

## SICILY AND THE AMALFI COAST

This year Mike and I went on our trip to discover Sicily and the Amalfi Coast April 22<sup>nd</sup> – May 11<sup>th</sup> 2022. It was a private trip organized by Top Travel Italy. We arrived in Palermo for a three night stay. We did some exploring on our own and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day we had a private guide take us on a walking tour with a food experience. Palermo is the capital of the Italian island of Sicily. The 12th-century Palermo Cathedral houses royal tombs, while the huge neoclassical Teatro Massimo is known for opera performances. Also in the center are the Palazzo dei Normanni, a royal palace started in the 9th century, and the Cappella Palatina, with Byzantine mosaics. Busy markets include the central Ballarò street market and the Vucciria, near the port.

On our way to Agrigento we had a stop at Monreale. The Monreale Cathedral with its frescos and altars were amazing. We walked around to see the famous Byzantine frescoes in the medieval church. We then went to the entrance for the stairs that led us to the walkway that took us to the roof for a view of the city. We were fortunate that few people were discovering the roof top as it would have been time consuming for groups to maneuver the walkways.

Monreale is a town and *comune* in the Metropolitan City of Palermo, in Sicily, southern Italy. It is located on the slope of Monte Caputo, overlooking the very fertile valley called "*La Conca d'oro*" (the Golden Shell), a production area of orange, olive and almond trees, the produce of which is exported in large quantities. The town, which is (south) of Palermo, the regional capital.

Monreale forms its own archdiocese and is home to Monreale Cathedral, a historical Norman-Byzantine cathedral, one of several buildings named in a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The cathedral of Monreale is one of the greatest extant examples of Norman architecture. It was begun in 1174 by William II and completed four years later.

(Tuesday, April 26<sup>th</sup>). We arrived in time for lunch at Erice. Towering over the west of Sicily at 751m above sea level and often covered in clouds, Erice is a wonderfully preserved medieval town offering the most breathtaking views and history on top of Mount Erice. Amongst the most visited sites are the two castles, Pepoli Castle and Venus Castle. The former was built by the Arabs while the latter was a Norman construction with imposing towers that derived its name from the fact that it was built on the site of the ancient Temple of Venus, allegedly founded by Aeneas. We viewed the ruins and took the path through the gardens to the town of Erice. Stopping in shops, small churches and an orphanage we continued down the narrow streets to a restaurant with out-door seating. Afterwards we found our driver waiting for us at the exit of town and he took us to Marsala known for its wine. Marsala Cathedral is the largest church in the town of Marsala. We went inside for a visit. After a long day of touring our driver took us to our hotel. We stayed at Doric Boutique Hotel & Resort. The hotel was situated on private property less than 5 minutes by car from Agrigento. It featured several gardens and an outdoor pool. We had a nice room with our own private pool room. Our room had a view overlooking the Valley of the Temples that we would visit the next day.

(Wednesday, April 27<sup>th</sup>). Agrigento is a hilltop city on Sicily's southwest shore. It's known for the ruins of the ancient city of Akragas in the Valley of the Temples, a vast archaeological site with well-preserved Greek temples. The city of temples, with its vast archaeological park that retains a string of five Greek temples and the ancient city walls that surrounded the place that was named Akragas. It is one of the most outstanding examples of Magna Graecia art and architecture, and is one of the main attractions of Sicily as listed in 1997.

(Thursday, April 28<sup>th</sup>). Staying at Taormina (Villa Diodoro Hotel). First stop on the way was at 'The Villa Romana del Casale' a large and elaborate Roman villa or palace located about 3 km from the town of Piazza Armerina. Excavations have revealed one of the richest, largest, and varied collections of Roman mosaics in the world, for which the site has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The villa and artwork contained within date to the early 4th century CE.

