

*Sorrento's charm lies in its classic Fifties elegance combined with its discreet modern amenities and service. Charlotte Metcalf and her six-year-old daughter loved it*

**T**HERE IS NOTHING quite like a dreary day of January rain to make us Brits crave a window opening onto clear skies and sea sparkling in gentle sunshine. Thankfully, it is not long before Italian seaside hotels start throwing open their shutters onto just such a view. Flights are cheaper in early spring and it is unquestionably one of the most beautiful times to visit southern Italy. I have just returned from Puglia and can report that even in January the sun was warm and the air already sweet with the scent of early lemon blossom.

A haven in early spring, Sorrento on the Bay of Naples is a town that seems resolved not to change. This is perhaps why its reputation as a fashionable destination has faded. Yet it is precisely its resistance to becoming a slave to trend that makes Sorrento delightful. Reassuringly, it serves up everything that we winter-battered Brits, thirsting for some Mediterranean warmth and charm, want from Italy. There's no modernisation for the sake of it and thus the town retains a flavour of timeless glamour, underpinned by superb service. After so much of our own heritage has been gratuitously, often brutally and carelessly, dragged into the digital age, we feel nostalgic for Sorrento's kind of classic Fifties elegance that we imagine Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant enjoyed.

Sorrento boasts many hotels but there are two particularly comforting ones. The Excelsior Vittoria dominates the harbour, its handsome 19th-century façade standing high and proud on the clifftop. It is conveniently situated right off the town's main square but secluded amongst five acres of orange grove. Inside, the hotel is full of light and airy marble halls with ornate ceilings and billowy curtains at long windows. Walking in with my six-year-old daughter felt like entering an earlier age in which people still dressed for dinner and valued etiquette.

On the hotel's curved terrace above the sea, elderly, polite waiters in white jackets served my Campari and my daughter's lemonade with soothing, quiet formality. Our sugar-almond coloured bedroom was comfortably upholstered and furnished with delicate antiques. The walls were hand-painted with garlands and flowers. Other than a television and an efficient internet connection, there was zero concession to minimalism or to contemporary

design. Best of all you stepped out onto a little balcony, straight from a painting by Matisse, dizzily high aloft the Bay of Naples with a view towards Vesuvius.

If the Excelsior Vittoria is the beautiful duchess, haughtily conscious of her aristocratic charms, the smaller Cocumella Hotel in the Sant'Agnello quarter is the irresistible coquette. The Cocumella is the oldest hotel on the peninsula and once a favourite with Grand Tour travellers like Goethe, Mary Shelley and Hans Christian Andersen. My daughter and I ate delicious prawn and scallop carpaccio on an all-white terrace looking seaward over flowering gardens luscious with citrus and banana trees, succulents, tropical palms

wondered just how much culture a six-year-old could stomach but I had underestimated the power of the Italians to charm small children. Fabio, our guide to Pompeii, greeted my daughter as if she were a princess and his mission was purely to entertain her. Within seconds, my daughter, wide-eyed with wonder, had placed her hand trustingly in his. He kept her riveted for two hours, helped by his promise of a *gelato*. Without my daughter complaining of heat, tiredness or boredom, I was free to marvel at the excavated amphitheatre, temples, forum and fresco-adorned houses (though they are crumbling fast), market, brothel and virtually intact bath-house.

After such a long day, a massage at the

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and 400-year-old yuccas. Stephen Pike, the General Manager, understands perfectly the expectations and needs of British guests. He knows our yearning for the Italy of our imagination rather than for an updated version. Asked recently on the telephone by a prospective Russian guest if the hotel had been renovated, he replied, 'Happily not. It has been refurbished.'

**G**eographically, it's easy to reach both Capri and Pompeii from Sorrento. A private lift creaks down from the Excelsior Vittoria's terrace to the marina where you catch boats to Capri, Procida and Ischia. Capri is overcrowded and overpriced and many of the grand Italians, like film-director Zeffirelli, have fled, but Capri remains sensationally beautiful. In spring trees are starting to be heavy with big, pale lemons; geraniums and bougainvillea are about to burst vividly against whitewash and sun-bleached terracotta. Lanes, that will be full of jasmine when the summer comes, wind up towards church squares with views over dazzling sea.

Pompeii, the Roman city buried but preserved in ash when Vesuvius erupted in 79AD, is disintegrating at an alarming rate, following last November's tragic collapse of The House of the Gladiators famous for its frescoes. Now is the time to visit before the rest of the city subsides. Last summer I took my daughter there. I

Excelsior Vittoria revived us. In town we found a pretty, unpretentious-looking restaurant down an alley with tables wobbly on cobblestones under the stars. Il Bucco turned out to be Michelin-starred. Despite the restaurant's superb food and status, the waiter behaved as if my daughter ate at that kind of restaurant every night and set up a side table to accommodate the three Babar elephants she'd brought along.

Sorrento's charm lies in its trick of presenting itself like a gracious Sophia Loren movie set while having all the modern amenities and service to make being there an exceptionally luxurious experience. On our last night, we were invited to the Cocumella's seafront bar and restaurant. Tucked amongst the rocks and invisible from the main hotel, the restaurant has a chef from Tokyo and the only Japanese Robata grill in Italy. Just when I thought things were becoming a little quaint and provincial, Sorrento proved to be as sophisticated as the trendiest of resorts – but discreetly so.

After a long British winter, an early spring trip to Sorrento restores faith in the kind of Italian idyll that we fear may have disappeared. ♦

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