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PURE SHORES

South-west Italy is home to one of the most seductive coastlines in the world – making it just the spot for a romantic mini-moon, as *Tracy Ramsden* discovers



Mid-shin on Italy's boot lies a 40km stretch of unrivalled shoreline that has become the fabled backdrop for thousands of novels, films and paintings. But there is a backstory to how we decided on the Amalfi Coast for our honeymoon destination.

A year after I met my now-husband, Ron, he told me to book two weeks off work because he was taking me on a surprise trip, which after much badgering, I discovered was to Italy. I excitedly tapped my Italian friends for recommendations and bought a copy of Jess Walter's *Beautiful Ruins* to read on my sunlounger. But when we arrived at the airport, he placed a rolled up dollar bill in my hand - we were, in fact, heading on a road trip around California. Italy had been a ruse. I wondered why he hadn't used Skegness, and learned two things that day: one, he was a keeper; two: I now had an Italian itch that would need scratching.

Fast-forward some six years, a mortgage, a child, and now a wedding, and we've finally touched down in Naples. Tip one: make the most of your transfer. We visited Amalfi via Capri, so caught the ferry directly to the island - the Calata Porta di Massa (for slow ferries) or the Molo Beverello (for fast ferries) are a short shuttle ride from Naples airport. Forty minutes on the hydrofoil is the perfect introduction to those famous azure waters, as the rocky outline of Capri emerges majestically in the distance.

Stepping off the gangway on to Capri ignites all the bygone glamour of a 40s movie set, with just a hint of debauchery - it is here that some say Odysseus resisted the seductive but deadly song of the Sirens, and the Roman emperor

Tiberius engaged in illicit affairs. We taxi up the hairpin roads towards Anacapri and our first stop, Capri Palace, which lives up to its grandiose name.

Built in 1960 at the foot of Mount Solaro, it takes in the views of the Bay of Naples, a spiralling pathway lined with bougainvillea leads to a zen white and gold entrance hall, all marble and Roman-style pillars. We are staying in the Paltrow suite. Yes, you heard it. Each decadent room - with its own plunge pool - is dedicated to an actress or artist of the owner's choosing (there are also Magritte and Warhol suites with colourful artworks tiled to the bottom of the pools). I'll be honest - the large black and white framed portraits of Gwyneth hanging above the marital

'It is the perfect introduction to those famous azure waters'

bed is a little disconcerting, but it's this kitsch, just-the-right-side of naff glamour that has made Capri the playground of the rich and showy for the last five decades. We are greeted with a bottle of champagne, a heart-shaped chocolate brownie and his 'n' hers robes. So far, so 'honeymoon'.

The midsummer night's ball is a weekly event for guests, where the house band perform covers and waiting staff take you by the hand for

Find your zen in Capri Palace's marble-clad bathroom (below); drink in the azure-blue views from the gardens at Monastero Santa Rosa (left) and Capri (far left)



a glide across the marble. It's fun, like a swanky Butlin's clubhouse, especially after a couple of Aperol Spritz (FYI, the Italians don't do half measures).

Next day, we stroll the narrow lanes of Anacapri, lined with cute *trattorias* and boutiques selling ceramics and crisp linens - you'll need to head to Capri town, 15 minutes away, for designer labels such as Prada, Gucci, Fendi and Valentino. We buy olive oil and limoncello, then hop on the eerily vertiginous one-man chair lift (you are 'secured' by only a flimsy rope across your lap) to the top of Mount Solaro. We drink beer in the sunshine and mop up views of the lush green island, dappled with white rooftops and ring-fenced by clear blue waters.

Don't leave Capri without checking out Fontelina Beach Club, too - a remote paradise accessible by a winding path to the water's edge. Here, you can sit beneath the shade of a pretty pergola and feast on fresh seafood. But be warned, it gets booked up in peak season. Thankfully, L'Olivo - the island's only two Michelin-starred restaurant - is a fine alternative, where we enjoy sea scallops with asparagus and seared monkfish medallions. All delicious, but genuinely not a patch on the simple margherita pizza served up at Capri Palace. Everything you hear about Italian food is true. I'm not sure if it's the sun-drenched tomatoes or the fresh mozzarella, but that pizza ►



The picturesque hilltop town of Amalfi (far left) and sun-drenched vines in Campania wine region (left)

was so good we ate three in two days. Don't judge it till you've tried it.

