



The view from the pool at the Hotel Santa Caterina in Amalfi, a maritime republic and significant trading power in the middle ages

ITALIAN EDEN

THE AMALFI COAST AND CAPRI ARE TWIN BYWORDS FOR IDYLIC BEAUTY AND ELEGANT HOLIDAY LANGUOR. GIVEN THE CHOICE BETWEEN HERE AND HEAVEN, THE WELL-HEELED COULD BE FORGIVEN FOR WANTING TO STAY PUT.

In the town of Amalfi there is a faded ceramic plaque in the piazza adjacent to the Porta della Marina. The tablet features a boastful inscription attributed to 19th-century Italian writer Renato Fucini that reads: “Judgment day, for the Amalfitani who go to heaven, will be a day just like any other.”

If the Amalfi Coast, a 40km stretch of former fishing villages from Positano in the north to Vietri sul Mare in the south, is one vision of heaven, the island of Capri just across the Tyrrhenian Sea is another. According to Suetonius the Emperor Augustus, upon landing in Capri in about 14AD, witnessed a winter oak spring to life. The superstitious Augustus, by then a frail old man, took it as an omen that his reign could still flourish, and promptly acquired the island from Naples.

“I am fully convinced that there are places that call you,” Paolo Signorini says, sitting in the lobby of the

Caesar Augustus, a grand five-hectare five-star hotel on a peak of Anacapri. A sprightly 70-something, Signorini is the third-generation owner of a hotel famous for its infinity-like views and statue of Augustus with patriarchal hand outstretched over Capri. “You don’t choose them. There are places that have a special soul and they know which people will make them famous.”

We travellers might not have the clout of Augustus, but Capri and the Amalfi Coast do call us. Like pilgrims to paradise we come here each year in droves — Australians, English, Americans, Germans, Russians and now Brazilians — to bask in a kind of maddening happiness. There are other idyllic paradises in the world, for sure, but this particular part of southern Italy, this sun-drenched Eden on the Mediterranean, has its own special alchemy. The journey begins in the mind months before we arrive, in daydreams of lazy, sunburnt afternoons perched on a cliff terrace or bustling piazza

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with a Campari and antipasti. And after we leave, Capri and the Amalfi Coast become perpetual reference points for pleasure. Not for nothing was this the final stop for writers, philosophers and artists on the Grand Tour.

Paolo Signorini heard the call of the island in 1993 when he returned to Anacapri to take charge of the family-owned hotel. After World War II his grandfather had leased the Caesar Augustus to an Austrian hotelier friend who had turned the 19th-century villa into a shambles. “It was completely destroyed,” recalls Signorini, “completely ruined with the worst public image.” It took the family 40 years of legal battles to take back the property. In the end the judge was only convinced to return the hotel to its rightful owners after discovering that the Caesar Augustus was listed under “What not to do in Capri” in English and French guidebooks.

When Signorini arrived to sign the handover papers he had never been to the property and was convinced his family would immediately sell the hotel. But then he walked around and gazed over the island at the town of Capri, the Tiberius Baths, the Blue Grotto and the shifting azure and petrol green waters stretching out to the Bay of Naples. “I had a feeling that I couldn’t sell this place,” says Signorini. “Why? The reply came very clear in my mind: ‘This is a gift from God. God will be very angry with us if we sell it.’”

Little by little he returned the Caesar Augustus to its former glory, making it one of the top three resorts in Europe, and number 14 in the world, as ranked by Condé Nast Traveller in 2011. “This was the best day of my life,” says Signorini. The former entrepreneur from Naples credits the hotel with its own salvation: “It was the place choosing me to do the right thing.”

Such *piccoli racconti* — small, heartfelt tales — are found all across Capri and the Amalfi Coast. Much like the Caesar Augustus, the stories are to be found in classical, old-world hotels family-run for generations. They might be short on mod cons, but for us, the visitor, it’s an opportunity to be a guest of history.

One such hotel is the Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria in Sorrento, the launching point to and from Naples, Positano, Amalfi and Capri. The neoclassical hotel has been owned by the same family for 181 years, following its opening in 1834 as a *locanda* (type of inn) for Grand Tourists making their way south from Pompeii. It was here on this very site that Emperor Augustus kept his Sorrentine villa. Local archaeologists found the stone remnants of Augustus’s sea pool directly underneath where the hotel’s pool sits today.

Named after former guest the Swedish Princess Victoria, the Excelsior Vittoria is composed of three villas and surrounded by lush gardens. The Italian tenor Enrico Caruso lived here, and the suit that bears his name is one of the finest hotel rooms in all of Italy. A piano sits close to a huge terrace with a view overlooking the Bay of Naples and Mount Vesuvius. Downstairs the furniture in the plant-filled Winter Salon is made from inlaid wood by Sorrento artisans. There are chairs made by 19th-century Sicilian architect Giovan Battista Filippo Basile. The chairs that complete the set are in Paris’s Musée d’Orsay.

Owner Guido Fiorentino believes effective hotel management stems from treating it like a family home.



Clockwise from above: breakfast on the terrace at the Santa Caterina; the Capri Palace’s Il Riccio restaurant and Acropolis room; the pool and lobby of A-listers’ playground the Grand Hotel Quisisana in Capri; the terrace and inside the Excelsior Vittoria in Sorrento; and poolside at Capri’s Caesar Augustus



“The hotel is made from the people that work in the hotel,” he says. “Our people, our employees, do such a good job that we make them feel part of the family. As the owner, if you are arrogant with people they will never give you the best.”

