A scenic base for touring Italy's ankle

By Meg Pier
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SORRENTO, Italy — Fall is lovely on the Cape and islands, but if its allure has faded with the waning daylight and you're willing to venture farther afield, you might consider a peninsular community, on a different continent: the Amalfi Coast of Italy and the island of Capri.

The Amalfi Coast, in the Campania region, the ankle of Italy's famous boot, stretches 43 miles from Sorrento on the Bay of Naples to Salerno on a gulf bearing its name. With a Greco-Roman heritage dating to 1000 BC, about 250 years before the founding of Rome, this stretch of shoreline abounds in rugged natural beauty and picturesque cliffside villages, with dwellings in shades of spice, sky, and sea, amid fragrant expanses of olive groves and lemon trees. Sorrento is an ideal scenic base from which to rest, relax, and explore.

The 31-mile drive south from Naples to Sorrento on a sunny fall Saturday takes more than two hours — apparently the weekend changeover is not a phenomenon unique to Cape Cod. If possible, travel on a weekday when traffic is down, ideally during the "siesta" hours of 1-4 p.m. We found the roads here were far better marked than in other parts of Italy, presumably due to its tourist trade. Nonetheless, the ride can be harrowing, and not just because you are high atop cliffs with surf crashing far below. Scooters are a chief mode of transportation for locals and visitors alike, and many drivers seem to harbor a death wish. Old men, as well as young couples with infants, passed us on perilous curves against high-speed oncoming traffic.

Sorrento offers a host of accommodations across the price spectrum. It's best to make plans 6-10 months in advance, especially if you're visiting in summer. Much like Nantucket and the Vineyard, this locale draws many summer visitors who return to their favorite spot annually, as well as thousands seeing it for the first time.

Keep in mind that very few hotels have private beaches, as most are built into rocky precipices rising from the sea.

The island of Capri, west of Sorrento, long known as a getaway for jetsetters and glitterati, has much to offer the day-tripper who arrives by ferry. The ride on a hydrofoil takes about 20 minutes.

The ferries come into Capri's tacky and touristy Marina Grande, from which buses, trains, and grotto tours depart. While it's a deceptively charming sight from the water, skip this harbor entirely and head directly for Capri Centro. A taxi is recommended for this excursion for more reasons than one. The walk from Marina Grande is not easy; it took two fairly able-bodied individuals 40 minutes to hike the steep stairs, with several pauses to catch our breath.

GLOBE PHOTO/MEG PIER

A cove and cliffside beach on the isle of Capri off the Amalfi Coast.

Once in the centro, you'll find the Piazzetta, a charming square dominated by a clock tower with a bright yellow and blue face and the church of St. Stephen. Clustered in the plaza are numerous coffee bars (a bar where alcohol is sold is referred to as a "bar Americano"), and a variety of boutiques, from the high end to souvenir shops.

Villa Jovis, the remains of a Roman villa where Emperor Tiberius supposedly flung his enemies into the sea, is a strenuous 45-minute walk that begins through an arch off Capri Centro. You'll want to stroll leisurely, not only because of the steepness of the walled stone lane, but to enjoy snatches of sea views and glimpses of gorgeous gardens with masses of morning glory and myrtle, profusions of orchids and oleander and sunflower stalks reaching for the sky at the centuries-old gated homes along the way. In seafaring tradition, each villa proudly boasts its name on brightly colored tiles, many of which are also emblazoned with a sunburst emblem, an apt golden image echoed again and again on exteriors throughout this island of light. Here sun worship has a fabled history that spans from the Bronze Age to rock star royalty of today. At the summit, you're rewarded with a panorama of the entire island, the Neapolitan Gulf, and a profile of Mount Vesuvius.

Reason number two for a taxi: We found our driver a most able ambassador for his island. For a negotiated fee of about $100 for the better part of a day, he brought us to spots we might not have visited otherwise. He also was willing to drop us off in a particular place for an agreed-upon period and pick us up a bit later.

One such place was the Faro lighthouse, the largest in Italy with its beam visible for 20 miles, on the southwest corner of the island. At its base, steps are cut into the rocky coastline leading down to a small emerald cove. Flanking the stairs are tiered levels of cliff all the way to the water. There sprawls the Lido del Faro, a cafe and bar with beach chairs for the customers. A number of swimmers climbed the face of the rocky promontory that almost encircles the inlet and then jumped the 30 feet into the azure water, prompting applause from those sunning themselves on the rocks.

