

# ITALIA!

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## AMALFI AMORE

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# AMALFI *Amore*



**Adrian Mourby** takes a road trip along the awe-inspiring Amalfi Coast from Sorrento to Salerno...

*Images, this page, top to bottom:*

*Kate enjoying the view from the Caruso Suite, Excelsior Vittoria, Sorrento*

*This was the suite where the operatic tenor Enrico Caruso lived before his untimely death*

*La Fontana di Sant'Andrea, Amalfi – though this is not Andrea, who would never be depicted in such mundane activity*

*La Fontana De Cap'e Guccio used to water donkeys but is now a permanent Nativity scene*

There was a seagull on our balcony, a very large one, enjoying what was left of the pre-prandial *grissini*. The Excelsior Vittoria in **Sorrento** stands on top of a cliff outside the old city gates, rising up like part of the cliff-face. On our balcony Enrico Caruso spent many happy days towards the end of his life, according to a recently installed hotel plaque. He died soon after leaving Sorrento in 1921, on his way to Rome for an operation that might have saved his life. This suite has been kept decorated in an old-fashioned style, with big drapes and a marble fireplace, in his memory. My wife Kate shooed away the seagull, who left calmly, stepping out into the sky and floating away on a thermal.

Still, the bird's departure had given us a reason to look again at Caruso's view. Across the Bay of Naples rose Vesuvius and below us the ferry to Capri was just heading

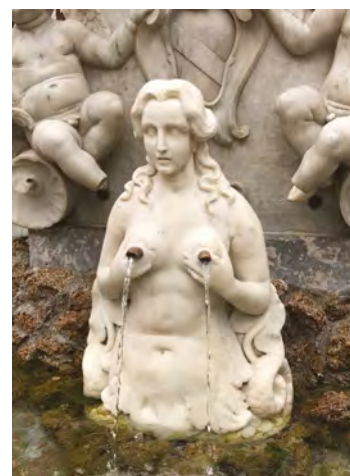
into the sunset. Tonight we were having dinner in Bosquet, the hotel's Michelin-starred dining room, and then heading out at 3am for the Solemn Procession which takes place every Holy Thursday around the historical centre of Sorrento. The procession is organised by the Archconfraternity of Santa Monica, and it turned out to be much more dramatic than we had expected.

## HOODED FIGURES

It was cold and dark as we stepped out of the hotel's garden to encounter the procession making its way through Piazza Torquato Tasso. White-robed, hooded figures, some with flambeaux, some carrying crosses and even scourges, were singing dolefully as they passed by. At the back of the procession, Our Lady of Sorrows, a life-size statue of the Virgin Mary, was borne aloft on a silver plinth decked with white flowers. Behind her marched young boys – unhooded – with



Images by Kate Tadman-Mourby unless otherwise stated





My wife Kate shooed away the seagull,  
who left calmly, stepping out into the  
sky and floating away on a thermal

*View of the Sorrento  
Excelsior from the sea –  
below is the port whence  
ferries depart for Capri*



## WHAT TO SEE AND DO

**MUSEOBOTTEGA DELLA TARSIALIGNEA**

Via Santa Nicola 28, 80067 Sorrento

[www.museomuta.it](http://www.museomuta.it)

Marquetry is a particular speciality of Sorrento, and in this 18th-century *palazzo* the inlaid wooden furniture made by local masters is displayed. The palace itself, with its frescoed vaults and ceilings covered with hand-painted wallpaper, is also worth your attention.

**FONTANA DI SANT'ANDREA**

Piazza Duomo, 84011 Amalfi

Situated close to the Duomo, this fountain is the perfect base from which to set out find the best *gelato* in Amalfi. It is topped by a marble representation of the crucified saint, below which another woman appears to be lactating through metal pipes (as you can see on the previous page).

**ROMAN VILLA & ANTIQUARIUM**

Via Santa Maria Vetrano 19, 84011 Minori

This patrician villa on the old sea coast of Roman Minori was abandoned at the time of the explosion of Vesuvius. It remained buried for centuries. When excavated, its ground floor was found well-preserved, with Pompeian mosaics, frescoes and lots of amphoras.

**PROVINCIAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF SALERNO**

Via San Benedetto 28, 84122 Salerno

[www.museoarcheologicosalerno.it](http://www.museoarcheologicosalerno.it)

Located not far from the cathedral, in an old Benedictine monastery complex, Salerno's archaeological museum contains artefacts from the pre-Bronze Age era, the period of Greek occupation, and also a celebrated bronze head of Apollo from Roman times.

*Images, clockwise from top right:*

*This Norman tower has stood here for the best part of 1,000 years*

*Easter in Amalfi means Sunday Mass at the Duomo*

*Worshippers and visitors mingle outside the Duomo*

*We met a man selling lemons along the coastal road*

*The Solemn Procession takes place every Holy Thursday in Sorrento*

*Arriving at the Hotel Santa Caterina, just outside Amalfi*

trays of white flowers. Also known as the Visit to the Sepulchres, this procession commemorates the Virgin Mary seeking her missing son.

On the evening of Good Friday a similar procession, but with black-robed figures, organised by the Confraternity of Death, enacts the Procession of the Crucified Christ.

We were fortunate to be in Sorrento at Eastertime. Our holiday plans were to drive from Naples to Salerno via Sorrento, taking in as much of the coastline as possible. We hadn't expected a crash course in Roman Catholicism. There are few events in Campania as dramatic as those two Easter days on the Sorrentine Peninsula.

The next day we took the hotel's lift down to the small port below and had coffee at Ristorante Ruccio. The café displays photos of Sophia Loren in the film *Scandal in Sorrento* (1955). Ruccio's was one of the locations in this comedy about a retired marshal (played by director Vittorio de Sica) who returns to Sorrento and gets involved with Loren, who plays Donna Sophie, a *smargiassa*. That's an Italian word I did not know. It means a show-off, the proprietor told us.

From Porto di Sorrento you can see that the Excelsior Vittoria is two separate Victorian hotels linked by, of all things, an oversized Swiss chalet. When I met up with the hotel owner, Guido Fiorentino, he told me that his family built the hotel in 1834 but extended it when Maria Sophie, the last Queen Consort of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, was coming to stay. The extension was built in the style of a chalet, which was fashionable across Europe in the second half of the 19th century. According to Cosima Wagner's diaries, Richard Wagner completed part of *Parsifal* while staying in the chalet.

We spent the day shopping for tablecloths and ceramic bowls along Via San Cesareo and walking round the cliff-top villas of Sorrento before descending through a 4th-century BC Greek gate to the marina. Here a trendy new alfresco restaurant called Fish & Soul served us excellent seafood in brilliant sunshine. On the way back we encountered

Hotel Tasso, which has a plaque to commemorate the poet Torquato Tasso, who was born in Sorrento. There's a second to 'Enrico' Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright who stayed here in 1881: "Here in the sun, Enrico Ibsen, weeping over the dark destinies of man, wrote *Ghosts*."