Next stop, Amalfi - the ancient town that sits between the glitz of Positano and the coastal crowds of Sorrento. There's a small, pebbled beach beside the bustling port and the town's main square is presided over by the Arabic-Norman Sant'Andrea cathedral. Its striped Byzantine exterior offers due pomp to the relaxed piazzas where we snack on giant green olives and sip white wine. If you have time, it's also worth swinging by the Museo Arsenale Amalfi, a medieval shipyard-turned-exhibition space dedicated to Amalfi's maritime history.

But we're here to escape the crowds, so we wind our way up the back bends towards the dizzying heights of Conca dei Marini - and a little slice of heaven. Perched perilously on the cliff edge, the Monastero Santa Rosa is a boutique hotel comprising 12 rooms and eight suites, in a 17th-century monastery. We are welcomed with the ceremonial ringing of its bell and served fresh lemonade before stepping out on to the balcony to look back at one of the world's finest views. Built in 1681, this former home to cloistered nuns of the

Dominican order was transformed into a hotel in 1924, later attracting the likes of Jacqueline Kennedy and actor Eduardo de Filippo. The monastery's ancient vaulted ceilings, confession boxes and original 'wheel' - where nuns sold herbal remedies without being seen - still remain. The spa is located in the cavernous underbelly of the monastery. The former laundry once existed here, and authentic mosaics and stone walls retain a hint of its history.

But we spend most of our time

'In the piazzas we snack on giant green olives and sip white wine'

outside, nestled in the *Giardino del Benessere* (or, the garden of well-being). Surrounded by lemon and olive trees and the waft of jasmine, we stare across the edge of the infinity pool out to sea. Smug doesn't even begin to cover it.

In the Il Refettorio eatery, a Mediterranean menu designed by Michelin-starred chef Christoph Bob is made up of organic vegetables and herbs (mostly grown on-site), fresh fish from the Tyrrhenian sea, *Gragnano* pasta, *Cetara* anchovies and artisan cheeses. I go for lobster on mashed chickpeas and my husband has the shrimp ravioli as we attempt to commit

the moonlit sea view to memory (one for the bank when it's raining back home, the wedding blues have set in and we're eating tinned tuna because *somebody* forgot to do the food shop...).

For our last day in Italy, we head for the hills to explore the world-renowned Campania wine region. There are plenty of wine tours, but for something a little more authentic we used Citalia - local experts who took us off the beaten track. Up in the arid hillsides (we saw two bush fires - apparently all-too common) is Tenuta San Francesco, a family-run vineyard that includes a 200-year-old vine thicker than the average man's waist. We wander beneath the gnarly vines that stretch on for four hectares, canopied from the midday sun by leaves and gigantic grapes.

In the main house, we are welcomed with a delicious *Caprese* salad and tomato pasta, cooked in the adjoining family kitchen. We sip wine after wine as we cut proverbial bread with a small group of guests from the US and Germany. Each wine has its own distinct story and flavour but the one we take home with us is a light, fruity red called E Iss, aptly translated as 'This is it'.

It's a wrench to say *arrivederci* as we leave for the airport in a happy cloud. We pass fruit stalls selling tomatoes the size of my head, looking back across the winding roads that carve up Amalfi's coast with a couple of bottles of E Iss clanking in the suitcase, ready to be opened on our first anniversary. ■

Room rates at Capri Palace (Mythahotels.com) start from €380 (about £335) per room, plus VAT, based on two people sharing on a B&B basis. Rooms at Monastero Santa Rosa Hotel & Spa (Monasterosantarosa.com) start from €400 (about £355) per night in a sea view superior room, based on two people sharing on a B&B basis. Rates include complimentary shuttle bus until midnight to/from Amalfi and use of the hotel's spa, pool and fitness facilities. Visits and packages to Tenuta San Francesco can be booked through Citalia's Italy Experts and via its ground partner Sunland Viaggi e Turismo, Sunland.it. Packages start from €50 (about £45) per person; visit Vinitenutasanfrancesco.com for details.