



Positano

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Piazza Tasso, Sorrento

Why I Come Back to Sorrento

I skirted around *Sorrento* for decades—avoiding what I'd written off as a tourist resort, and visiting the wonders of *Naples*, *Pompeii* and *Amalfi Coast* towns instead. Then my friend *Gioia*, a well-travelled Roman native, confessed: "You know where I've *always* wanted to go? Sorrento!" Her Italian friends had sung its praises, and though she'd spent many summers in nearby *Capri*, she'd also skipped this destination.

Cut to our arrival at Sorrento's *Imperial Hotel Tramontano*. Oohs and aahs ensued from the moment we stepped into the elegant lobby that opens to a cliffside terrace, hanging over the sparkling Mediterranean Sea. We immediately ordered *Prosecco* and took a seat with a view of Mount Vesuvius in the distance. Thus my love affair began, to the strains of *Come Back to Sorrento*, that soulful song, composed at this very hotel.

Since that first visit, I've come back to Sorrento often. I've been won over far beyond the obvious reasons: Its breathtaking coast that inspired the Greeks to name it *Surrentum*, believing that this was the spot where mythical creatures lured

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SPECIAL REPORT: HIGHLIGHTS OF THE AMALFI COAST

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INSIDERS REVEAL THE BEST OF THE

Amalfi Coast

The *Amalfi Coast* has been welcoming

visitors since Roman times and remains a must on any Italy travel bucket list.

Many of you also return again and again as the charming towns and alluring islands of the

Costiera Amalfitana hold more treasures than one can possibly explore in even a few trips.

Who knows the area better than Amalfi's ultimate insiders: hoteliers whose luxury properties make this a coveted destination. *Dream of Italy* Executive Editor Bethanne Patrick talked to these owners and managers about what's not-to-be-missed and



Fontelina Beach Club

what's worth your time and travel dollars. Their answers appear above the lines in each box and below the lines, we've provided additional information.

While some of their recommendations will be familiar, not only does their imprimatur give emphasis—we've also nabbed some of their never-before-revealed secrets. If they occasionally recommend their own hotel's services, you can be sure it's because they believe those are—the very best. Also note that this isn't in any way a comprehensive list but a great start to planning a trip to this magical place.

The Amalfi Drive is 25 miles long.

Odysseus off course, and its location that makes it an ideal base to ferry off to Capri (20 minutes), Amalfi Coast villages and Naples, or to discover the ruins of Pompeii by train in under an hour.

What I've grown to love most about Sorrento is how Old World graciousness is kept alive here by the spirited natives, who follow in a tradition of hospitality that began here in the days of the Grand Tour, when visitors like Byron, Wagner and Ibsen checked into Sorrento hotels for long, inspirational stays. Yes, it's a tourist resort, but so sincerely rooted in the passionate, generous soul of the *Mezzogiorno*, that I'm forever swept up with its details of personal enchantments.

Take, for instance, the Hotel Tramontano. Though it's a property with hundreds of rooms, when I ask for a wake-up call, *Gennaro* from the desk rings me up with a genuine *Buon Giorno* (no automated recording here!), and when I return to my room after a day of sightseeing I find that my bed's been made with a scarf I'd tossed aside, carefully shaped into a heart outline on my pillow.

Or in the fabulous *Centro Storico* shopping vias, jeweler *Rosalba* sweetly shows me how she makes cameos, with her endearing smile and curvy tool in hand, carving a conch shell. Steps away, Anna at the scarf shop

takes the time to teach me how to tie a chic Valentino knot.

Meals here are delicious, stretched out affairs, served by attentive, dark-eyed waiters, who take pride in Sorrento's star dishes: *Gnocchi alla Sorrentina*, eggplant parmesan, braciolo. Robust wines from the fertile slopes of Mount Vesuvius vineyards flow freely, and at dinner's end, a

chilled glass of *limoncello* is typically brought over, compliments of the house.