**VERTIGINOUS CLIFFS**

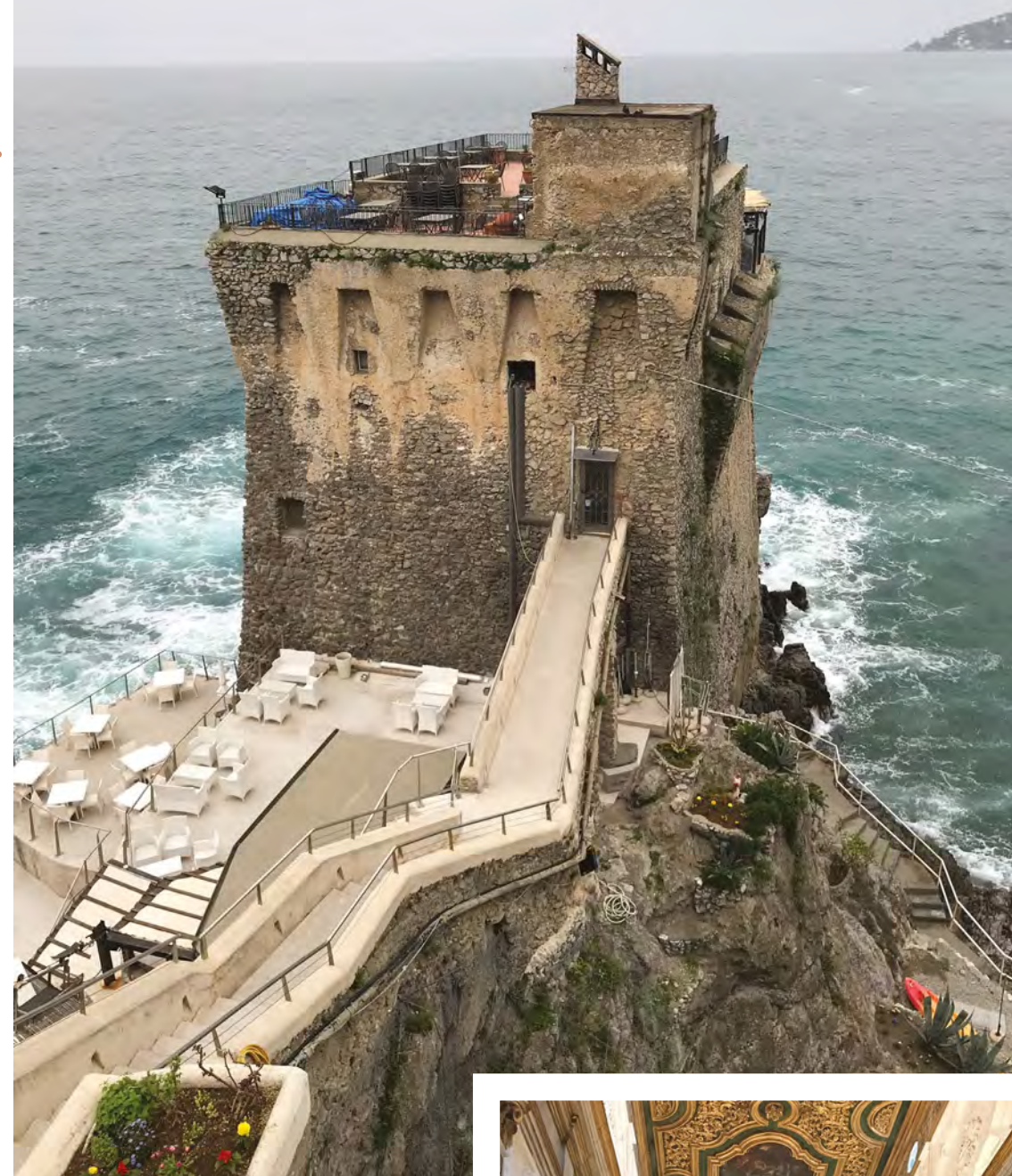
Saturday morning we drove the 32 kilometres to **Amalfi** ② via the coast road that clings to the side of vertiginous cliffs, winding through the towns of Positano and Praiano. Kate leaned out of the passenger window with her camera while cautioning me not to look at the views she was snapping. As if the road weren't narrow enough, locals stopped their cars on bends to chat to each other. Coaches also made driving interesting, pulling over so passengers could swarm into ceramic factories built into cliffs or visit lay-bys selling limoncello and Amalfi's giant lemons, the size of a rugby ball. This coastline is covered with terraces of fruit trees. The terraces seem to reach up to the sky.

At Hotel Santa Caterina, outside Amalfi, it felt warm enough for an Easter swim. Just as at Excelsior Vittoria, there was a long lift down to the shore where a small concrete jetty existed for bathers. Santa Caterina, like the Vittoria, is still owned by the same family who built it. In this case it's the Gambardellas, who opened for business in 1906. Stepping inside is like coming into someone's home, with paintings, objects d'art and bits of furniture that resemble family heirlooms rather than the work of one designer.

We ate that evening down in Amalfi, on the seashore at a







modern seafood restaurant called Grand Marina. Afterwards we wandered round the moonlit town, which is built into a cleft in the sea cliffs and has a most dramatic cathedral. The church sits atop a long, dramatic flight of steps and has a garish façade that nevertheless successfully combines Norman, Arab and Byzantine elements. Beneath the steps is a crypt containing the remains of St Andrew the Apostle, brought here in 1208 after crusaders had diverted from the Holy Land to sack Constantinople.

