

Amalfatorious

Too much has been written about the Costiere Amalfiteri and every visitor has a favourite part unless the constraints of financial capacity limit the venues to the hills of Praiano and not the opulence of the film star hotels spilling down the cliffs. Only the game or brainless need bring their own car and the ability to find a car park would probably add a few bucks to any tariff and new wing mirrors would be the least collateral damage.

Winging it in from Casablanca into Rome was never an easy task and the loss of baggage exacerbated the drama via the Iberian Madrid 8.30pm connection. Exit customs to track the organised pickup and the driver was prepared to camp for a period on an outside chance the baggage would materialise next flight. Rome's non-existent security made it easy to slink back into the baggage area as the lonely bag circulated on a carousel and was walked out without interest or customs.

Perhaps this was a smart move for four passengers to pay the extra for Seahorse Limousine Service as it now saved a night's accommodation on a 2.30am trip. Hard to capitalise on the Amalfi Coast as the looming steep hills in misty morning gloom were awesome in their greyness and the welcome of Piazza San Luca in the Praiano hills after 20 hours was sublime.



The apartment Casa Concetta rented for seven days is only 60 steps up from the plaza on 3 layers perched above a small church and can sleep 6 people with ease. Views are magnificent in an East West vista almost a sea sunrise and sunset into the deep blue Mediterranean taking in what seems the whole bay as the hillside falls into the water. The Villa is an agricultural micro system of organic recycling with vegetables planted in narrow rows downwards to catch the angle of the sun. Yes all the shallots, capsicum, lettuce, peas, beans and a robust patch of potato were for the use of the guests. Around the parameters were the necessities of Italian life such as artichokes, lemon trees, garlic, parsley, rocket and herbs to pop in with the spoils from the handy alimentari at the church piazza.

The views from the balcony were stupendous as the houses below tumbled into every nook and cranny but they seemed to be in a continual state of repair like chipped icing on a wedding cake. The early morning sunrise seeped across the rugged hills and was a slow opening of a picture book as the haze started to settle.

The Praiano culinary Olympics started as a lunch expedition to the recommended La Brace for a shared Cozze Gratinata (mussels and Parmesan), mozzarella pomodori, bresaola Rucola and 3 styles of pasta, beers and house rosso for E25 pp. Views, bonhommie and the onset of siesta led to a seemingly innocuous Sunday stroll to Positano for a gelato around the roads totally unaware of the travails of 11 kilometres of roadway.

The Praiano Positano road is a series of inclines, hairpin bends, narrow overhangs, tortured and twisted short bits and only tourists would attempt this walk in the afternoon sun. The treacherous trek is rewarding in its ability to peer over precipitous rocks into hidden vales all the sights missed by vehicle travel.

Houses which would not be considered habitable in other countries are trowelled onto rocks with hanging companion gardens and vine covered pergolas. Olives and citrus are in every garden with sheep and goats fenced into impossible plots as we avoid death by motor as traffic passed within centimetres in nonchalant abandonment.



One wonders why there is not more road rage, but there again the frenetic makeup of the Italians does not question the dodgems associated with the Amalfi Coast, protected under talisman crosses dangling from each mirror. In isolation the superb five star hotel San Pietro hangs out over a bend giving the appearance of being plastered into the hillside tumbling and hiding its undoubted wares to the poor people who are left dreaming about its charms.

The passage into Positano is now cluttered with the meanderings of people trying to jockey for position to get on the local bus that provides the cheapest method of travel at one Euro between here and Praiano.

This is the real deal of traffic mayhem as the tight corners are powered around with great alacrity, horn blasting and on occasions long reversals as the "Madonna "Express hits the Mille Miglia



Praiano is a few kilometres long with no known centre as the sprawl of cascading residences are serviced by small market shops or alimenteri which are pocketed in the twisted torte of the rock face. The staccato beat of jackhammers penetrates the morning calm as the rejuvenation of ancient boltholes is in a continual state of preparation. Teams of mules and horses pop up from stepped alleys with storage buckets strapped to their backs as the rubble is extracted from the inaccessible sites.

