

Live *the good life*

The Amalfi Coast has long been famed for its beauty and glamour – now discover a whole new side to the region with our countdown of its 12 best local experiences

WORDS ALEX VON TUNZELMANN | PHOTOGRAPHS MARK READ

The coastal town of Amalfi is framed by steep cliffs, with houses built into their crevices





12 Make the perfect gelato

In AD 27, the Roman emperor Tiberius moved to the island of Capri. He spent the next 10 years just off the Amalfi Coast – a natural paradise of secluded beaches and towering cliffs. The region has been a favourite destination for visitors to Italy ever since. Overdevelopment has been restricted by the

coast's narrow roads and tightly packed medieval towns. As a result, the Amalfi Coast has kept its character: warm, open and quintessentially Italian.

And what could be more Italian than gelato? At the Gelateria David in Sorrento, owners Mario and Carmela Gargiulo make 130 flavours of ice cream – and teach others how to make it too. In their workshop, students blend cream, sugar and egg yolks with fresh fruit. Mario only uses seasonal produce, so the flavours depend on what's at the market that day: almond and lemon zest, or tomato and basil. They even do zuppa inglese – an English trifle gelato.

● Gelateria David, Via Marziale 9, Sorrento (tasting classes £8; 00 39 81 8073649; gelateriadavidsorrento.it).

11 Learn the secrets of limoncello

In the terraced groves outside Praiano, Valentino Esposito picks large lemons from a tree.

Most are the size of two fists, and weigh heavily on the slender branches. 'You can have lemon with meat, with fish, with ice cream – even just half a glass of lemon with half a glass of water is delicious,' he says. The highlight, though, is limoncello, the region's traditional and much-loved lemon liqueur, usually served as an after-dinner digestivo. Valentino's limoncello is so well-regarded that chefs Jamie Oliver and Gennaro Contaldo are long-term admirers, and he sometimes hosts picnics for them in his lemon groves.

Back at his small artisan factory, Il Gusto della Costa, Valentino brews some lemon

coffee: dark espresso with two thin slices of peel in the pot. Two assistants pour vibrant yellow liquid into glass bottles. 'For limoncello, you only use lemon peel with no white pith on it at all,' Valentino explains. 'The white makes it bitter. The peel must infuse for three or four days in alcohol, then we add a syrup of cold water and sugar. Only four ingredients. The bright colour is natural. In September or October, when the lemons are green, the limoncello is green.'

A sip of the yellow stuff is a revelation. It is thick, sweet, potent and full of the fresh, zingy flavour of the Amalfi Coast's most famous fruit.

● Il Gusto della Costa, Via Gennaro Capriglione 24, Praiano (00 39 89 813048; ilgustodellacosta.it). ▶

ILLUSTRATION: STUART KOLAKOVIC



Valentino Esposito, producer of some of the region's best-loved limoncello

8 Walk

the Path of the Gods

Movie stars such as Grace Kelly, Humphrey Bogart and Elizabeth Taylor may have come for the glamour, but the Amalfi Coast's inspiring natural scenery has also drawn literary names. The likes of Italo Calvino, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and DH Lawrence found beauty and tranquillity on one of the coast's most stunning walks, the Sentiero degli Dei – the Path of the Gods.

From the hilltop town of Agerola, an anonymous road leads towards the sea. Here begins the heavenly route, winding up and down precipitous ridges all the way to Positano. Back in the 16th century, this coast was often attacked by Saracens and pirates. The ruins of a defensive tower serve as a reminder of that more troubled time. Now, though, it is a place of perfect serenity. The air is gently scented with wild thyme and the only sound to be heard is that of chirping crickets and the occasional porcupine shuffling through the undergrowth. At every turn, there is a new and dramatic view down to the cobalt-blue Gulf of Salerno below. On a clear day, the island of Capri is distantly visible at the end of the Sorrentine Peninsula. If the Gods ever did walk the Earth, it is easy to imagine that they must have done so here.

● Path of the Gods walk (3 hours, signposted from the main piazza in Agerola; in-italia.com/italy/campania/hiking-path-sentieri-degli-dei). ►

9 Watch

the sun set on Positano

Positano is one of the most beautiful towns anywhere in Italy. Arranged around a beach of soft, volcanic sand and the tiled dome of the Church of Santa Maria Assunta are high terraces of terracotta-roofed buildings; these contrast in salmon pink, lemon yellow and brilliant white against the impossibly blue sky and sea.

The Sirens in Homer's *Odyssey* lured sailors to their doom on a rocky island by singing a song of seduction. According to local tradition, that island lies just off the Amalfi Coast. The Hotel Le Sirenuse is named after these mythical creatures, and its terrace offers what is generally agreed to be the most sublime view of Positano. It also serves the best drinks in town.