We were back again the next morning for a packed Easter Sunday Mass with a lot of incense and Archbishop Soricelli liberally dousing the congregation with holy water. Our holiday was taking a distinctly religious turn. After the service the shops and cafés were open, so we walked up Via Lorenzo D'Amalfi, past all the limoncello and ceramic stores as far as the 'Donkey Head' fountain.

Fontana De Cap 'e Ciuccio was constructed in the 18th century for the refreshment of Amalfi's hardworking donkeys, who linked the port with the steep streets of the town, but since 1974 it has been decorated by a complex nativity scene with shepherds and other rustic figures attached to two mountains that rise up out of the water. The donkey has been adopted as the symbol of Amalfi. We saw one shop selling plates with the rather Old Testament motto "You Shall Have No Other Donkey Before Me".

## METAMORPHOSIS

Leaving Amalfi, we drove four kilometres along the coast as far as Minori. En route we passed through the town of **Atrani** — made famous by M C Escher in his Metamorphosis etchings — a road up to the left led to Torre dello Ziro, a ruined, turreted fortress on Monte Aureo. This was once the home of Giovanna d'Aragona, the widowed Duchess of Amalfi who scandalised her family in 1498 by marrying her butler. The duchess's brothers killed them both. The story is loosely retold by John Webster, a near contemporary of William Shakespeare, in his play *The Tragedy of the Duchess of Malfi*. ➤





## WHERE TO EAT

**TERRAZZA BOSQUET RESTAURANT**

*Hotel Victoria Excelsior, Piazza Torquato Tasso 34, 80067 Sorrento*

[www.exvitt.it](http://www.exvitt.it)

The Victoria Excelsior's premiere dining room has superb cliff-top views of the Bay of Naples and offers a modern take on authentic regional cuisine under Michelin-starred chef Antonino Montefusco.

**FISH & SOUL RESTAURANT DA CATALDO**

*Via Marina Grande 202, 80067 Sorrento*

[www.soulandfish.com](http://www.soulandfish.com)

A team of young, enthusiastic chefs started this fish restaurant on the beach next to Sorrento's marina. It's an open-air wooden deck with views of the local boats and very sophisticated food presentation.

**DON ALFONSO 1890**

*Corso Sant'Agata, 11*

*80061 Sant'Agata sui due Golfi*

[www.donalfonso.com](http://www.donalfonso.com)

In the hills above Sorrento the extraordinary Alfonso Iaccarino turned his restaurant plus six bedrooms into a world-famous brand that now has branches as far apart as Dubai and Toronto. This is the original.

**UN PIANO NEL CIELO**

*Via Gennaro Capriglione, 147*

*84010 Praiano*

[www.casangelina.com](http://www.casangelina.com)

Casa Angelina is a modern boutique hotel, with minimalist décor, clinging to a steep cliff between Sorrento and Amalfi. Its fine-dining restaurant, "a floor in the sky", has superb views across the Gulf of Salerno and a good Mediterranean menu.

**RISTORANTE MARINA GRANDE**

*Viale della Regione 4, 84011 Amalfi*

[www.ristorantemarinagrande.com](http://www.ristorantemarinagrande.com)

Just above the beach – with views of the red and white parasols and the sea beyond – this is one of the best fish restaurants along the coastal road. The family who run it have been here since 1922.

**EMBARCADERO**

*Lungomare Trieste, 84121 Salerno*

[www.embarcaderosalerno.it](http://www.embarcaderosalerno.it)

This modern structure on the seafront is a popular café-bar that also does attractively light seafood dishes. In the late evening it becomes quite a party place. Sit upstairs if you want to enjoy panoramic views over Salerno's two marinas.

**Minori** ④ is a small seaside town with an 18th-century basilica that contains the body of Saint Trofimena, which was discovered here on the beach in the 7th century. According to local legend, the Sicilian saint was killed by her father for refusing to marry a pagan. He squashed her into an urn and threw it into the sea. Her corpse eventually washed up at Minori.

