

# Bradt travel guides

**Sally Stott**

## **Prisoners of Pompei**

Somehow we had ended up in the cemetery. It was the last thing I wanted to see - as well as the painted house, the sauna, the dog mosaic, the brothel with sex graffiti, and the room full of broken pots. Just a few more things on the map! Only now it was dark, the tombstones, as tall as houses, were looming over our heads, and we couldn't get out.

"Gates close at 7.30pm," a sign had said in Italian, but the only Italian we knew was "ciao" (hello) and "ciao" (goodbye), so we hadn't seen that. As the sky turned to black, Pompeii, a skeletal city immortalised in ash, opened its burnt-out eyes, and we realised something: we were the only people still here.

We ran past the graves, along the bubbling stone of never-ending streets - which a few hours earlier had been drenched in the hot, dripping sun. The cold, quiet city glowed, blue-grey in the moonlight. Gone was the chitter-chatter of tourists and the pseudo-military guards keeping fascinating artefacts and tormented spirits behind well-bolted doors. Now the real residents were in charge.

Face-after-face on the tombs - the carved alter egos of the dead, their unblinking eyes watching us stumble; finally able to make their presence felt after the souvenir hunters, ice-creams and selfie sticks had been spat out. As we sped past people's former homes and possessions, down the now deserted paths of daily lives, under untrimmed trees and bushes, bats flew in front of our faces, swooping and screaming: "Go back, go back".

In the shadows, the map faded from sight. It had shown us what the guided tours hadn't; that there were miles of streets no one was looking at; whole houses and temples not deemed worthy of a pithy description; palatial mansions almost completely intact; an amphitheatre empty, too far away for most people to walk to - or just not as quite big as the Colosseum. And then there was the cemetery.

Nobody comes to Pompeii to see an actual cemetery. The dead people they are interested in aren't buried in the ground; they are covered in plaster, their faces curled into horrific grimaces, illuminated by the continual flash of cameras on their glass box prisons. Bodies destined to be forever incarcerated, highlighted on the map with a big red star. Maybe one day you'll go and stare at them. But perhaps afterwards you'll visit the real Pompeii, like we did.

Crackling stone; the stretched fingers of backstreets; gardens once played in, now quiet and still; small pots where food was served hot and spicy, now cold and empty, the paraphernalia of daily life made special by the way its owners died. The bats, the rats and the bugs are the only life here now, along with us - and whatever else lurks around the corner.

Eventually: a small metal turnstile. And a man. A man! Apologies. We didn't realise the time.... We thought we'd got locked in...We didn't know where to go...He shrugs: "This is Italy. You go where you like." Apparently it happens a lot; people getting lost. They - we - are all the same. None of us can read a map. But at least he was there to save us. "A pleasant surprise, yes?"

And yet, as we leave and go back to the train, to a world of tourists, tickets and timetables, we can't help but be disappointed. Holidaymakers chat loudly, while locals chat louder. We miss Pompeii and cold silky quiet of those who once walked its streets. Next time, we must try and stay longer. Next time, we must stay all night.