On the way we stopped at the city of Caltagirone. The town is a production center of pottery, particularly maiolica and terra-cotta wares. The main landmark of the city is the 142-step monumental Staircase of Santa Maria del Monte, built from 1608 in the old part of the town. The peculiarity is that each step is decorated with different hand-decorated ceramics, using styles and figures derived from the millennial tradition of pottery making. The patterns, ranging from Moorish to baroque, were designed by the more than 100 workshops in Caltagirone at that time. I purchased a nice vase with traditionally colors of rich blue and golden yellow floral motifs with the artist's signature and the city of Caltagirone on the base.

(Friday, April 29<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup>). Continuing with our trip to Sicily we spent 3 nights in Taormina at the Hotel Villa Diodoro which looks out over Mount Etna and the Bay of Naxos. The next morning our driver picked us up at the hotel to take us to Mount Etna an active stratovolcano on the east coast of Sicily, Italy, in the Metropolitan City of Catania. It was quite an interesting ride up the curly road lined with bales of hay on the curves. Crazy groups of motorcycles and four wheelers speeding up the mountain. We walked among the lava rocks and had views of Mount Etna one of the world's most active volcano. Our driver took us to DonnaFugata with a tour of the vineyards and winery with a tasting of their many wines paired with food.

Another day after breakfast we went to explore the town of Taormina idyllically perched on a rocky promontory high above the sea. Beautifully restored medieval buildings, breathtaking views around every corner and a giddy network of winding streets strewn with shops, bars and restaurants. We walked thru Villa Trevelyan Cassiol now a public garden tied to the life of a Scottish woman named Florence Trevelyan who in the 70's acquired this parcel of land which was used at one time for agricultural productions and later transformed into a park. Florence designed a group of buildings called "the beehives" or Victorian follies that she used to relax and have parties. We walked down the streets and admired the views of Mount Etna. The main attraction is without doubt its Greek-Roman theatre where many events are held with beautiful views of the Bay of Naxos. At the end of Corso Umberto I is Piazza del Duomo, complete with 13th-century

Cathedral and Baroque fountain. As with many churches of this period in Sicily, the Duomo, dedicated to St Nicholas of Bari, has a distinctly fortress-like quality thanks to its robust structure and the battlements that delineate the roof. Its Renaissance doorway belies an essentially Gothic interior complete with a rose window at the west end. We stopped for lunch, pastries, cannolis and cookies filled with delicious Italian pistachio cream. We wandered in the *Naumachie* the remains of an old Roman wall, 130 meters long, with 18 niches that surrounded the Gymnasium. The niches probably held statues in the past. Built in the 1st Ct BC, it is, after the Greek theatre, the oldest structure in the town brought to light only in 1943. The name Naumachie, meaning “the sea battle”, was wrongly given to the structure due to the big water basin found here. However, the basin wasn’t used to stage the big sea battles but was just a reservoir used as a water supply for the Gymnasium and the city. We watched artist painted and molding their pottery outside their shops. Many tiles and pots decorated the building and banisters. We stopped for a granita, which is a semi-frozen dessert, originally created in Sicily, that's made from sugar, water, and various flavorings. The mango granita was terrific.

(Monday, May 2<sup>nd</sup>) Continuing with our trip to the **AMALFI COAST**. Driver took us to the Catania airport for our flight to Naples and then transport to our hotel Aurora in Amalfi city center where we our room had a nice balcony overlooking the sea and the docks. We had lunch at a sea side restaurant with outdoor seating. Ordered two Limoncello Spritzs, shrimp cocktails, caprese salad, lemon & pink shrimp risottos on a beautiful sunny day watching the boats go by. Amalfi is a town in a dramatic natural setting below steep cliffs on Italy’s southwest coast. Between the 9th and 11th centuries, it was the seat of a powerful maritime republic.