Bar Da Sol is at the northern end and does a serious imitation of the universes richest hot chocolate ,good coffee and cold beer as the locals mix freely with the interlopers, all taking advantage of a fair price on the terrace that overlooks the bay. There is a feeling of community which integrates the visitor as the gathering points are spread about the slopes and the bus service puts one halfway to every iconic venue.

The older style Opengate Hotel has seats both sides of the main road and the Napolitano pizza, not far from its birthright, plus the lasagne and fish in the wood fired oven has the taste of Italy burnished into the flavour. Down below past the watchtower is the famed Africana night club sunken into the rocks on a rough hewn pathway that reeks of the escape route from the pirates and Napolitano overlords. The same path leads to Il Pirate restaurant that is woven into the crevices overlooking the small painted fishing boats that belong to the hidden fishing village. A rock fissure that opens into a small bay was the ancient home to 400 fisher folk that now only houses about 50 and the space remaining looks barely capable of supporting that and the four restaurants.



The major sport is to travel the length of the peninsular to the genuine traps of Amalfi, Ravello, Minori, Praiano and Positano which are all within 30 kilometres and each has its intrinsic values and combine to provide world class eating venues. The road to Amalfi is another torture test of resolve but the village is a commercial wonderland even if the snakelike series of shops do not allow some of the more corpulent shoppers much purchase on the cobblestones. Small pizza, panino and pasta shops do the bulk of the trade as the well placed cafes in the squares have empty seats proving that the added cost of being seated and copperto charged is self defeating to the modern clientele.

The real place to lick a gelato at reasonable rates is to meander the alleys and end up watching the forever weddings at the magnificent Duomo in the chaos of the main square. Leave this area and play at the waterfront with Polizia blowing whistles, buses manoeuvring and the general tourist indecision creating a new visual sport.

The alternative trip is to catch the ferry from Amalfi to Positano a twenty minute voyage, agin a sometime 40 minutes by road, value for E6 at the typical Italian decentralised system of purchasing a ticket remote from the departure wharf.

The boat is a sturdy thumping beast as a totally different coastal orientation reveals the beauty of the castles; watch towers and tumbling homes along the sheer cliffs digitalising new photo opportunities.

The dénouement is the entry into Positano from the ocean and wending the way up from the beach through the exquisite purchasing palaces well known for the ability to inveigle the moths from their boltholes.

This harbour view is a great angle of pastel homes climbing the small valley and makes a pleasant foraging expedition to see how the other half can spend their dollars in the demon designer deities.

The must do walk is the Sentiere Degl'ai Dei or the 'Walk of the Gods' but only if your vertigo is in sync with the walking shoes as the route along the roof of the Amalfi Coast is not for the faint hearted.

Best method to trek, without walking the 1000 steps up to the commencement, is to catch the bus from Amalfi waterfront to the village of Boomerano on the Agerola bus and start with the least amount of uphill walking.

The bus is full as the early part of the day is popular especially with the large contingent of Tyrolean Terror trekkers replete with walking sticks and Everest hiking boots ready to conquer the Alpino.

It is a ponderous bus route in a series of tight bends some requiring a second go as the bus tacked into the oncoming traffic as the rocking horse special lurched into Panavision and vistorama overload along the precipitous route.

Boomerano is a nondescript village about 16 kilometres from Amalfi and the Church is the beacon for commencement and the most gentile of curates in sartorial elegance was on the path seemingly to bless the forthcoming journey.



The pathway begins with blessed innocence onto an easily negotiable manufactured walkway before dissipating with a vengeance around some bluffs of despair. This is not an altogether fair description but the awesome vista blows the senses as one conquers the vertiginally challenged equilibrium as it seems a volume of depth bounces the most balanced of souls. The footholds seem precarious in parts as the 'rubble run' or marbles of granite lurk about for the unwary.

