

Return to Sorrento

I'm convinced I was Italian in a past life. I love the pasta, pizza, coffee, gelato, wine, the country, the language and the people. Every time I travel to Italy I'm persuaded further that there could be some truth to my conviction.

Thoughts of a trip to the Amalfi coast had been percolating in my mind since watching a television programme about Herculaneum. A last minute offer proved too tempting. Only after I'd booked the holiday, did I begin to hope the hotel on Sorrento's outskirts would be as good as it looked and sounded online.

"Great!" my partner Gary sighed, while we waited for the tour rep in Napoli airport. While I am a seasoned Italophile, this was his first venture on to Italian soil. I knew that while he was excited to explore the area's Roman artefacts, he had not fallen in love with Italy the way I had, yet.

As the coach pressed through Friday afternoon's autostrada traffic, the tour rep relayed the local history, geography and culture to us. Wispy clouds danced in puffs over Vesuvius's crater, a constant reminder of the destruction the volcano has caused for centuries. Luscious allotments, lemon groves, ancient ruins and pastel coloured buildings welcomed us as Dean Martin belted out 'Volare', drowning battered Fiat Pandas honking their horns as they outmanoeuvred Lancia Ypsilons. As I breathed in the sights and sounds of Campania, I watched the tour rep talking on her mobile phone. She frowned and walked down the aisle towards us.

"There's a problem with your room," she said in her lilting Scottish brogue. "The hotel's been on the phone."

I looked at her in disbelief.

"We're arranging accommodation for you, close by."

"Ok." I nodded.

"I'm really sorry. I'll come back to you with more details." She returned to her seat at the front of the coach, continuing to converse in Italian on the phone.

"At least it's close by," I said.

Gary rolled his eyes in silence. I reckoned he was now wishing we'd gone to Portugal.

The tour rep returned five minutes later.

"It's sorted. It's just for one night. Then you'll be back in your hotel." She watched our faces intently before continuing. "You'll be staying in a convent."

"A convent?" Gary asked.

"It's stunning."

"A convent?" he repeated.

"There's sea views. We've booked dinner and wine for you, to make up for the disruption."

"A convent?"

"It's called Villa Crawford," she carried on.

"I don't believe this!" I said.

"I'm really sorry," she continued, "we're doing our best."

"I just don't believe what's happening. I know Villa Crawford."

They both looked at me.

"There's a photograph of Villa Crawford hanging in the hall at home, taken when I stayed in the area years ago. It was dilapidated then. In the evenings I sat at the seafront entranced by the mystery decaying mansion, imagining fabulous parties that took place on the terrace in the 1920s. And now I'm going to stay in it!"

Her eyes widened as I spoke, but not as much as mine did when we arrived at Villa Crawford. An elderly nun, smiled traversing a path shaded by olive trees. We climbed marble steps into a cool vestibule, richly decorated with dark mahogany furniture. The once rundown casa had been

transformed. I gazed at high ceilinged rooms with bulging bookcases and oil paintings encased in gilt frames. The ornate clock on the high mantelpiece ticked slicing the silence. French windows in the lounge opened on to the terrace revealing breathtaking views over the Gulf of Sorrento. I abandoned our luggage, finding a white marble staircase cascading to the top of the villa, flooded with light from a long stained glass window. Along a corridor I discovered a narrow, stone, spiral staircase, used by servants in bygone days. A moustached man stared from a black and white photograph, welcoming us. Staying in the former home of the American author Francis Marian Crawford was not a part of the Sorrento I had imagined I would be returning to this time.

Entranced, we followed the spiral staircase down to the cellar. The white vaulted dining room took on an ephemeral rosy glow from the setting sun. A dark suited waiter brought the menu, wine list and his recommendations. I quickly translated the selections and we chose. And then it happened. The sun dived into the water, casting pink and orange fiery rays across a dark blue sea. We sipped chilled Lacryma Christi. Mini cheese pastries whetted our appetites as we awaited freshly caught herb grilled seabass in the airy restaurant. We didn't need to break the magical silence. Gary smiled at me. And I knew something special was happening. He had begun to fall in love ... with Italy.