We made our way to Duomo di Sant’Andrea (Amalfi Cathedral) dedicated to the Apostle Saint Andrew whose relics are kept here. The High Altar in the central nave is formed from the sarcophagus of the Peter of Capua (died 1214). Sixty-two steps, wide and steep, lead up to the doors. People like to hang out on the steps and in the many outdoor restaurants in Piazza Duomo or fill their water bottles at the ‘Fontan dell’ Andrea’ a fountain with clean water coming out of the breasts of a marble woman. Inside is a quite courtyard “Cloister of Paradise’ surrounded by Moorish arches and marble columns. Inside many chapels are niches on the walls with mosaics from the early days. Some pretty weird relics in the museum. A staircase leads you to down to the crypt of St. Andrew. In May of 1208 the relics of St. Andrew arrived in Amalfi, and since then they have been preserved in this lavishly decorated crypt. Behind the main altar is a small and richly decorated case that contains the skull reliquary of St. Andrew. Climbing the stairs from the crypt takes you to the stunning Cathedral, with its sumptuous Baroque interior dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Walk down the center aisle and look up to see the coffered ceiling with paintings showing scenes from the life of St. Andrew. The central apse is supported by two ancient granite columns that were found at the Greek ruins in Paestum.

We went inside shops that sold handmade paper stationary and cards, decorative pottery, cameos of sardonic shell, coral, ivory and stones, an ancient tradition that began in Amalfi. You will find coral jewelry, bottles of limoncello, olive oil, jams and marmalades. Everywhere Amalfi lemons (they are large, sweet and juicy). You will find

products of lemons, soap, candy drops, lotions, dry pastas, etc. Gigantic bumpy lemons are everywhere, they are actually citrons, called cedri, and are more for show, they are pulpier than they are juicy and made a good marmalade. Stores filled with goods and clothes, leather sandals, hats, souvenirs.

Restaurants and cafes selling home made sorbet, gelato, chocolates, pizza by the slice (my favorite was an egg plant, red pepper thick crust white pizza slice), sandwiches with ham/prosciutto and mozzarella, bakeries with donuts filled with lemon cream, designer cakes and tarts, racks of cured hams and cheeses. One store sold paper cones filled with cooked sea foods with roasted potatoes.

We walked the streets and stopped at a secret charming fountain 'De Cape 'E Ciucci' (*Donkey's Head Fountain*). Imbedded faces on each side allow you to get a drink of water. The water spills into a pool filled with gold fish. Above the pool is a miniature village all laid out with characteristic figures, homes, sheep and donkeys on a mountain side. We saw enough and decided to go back to our hotel for the night.

(Tuesday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>). Discovering Ravello and the Amalfi Coast private excursion. Our driver picked us up at the hotel and took us for an amazing ride on the twisty, windy road, barely wide enough for a bus in some places. Full-sized tour buses bearing down on tiny cars without a care in the world with 100-foot sheer drops. A breathtaking drive in one of the most beautiful parts of the world, you want to leave the driving to a local. Our driver was great. He took us to Vietri sul Mare, famous all around the world for their polychrome ceramic handicrafts, whose first records date back to the XV century. We went inside Ceramica Artistica Solimene Vincenzo to view the vast collection. When you enter the place you're not sure if you are in a factory or a museum. But you are free to explore the ceramics. I saw many items I liked and settled on a hand shaped duck vase. "I love my duck vase", glad I got home with it unbroken.

We then went to the Villa Rufolo, Ravello built in the XIII century by the wealthy and powerful Rufolo family. Around the middle of the nineteenth century it was sold to the Scotsman Francis Neville Reid who took care of a general restoration, resulting in today's layout. The villa is entered through an opening in the arched entrance tower, and after a short street a clearing is dominated by the Torre Maggiore: the latter facing the bell tower of the cathedral in Ravello, overlooking the terraces (upper and lower) as well as overlooking the Amalfi Coast and the Gulf of Salerno with flower gardens that are in bloom most of the year.