The pathway meanders along the mountain side with views from every part and the 2000 metre sheeraway in sectors treat the optical and neural nerves to a new high. The survival of the walking species is definitely in the spring and autumn as summer heat and winter chills would add another dimension. In parts structures of a bygone era on sloping abandoned gardens begs the questions; were they escape holes from the wars ,how did they put foundations on the edge of precipices ,how could they survive on the bare patches ?

The wonder that makes up this great walk and the availability amid a very popular tourist area begs the question on its survival or perhaps the intensity required to do it will be self governing. The pathway in parts has rocky sectors dropping away to unseen chasms and only one push could act as a marriage equaliser and no evidence could be found.



There is a rainbow at the end of the walk as after 4 hours the hamlet of Nocello cried out to be visited and the recommended trattoria at the village entry is a clean machine with E7.50 pasta of the day to die for. The killer penne pomodoro was supplemented by the balsamico and the chilled locale vino bianco blending in with the mind stopping view of Positano 1000s of meters below. Price per square inch this view will stop the most dedicated and to get the full whack the footway downwards is a jaywalker's paradise. A booby prize is to be tempted to take the perceived short cut halfway down the Nocello road and enter knee wrenches hell as the 1500 steps jolt the brain into submission and tip one into to Positano back alleys.

As a place to lay ones head Positano is not for all, although in parts as attractive as any super destination, a holiday home to the dispossessed of tourist persona emptying their creativity, wallets, humour and soul as the overpriced saturation continues in every brochure. It is a harsh summation but escape is easy as the staging post for local buses is at the best gelato and vino stop in the Positano junction and the time to kill is worth every centavo as the passing parade of life trickles past.

Minori is six kilometres south on the Salerno road with a large long flat black sand beach alongside a tree lined esplanade seemingly waiting for something to happen. The tourists on the beach look English as the blimp like bodies pinking themselves could be any nation bar the feet in black socks and sandals. The esplanade has some cafes with good coffee and reasonably priced drinks so the resting faze is soon entangled in the effusive and helpful local beach side café with the obligatory dog. Now every dog in Italy has an English name and as much as male Christian names in Italy end in o, such as Aldo etc, the dogs have names ending in y such as Ronny Charley and it seems incongruous to hear the dogs being called to heel.



The walk from Minori to Amalfi is yet another dodgem special but views from the roadside are better than the bus revealing the lemon groves and cliff perched homes. The gardens are typical of the whole coast but never become tiresome as each corner seems to have a niche that sets it apart. The desire to have lunch on the terrace on Amalfi waterfront exposes another quirk of Italian governance as wardens cruise the beat looking for infiltrators consuming their own rations a sort of food Carabinieri.

No trip to the Amalfi is complete without the boat trip to the Isle of Capri which undoubtedly in its heyday was an iconic escape to paradise but a more apt modern nomenclature is the Isle of Debris. The place has been reading its own press releases with tourists flogging themselves to fellatio-ate the blue grotto and overloading the more than average funicular.

Capri is accessible from Positano on the jet launch and a smart move is to book a return to make sure there is an escape clause. The trip across the bay is very pleasant and interaction amongst the passengers is quite cheery and the boat pulls into the harbour to a disgorging mass of tourists all swarming toward the cable car.

The push and shove for April is disconcerting and in season must be terrifying as the spewing hordes are dropped off into the Capri main piazza to fend off those already moving.

It is a shuffle to walk the streets and the pall of Prada predominance barely overshadows the sheer end game of ogling those rich enough to actually inhabit one of the stores. The Capricious Caprians decked in designer chic promenade the sidewalks and the cafes become staging posts to preen and be seen as the glitterati use their wallets as suppositories.



