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# EXPERIENCE

## the Grand Tour

With superb views across the Bay of Naples to simmering Mount Vesuvius, Sorrento was a top spot for 19th-century tourists. Start here for a delicious taste of the past, says Helen Thomas

SORRENTO HAS LONG ATTRACTED pleasure-seekers. Known throughout history for its stunning coastline, in Greek myth this was the land of the Sirens who lured Odysseus to the rocks. The Romans too fell in love with it, spending their summers in *campagna felix* or the 'happy land', as they called it, in marble holiday villas that lined the bay. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Sorrento was rediscovered, bringing Grand Tourists – Lord Byron, John Keats and Sir Walter Scott among them – attracted by the mild climate and newly excavated sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum close by.

Today, Sorrento is still a fine place for relaxing and retains much of its old-world feel. Villas and hotels teeter on the cliff edge above the Bay of Naples and there's a straight drop below to the marina where boats in the harbour resemble toys. All around, bougainvillea and camellias trail up the walls of café terraces and villas.

The main square, Piazza Tasso – named after

Sorrento's most famous son, the lyric poet Torquato Tasso – is the place to see and be seen. By day, brightly decorated horses drawing open-top carriages go clip-clopping by, and tourists sit at cafés sampling *limoncello*, the distinctive lemon liqueur of the region. By dusk, the locals take their evening stroll, or *passaggiata*, through the cobbled streets of the town's old centre. These narrow lanes, their original Roman grid system still discernable, are lined with inviting shops selling beautiful inlaid wooden boxes – an ancient local craft, and perfumeries offering lemon scents made using traditional recipes.

At the Sedil Dominova on the Via San Cesareo, where once the nobility came to debate town issues, local men now gather to play cards under a 16th-century cupola painted with trompe l'oeil cherubs. In the heart of the old town, the cloistered church of Saint Francis is the perfect romantic setting for art exhibitions and concerts held during the summer months.

Sorrento, not far from Naples and the sites of





OPPOSITE Mount Vesuvius on a clear summer's day, seen from the breathtaking terrace of the Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria. LEFT Large lemons are used for decorative displays, perfumes and limoncello, the local liqueur. ABOVE Card-playing at the Sedil Dominova, Sorrento's local forum since the 14th century.

BELOW A hill-top vista of Sorrento.

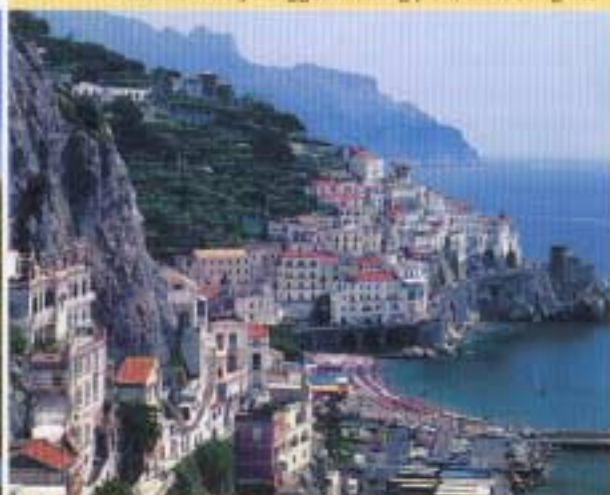


## The spectacular coast route

Along the rocky shoreline south of Sorrento, the **Costiera Amalfitana** follows a twisting road of hairpin bends that clings to the cliff tops, with vertical drops into the sea to one side. The villas of the rich and famous line the route; among them, the holiday escape of Sophia Loren and Rudolph Nureyev's private hideaway, a tiny island off the coast.

The drive passes through Positano and Amalfi, which, not long ago, were only accessible by boat. Built on the cliffside, **Positano** seems to tumble straight into the sea, its confetti-coloured villas teetering on the hillside. After the Second World War, the town was home to artists and writers, among them John Steinbeck, but today it's an exclusive resort for the wealthy. Steep steps lined with boutiques run through the town. Follow the route down to a tiny beach and you're rewarded with cafés serving delicious coffee and gelato.

From Positano, it's a 30-minute drive to **Amalfi** (below), a small town with a rich maritime history. Despite being hit by an earthquake in 1343, which sent the town sliding into the sea, Amalfi became southern Italy's biggest trading port, controlling the



entire Mediterranean until 1570. Today, Amalfi's highlights include the **Duomo Sant'Andrea**, a combination of early Gothic and Moorish designs with a baroque interior, and its Museo della Carta, Europe's oldest working paper mill.

