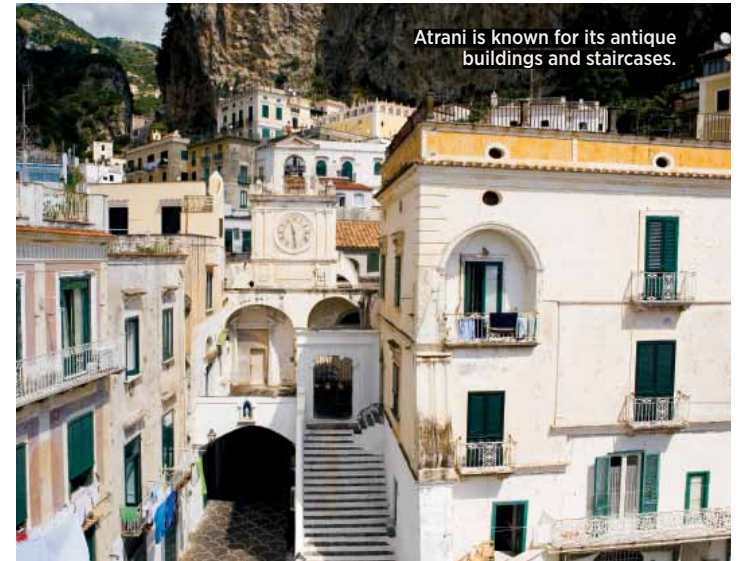
To the west, I encountered a loose grid of streets packed with crafts and culinary delights. On Corso Italia, interspersed among Benetton, Max Mara, and Mario Palumbo Gioielli (an Aladdin’s cave of glittering watches and jewelry from Gucci, Chopard and Armani), I found charming

local shops like Aponte, which sells men’s accessories as well as wonderfully quirky handbags shaped like flower trucks or emblazoned with old-fashioned scenes of Monaco and New York. I also paused to watch Toni Corcione at work in Sandali Corcione, fashioning sandals by hand as his ancestors have done here since 1925.

On cobblestoned Via Fuoro, I discovered Da Ciro Taverna Napoletana, a ship-like niche of a bar that serves two types of organic wine—red and white—alongside heaping plates of prosciutto, cheese and olives. With an eclectic soundtrack ranging from Serge Gainsbourg to Seal, I could have happily whiled away an entire afternoon here. But curiosity got the better of me, and I doubled back east along Via Fuoro, where shop goods spilled out into the street, stopping to admire the intricate wood marquetry—a renowned Sorrentine discipline—at Augusto & Lucas, a workshop where generations of family members have carried on the craft.

Feeling it was my duty to “research” yet another Italian specialty—gelato—I let myself be drawn in by the promise of a free sample at Antica Gelateria, which has been serving creamy scoops since 1860. As I delved into a cup of mint chocolate chip, I struck up a conversation with the silver-haired proprietess, who was so friendly that she even saw me off with a hug.

I left just enough time for a cocktail before dinner at Terrazza Bosquet, the Michelin-starred restaurant back at my hotel. Inside the palm-fringed Vittoria Bar, a pianist played “Caruso,” a famous Italian ballad composed here by Lucio Dalla. Outside, the sinking sun extinguished itself in the bay in a fiery blaze. Heaving a contented sigh, I reckoned it had been the perfect day—and I never had to break a sweat.



Atrani is known for its antique buildings and staircases.

positano

After ambling down the stairs from the inn to the main road during the visit to Positano, my choices included descending another 250 or so steps (who was counting at this point, anyway) to a tiny, deserted beach or following the sinewy asphalt for about a kilometer into town before passing shops and stalls to reach the main beach, Spiaggia Grande. A further 10-minute walk led to a less populated beach, Spiaggia del Fornillo, accessible by a short, steep set of stairs that wound down a cliff separating the town from the shore.

Our spirits continued to climb on our journey to Nocelle, a tiny, twisting village about 1,400 steps farther up from our B&B. Our walk followed a relatively short trail that connected to the famed Sentiero degli Dei, or Path of the Gods, which continued on upward along mountain ridges and shady forests high above the sea. (The well-known trail, nearly 6 miles long, connects Nocelle to the mountain village of Agerola.)

With fog enshrouding the trail on the morning of our hike, it was impossible to see if a sheer drop awaited just yards off the path. Yet with the eddying mist exposing glimpses of our surroundings like a fan dancer, it was as ethereal as it was unnerving. Later, the clouds suddenly lifted with the theatrical flourish of an opening curtain, revealing the undulating coastline in all its glory.

Two days later, we undertook another inspiring trek. After taking a roughly half-hour ferry ride east along the coast to Amalfi, we paused just long enough to admire the latter town's 9th-century cathedral before beginning our journey upward to Ravello, passing through an enchanting tumble of buildings in the village of Atrani. I lost track of the thousands of stairs we climbed as we passed terraced fields of lemon groves, but later I discovered we'd ascended 1,200 feet—nearly the height of the Empire State Building. A tangled green valley yawned below, and the views from the gardens of Villa Rufolo, the inspiration for Klingsor's garden in Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*, were, in a word, stunning.

Perhaps the best part of our hiking holiday, however, was nourishing ourselves with hearty meals that ranged from simple pizzas at La Vecchia Cantina in Ravello to three-course feasts at Il Ritrovo Ristorante, perched high above Positano's coastal attractions. Calories were of no concern, especially since we knew that after dinner each night, we'd still have another 360 steps to climb to get up to our refuge in the hills. **1**

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GETTING YOUR BEARINGS

>> Overlooking the Bay of Naples from the north side of the Sorrentine Peninsula, Sorrento is filled with interesting stores, scores of restaurants, and cafes tailor-made for sunset aperitifs.

Cross the Lattari Mountains, the spiny backbone of the peninsula, to find the Amalfi Coast. This is perhaps Italy's most scenic stretch of coastline. Hairpin turns on the sinuous road wind between jagged mountains on one side and eye-popping drops to the sea on the other. Even more impressive than the road are the villages themselves, which cling to cliffs with the tenacity of cacti in the desert. Some seem to have been designed by an especially sadistic fan of M.C. Escher, with endless staircases leading to, well, more endless staircases ... and ultimately to dazzling views, as epitomized by postcard-perfect Positano.

July and August boast the most cultural offerings, but the peninsula also teems with tourists at these peak times. If you want to avoid the largest crowds, the best times to visit are in May and September. In Positano, many hotels, bars and restaurants close for the winter, while Sorrento is slightly less sleepy during the off-season.

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