

AMALFI COAST

The Italian job

It's a tough assignment for DAVID BULLARD, who has to spend four days on the exquisite Amalfi Coast while coming into close, repeated contact with fine food and drink

SALVATORE Capuano, the dapper managing director of Sireon Tours in Sorrento, had left a message arranging to meet me at 7pm at my hotel. I worked out that this would give me plenty of time to snatch some sleep after the discomfort of having to travel in Lufthansa's economy class. By the time Capuano arrived, I had slept, bathed, shaved, explored the narrow lanes of Sorrento, and spent a pleasant half hour in the bar of the Bellevue Syrene hotel.

After introductions, Capuano enthusiastically launched into a description of the restaurant we were about to visit and the sort of food they served. I immediately decided that I liked the man.

The fashionable Amalfi Coast is one of the most exquisite stretches of Mediterranean coastline and its terraced villages attract the world's rich and famous in high season. Gore Vidal, the tediously opinionated American writer, has a villa in Ravello and local hotels brag about their celebrity guests. John Steinbeck stayed at Le Sirenuse in Positano way back in 1953 and they're still talking about it. Greta Garbo eloped with Leopold Stokowsky to Ravello and stayed at Villa Cimbrone, while Richard Wagner found the inspiration for the second act of his opera *Parsifal* in the gardens of Ravello's 11th-century Villa Rufolo.

With luxury hotels charging R3 700 per night for a standard double room in high season, the prices are blatantly intended to discourage the backpacking riff-raff. Unfortunately, money is no longer a guarantee of good breeding and, in high season, you are just as likely to bump into the likes of Naomi Campbell, Posh Spice or Bernie Ecclestone.

Unlike the glitterati, I visited the Amalfi Coast in the low season. Not that this is a problem. You get to stay in world-famous hotels at low season prices with attentive staff, the roads are virtually deserted, you can get into a restaurant without queuing for hours and the weather is fabulous.

My four-day tour had been cleverly arranged to bring me into close and regular contact with good food and drink.

My first stop, Sorrento, is not really part of the Amalfi Coast. Lying across the bay from Naples, it is an attractive resort town of elegant hotels, tempting shops and restaurants.

Dinner the first night was at Ris-

YO MAMMA:

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torante Antico Francischiello da Peppino, about 15 minutes outside Sorrento. We had the almost undivided attention of the owner, who recited a long list of specials. I only managed three courses, but I did finish an excellent dinner with a glass of something local made from walnuts. It was dark and treacly and tasted as though it should be doing me good. I slept like a baby that night.

Next day Capuano met me after breakfast and we drove across the mountain pass and down again to the Amalfi Coast road to Positano. The town seems to hang on the side of a mountain with steps winding down to the small beach. I happened to be there for lunch and ate well at a restaurant called Chez Black on the main beach. I subsequently learned that this is *the* place to be seen. On the day I lunched there was a dearth of recognisable celebrities and it's quite possible that I was the most famous person there, but nobody seemed to care very much.

The winding mountain road is quite stunning, particularly in the late afternoon light. Ancient monasteries and churches dot the landscape and you drive round a bend to find yet another breathtaking vista. The road down to the town of Amalfi is rather like that. In the Middle Ages Amalfi was one of Italy's major maritime republics. Most of the old town slid into the sea in the 14th century, which diminished Amalfi's commercial importance somewhat.

Today it is an attractive town to explore.

Not far from Amalfi lies Furore and it was at the new, five-star

Furore Inn Resort that I spent my second night.

The Furore Inn, sitting high on the mountainside with spectacular sea views, is a combination of health spa, sports complex and luxury hotel. It also has a very fine restaurant called La Volpe Pescatrice and as I was one of only four guests staying that night, I received service second to none. Plates kept arriving with something the chef would like me to try before my first course eventually arrived.

Dining on your own can be rather intimidating and I have found the only solution is to drink as much as possible to make the company more interesting. I eventually staggered back to my suite after a sumptuous meal and explored the delights of the hotel's adult movie channels.

The Palazzo Sasso in Ravello is one of the finest hotels in Italy. The service is impeccable, the restaurant under chef Giuseppe Lavarra is well on the way to winning back its coveted Michelin star and the wine list offers a choice of 650 wines. One of the cheapest on offer was our very own Veenwouden at R850 a bottle.

I found myself booked into one of the hotel's two luxury suites, complete with private balcony, antique furniture and a well-stocked fridge. Offered such opulence, it's difficult not to just hang around enjoying the vastness of the suite, emerging occasionally for meals. However, I walked energetically around Ravello and discovered the magnificent gardens of the villas Rufolo (setting for the annual music festival) and Cimbrone.

On my last day in Ravello I was scheduled to meet the legendary Mamma Agata for a cooking lesson. I strolled down to meet Capuano in the town car park and we made our way, through impossibly narrow roads, to Mamma Agata's house.

It's hard to believe that Mamma Agata hadn't just been dispatched from central casting because she looked as though she has just stepped out of a Fattis and Moni's ad. She also didn't speak a word of English.

She stood in the small kitchen of her house, surrounded by fresh ingredients (many of them grown on the terraces below the house) and threw things into pots and pans. Every so often she would hand me something to taste and grab another pot to start cooking something else.

Her daughter Chiara opened a couple of bottles of wine and I stood in the kitchen, trying not to get in the way, and watched as Mamma Agata peeled, jointed, fried and boiled.

Two hours later, I was ushered onto the terrace to have lunch with the family. The view was stupendous, the food and wine tasted wonderful and it was one of the best afternoons I have ever spent, despite my inability to understand a word anyone was saying.

I may not have learnt too much about cooking from Mamma Agata but I understood why Ravello has no need of a McDonald's.

● David Bullard was a guest of Italian Excursions (011) 783-2364 who represent Sireon Tours in South Africa.