A half hour drive inland is **Ravello**, a hill-top town with Moorish ruins that inspired Wagner to write his opera *Parsifal*. The Villa Cimbrone is one of Ravello's main attractions. These gardens were laid out by Lord Grimthorpe, who was responsible for the design of Big Ben. He filled the terraces with floral walkways, classical statues and busts. A plaque tells us this was where Greta Garbo stayed, when hiding from Hollywood with her lover, the conductor Count Leopold Stokowsky. At the far end of the garden is the highlight of Ravello: the Terrace of Infinity is a rooftop belvedere lined with marble figures overlooking a 1,000ft drop to hill-top villages, gorges and the azure Tyrrhenian Sea.



ABOVE A tranquil harbour scene in Sorrento.

ABOVE RIGHT The dining room at the Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria.

#### Traveller's notes

##### Booking a holiday

H&A travelled with Italy specialist Citalia, to stay at the five-star Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria in Sorrento; prices from £1,295 per person for a seven-night stay (in high season), including flights. Call 020 8686 5533; visit [www.citalia.co.uk](http://www.citalia.co.uk). Alternatively, fly direct to Naples with easyJet ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)). The Excelsior Vittoria can be contacted directly on 00 39 081 607 10 44; [www.exvitt.it](http://www.exvitt.it).

##### Travelling around

Three day's car hire with Holiday Autos from Naples airport starts from £110, including taxes, insurance. Call 0870 400 0010.

##### Book to take away

Sorrento, Amalfi & Capri by Julian Tippett (Sunflower Books, £9.99), a useful walking and touring guide, including where to picnic.

**More information:** Visit [www.italiantourism.com](http://www.italiantourism.com).

Pompeii and Herculaneum, was a pleasant stop for travellers on the last leg of the Grand Tour. And wandering through these ancient lanes, past 19th-century summer residences and historic hotels, you step back into the world of relaxed tourism when aristocrats travelled Europe in search of intellectual refinement.

One such resting place is the Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria, which opened to travellers in 1834. Set off the bustling main square, it is a tranquil retreat, approached through a tunnel of olive and orange trees and decorated with enormous urns at the entrance. Fragments of pillars in the park come from Emperor Augustus's summer villa, which once sat on this very spot.

The interior is equally impressive. A series of salons with lush décor and trompe l'oeil ceilings, again painted with cherubs, leads on to an Assembly Room, where the Emperors of Austria and the crowned heads of Sweden probably crossed paths with the likes of Wagner, Verdi or Dumas. King Edward VII stayed here in 1910.

Despite its illustrious past, the hotel, which has belonged to the Fiorentina family for four generations, retains a friendly feel. Luca Fiorentina has devoted herself to the safekeeping of this Victorian setting, including the recently restored staircase, where frescoes representing the four seasons have been recreated. The Palm Court salon is filled with appropriate antiques: ceramic floor tiles from Vietri; 19th-century marquetry furniture made by Sorrento artisans; and a 19th-century gouache medallion advertising the port.

Outside, an Art Nouveau sign leads to the hotel's winter garden perched upon the cliffs, 50 metres above the shore. Here, guests can stroll, encircled by a stone balustrade lined with marble classic busts. This is the place to enjoy Sorrento's most magical feature, the view across the bay to ethereal Mount Vesuvius, which geologists say is due another eruption. □

## Unmissable classical sites

The Circumvesuviana train begins in Sorrento and travels around the bay stopping at Pompeii, Naples and Herculaneum. **Pompeii** is a revelation, a window on a lost Roman city in the 1st-century AD – it would take days to explore but it's enough to spend an afternoon wandering down the streets into private villas, public baths and the market (shown below). Frescoes showing daily life reveal the luxury with which rich Romans surrounded themselves. **Herculaneum**, a smaller site, is better preserved – some of the wooden furniture is still intact, as well as some beautiful geometrical Roman mosaics. A car journey south of Sorrento is the forgotten city of **Paestum**, once the great city of Poseidon. It was rediscovered in the 18th century amid dense forest, and today the three major monuments, the Temples of Hera and Neptune and the Basilica, look much as they would have done 2,000 years ago. It's breathtaking, but ghostly.