For fresh seafood and a folksy change of scene, I head down a zig-zag stone pathway to the *Marina Grande*, a lively spread of beaches and restaurants. In the evenings a

mandolin player strolls about, playing the song I've learned by heart: "*Vide 'o mare quant e bello, Spira tantu sentimento.*" (See the sea how beautiful, it inspires so many emotions...) The mandolin player gives me a wink as I join in,

then throws his head back for the dramatic finish, sending the plaintive note, filled with Sorrento passion, into the starry night.

Here are three of my favorite reasons to return to Sorrento:

Cloisters of San Francesco

It's magical to slip into this small 12th-century cloister, part of the San

Francesco church complex. Moorish pillars blend in remains of pagan temples, surrounded by tumbling bougainvillea, fragrant roses, and bird songs. It's a popular place for weddings and classical music concerts in summer.

Upstairs from this oasis are galleries, where displays of such treasures as vintage music boxes can be discovered. The adjoining Baroque church is beautiful and on the piazza is *Ristobar*—perfect for gelato, coffee or cocktails with a view—and the *Sorrento Lift*

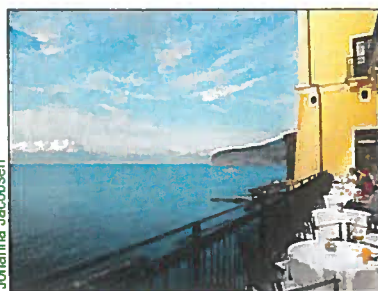
(www.sorrentolift.it), an elevator that easily takes you down to the *Marina Piccolo* ferry port for 1€. (*Via San Francesco, 1; Open daily; Free admission*)

Museum of Inlaid Wood

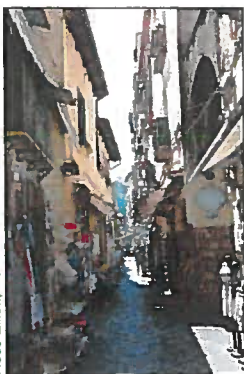
Sorrento's artistic tradition of *intarsia* (inlaid wood) is celebrated in *Museobottega della Tarsialignea's* dazzling collection, which includes masterpieces from 1400 to the days of the Grand Tour (music boxes, treasure chests), along with contemporary designs. It's the private collection of *Alma and Alessandro Fiorentino*, a Sorrento architect who lovingly restored this palazzo from 1700 and opened the museum in 1999. (*Via San Nicola, 28; www.museomuta.it; 39-081-877-1942; Open daily; 8€*)

Baths of Queen Giovanna

Legend says 14th-century *Queen Giovanna d'Anjou* loved to bathe nude in the lagoon here. I, wearing a bathing suit, had an adventurous morning at



Imperial Hotel Tramontano



Sorrento street



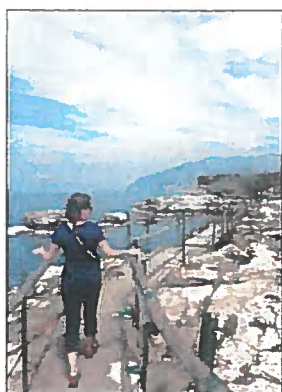
Seafood at Marina Grande



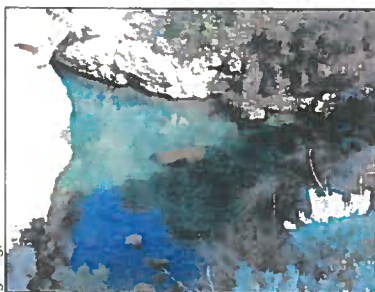
Cloisters of San Francesco

Surriento is the town's origina

these baths with my friend Anna arriving from a rocky path off the main road, that opens to a stunning panorama of the sea. I'd recommend rubber-soled shoes for the climb into the lagoon, where we discovered a cool, crystal clear pool.