Our driver then took us to Positano. Positano is a cliffside village on southern Italy's Amalfi Coast. It's a well-known holiday destination with a pebble beachfront and steep, narrow streets lined with boutiques and cafes. We walked around and stopped at the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption. According to the legend the monastery was erected in honor of a Byzantine icon representing the Virgin Mary, which is still venerated by the locals, set right in the heart of the seaside town. I got a take out at a bakery of the most delicious pastry filled with cream with a sprinkling of pistachios. Back at Amalfi we went for dinner at Trattoria Da Maria that served classic Italian

dishes. I had the lemon chicken with roasted potatoes and Mike a seafood plate and by request we had some pizza bread. Nice dinner and then a stroll back to our hotel for the night.

(Wednesday, May 4<sup>th</sup>). **AMALFI COAST** Today was a 7 hr. private boat excursion along the Amalfi picturesque coastline. We started at Amalfi towards Praiano and Positano. Our boat was very nice and comfortable. We had an English speaking skipper who took us for a slow enjoyable boat excursion along the coast. He pointed out all the interesting nature rock formations, landscapes and impressive cliff side hotels. We passed many Amalfi Coast defensive towers. There are about thirty defensive towers built along the coastal strip that goes from Vietri sul Mare to Positano and that tell the story of eight hundred years (from the IX to the XVII century) of struggles supported by the local populations against the frequent and bloody Saracen raids and corsair leaving behind a red trail of blood, rubble and imprisonment. The imminent danger was signaled to the population, through the lighting of fires, so as to allow the inhabitants to find shelter in the woods, in the caves or in the fortifications. Most of the towers were disarmed and used for other purposes (housing, traffic light or telegraph signals).

We docked at a seafood restaurant called La Tonnarella for lunch. Mike had oysters and a sea food platter and I had fries with shrimp. We shared an antipasto platter. The restaurant began at the end of the nineteen sixties thanks to the wise transformation of a small apartment used to contain the tonnara (from which it gets its name), a particular net that was used until 1965 to fish tunas in the area, the first owner was the entrepreneur Umberto Lauritano, better known as “O’Bacchiss”, descendent of ancient sailors. During these times the beach of Conca Dei Marini was never that busy; only few umbrellas and some old fisherman’s boats could be seen. Then the fame and the “boom” arrived. It had its own private beach that children and adults were relaxing at and playing in the water. We passed Praiano where ‘The Path of the Gods Trail’ can be reached by walking up hundreds of steps in about an hour.

We passed many vertiginous houses tumbling down to the sea in a cascade of sun bleached peach, pink and terracotta colors, visited by writers and artists from all over the world. We passed the former villa of the actress Sophia Loren complete with a chair lift so she could swim in the warm waters. The skipper took us close to a cliff side waterfall. He took our boat inside ‘Grotta dello Smeraldo’ (Italian for ‘Emerald Grotto’), a cave partly inundated by the sea and located in Conca dei Marini. The cave owes its name due to the emerald light that reverberates in it: an underwater fissure allows sunlight to filter through. Formation of cave was caused by tectonic upheaval of cliffs:’ cliffs fractured, and the cave was formed along the fissures. Now the cave has descended, and sea water had entered it, partly flooding the stalagmites in it.

We stopped for a bit during the cruise to chat with our skipper. He was very interested in our travels and told us about his. The skipper asked if we wanted some snacks and a bottle of bubbly. We toasted ourselves on a nice sunny day with our skipper and thanked him for a wonderful cruise along the Amalfi Coast.