After looking at the remains of the town's Roman villa with its Pompeian frescoes, we drove back two kilometres to spend the night at Villa Scarpariello, a boutique hotel within the Valle delle Ferriere nature reserve. This began life as a 16th-century watch tower on this frequently raided coast but is now a very colourful hideaway. Past guests have included King Umberto II, Jacqueline Kennedy and Greta Garbo. Garbo vacationed here in 1938 with the conductor Leopold Stokowski during an affair that took them eventually to Capri.

**UNBROKEN BEACH**

The next morning we zoomed past Minori to visit neighbouring **Maiori** ⑤, another seaside town, this time with the longest unbroken stretch of beach, at 930 metres; it is also one of the few sandy beaches along the Amalfi coastline. The Romans took Maiori from the Etruscans in the 3rd century BC. Around 1000 AD the town became part of the Norman Principality of Salerno – and it still has a very impressive Norman watch tower jutting out into the sea, and a 13th-century church, Santa Maria a Mare, which is topped with alternating bands of dazzling yellow and green maiolica tiles.

The beach and town of Maiori featured in four of Roberto Rossellini films. Today you can still recognise street corners that were used in Rossellini's masterpiece *Viaggio in Italia* (1953), which starred George Sanders and Ingrid Bergman. These days a film festival is held every November in Maiori that commemorates the director with its Premio Internazionale Roberto Rossellini award.

Approaching Salerno we stopped off at **Vietri Sul Mare** ⑥. This town is known for its polychrome



Image © Getty

ceramics and for the remarkable "Palazzo" Solimene, which was built in 1954 by the architect Paolo Soleri. Soleri's client was the talented local ceramicist Vincenzo Solimene (1925-2007), who wanted a factory. What Soleri presented him with was a rippling design covered in green and terracotta vases that recalls Gaudí's extravagant work in Barcelona. Today Palazzo Solimene still produces ceramics – crockery and floor and wall tiles, all worked and painted by hand.

From here we drove down into **Salerno** ⑦ which seemed huge after all these tiny seaside towns. Salerno is a major Italian port but also has a medieval core and a grand late-19th-century promenade known as Lungomare Trieste. As this was Easter Monday, we parked as close as we could to the cathedral, passing rows of Renaissance *palazzi*, many of them built by merchants who made their wealth trading in the city.

The cathedral was begun in 1076, after Norman soldiers under Robert Guiscard seized the city from the Byzantine Empire. It has a remarkable bell tower, that once again fuses Arab and Norman styles, and a massive marble pulpit known as Ambone D'Ajello in a raised-room style more often found in Eastern Orthodox churches. The cathedral's big metal doors were seized on a raid in Constantinople in 1099. But the cathedral is best known for containing the body of St Matthew, who is said to have died in Ethiopia. Three hundred years after his death, Matthew's

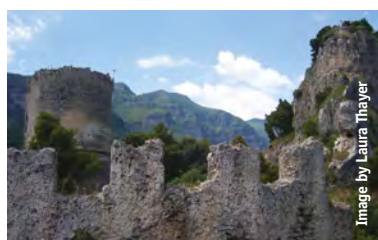


Image by Laura Thayer

*Images, clockwise from top:*

*La Basilica di Santa Trofimena, Minori, houses the mortal remains of its eponymous saint*

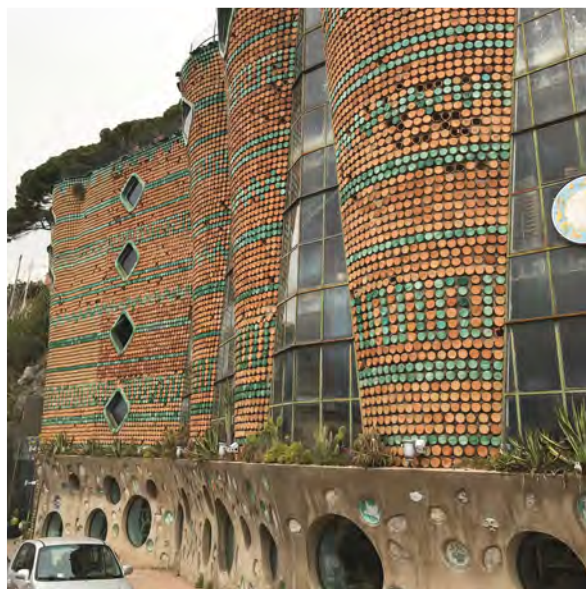
*Il Palazzo Solimene at Vietri sul Mare recalls Gaudí's Barcelona*

