



Adventure Girl
Stefanie Michaels

Con l'Amore da Amalfi

By Stefanie Michaels

I land at the Rome International Airport. Alberto, my driver, greets me, hastily grabbing my bags. I check my watch, still set on L.A. time. “It-za 7:30 in the morning Bella, you can sleep on the way to Amalfi,” Alberto says. I inquire about the travel time by car, having “guesstimated” a few hours. I am a horrible car traveler, preferring the hassles of air-travel, to being “auto trapped” for endless hours, and adding to my dreaded moments of motion sickness. “It-za four-hour drive, don’t-a-you-worry,” he says.

What’s to worry? I have just landed in the world’s number one tourist destination, land of all beautiful things—the scenery, the people, wine—and let’s not forget about the food. Armed with ginger tablets (great for motion sickness), I grab the front seat—access

to open window and fresh air.

We exit the airport, immediately hitting Rome’s gridlock traffic. Alberto maneuvers past crammed turn-offs, dodging back and forth, seeking any inch of space to move forward into. Eventually, we emerge unscathed from the chaos and head south towards Amalfi. Note to self: Next time, fly into Naples; take the one-and-a-half hour drive into Amalfi.

Alberto handled the road with frenzied brilliancy, even moving within millimeters of limestone hillsides to allow passing buses to breeze past us without loosing pace—a heart jumping experience, yet the only way to access the coastal cities by car. Additional options are boat hire or pricey helicopter transfers from Naples to Positano.

I check into Amalfi’s Santa

Caterina Hotel—a mix of family charm and classic elegance, with all the amenities an overwhelmed traveler craves.

As dreary as I felt from my exaggerated travel day, I noticed the hotel’s details—hand painted floor tiles, family possessions placed about, my beautiful weighted room key; big, ornamental, meant for guests to leave at the front desk, so as to notify staff when rooms are available for cleaning.

“Welcome to Santa Caterina Hotel. It is a pleasure to have you with us here. Wishing you a pleasant stay,” says my cream colored postcard, placed in my room, number 28. I move into the bathroom—an important precursor as to whether or not I will fully enjoy my stay. More delicious painted floor tiles, an enormous tub with jets, top-notch bathing products,



us by,” as he poured my sparkling water. “Really Pipino, what is it that you have to share with me?” I ask. “This is happy water I am pouring you, don’t have too much, or you will be too happy.” Another note to self- drink lots of sparkling water for joy and sweet memories of Amalfi.

Down the coast to Positano, I land at La Sirenuse, a former villa of an Italian nobleman, Marquis Paolo Sersale, now helmed by his heir, Antonio— a darling man with an unlimited library of stories about the hotel’s history. La Sirenuse, located in the heart of Positano, opens its doors from March 1 through November 30, offering

heated towel bars— a large beautifully equipped bathroom. Heaven.

Fans of Brad Pitt would truly be in “heaven.” Room 28 had been Brad’s room, while filming scenes for Mr. and Mrs. Smith. So this was the hotel splashed in tabloid headlines around the globe!

Owner, Crescenzo Gargano welcomed me with a glass of refreshing lemonade at “La Terraza,” the hotel’s terrace, complete with jaw dropping views above the lapis colored “mediterranean.” Crescenzo, pointed to the hills and countless lemon trees. “The lemons are very special to us. We call them Amalfi Limones. We use no pesticides and you will only find them here. They are our babies and we use them in our recipes.”

Challenge. Try everything “limone”. That evening, I upped my own ante, dining on a seven-course meal including the infamous Tagliolini al Limone and Profiteroles al Limone. Hands down, it is my most favored Italian meal to date. Creamy, melt-in your mouth everything, and as my friend, Jaj and I say, “yumm-a”.

Pipino, the restaurant’s maitre’d, approached with his contagious smile on my final morning there. “I have something special for you to remember

Camo, where beautiful cameos are produced (complete with a cameo museum). There, I was given a special cameo memento, in memory of my time in Amalfi and of my room at La Sirenuse.

Not surprisingly in most of Europe during the high season, great suites with awesome bathrooms commands high prices, with La Sirenuse’s rates ranging between \$1,200 to \$3,800 Euro per night.

Ravello was my last stop for this adventure. Butterfield and Robinson- a travel firm featuring luxury active travel, offers a unique way to get there from the coast. B&R call their Amalfi walking trip, Walking in the Footsteps of Gods— I call it walking off a week of eating pasta.

Their hike into the hills is challenging; up more than 2,000 steps through beautiful nature and quaint towns. After 2.5 hours of hiking, I skip the final hour hike, taking their van to Palazzo Sasso— a stunning five-star hotel resting atop a 1,000-foot cliff.

Locals say the “hills of Ravello kiss the sky,” and Ravello devotees— Plácido Domingo, Oprah, Jennifer Connolly, Anjelica Houston, and Gore Vidal have all been enchanted by this spectacular locale.

A former aristocrat’s 12th century villa, many of Palazzo Sasso’s rooms remain in tact and updated. There are 32 rooms, 11 suites, with a staff-to-guest ratio of two employees per room.



The hotel offers a spa/beauty center, heated pool, sun deck, plunge pools, two cafés- Caffé dell’Arte and Terrazza Belvedere, the 2-star Michelin Award winning restaurant, Rossellinis, and limousine and helicopter service for the jet-setter in you.

I am a gastronome disaster in the kitchen. Thank goodness, the hotel found this out and booked me an epicurean adventure at Mamma Agata’s cooking school.

Yes, I almost broke out in a sweat when I found out I’d have to try cooking in public, yet meeting Mamma Agata, put any hesitation and fear of kitchen apparatuses behind me.

Mamma’s classes commence in her gourmet kitchen. Her daughter, Chiara, translates Mamma’s Italian to English. Lessons are interactive, recreating Mamma’s southern Italian recipes. Fresh vegetables and lemons

are chosen from the garden, followed by instruction and note-taking; thus attempting Mamma’s recipes takes all morning. Once students have conquered the kitchen, it’s time for a decadent lunch provided by Mamma, and “mangiare” the recipes created. It was “yumma-festive” and my first edible cooking adventure without burning anything!

Adventure over.

A week in Amalfi, and ten pounds heavier—unfortunately not my luggage—I head out to meet my driver. It’s time for my final wild ride on the “Amalfi Highway.”

Lowering the van’s window, I slip a ginger tablet onto my tongue, and catch a faint smell of lemon in the crisp air. I glance at my watch, still set on L.A. time. “What time is it now?” I

ask the driver. “Don’t-ta-worry Bella, rest-a on the way back to Roma.” ■

What’s to worry?
With love from Amalfi.

Where is it?

The Amalfi Coast, or Costiera Amalfitana in Italian, is a stretch of coastline on the southern side of the Sorrentine Peninsula of Italy (Province of Salerno), extending from Positano in the west to Vietri sul Mare in the east. The towns lying on the Amalfi Coast are Vietri sul Mare, Cetara, Maiori, Minori, Ravello, Scala, Atrani, Amalfi, Conca dei Marini, Praiano and Positano.

Renowned for its rugged terrain, scenic beauty, picturesque towns and diversity, the Amalfi Coast is listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. The area is featured in Positano (1953) by American writer John Steinbeck

Where to Stay

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Mamma Agata’s secret:

Make the gnocchi today and cook them tomorrow. The important tip is that when you cook them, be sure to add the olive oil before placing them in the refrigerator.