**AMALFI COAST** (Thursday, May 5<sup>th</sup>). Transfer from Amalfi to Capri staying at Hotel Gatto Bianco ‘The White Cat’ for 3 nights. Capri is an island located in the Tyrrhenian Sea off the Sorrento Peninsula, on the south side of the Gulf of Naples in the Campania region of Italy. Capri is famed for its rugged landscape, upscale hotels and shopping, from designer fashions to limoncello and handmade leather sandals. One of its best-known natural sites is the Blue Grotto, a dark cavern where the sea glows electric blue, the result of sunlight passing through an underwater cave. In summer, Capri's dramatic, cove-studded coastline draws many yachts. After landing at the port we hired a taxi driver to take us to our hotel. Our taxi was a vintage car with benches in the backseats. The driver pushes your luggage in the trunk and secures it with a bungee cord. I was sure my suitcase was going to fall off the car as we made our ascent up the steep hill to the top. Getting around Capri you can take a bus, taxi or the funicular to the top or by foot. We stayed Hotel Gatto Bianco ‘The White Cat’ for 3 nights, where a white cat meets you at the entrance or inside the hotel lounging around. For our first day we took a walk down designer road where all the designer shops were eager for your business. We did some window shopping. We walked around town to get familiar with the area and then stopped for lunch at Ristorante La Capannina Caprese antipasti, pasta, meat & seafood, plus regional wines, at a cozy 1930s trattoria. The food and desserts were delicious. My dessert was meringue with vanilla ice cream and dark chocolate sauce, Mike had cream caramel in a chocolate rimmed glass. We looked at the board outside the restaurant with photos of celebrities that had dined at this restaurant. We looked in shops, took back streets and took in the views. After settling in went out to look around after dark and had a few drinks and a pizza. Rested up for our next excursion for tomorrow.

**AMALFI COAST** (Friday, May 6<sup>th</sup> – May 7<sup>th</sup>) Today is our Capri Island walking tour with a private guide. She met us at the hotel and took us through walkways that avoided the otherwise crowded streets. We left through the lovely patios of our hotel ‘Gatto Bianco’ and ran into the local white cat resident. We passed secret courtyard gardens maintained by local residents. We then went to the ‘Gardens of Augustus’, originally known by the name of Krupp Gardens, are botanical gardens on the island of Capri, Campania. The gardens were established by the German industrialist Friedrich Alfred Krupp in the early twentieth century to build his mansion in Capri. The ‘Gardens of Augustus’ are comprised of a series of panoramic flower-decked terraces overlooking the Faraglioni on the one side and the Bay of Marina Piccola and Via Krupp (a switchback hairpin pathway) on the other. The gardens were impressive with many statues, elaborate tiled benches and loads of blooming flowers.

On the way to visit Villa San Michele after strolling through the ‘Garden of Augustus’ we stopped to experience the lovely perfumery ‘Carthusia’. Legend has it that in 1380 the sovereign Giovanna d’Angiomas coming to Capri. Certosa di San Giacomo prepared a collection of the most beautiful flowers of the island in vases and never changed the water for 3 days. When he went to throw the spent flowers away he noticed the water had acquired a fragrance. What is the fragrance he wondered and turned to an alchemist who identified the scent back to the wild carnation of Capri, the ‘Garofilium Silvestre Caprese.’ This water became known as the first perfume of Capri. In 1948 old perfume formulas, under the license from the Pope revealed them to a chemist who created the

smallest laboratory in the world calling it 'Carthusia'. All Carthusia fragrances have an invisible and indissoluble bond with Capri. Lots of samples to try and interesting photos on the walls of Sofia Loren, Clark Gable, Frank Sinatra and others.

We hired a taxi to take us and our wonderful guide to Anacapri via the numerous hairpin turns. One of the popular attractions in Anacapri is the Villa San Michele. Built in 1885 by Swedish physician, Axel Munthe, to be his dream home in this idyllic location with broad views of the Bay of Naples and the town of Capri. San Michele's gardens are adorned with many relics and works of art dating from ancient Egypt and other periods of classical antiquity. In his later years, Axel Munthe wrote his youthful memoir *The Story of San Michele*, which describes how he first visited the island and built the villa, decorated with the remains of palaces built by the Ancient Romans which he found on his land. Axel Munthe wrote: "I want my house open to sun and wind and the voice of the sea, like a Greek temple, and light, light, light everywhere!" Surrounded by impressive gardens and the Barbarossa mountain, a sanctuary for migratory birds. Axel Munthe was an interesting person, he spoke several languages and studied medicine in Paris and opened a practice in France. He married a wealthy Englishwoman and they spent most of their lives in Italy. He was an advocate of animal rights, and often treated the poor without payment. He surrounded himself with a menagerie of animals and birds. He had several dogs the best-known was 'Puck' a large Great Dane, along with his owls, a tortoise and a mongoose. His most hilarious pet was 'Billy the Baboon' an alcoholic monkey who was always creating havoc. We toured the house that led through the wisteria pergola walkway to views of Capri and the sea. At the end was a 3200 yr. old Egyptian Sphinx silently facing the sea on the terrace. The sphinx as the main symbol of San Michele may have been inspired by one of Munthe's favorite authors, the German poet Jean Paul, who compared Capri to a sphinx. The Swedish sculptor Carl Milles wrote that the pergola was the most beautiful expression of the infinite he had ever encountered. Because the pergola follows the rounded contour of the rock, it actually seems endless. On a misty day, when the horizon is obliterated, you can really get the impression that the garden is floating in the air, high above the noise and bustle of the island.

