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## From chaotic Naples to a quiet convent



*Richard Turen*

When your local guide bursts into laughter as he begins to attempt to describe his city, you know you're in for an experience, of sorts.

"In Naples, you know," the guide begins, "they say all of the crazy people in Italy, the really crazy ones who are not politicians, live in Naples. But I know there are some people here who are not so crazy. We are just waiting for them to identify themselves."

And so begins the story of Napoli as our vehicle moves forward. The guide went on about the chaos that is his city and offered no shortage of examples. For instance, no one believes a street sign really should be taken "literally,"

and being aggressive is not necessarily rude. As he spoke, a cast of locals, as if witnesses for the prosecution, cut us off on their motorbikes and crossed the street with an abandon that closely approximated a kind of death wish as urban ballet.

I love this place, and no local guide is going to talk me out of my appreciation for the cobblestone streets that make walking a game of chance, the narrow alleys adorned with thousands of colorful bits of laundry on lines stretching from building to building, the old men playing cards in doorways and parks, and the frantic children running, never walking, past their mommas sitting on chairs outside their front door.

It is the only city I know of where people routinely talk with strangers from their mopeds while sitting in traffic. A fun game is to count the Neapolitan "shrugs." This is the ultimate "such is life" city.

Naples has corruption that is almost enjoyable to watch. Locals find it amusing and discuss it over their morning espresso or their warm afternoon *shakerato*, an iced espresso served in a properly chilled glass. The city brags equally about the quality of its art and the skill of its pickpockets.

Then there is the pizza. Much of it is larger than the plate it rests on. Proper Neapolitan pizza has few ingredients. Anyone caught serving a "Hawaiian" pizza would be quickly invited to move north. It is the essentials that matter.

In 1999, after the passing of her husband, a hotelier you have never heard of, Bianca Sharma, was with several longtime friends and her teenage sons on a boat trip along the Amalfi coast. She looked up and somehow noticed the remains of a former monastery perched on the very tip of a near vertical cliff. The building was falling apart, but when she asked the boat captain who owned it, he said he thought it was for sale.

As with anything involving renovation of historical properties in Italy, the process was quite daunting. But the former sequestered convent became a labor of love for Ms. Sharma, and she spent more than 10 years restoring it. No detail was overlooked, and the redesign and rebuilding process has resulted in the opening of a 20-room luxury property that is, in my view, Europe's best new small hotel and certainly the new reigning queen of top properties along the Amalfi coast.

I was traveling with my family and two dozen clients. It was the consensus of our well-traveled group that Monastero Santa Rosa was the finest property we had ever experienced anywhere in the world. That it was designed and is overseen by a woman with no real hotel industry experience is an industry miracle.

This was all a bit of a surprise. We had heard that Prince Albert and Princess Charlene had been the first guests at the property when it opened in 2012. It is, like several other small properties in Italy, including the Townhouse at the Galleria in Milan, not particularly well known outside of A-listers and travel consultants who deal with those seeking unobtrusive excellence without attracting undue attention.

I lack the talent to put our stay into words. What made it so special? Was it the way staff rings an ancient bell in the small courtyard whenever new guests arrive or depart? The idea that staff would drop what they are doing to bid hello or farewell to guests says a great deal about this place.

Is it the terraced views, which are simply incomparable? Is it the caring concern of the manager, Flavio Colantuoni? Is it the carefully tended orchard and vegetable garden just across the road where Chef Bob sources his incredible dishes.

Although our search for Italy's best pizza involved [stops in Rome](#) and [along the Amalfi coast](#), it was in a small, rather well-worn pizzeria named Il Peperoncino Birichino that we found the Holy Grail.

The place is tucked into the middle of Santa Lucia, a street with several upscale pizzerias.

Look at the guide books and you will not find Il Peperoncino mentioned. Da Michele, with its long lines and only two options, margherita or marinara, gets all the press. Trianon da Ciro is a local favorite, in part thanks to its 82-year history baking Neapolitan pies.

Our judges chose Il Peperoncino because, I suppose, it was both delicious and very different than any other tasting we had experienced.

The sweet dough, made with a just-so pH level and that "sacred" Naples water, is stuffed with the freshest ingredients, then ever so lightly fried. When served, the insides are encased in a piping-hot hat, and there is a slight whoosh as you cut into the first piece. One of our judges referred to it as "the world's best Neapolitan chicken pot pie -- without the chicken, of course."

Anyway, at the end of our trip, after the ballots were counted, flat pizzas lost out to this version we had never seen anywhere. It was unexpected, and I hope you get to try one someday soon.

We left Naples for the Amalfi coast, where we would be staying at a new, small hotel just outside of Amalfi. We would then be heading to Positano for a few nights at Le Sirenuse, regarded by all of the major travel magazines as the very top property south of Rome.

Le Sirenuse did not disappoint. But the hotel that preceded it just about floored us.

As we arrived, the bells started tolling. We were met by staff and ushered onto a side terrace with perfect views of the coast. The excellent bar manager made certain that we were all part of his inner circle, and he is a master.

For many, it was the perfection of the furnishings, the antiques and so many surprises. Quick, come with me and look on the lower floor near the library. See the four tiny rooms with floor drains? This was where the nuns were placed after dying so their bodily fluids could run out before they were embalmed.

I slept in one of the nuns' cells. Each room is named for a medicinal local herb such as Sage, Lavender and Salvia. I am not sure that the nuns would recognize the chic furnishings, but they would recognize the confessional in the hallway.

Perhaps, what is most symbolic of the Monastero's ability to create lasting memories is the walk down past lovely gardens, many of them hidden so that each step outside brings new discoveries, to the swimming pool. A huge, slightly sloping infinity pool, it enables you to swim up to the edge and see the steep white cliffs below.

On my last day, two seagulls came up silently behind me in the pool to linger, have a drink and, I believe, say goodbye.

As the bells were rung on departure, there were more than a few tearful goodbyes. If you've been with me for a while in this space, you know it is not my habit to gush over hotels. Forgive me. I had to share this one with you.

It was a huge transition from the chaos of Naples to the beauty and tranquility of Monastero Santa Rosa. But perhaps it is fitting that Naples be followed by some time in a nun's cell with confession box nearby.

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