

The Perfect Break

Sorrento, Italy: the perfect break

Sorrento keeps la dolce vita alive alongside its vibrant coastal charm, says Lee Marshall.



Sorrento's seaside vocation is given historical depth by its wealth of Renaissance palazzi and Romanesque churches

By Lee Marshall 10:57AM GMT 09 Mar 2011

Comments

Why go?

Because for all the pizza and *limoncello* clichés, this handsome seaside town, on the rocky peninsula that forms the southern reach of the Bay of Naples, has *la dolce vita* spirit down pat. And because, if you're lucky with the weather, even this early in the year there are days that feel like high summer. By April spring is well and truly under way.

Dominating its own little bay-within-the-bay, Sorrento's seaside vocation is given historical depth by its wealth of Renaissance palazzi and Romanesque churches. It's a perfect hopping-off point for the even more vertical charms of the Amalfi Coast on the southern side of the peninsula, and for the elegant resort island of Capri, which is just a 20-minute ferry ride away.

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Plane and bus. Naples's Capodichino airport (about 30 miles from Sorrento), is served by British Airways (0844 4930787, www.ba.com) and Easyjet (0905 8218905, www.easyjet.com) from London Gatwick, while charter flights are run by Thomson (0871 231 4787, www.thomsonfly.com) out of several UK regional airports. Curreri (www.bus.it/curreri) runs six buses a day between the airport and Sorrento. Larger cruise ships moor at Naples; from here you can reach Sorrento either on the Circumvesuviana railway (via Pompeii) or, in summer only, via hydrofoil ferry direct from Naples' main Beverello wharf. Timetables can be accessed through the site www.sorrentotourism.com.

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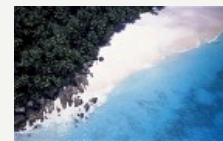
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Stay at...

La Minervetta (00 39 081 877 4455, www.laminervetta.com), a breath of fresh air on the staid Sorrento hotel scene. Perched above the Marina Grande on a near-vertical clifftop site, this light-filled 12-room contemporary refuge is a bracing walk up from the centre of town. But the seaside-chic décor by the interior-designer son of the owner is spot-on, and the seagull-eye views over the Bay of Naples from the rooms, the sun terrace and the outdoor Jacuzzi are spectacular. From 250 euros for a double.

If you'd rather be more central, and relive the days when Sorrento was a fixture on the aristocratic Grand Tour, book in to the Excelsior Victoria (00 39 081 877 7111, www.exvitt.it), which has been run by the Fiorentino family since 1834, and exudes genteel fin-de-siècle charm. With its Art Deco winter garden and sea-view terraces adorned with classical busts, this is the place to break out that linen suit and panama. Doubles from 280 euros.

The best budget option is Villa Oriana Relais (www.villaoriana.it, doubles from 60 euros), a lovely panoramic B & B set among lemon groves just 10 minutes' walk from the town centre.

Spend the morning ...

Wandering around Sorrento's Renaissance and Baroque *centro storico*, which makes up in southern charm what it lacks in stand-out sights. And although few of the package visitors that throng the town ever discover them, there are a few worthwhile cultural draws – such as the Museobottega della Tarisalignea (entrance with guided tour 8, www.alessandrofiorentinocollection.it), dedicated to the history of Sorrento's marquetry work, or the lovely 14th-century cloister of the church of San Francesco.

Have lunch at ...

Da Emilia (Via Marina Grande 92, +39 081 807 2720, closed Sun, average 30 euros a head without wine) just back from the quay, where locals tuck into plates of mussels sautéed in lemon, or fresh mozzarella, tomato and basil, followed up perhaps by a straight-off-the-boat seafood fry-up.

Spend the afternoon ...

Exploring the Amalfi Coast, the vertical paradise of perched villages and rugged nature on the southern side of the Sorrentine peninsula.

Positano, the first of the Amalfi towns, is a Mediterranean marvel with its steeply-tiered pastel houses and *dolce vita* bars and boutiques; Amalfi, beyond, has a more medieval feel, and its Arab-Norman cathedral bears eloquent witness to the town's high-water mark between the ninth and 12th centuries, when it was a powerful maritime republic.

Buses to Positano and other Amalfi coast destinations are run by SITA (www.sitabus.it).

Have dinner at...

L'Antica Trattoria (Via Padre Giuliani 33, +39 081 807 1082, closed Mon, average 60 euros a head without wine). For sheer dining pleasure in Sorrento's maze-like *centro storico*, it's difficult to beat this upmarket but friendly restaurant, where traditional Sorrentine cuisine is given a gourmet shot in the arm.

Stay out late at...

Primavera (Corso Italia 142, +39 081 807 3252), Sorrento's best *gelateria* and *pasticceria*, which is open into the small hours. This being the land of lemons, you have to try their speciality, *crema di limone* (lemon cream). If you're feeling adventurous, they even do a *parmigiana di melanzane* (aubergine parmigiana) flavour.

Spend the next day...

Being alternative. There's no denying that Pompeii, 17 miles from Sorrento (+39 081 857 5347, www.pompeisites.org), open Apr-Oct 8.30am-7.30pm Nov-Mar 8.30am-5pm, full admission 11 euros, is an

amazing sight – an entire Roman town preserved in suspended animation as it was on the day in AD 79 when Vesuvius erupted and buried the place in volcanic ash. But Italy's most visited archaeological site is chronically underfunded and plagued by unlicensed guides.

Head instead for the other great Vesuvian site, Herculaneum (+39 081 739 0963, www.pompeisites.org, open Apr-Oct 8.30am-7.30pm Nov-Mar 8.30am-5pm, full admission 11 euros), which has had a facelift and now offers a far more pleasant visitor experience. And with its wide suspended walkways, it's the only one worth considering for visitors with mobility difficulties.

Go shopping for...

Something other than *limoncello*. Inlaid intarsia furniture, or marquetry, is an ancient Sorrentine craft; to see the real deal, rather than the made-in-China tack sold in the souvenir emporiums, head for Antonino Attardi (Via Padre Giuliani 45, +39 081 878 1291) or (for antique pieces) Massimo Gargiulo (Via Padre Giuliani 21 +39 081 878 4879).

For local produce, head for the downtown outlet (Piazza Tasso 16/18, +39 081 878 1263) of organic farm Fattoria Terranova. Here you can buy homemade jams, savoury preserves, cheeses, olive oil and – yes, even *limoncello* – safe in the knowledge that they're genuine and local.

Further information...

The main Sorrento tourist office is in Via Luigi di Majo 35 (+39 081 807 4033, www.sorrentotourism.com).

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