Back to town passing many shops, I stopped to buy a lucky bell charm. Our guide was proud to show me her lucky bell that once belonged to her grandmother and convinced me I had to have one of these bells! The bell charm and the Saint Michael's legend had it that a long time ago a young shepherd lost his sheep; Saint Michael appeared to him, enveloped in a golden beam of light, splendid on his white horse. He gave him a bell and told him to follow its sound and it would keep him from all danger. It was thanks to the sound of the bell that the shepherd found his lost sheep. Since then his life was filled with joy and happiness and all of his wishes were fulfilled.

After our tour ended thanks were given to our guide and we went for a seafood lunch at Ristorante da Giorgio. Later that day we stopped for coffee and dessert at 'Caffe Manari' and enjoyed coffee and shared a yummy small passionfruit cheesecake. Did some more window shopping and then back to the hotel.

**SORRENTO** (Sunday May 8<sup>th</sup>) It rained the day before in Capri so we walked around town and visited Church Santo Stefano dedicated to Saint Stephen. We were supposed to have a Capri Island boat trip to include the Blue Grotto. We could not go because of the weather but we did return from Sorrento back to Capri by ferry another day. We stayed at Hotel Palazzi Guardati located in the historical center of Sorrento city centre. Sorrento is a coastal town in southwestern Italy, facing the Bay of Naples on the Sorrentine Peninsula. Perched atop cliffs that separate the town from its busy marinas, it's known for sweeping water views and Piazza Tasso, a cafe-lined square. The historic center is a warren of narrow alleys, stores, restaurants and their most famous export – limoncello liqueur. Our driver was waiting for us at the port and took us first for a visit to 'Frantoio Gargiulo' for an olive oil and limoncello tasting experience. The guide took us through their factory and explained how the production of extra virgin olive oil is made following the traditions of millers handed down from generation to generation. The history of the production of olive oil dates back many years ago, even back to the times of Greek mythology. The first evidence of the production of olive oil in the Sorrentinian Peninsula was during the age of the Greek colonies. The old Greek inhabitants produced the olive oil by grinding the olives in an old olive mill, which were made of calcareous stone. The colonies used to prepare large jars of olive oil, which were produced in Sorrento, and donate them to the Goddess of Athens at Punta Campanella, and ever since then olive oil has always been a part of their tradition.

After settling in at our hotel we walked to Piazza Sant'Antonino and had lunch at Ristorante Pizzeria L'Abate. We enjoyed walking around town and window shopping. I stopped in a shop that was selling handmade inlaid wood works typical of Sorrento. The shop was full of marquetry boxes, frames, pictures and furniture. The owner and artist was in the shop and met us with a big smile. He said he was in his 90's and made the boxes that were in his shop. I had a hard time deciding what to buy. I settled on a beautiful blue inlaid box made of burl-walnut & rose wood trim with an art scene from Pompeii of two puttis, (*Italian puttos*). Today, in Italian, *putto* means either toddler winged angel boy or child.