Baths of Queen Giovanna



Baths of Queen Giovanna

It was dreamy to ease into shallow, sparkling turquoise water of the *Bagni della Regina Giovanna*, then swim through an arch into the open bay, where waving ferries in the distance

was one of the most exhilarating of all my Italy swimming experiences. On a cliff nearby are ruins (foundation stones) of a 1st-century Roman villa—perfect for sunbathing, though legend goes Queen Giovanna

preferred to use the cliffs to toss away her lovers so their trysts would be kept secret! Around the bend is a wooden boardwalk set over rocks that leads to *Lido La Solara*—a lively beach club, bar and restaurant. (To reach the baths, take a 45-minute walk from Sorrento's Piazza Tasso or the LINE A Bus from Tasso and get off at Capo di Sorrento, then it's a 10 minute walk in. The beach club is at Calata Punta del Capo.)

—Susan Van Allen

A frequent contributor to *Dream of Italy*, Susan Van Allen is the author of *100 Places in Italy Every Woman Should Go*. Find out more at

The Details

Check out www.sorrentotourism.com for year-round events as Sorrento is in full-swing even in low season with sparkling Christmas celebrations.

Getting to Sorrento

Take the Campania Express, a new *Circumvesuviana* train is specially designed for tourists, running March through October, from Naples to Sorrento in 50 minutes with stops at *Herculaneum* and *Pompeii*. (www.eavsrl.it)

Hop on the ferry from Naples for the 40-minute ride to Sorrento. (www.naplesbayferry.com or www.alilauro.it)

Hire a private driver like Sorrento native, *Salvatore D'Esposito*, who lived in New Jersey for 30 years and speaks perfect English. (39-333-6985466, salamerican@hotmail.it)



Where to Stay

Imperial Hotel Tramontano

Via Vittorio Veneto, 1
(39) 081 8782588
www.hoteltramontano.it

Rates: Doubles start at 150€ per night, with breakfast.

This elegant historical property has been welcoming travelers since 1812, with a pool and excellent restaurant.

Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria

Piazza Torquato Tasso, 34
(39) 081 8777111
www.exvitt.it

Rates: Rooms start at 225€ per night, with breakfast.

Sorrento's most luxurious property has been run by the *Fiorentino* family since 1834. It's surrounded by a 5-acre gorgeously landscaped garden and citrus grove, plus there's a spa to add to the bliss.

Hotel Admiral Sorrento

Via Marina Grande, 214
(39) 081 8781076
www.admiralsorrento.com

Rates: Rooms start at 125€ per night, with breakfast

Set beachside on the folksy *Marina Grande*, modern, airy rooms here come with terraces.

Where to Eat

L'Antica Trattoria

Via P. R. Giuliani, 3
(39) 081 8071082
www.lanticatrattoria.com

In the heart of the historic center, enjoy traditional Sorrento specialties in beautiful cozy dining areas or back patio draped with grape vines.

Il Buco

2a Rampa Marina Piccola, 5
(39) 081 8782354
www.ilbucoistorante.it

Closed Wednesday

Traditional Sorrento recipes are given a modern twist at this chic, contemporary-designed spot.

Da Emilia

Marina Grande, 62
(39) 081 8072720
www.daemilia.it

Closed Tuesday

The freshest catch of the day is celebrated in this welcoming beachside restaurant, with delicious specialties such as *gnocchi ai frutti di mare*.

Where to Shop

Roseta

Via Fuoro, 9
(39) 081 8772716

Lovely *Made in Italy* scarves and ties, with classic signora shopkeepers who teach you the art of scarf tying.

Gargiulo Inlaid

Via Fuoro, 33
(39) 081 8782420
www.gargiuloinlaid.it

Gorgeous wood inlay—jewelry boxes, treasure chests, and clocks. You can see artisan *Salvatore* and his father *Giuseppe* at work, following a tradition begun by his family in the 19th century.

Miele Gioelli

Via Fuoro 57
(39) 081 19004041

Sweetheart *Signorina Rosalba* crafts exquisite jewelry here—blending corals, cameos, and semi-precious stones in southern Italian traditional style. She can custom-design a piece for you or sit you down for a jewelry-making lesson.

1€ = \$1.12 at press time

name in Neapolitan dialect.