The only escape from this world is to catch a bus to Anacapri where sanity prevails on the main thoroughfare as it snakes around the hillside with perky pizzerias and cafes lining the sides. The fixed prices are reasonable and enticing as no doubt competition now created some reality and the best insalada in Italy lived here.

The Italians do what they know very well but the salad gene was not generationally passed down and salads are the inevitable lost piece of cuisine-art. No need to describe what every Australian Café can make blindfolded but suffice it to say the ubiquitous iceberg lettuce, tomato and onion had got the flick and were not to be seen.

There was no desire to face the blue grotto functionaries and to avoid the hassles of getting into the ruck again so rest and recreation prevailed until the bus arrived. A new Guinness Book of Records Bus Jam of 55 persons on a twenty five seater was perhaps liveable but the degree of difficulty in the dive down the precipitous road to the harbour belied ones shortened lifespan.

A sense of relief in our small group on making the boat was soon supported by others that were bitterly disappointed by the Island and a mutual gathering in Praiano was called for at the legendry local. Introductions and new found friends assuaged the long wrestle of overdone commercialism and even the Catholic call to prayer of distorted bell wrangling from the nearby church did not interrupt the sipping.



The varied activities on this coast are not complete without the Pompeian experience and my Grandmother described it in such elated terms as she visited it in the early sixties the memory always prevailed. Who escaped the legends of old Roman tales even a schoolboy thought lingers of the stories Bulwer-Lytton told of the slave girl Nydia who escaped the holocaust.

Pompeii is a full day's excursion from Praiano requiring an early start via the Sita bus to Meta Stationne thereby saving the twenty minutes going via Sorrento. Board a very boring train trip to town station and disembark with yet again a large crowd to jockey for the entry requirements and to get an audio tour.

This is a mistake as the only way to have a full and complete day or a fast track three hour tour is to get a good guide negotiable at the entrance. Hot and reflective heat from the stonework brings wonders of the tortures the summer would surely bring.

The saviour to broiling the archaeological soul soon depletes the personal water supply but costs of rehydration are not as exorbitant as warned. Every Dresden resident homesick about a rubble pile seems to have joined tours as the staccato guttural bark of the super loud tour guides resonated impinging the thought process.

The audio headsets give autonomy with direct commentary but a better voiceover revamp without spaghetti western music would provide less interference. The highlight of the day is the tasty lunch of vine tomatoes, provolone, prosciutto and crusty breads and what seems a picture perfect mini forum in the half round.

A plaque is found that casts a more solemn aura in lunching as the description of our dining table impacted it was the tomb of a temple priestess built to oversee the road to Herculaneum.



A major point of interest to the prurient minds is the Lupinary or brothels which have graphic murals of every known sexual gymnastic pose on the wall no doubt acting as a positional guide. The Lupi-menu reveals the price of a 'Wellington Boot 'was two glasses of wine which in today's values sounds an absolute bargain.

The Villa of mysteries (Villa dei misteri) is named for the paintings in one room of the residence which is on the outskirts of Pompeii and was relatively untarnished in the 79AD eruption.

Throughout the villa is decorated with very fine paintings and frescos although the actual subject of the frescoes is hotly debated. A most common interpretation of the images is the initiation of a woman into the special cult of Dionysus who seems to be getting off with Ariadne but there again perhaps in reality they are an ancient fore runner to manga comics?

Withdrawal from the 50 hectare site, of which only a third is open to the public, is via the enormous amphitheatre (Teatro grande) to then get into a commuter scramble to gain passage to Sorrento and the bus to Positano. The guide books present Sorrento in a lesser light and it was not on the current agenda to visit so the opportunity to wander while trying to buy an elusive bus ticket is taken.

The population of seventeen thousand residents make it the largest town on the peninsular and the centre had the feel and guise of an English holiday town and it was only the best presented Gelato shops in Italy that changed the perception. Brief visits are not a fair assumption but Amalfi Drive provides magnificent views over the Bay of Naples and the town is home to the many ferries and hydrofoils that service Ischia and Capri.