We went inside the 'Church and Cloisters of San Francesco' with its cloisters where wedding are often held. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, with its panorama terrace, was a photo gallery featuring the works of photographer Raffaele Celentano. He grew up in Southern Italy in a Catholic working class family. He noticed very young he could see things differently as most. He saw them in images that he was able to find in later in photography where he was able to express himself artistically and make a livelihood out of it.

We then went to 'Villa Comunale Park'. This small park offered one of the best views from the park's terrace where you could gaze out on to the Gulf of Naples with its landmarks on the horizon of the island of Ischia and Procida with the imperious Mount Vesuvius a somma-stratovolcano looming in the background. We strolled the *vicoletti* or laneways to see Vallone dei Mulini a historic old abandoned flour mill in a deep canyon called the valley of the mills. A sawmill provided wood for the city and was abandoned in the 1940's. It is located behind Piazza Tasso. The valley is carved by two rivers: Casarlano-Cesarano and S. Antonino.

Mike made reservations for dinner at O'Parrucchiano La Favorita (founded in 1868 by Antonino Ercolan) in a classic 1800s venue with glass-enclosed halls & garden tables under citrus trees & gardens. The restaurant takes credit for the invention of the famous cannelloni originally called "strascinati". I ordered 'Delizia al limone' (Lemon cream sponge cake) for dessert. They are sponge cakes filled with a lemon cream, brushed with Limoncello syrup and covered in a lemon and whipped cream glaze. This restaurant was a work of art and quite the dining experience. After a good meal we walked back to our hotel with the streets all lit up with people walking around having a good time.

**SORRENTO TO POMPEII** (Monday, May 9<sup>th</sup>) Pompeii private excursion with tasting experience (6 hrs. approx.). Our driver picked us up in historical center in Sorrento and took us to the entrance of the ancient city in Campania. Pompeii is a vast archaeological site in southern Italy's Campania region, near the coast of the Bay of Naples. Once a thriving and sophisticated Roman city, Pompeii was buried under meters of ash and pumice after the catastrophic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D. The preserved site features excavated ruins of streets and houses that visitors can freely explore.

Our lady guide was wonderful and took us away from the crowds to places she knew. Her father used to work there as an archaeologist. Vesuvius showered volcanic debris over the city of Pompeii, followed the next day by clouds of blisteringly hot gases. Buildings were destroyed, the population was crushed or asphyxiated, and the city was buried beneath a blanket of ash and pumice. For many centuries Pompeii slept beneath its pall of ash, which perfectly preserved the remains. When these were finally unearthed, in the 1700s, the world was astonished at the discovery of a sophisticated Greco-Roman city frozen in time. Grand public buildings included an impressive forum and an amphitheatre; lavish villas and all kinds of houses, dating back to the 4th century bce, were also uncovered. Inside were some preserved remains of people sheltering from the eruption; others lay buried as they fled; bakeries were found with loaves still in the ovens. The buildings and their contents revealed day-to-day life in the ancient world—and stirred 18th-century interest in all things classical.

After touring Pompeii our driver took us to Cantina del Vesuvio Winery with the Russo family (since 1930), unique wines born in the shadow of the volcano. Toured the vineyard, planted in the volcanic soil on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius. Had lunch with a view of the vineyards and food featuring local specialties along with tastings of their classic wines. Antipasto appetizer with local products: salami, provolone cheese, "casatiello" (a savory bread), salted ricotta, bread with olive oil and local herbs and spices, prosciutto ham from Campania, and bruschetta with heirloom Piennolo tomatoes and roasted aubergines on bread paired with Lacryma Christi del Vesuvio Bianco DOP. Spaghetti made with durum wheat flour and tossed with a sauce made from heirloom Piennolo tomatoes and basil, paired with Lacryma Christi Riserva. Pastiera Napolitana, a traditional dessert featuring sweetened ricotta, candied fruit, and boiled wheat berries, paired with Capafresca Spumante Rosato.