As the sun sets, the lights start to twinkle. Were the Sirens really in Positano, they need not have sung for Odysseus – they could just have raised a glass of perfectly chilled prosecco from this terrace, and he would have made a beeline for the treacherous rocks below.

● Hotel Le Sirenuse terrace bar, Via Cristoforo Colombo 30, Positano (open year-round; mains from £22; 00 39 89 875066; sirenuse.it).



The Path of the Gods.
TOP LEFT Adriana di Fiore and her daughter Francesca still make the Capri pants favoured by Jackie Onassis.
LEFT The terrace at Le Sirenuse



10 Shop

like Jackie O

When Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis visited the island of Capri in the late '60s and early '70s, she packed light. Once there, she would drop into La Parisienne and buy 12 pairs of Adriana di Fiore's famous Capri pants.

Today, Adriana still works in the boutique established by her family more than a century ago, which is situated in the corner of Capri's main piazza. Jackie O's favourite slim-fitting trousers are made by hand in the workshop, along with a range of clothes in a distinctive Caprese style: bright colours, flowing cuts and jewelled detail.

In the last few years, more international labels have muscled out many small-scale Caprese designers and artisans. Yet Adriana and her daughter Francesca stood firm, and are proud to support local talent. 'They try to get us out,' says Adriana with a glint in her eye. 'But we are fighting to remain!' It would be a brave global brand that took on the feisty ladies of La Parisienne and tried to mimic their classic Amalfi Coast style.

● La Parisienne, Piazza Umbetro 1, Capri (Capri pants £177; 00 39 81 8370283; laparisiennecapri.it).



7 Drive a classic car

It is a fantasy straight out of a James Bond film: taking the hairpin bends of the spectacular coastal road in a classic convertible car. There are many rides for rent in Sorrento – from dinky Fiat 500s to Jaguars and Ferraris. Today's choice, a bright red 1970s Alfa Romeo with the roof down, hugs the hot tarmac as it rounds the sharp corners. Above, craggy rock faces veer up to the sky; below, they plummet to the deep blue Tyrrhenian Sea. The car purrs along at a moderate speed, all the better to take in the memorable views and slow enough, of course, not to mess up one's hair.

● Spider Life Style, Via Gottola 83, Piano de Sorrento (classic car hire from £88 per day; 00 39 33 3992 5141; spiderlifestyle.com).

6 Wander through a Rossellini film set

One of the region's most beloved sons was the director Roberto Rossellini, known as much for his colourful love life as for his movies. He filmed in Maiori, and stills from his famous scenes are displayed around the town. Visitors walk the streets recreating the poses of his leading ladies, Ingrid Bergman and Anna Magnani, pretending to star in their own movies. One person who doesn't need to fake it is former builder Carlo Rumolo (right). Still sprightly at the age of 100, he was spotted by Rossellini in an amateur dramatics production in the early 1950s. Soon after, he was cast as a police brigadier in *The Machine that Kills Bad People*, a morality tale about a photographer whose camera has the power to kill. Carlo couldn't be happier that visitors to Maiori still want to talk about his moment of stardom. 'It is wonderful to have done something in my life that people care about so much,' he says with a huge smile.

● Rossellini film stills can be found throughout Maiori. For information on the Roberto Rossellini Memorial Prize and film festival held in November, visit premierossellini.com.



5 Cook real Italian food

Lima, known to everyone as Mamma Agata, lives in a house on a terrace below the centre of Ravello. Back in the 1960s, she became the personal chef to an American heiress living here. Soon afterwards, she was cooking for Hollywood couples Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, and Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

These days, Mamma Agata teaches cookery to guests at the home her family has lived in for 250 years. The school is managed by her effervescent daughter, Chiara, who bounces around, cheerfully forcing food on students. 'If you want to get the family together, cook!' Chiara trills, offering up the fruits of that morning's class: courgette flower fritters, aubergine parmigiana, pappardelle con peperoni (pasta with peppers), chicken with rosemary and Mamma Agata's famous lemon cake. Humphrey Bogart became obsessed with this cake when he stayed in Ravello, and insisted on having it with breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Her extraordinary gift for home-style cooking with regional ingredients comes across in everything she prepares, and she uses natural ingredients freshly picked the morning of each class. For Mamma Agata and Chiara, teaching cookery is not merely a job, but a passion. 'If I were a millionaire, I'd do this for free,' says Chiara. 'For Italians, food is the centre of the world.'