*Detail in the Duomo of Salerno, which is chiefly famous for housing the relics of St Matthew*

*The ruined fortress of Torre dello Ziro was once the home of the ill-fated Giovanna d'Aragona*

*The beach at Maiori is the longest on this stretch of coastline*





remains were transported by merchants to the westernmost part of Brittany, from where a local Roman commander brought them to Campania. A long story of burial and reburial – and even loss of the bones at one point – ended in 1081 when a monk brought them to Roger Guiscard, who was now calling himself Prince of Salerno. Guiscard reburied these remains in the crypt of his new cathedral. Today Matthew the Apostle is the patron saint of Salerno and a silver statue of him is carried around the city centre every year on 21 September.

We had seen a lot of saints and churches on this trip so it was time to walk along Lungomare and get some fresh air before driving back to Naples airport. Although it had taken us four days to drive from Sorrento to Salerno, the trip back to Naples, bypassing the Sorrentine peninsula, took us under an hour. ■

## GETTING THERE

### ► BY PLANE AND CAR

Naples is the nearest airport, about 75 minutes (70km) away by car. BA and budget airlines fly direct to Naples from many UK airports.

## WHERE TO STAY

### GRAND HOTEL EXCELSIOR VITTORIA

Piazza Torquato Tasso 34, 80067 Sorrento  
[www.exvitt.it](http://www.exvitt.it)

Richard Wagner, Enrico Caruso, Luciano Pavarotti, Jack Lemmon, Marilyn Monroe and Sophia Loren have all stayed at the Queen of Sorrentine hotels. Service, food and décor are all of a very high standard, and there are delightful gardens too. Double rooms from £530.

### BELLEVUE SYRENE

Piazza della Vittoria, 5, 80067 Sorrento  
[www.bellevue.it](http://www.bellevue.it)

In 1750 Count Mastrobuono built a villa in Sorrento overlooking the sea, which was converted into a hotel in 1820. King Ludwig II of Bavaria, Victor Emmanuel III of Italy, and the Russian author Ivan Turgenev all stayed at The Syrene. Double rooms from £435.

### HOTEL SANTA CATERINA

Via Mauro Comite 9, 84011 Amalfi  
[www.hotelsantacaterina.it](http://www.hotelsantacaterina.it)

A lovely, old-fashioned, family-owned clifftop hotel whose restaurant has a distinctly Edwardian swagger to it. All the staff have been there for years. With its unselfconscious style, this is the Amalfi coast's Grand Budapest Hotel. Double rooms from £380.

### BELMOND HOTEL CARUSO

Piazza San Giovanni del Toro, 2  
84010 Ravello  
[www.belmond.com](http://www.belmond.com)

High up in the mountains above Amalfi, the Caruso is one of a number of gorgeous *palazzi* owned by the Belmond group. Service is superb and the view from the infinity swimming pool is seductively hard to leave. Double rooms from £725.

### VILLA SCARPARIELLO

Via Carusiello 32, Località Marmorata  
84010 Ravello  
[www.villascarpariellorelais.it](http://www.villascarpariellorelais.it)

The setting for Greta Garbo's affair with the American conductor Leopold Stokowski was originally built as a coastal fortress and watch tower, but is now a cheery and colourful boutique hotel with suites for weekly rental and rooms for the night. Double rooms from £110.

### LLOYDS BAIJA HOTEL

Via Enrico de Marinis, 2  
84019 Vietri sul Mare  
[www.lloydsbaiahotel.it](http://www.lloydsbaiahotel.it)

Situated just outside Salerno, at the end of our journey, this deceptively large 1950s hotel cascades down the cliff to a private beach. Its restaurant, Re Mauri, is Michelin-starred and benefits from a terrace overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea. Double rooms from £84.