Case in point is the Excelsior Vittoria’s concierge, Antonino Gallano, who has worked here for 42 years, following on from his father, who was here for close to 50 years. His son, Diego, started this year as a concierge, too. When you first meet Gallano Sr he is so engaging you feel you know him already. He is trained to know what guests want “20 seconds before they know it

themselves”. “A holiday is finding the second home away from home,” he says. “We try to understand who is the person in front of us so you feel part of the family, not just an object moving in the hotel.”

After Sorrento the traveller often heads to Positano — or “Aussietano”, as it is also known, thanks to the prevalence of Australians. The boutique Le Sirenuse and awe-inspiring Il San Pietro di Positano hotel are the two most desirable destinations. The well versed would take a spaghetti vongole lunch and a day on the oceanside sun lounges at the laidback Da Adolfo restaurant; this is accessible from the Positano wharf via a private boat driven by a man called



There are even groups of photographers who will, for a fee, pretend to be your personal paparazzi.



Santa Caterina cocoon, but the siren song of Capri, a 40-minute ferry ride away, is too enticing. Homer's deadly sea temptresses may be scarce in these waters, but the peril to your wallet is real: Capri is expensive, particularly around the luxury precinct of Via Camerelle and the Grand Hotel Quisisana. The Quisisana's wide, grand terrace is the meeting point for the flashy and well-heeled in Capri; a stroll down Via Vittorio Emanuele is an exercise in human exhibitionism. There are even groups of photographers who will, for a negotiated fee, pretend to be your personal paparazzi.

If you are a person of means, however, the Quisisana is a fine place to be, perhaps the finest in Capri town. Last summer Michael Caine propped himself up at the Quisi bar for a week and went relatively unnoticed. Maybe that's because people come for the Antigua-born piano player, Nigel, who has been playing here every season for 30 years. Or the head barman, who has been serving drinks going on 45 years. Or the handsome head concierge, Mario, behind the desk for 42 years. Nothing seems to change at the Quisisana, and that's how guests like it; each summer they can return and get the exact same experience as when they first arrived decades before. Maybe this is why, along with Como's Villa d'Este and Rome's Hotel Hassler, the Grand Hotel Quisisana is considered one of Italy's milestone hotels.

Not all experienced travellers to Capri want to be part of the theatre. They may just want peace and leisure, but with the ability to dip a toe in to Capri, maybe heading down to La Fontelina for a seafood lunch and day swimming in the ocean, lounging in deck chairs on the rocks and gazing at the Faraglioni rocks and bikini-clad clubgoers. These travellers — and most of them are Italian — go to Anacapri.

Anacapri is positioned at the peak of the island on Mount Selaro and is known as Capri's second town for those on a budget, which doesn't seem to bother the Anacaprese at all. There are two main five-star hotels: the Caesar Augustus, and the discreet, elegant Capri Palace. The oasis-like Capri Palace was built in 1960 by Mario and Rita Cacace, owners of a chic boutique still next door to the present hotel called Mariorita. Once favoured by Jackie O and Grace Kelly for its tranquillity and discretion, their modern-day equivalent is Gwyneth Paltrow. The black-and-white 150sqm Paltrow Suite occupies prime position at the art-filled Palace and features gardens that seem to go on forever.

If you're not detoxing in the Capri Beauty Farm, the hotel's private beach club, Ristorante Il Riccio, is Anacapri's hidden gem. Painted in rich blue and white, it hugs the clifftop overlooking the Blue Grotto and has a low-key, relaxed vibe. Lazy days are spent here on deck chairs, tracking the boats heading in and out of the grotto, and cooling off in the water. Even if you're not a hotel guest it's well advised to see the grotto early and then take the boat here for a quiet, languid afternoon. Il Riccio's has a Michelin star, but the bar food is exceptional and very reasonably priced: fried calamari, prosciutto panini and a few Coronas or wines for two won't cost much more than €50. Like much of Capri and the Amalfi Coast, it's a tough place to leave; so, to quote Augustus again: "Hasten slowly." **W**



Mosquito, who epitomises in his blissed-out demeanor all there is to like about this part of Italy.

The Positano veteran, though, might head on past Praiano and on to the Arabesque town of Amalfi, a maritime republic from the seventh century to the 11th that traded with Greece, Lodi, Jerusalem and north Africa. On the way through the dangerously narrow *strada divina* (divine street) you pass under fragrant slopes covered with olives, vines, citrus groves and myrtle; below are serene coves filled with bobbing yachts.

The most elegant and exciting hotel in Amalfi is the Hotel Santa Caterina, a 19th-century mansion in

Moorish style. It's a typical Mediterranean hotel with its ceramic floors, white walls and colour accents, an abundance of flowers and beautifully appointed suites overlooking the ocean. The hotel was opened in 1904 by a town doctor from Amalfi, and is run today by his great-grandchildren. What is atypical is the gorgeous ocean platform and rustic café (warning: two Campari sodas cost close to €40) that doubles as a beach club, arguably the best on the Amalfi Coast. It's open only to hotel guests, and accessed by a private glass lift with jaw-dropping vistas of sea and Amalfi town.

One could easily spend a few weeks in the tranquil