Capri became a destination on the European grand tour after poet August Kopisch "discovered" its Grotta Azzurra in the 1820s. The Blue Grotto is so named for the luminous glow in the cave's large chamber caused by light refracted from its exterior through the sapphire water. Bypass the tours based in Marina Grande and take a taxi (or private boat, if you're lucky to know someone who has one) to the Blue Grotto's entrance. Our driver said if you arrive before 9 a.m., you can swim into the cave on your own rather than take the boats that carry dozens of tourists to the mouth of the grotto, where they climb into tiny rowboats to enter the cave.

Another day trip from Sorrento worth making is Herculaneum. Said to have been founded by Hercules himself, this archeological site is about a 50-minute drive from Marina Piccola in Sorrento.

Once a resort for Pompeii's wealthy, Herculaneum is even better preserved than Pompeii. Rather than burning after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79, Herculaneum was covered in a deep coat of ash that kept much of its infrastructure relatively intact, and preserved many artifacts, such as plants, jewelry, coins, fabrics, furniture, even a boat.

Gardens have been re-created with green lawns, shrubbery, and lemon trees, setting off the stark and colorless ruins. Rrestoration continues; you may see archeologists at work as you roam the ruins.

Positano is one of several villages near Sorrento renowned for their charm. Home of American author John Steinbeck in the 1950s, it is a 40-minute drive south from Sorrento along high winding roads overlooking the sea. Once in "downtown" Positano, follow a stone lane down toward the water that is lined with tiny boutiques selling touristy junk, art, and fine linen. At the bottom of the lane are several cafes and restaurants and the public beach. Like many Italian beaches on this coast, it is pebbly but the water is pure, clean, and a beautiful aquamarine.

That day, we returned to Sorrento for dinner and had a wonderful meal at Ristorante Taverna Azzurra da Gennaro: appetizer of paper-thin slices of tuna and swordfish, anchovies and octopus in lemon juice and olive oil, giant shrimp in the shell, and salmon, followed by a shared pasta course of ravioli in the shape of little fish, filled with crabmeat in a tomato/baby shrimp sauce. Then veal piccato and baked white fish surrounded by mussels, clams, squid, and giant shrimp. A strolling accordion player serenaded, not an uncommon experience here.

This was a tough place to leave, this captivating land of pure waters and wonderful, unprocessed food. Still, we found solace in the fact that, by comparison, Boston drivers now seem almost civilized.

Meg Pier is a freelance writer in Nahant. An exhibit of her photos, "Mediterranean Magic: Scenes of Greece, Italy, and Spain," is part of the Featured Artist Series at the Newburyport Art Association (65 Water St.; 978-465-8769; www.newburyportart.org) through Wednesday.

If you go . . .

How to get there

The lowest round-trip air fare between Boston and Naples, 30 miles north of Sorrento, at press time was $460 on Delta Airlines.

AutoEurope will book a rental car through Avis, Hertz, and others based on need and availability. Call 800-223-5555. For four days, a standard shift compact costs about $400; a week is approximately $570.

Two companies provide service to Capri from Sorrento's main harbor of Marina Piccola via hydrofoil, high-speed catamaran, and regular ferry. The Caremar ferry line accepts only cash and offers a more extensive round-trip schedule for about $15. Linee Marittine Partenopee accepts both cash and credit cards and provides a limited schedule for about $12.

What to do

Herculaneum
011-39-081-857-5347
www.pompeiisites.org
A 50-minute drive on Autostrada A3 from Sorrento (also accessible by train). Admission for one day is about $12.80; to visit five sister archeological sites of Pompei, Herculaneum, Oplantis, Stabi, and Boscoreale, admission is about $23 and good for three days.

Where to stay

Grand Hotel President
Via Colle Parise, 4
80067 Sorrento
011-39-081-878-2262
High in the hills above the town, this is typical in its subterranean architecture. The lobby and reception area are on ground level with guest rooms and other facilities below. The pool is on a fourth-floor terrace. Rooms $146-$263.

Belle Vue Syrene
Piazza Della Vittoria 5
80067 Sorrento
011-39-081-878-1024
www.bellevue.it
Built in 1824. Rooms about $338-$427, including continental breakfast.

Parco dei Principi
Via Rota 1, Sorrento
011-39-081-878-4644
At this deluxe hotel, doubles are $294-$368.

Where to eat

Ristorante Caruso's
Via S. Antonino, 12, Sorrento
011-39-081-807-3156
This is as much a museum and shrine to the tenor Enrico Caruso as a fine dining spot. Walls are covered with photos, newspaper clippings, and performance billings. Dinner for two about $77-$115.

Ristorante Taverna Azzurra da Gennaro
Via Marina Grande, 166
80067 Sorrento
011-39-081-877-2510
Dinner for two, about $64-$110.

More information

www.capri-island.com
www.sorrento.cc/about_amalfi_coast.php