

Forza Napoli

Rediscovering her Italian roots around the Bay of Naples on one of Riviera Travel's most popular trips proved a joyful experience for Yolanda Zappaterra

Is there a perfect time of year to visit southern Italy? Many will recommend late spring and early autumn, when the heat of the day isn't so oppressive that walking Pompeii's dusty streets feels like an exercise in managing heat exhaustion. But beyond that, it's hard to be more specific, as this part of the world is glorious at all times of the year.

However, as someone with Italian heritage, I can tell you that the perfect time to visit this increasingly popular region – Riviera Travel saw a fivefold hike in its January bookings this year for its Bay of Naples package, compared with January 2022 – is the week after SSC Napoli have won the Scudetto, Italy's equivalent of the

Premier League. When a team wins it, they become the *Campioni d'Italia* (Champions of Italy), and on May 4 this year, Napoli won it in style.

A region of football fanatics partied hard all night, but when I arrived at the airport on May 5, bleary-eyed border guards and baggage handlers welcomed us with warmth and smiles. En route to Sorrento, our base for Riviera's week-long trip, I noticed every single street, building, lamppost, roundabout and monument was festooned in blue and white banners, ribbons, bunting, flags and posters, many bearing an image of the club's de facto patron saint Diego Maradona, complete

ASK THE operator



Joanne Lynn

head of short-haul product, Riviera Travel

“The Bay of Naples trip is an Italian classic, a real taste of *la dolce vita*. Its blend of excellent food and wine, dramatic landscape, enviable climate and phenomenal cultural legacy provide all the ingredients for a memorable holiday, and the area has retained its roots and traditions in the modern era. This year, pent-up demand and a general desire to travel to Italy led to Atas (the Association of Touring & Adventure Suppliers) confirming that it has been the most requested country for 2023. And this part of Italy is an iconic destination, from its culture and nature to local food and historical attractions. I also think the scenery is part of the reason people travel to this area, with the famous Amalfi coastline and the Bay of Naples panorama overlooked by Mount Vesuvius. The volcanic soil and climate create the perfect conditions for producing locally grown, simple but high-quality food and wines, and seeing some of these being produced, as well as sampling them, offers added appeal.”



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Capri, in the Bay of Naples; banner to Napoli football legend Diego Maradona; Pompeii

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Darryl Brooks, Sergii Figurnyi



with halo. In Sorrento itself, visitors were quite literally getting in on the celebrations by inserting themselves into a life-sized cut-out of the squad with a speech bubble saying “C’ero anch’io!” (“I was there too!”).

Set high on the cliffs, Sorrento is the archetypal Bay of Naples town, filled with orange and lemon trees and winsome cobbled streets leading down to the tiny beach and lidos of Marina Grande, where family-run fish restaurants serve up huge platters of seafood on a quay with eye-popping views across the bay to Mount Vesuvius. It’s a great entry point to this most beguiling region and an escorted tour which, this year, is shaping up to be Riviera’s third-best-selling European one.

ESCORTED INSIGHTS

With daily excursions taking in iconic sites like Amalfi and Pompeii, a globally adored cuisine that includes plentiful pizza, pasta, fish and gelato, and historic discoveries to be made in the likes of Herculaneum, Ravello and the medieval heart of Naples, it’s an ideal starter pitch for clients new to escorted tours.

After a gentle introductory walking tour of Sorrento, the daily excursions picked up the pace. Where better to begin than the stunningly preserved Unesco site of Pompeii, a once-thriving Roman city famously buried under metres of ash and pumice after the eruption

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of Mount Vesuvius in 79AD? I had last visited as an eight-year-old with my family during a summer stay with my grandmother, and its miles of ruined streets and buildings, many still bearing gorgeous mosaics and fascinating artefacts, had clearly left an impression – for among the hundreds of marble columns and colonnades, finding the same one my dad had photographed us in front of back then was just as easy as it was thrilling.

Our early arrival had been timed so that we entered before many others did; we later discovered that 29,000 other tourists came that day, a daily record for 2023. In fact, early arrivals are a feature of many escorted tours, I came to learn from members of my genial group on our next excursion – a drive alongside one of the world’s most beautiful coastlines to the hilltop town of Ravello. The switchback roads and hairpin bends, Norman and Saracen towers, coastal settlements such as Positano, Maiori and ➤

DESTINATIONS

ESCORTED TOURS | ITALY



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Sorrento's seafront; Yolanda Zappaterra in Naples; life-sized cut-out of Italian football champions Napoli PICTURE: Shutterstock/Serenity-H

ASK THE expert



Margaret Moulton

manager, Miles Morgan Travel, Wells, Somerset

"This tour is brilliant to sell, as there is something to suit everyone. The Amalfi coast and Capri are stunning, with fantastic resorts and scenery, while the Roman ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum are fascinating and a dream for history buffs."



Richard Slater

owner, Henbury Travel, Macclesfield

"We recommend this itinerary as it offers the opportunity to see the most important sites in the area, while being escorted by a knowledgeable guide. It represents immense value, and Riviera's hotel selections are always high quality."



Praiano, and tiny villages squished into the clefts of mountains and gorges are the acme of *la dolce vita*, even if the Alfa Romeo Spiders of the Sixties have given way to Fiat Pandas.

From our comfy air-conditioned coach, these towns and villages – along with the near-vertical terraces of lemon groves, olive trees and grape vines – presented a vista that felt little-changed in the 50-plus years since I'd last seen them. Admittedly, the Oscar Niemeyer Auditorium built in the hilltop town of Ravello in 2011 came as something of a shock, its modernity and curves distinctly at odds with the intensely Italian piazzas and palazzos that make this music-steeped destination as delightful as it is. More familiar in my memory was the gorgeous view back over the coast from the boat to Capri on our next excursion.

OLD AND NEW

The following day, the tranquillity of Herculaneum was welcome, and being able to wander its two-storey houses a highlight of the week. Unlike Pompeii, the small seaside town was buried under mud rather than ash when Vesuvius erupted, meaning that many of its buildings have retained wood and marble features, frescoes and mosaics – and even organic remains like food – providing a unique view into the daily lives of the town's ancient population.

Wandering the teeming alleyways of Naples immediately afterwards felt as though we were in a

Wandering the teeming alleyways of Naples felt like a live-action recreation of the days of Pompeii and Herculaneum

live-action recreation of those daily lives, but peeking into courtyards filled with balconied apartments – the blue and white banners of SSC Napoli's *ciucciarelli* (little donkeys) draped everywhere – brought us firmly back into the 21st century. We stopped at souvenir shops for footie-related fridge magnets, T-shirts, bumper stickers, socks and even statues of team members responsible for the famous win, before making our way wearily but happily back to the hotel for a late-afternoon swim and early *aperitivo*. I reflected how this amazing tour, at the perfect time, had left me filled with wonderful memories – both old and new. **TW**

BOOK IT

Riviera Travel offers the escorted seven-night Pompeii, Capri and the Bay of Naples tour from £1,499, departing on May 3, 2024. The price includes return flights (regional airports included), breakfast and select dinners, daily visits and tours, plus an expert tour manager throughout. rivieratravel.co.uk