

# Sweet Sorrento

**O**K, WHOSE idea was it to fly to Naples the day after the city team lost 3-1 to Liverpool? "It's a lively flight," reported a steward with forced jollity and no small amount of understatement. "Why on earth would you want to go to Naples?" asked another as tempers grew increasingly frayed. Passions were riding high and that legendary continental charm was in short supply.

We replied that, as delightful as we were sure Naples was, we were actually going to Sorrento, at the southern end of the Bay of Naples.

"Ah, that's OK then," he said wearily, and trundled back up the aisle, leaving the Gucci loafer and Wayfarer-wearing hooligans in his wake. All style and discontent.

"Don't worry, all Italian men are not like this," ventured the man sitting next to me. Turns out he was from Sorrento. Very nice he was too, and deeply embarrassed by his countrymen's behaviour.

A couple of hours later, all was calm, the bad boys had apologised and were sleeping off their hangovers while we were basking in the newly acquired knowledge that our hotel was one of the best in Sorrento. "Very beautiful," gasped my flight buddy, hands aloft in admiration. At least I think he was referring to the hotel ...

Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria is certainly a grand sight. Approaching on the ferry from Naples, it is one of the first things you see, perched atop the cliff looking out across the water, with Mount Vesuvius in the distance, the summit shrouded in mist. An exclusive lift whisks guests straight from the harbour to the hotel terrace in a matter of seconds.

Arriving by car instead, we roll down the long driveway, surrounded on either side by roses and trees laden with fragrant citrus fruit, before coming to a fountain and the hushed hotel entrance, all glass, marble and turn-of-the-century elegance. Suddenly the football seems a very long way away. Sophia Loren and Pavarotti have stayed here. Caruso spent the latter years of his life here (in the now-named Caruso Suite, which still contains the legendary tenor's piano and writing desk). Princess Margaret has been a guest. So has the King of Siam. And I.

My plane buddy had been polite but a little confused. "Why do so many people come to Sorrento?" he asked. The truth is that, once you have tired of its exquisite beauty, the romantic streetside cafes selling thick, potent espresso and the delightful local habit of delivering a glass of limoncello after every meal, it is the perfect base from which to explore the rest of Campania. Naples itself. Vesuvius – the only active volcano in Europe. The islands of Ischia and Procida. Salerno. The thermal baths at Vico Equense. The Amalfi coast.

But first, Pompeii, possibly the most famous, certainly one of the most evocative, archaeological sites in the world. A city destroyed following an eruption of Vesuvius in 79AD, it lay buried for 1,500 years, staggeringly well preserved beneath several metres of ash and cinder. To see it now, the first thing to strike the visitor is how huge it is. It would take more than a day to explore it all; as it is we manage just a corner, snooping into the thermal baths with their mosaic-tiled ceiling, the grand houses with their fabulous frescoes and furniture intact, and the local brothel, identifiable thanks to the erotic art adorning its walls and the rather uncomfortable-looking stone beds.

There are three amphitheatres: the largest, for gladiatorial combat, another (smaller) for tragedies and comedies and a third (even smaller) for musical performances. Clearly the tastes of most Pompeians lay in bloodlust rather than high culture. Some things never change.

Walking through its streets is a vivid walk back in time; it's not hard to imagine chariots rolling down the giant cobbles, traders haggling in the forum,

As if its exquisite beauty and romantic streetside cafes weren't enough in itself, the Italian town is an excellent base for exploring Pompeii and Capri too

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worshippers giving sacrifices at the temples, working girls touting for business ... only the plastercasts of agonised townspeople and their contorted pets, those who died in their homes or on the beach, asphyxiated by poisonous volcanic gas, remind us of the true tragedy of Pompeii.

The very much living, breathing island of Capri is our next stop, a short ferry journey from Sorrento and a magnet for artists, writers and painters drawn by its light and rugged beauty. The jet set, too, have always loved the island. Rita Hayworth, Grace Kelly and Jackie Onassis were regular visitors and Gracie Fields established the island's most exclusive beach club – La Canzone del Mare – where she entertained the likes of Noel Coward and Emilio Pucci. Fields died in 1979 and her island grave is always adorned by fresh flowers, delivered daily and paid for by Elton John.

The island is still popular with the stars today – Mariah Carey owns a clifftop villa, while Naomi Campbell and George Clooney are no strangers to its shores. The main town hosts the Capri Hollywood film festival from Boxing Day until 6 January. But if you want to see Capri at its best, visit in springtime, when the flowers are in bloom and the sun warming up nicely, yet the cruise ships are not yet clogging up the pretty harbour.

The tiny Umberto I Square in Capri town – nicknamed the piazzetta – is a slice of pretty perfection, while the shops – from Prada and Hogan to Rolex and Salvatore Ferragamo – give a discreetly expensive nod to the class of visitor it has come to expect.

There are many walks around the island too, with spectacular views and a slice of Caprese cake, made with chocolate and almonds, a reward for all that energy expended. And the Blue Grotto is a magical (though expensive) must-visit. A cave in the south of the island, the sunlight turns the water inside a vibrant, otherworldly blue (while the *O Sole Mio*s of the boatmen echoing around the walls ensure value for money).

"Ah, but you must visit Positano," says our driver on the way back to the airport, homeward bound after an all-too-short weekend. "It is very beautiful." Sienna Miller is a regular visitor and Franco Zeffirelli has owned a villa there for decades. Unfortunately for us, however, it will have to wait till next time. Few holidays leave me desperate to return. This one already has me pining for the blossom of Capri in springtime. ■

## FACTFILE

Classic Collection Holidays (0800 294 9315, [www.classic-collection.co.uk](http://www.classic-collection.co.uk)) offers three nights at Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria from £816 per person in late April (seven nights from £1,330). Price based on two adults sharing a twin/double classic garden view room on a bed & breakfast basis and includes return flights Gatwick to Naples and private transfers.

For details on the activities in Sorrento visit [www.sorrentotourism.com/eng/index.html](http://www.sorrentotourism.com/eng/index.html) or call +39 081 8074033.

For information on Capri visit [www.capritourism.com/en](http://www.capritourism.com/en) or call +39 081 8370686.

Entrance to Pompeii is €11. A €20 ticket allows visits to five sites (Pompeii, Herculaneum, Antiquarium of Boscoreale, the Villas in Stabia and Oplontis) in three consecutive days. See [www.pompeisites.org](http://www.pompeisites.org).

Where to eat: Il Buco, Il Rampa Marina Piccola, Piazza sant'Antonino, Sorrento (+39 0818 782354, [www.ilbucoristorante.it](http://www.ilbucoristorante.it)).

Buca di Bacco, Via Longano, Capri (+39 081 837 0723).



**NEAPOLITAN DREAM**  
Sorrento is set on a cliff,  
overlooking the Bay of Naples.  
Opposite: Pompeii