**SORRENTO TO CAPRI** (Tuesday, May 10<sup>th</sup>)

We took one last walk around town and entered a walkway where inside was a magical garden. The unique Mediterranean gardens of trees, arches and flower beds were in bloom and well maintained. Areas to sit and relax were placed among the gardens with soft music playing. Many beautiful statues accented the gardens. We went inside the 'Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria' and ventured upstairs to a large terrace with spectacular views over the Gulf of Naples with Mount Vesuvius.

We took a ferry back to Capri for our private boat excursion including the Blue Grotto. When we were on Capri before, on this trip, we were scheduled to view the Blue Grotto but the weather was not suitable for the boats to take us on the water. The Blue Grotto is a sea cave on the coast of the island of Capri, southern Italy. Sunlight passing through an underwater cavity and shining through the seawater creates a blue reflection that illuminates the cavern. During the reign of Tiberius in Roman times, the grotto was used as a marine temple, and ancient Roman statues found here are now on display at the Casa Rossa.

Today is beautiful weather and glad to be on the water again. Sometimes in the summer the wait to get inside the Blue Grotto can take hours. Today we were lucky as we started early and the captain of our boat knew exactly how to get us in line with the other boats to get to inside the Blue Grotto, no waiting. You get inside a rowboat with two other people and lay low in the boat when entering the Blue Grotto. First you have to stop and pay or give a ticket to two men in a boat ticket boat...pretty funny. Our skipper waits his turn to get us inside the Blue Grotto. He told us to lie down in the boat and he then pulls on a chain during a low point in the swell that allows the rowboat to enter the grotto. Inside the grotto about three or four rowboats are inside and the skippers are all singing as their voices echo inside the grotto. Like other blues, blue grotto is relaxing and is reminiscent of the ocean.

The legend of the Blue Grotto: "Inhabited by mermaids, infested with ghosts and demons. The intense blue and the brilliance of the water hides monsters and supernatural creatures." For many years, those scary stories kept visitors away; the grotto was known among fishermen as the "Gradola", meaning a really hostile place. Indeed, inside the cave, some sculptures were found and their shadows could easily remind you of frightening shapes they could make people cut and run. The truth is it was the Roman emperor Tiberius, who commissioned the creation of these sculptures, during his stay in Capri. According to historians, the emperor loved to swim in the Grotto's blue light with others, and asked some artists to adorn the cave. It is said that during these baths, those who Tiberius did not like were thrown into the sea from a rock near his Villa Jovis. The unearthly blue color of the Grotto surely helped fomenting fears and legends of witches and monsters inhabiting the place.

After leaving the Blue Grotto our skipper took us along the coastline of Capri. He took the boat inside other big sea caves. We passed the 'Faro Di Punta Carena Lighthouse'. Punta Carena Lighthouse is an active lighthouse, located on the island of Capri on the head of the same name, about 3 kilometres southwest of Anacapri. The lighthouse has been active since 1867; its construction began in 1862. It consists of an octagonal prism

brick tower with lantern and gallery, above a two-story building. The lighthouse has a rotating view that emits white light flashes every 3 seconds. Capri's most iconic sight is the dramatic Faraglioni, three towering rock formations which jut out from the Mediterranean just off the island's coast. The rocks have each been given a name: the first, still attached to the land, is called Stella, the second, separated from the first block by a stretch of sea; Faraglione di Mezzo and the third, Faraglione di Fuori or Scopolo, meaning the head or promontory stretching into the sea. On top of a high hill facing the water is a bronze statue basking in the sun waving. The sculpture "Ciao Gennario" sends greeting to those coming to the island of Capri welcoming seafarers but also waving them off – saying goodbye as they set off for their voyages. When floating around the Adriatic look for this statue, known to be a lucky charm to travelers, then wave back and yell 'Ciao Gennarino!' *Hello and Goodbye.*

(Wednesday, May 11<sup>th</sup>) We took the ferry back to Sorrento and prepared to pack up to go home the next day. All things must come to an end. It was a true travel experience comprised of moments so special I can close my eyes and virtually experience our time in Sicily and the Amalfi Coast all over again.

Audrey & Mike Lambert