● Mamma Agata, Piazza S Cosima 9, Ravello (00 39 89 858432; mammaagata.com). ▶



Mamma Agata and her cat in her outdoor kitchen; she teaches guests how to make dishes such as courgette flower fritters and pappardelle con peperoni



4 Hide out like Greta Garbo

Perched high in the hills, the village of Ravello is an eccentric maze of stone staircases and medieval houses built around an 11th-century cathedral. This place offers such privacy that it attracted the most famous solitude-seeker of the twentieth century, Greta Garbo. In 1938, Garbo rented the Villa Cimbrone here with her lover, the conductor Leopold Stokowski, who was 23 years older than her and married to someone else. The press staked out the villa round the clock. Suddenly, sleepy Ravello was famed across the globe.

Cimbrone is now a hotel. Anyone can wander through the grounds, finding shelter from the blazing sun under trees set in fragrant beds of lavender. The gardens are

designed with a sense of mystery: secret grottoes and statues of Greek gods are tucked away among twisted vines and camellias which, gossip columns once claimed, Stokowski picked for Garbo every morning. Bright green lizards sun themselves on the terraces while enormous yellow swallowtail butterflies swoop low over the lawns.

'It is cruel to bother people who want to be left in peace,' Garbo snapped at the reporters who followed her around Ravello. Today, the Hotel Villa Cimbrone is as peaceful as any movie star could wish for: the perfect spot if you, like Garbo, want to be alone.

● Hotel Villa Cimbrone, Via S Chiara 26, Ravello (gardens open 9am-sunset; 00 39 89 857459; villacimbrone.com).

3 Eat fish in the bay

The Amalfi Coast is renowned for its seafood, and the best way to taste it is to eat as close to the ocean as possible. The Conca dei Marini has a secluded beach set amid cliffs that forms one of the coast's most beautiful coves. There is no way to drive here – visitors must either climb down steep stone steps from the road or take a boat from Amalfi town. Yet it's worth it for a visit to La Tonnarella, a beach restaurant serving whatever has been caught that day.

Waiters run back and forth with overflowing platters of luscious mussels and clams, pink and white octopus, heaps of fried calamari and chargrilled seabass, accompanied by carafes of white wine filled with slices of ripe peach. Tables must be fought for; locals arrive early and stay for the entire afternoon.

● La Tonnarella, Conca dei Marini, between Amalfi and Furore (mains from £11; 00 39 89 831939; ristorantelatonnarella.com).

2 Sleep like a saint

For those seeking spiritual fulfilment rather than glamour on the Amalfi Coast, there is the Oasi Madre della Pace, a convent dedicated to the Venerable Teresa Manganiello, hidden amid silvery olive trees and gardens dotted with yellow pansies in the hills above Sorrento. Run by Franciscan nuns, the convent opens its doors to guests from all over the world, who come for anything from a formal spiritual retreat to just a night or two of downtime.

The kitchen garden is along a path of sunflowers and grows everything from traditional lemons and tomatoes to kiwi



fruit. Yet the convent's most striking feature is the view – a spectacular panorama across Sorrento and the Bay of Naples to the active volcano, Mount Vesuvius. Certainly a pleasant way to atone for your sins.

● Oasi Madre della Pace, Via Parise – Zona Priora, Sorrento (from £60; oasimadredellapace.com).



1 Leap into the Mediterranean

The waters off Amalfi Town are filled with boats, ranging from modest dinghies to massive super-yachts. Some coves along the coast become floating cities at the weekend, with scores of vessels moored together and parties in full swing.

Yet the greatest thrill to be had on the Amalfi Coast is to head out for the open sea. Every town along the coast has a sign reading 'noleggio barche' (boat hire), indicating that anyone with a few euros to spare can

become the captain of his or her own vessel. Speeding away from the quay, the vastness of the Tyrrhenian Sea and sky opens up ahead. It's not clear where one ends and the other begins; the whole appears as alternating bands of periwinkle and petrol blue, shot through with ribbons of deep rippling cornflower. The sun heats the varnished wooden deck to the point where it feels like an egg broken on the side would fry in an instant. With everyone at

egg-cooking temperature, the time has come. Lining up along the side, toes clinging to the edge: three, two, one... with a yell, they all leap into the warm air and plunge down into the sea. For a submerged moment, all around is blissfully cool and quiet. Then they bob up again, snorting salty water out of their noses, scrambling back on board to do it all over again.

● Boat hire is available on most harbour fronts along the coast (from £18 per hour for a small motor launch). ▬

Cooling off in the Tyrrhenian Sea. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Hotel Villa Cimbrone; pasta at beach restaurant La Tonnarella; Sister Malene of the Oasi Madre della Pace