

Escape

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Falling in love with Angelina

Phil Hawkes

discovers Italy's true beauty along the Amalfi Coast

"BEAUTY is truth, truth beauty" wrote English poet John Keats. Although inspired by figures on a Greek vase, Keats might just as well have used this phrase to describe the true beauty of autumn in Italy's Amalfi Coast, where rugged coastal landscape blends with sea and sky to create an indelible impression.

Even the most sophisticated camera cannot capture the essence of this experience, just as words fall short and regrettably, clichés are unavoidable.

We hit the autostrada south from Naples, turning off to the Sorrento Peninsula and then ... presto ... the jagged edges of the Amalfi Coast unravel before us.

It's a daunting prospect as we scope the narrow serpentine route high above the cliffs. Sheer drops, Vespas buzzing like bees around the blind corners and large tour coaches lumbering like elephants.

Added to that, the fearless derring-do of irascible Italian drivers. It's all fun, as long as you don't suffer from high blood pressure.

After passing Sorrento there are three main towns awaiting our pleasure (and our survival) Positano and Amalfi on the coast, and Ravello high up on the mountainside.

They all have loads of charm but are different: Positano for trendy boutiques and trattorias specialising in seafood; Amalfi



Above: Balcony beauty at Casa Angelina on Italy's Amalfi Coast. Right: Amalfi magic - the hotel is in the middle of the photo..

for a busier vibe and nightlife; and Ravello for its uber-cool craft shops, the 13th-century Villa Rufolo and the Cathedral of the same period.

Ravello is one of the most famous (and touristy) mountain towns in Italy, with good reason.

We decide that none of these places meets our requirement for a relaxing few days in a quieter location and so we return to the village of Praiano near Positano.

It has a more "authentic" Italian feel to it, and some really good restaurants such as La Brace, whose pizzas are legendary. There's also a bar/cafe where the locals congregate in the evening and will happily practise their English with you as you sip a Campari or a Peroni. Of course, they all have relatives in Australia.

Thus begin several days of magic. We've chosen Casa

Angelina, one of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World, perched on a steep cliff overlooking the Mediterranean.

This place is sheer perfection. Balconies look out over the blue sea and the paler blue sky, creating the effect of merging seamlessly into our all-white room.

It's almost surreal, and brings back memories of the movie *The Truman Show* in which life turns out to be a giant movie set.

In the morning, we drag ourselves away from the view to try the buffet breakfast to end all buffets ... we ranked this as our No. 1 choice in the whole of Italy, and that's saying something.

Suitably recharged, we take the hotel's elevator carved through the rocks to the private pebble beach below and enjoy a lazy swim in the

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Mediterranean. Even in October, the water is buoyant and refreshing. Later, we try the hotel's lap pool which is kept slightly warmer.

Casa Angelina is also a showcase for modern art collected by the owner, Signor Capiello, who bought this property in poor condition and spent a fortune on creating this monument to good taste, Italian style and a sense of humour seen in the glass sculptures by Mexican artist Sosabravo.

The pervasive atmosphere is one of complete relaxation



where subtle music, lighting and the scents of lemon and sandalwood combine to create a "different vision of luxury" as the owner puts it.

It's topped off by a fine terrace restaurant where contemporary Italian cuisine is a happy marriage.

The Amalfi Coast is one of Italy's great treasures and in truth, we couldn't have found more beauty anywhere than in the village of Praiano and the Casa Angelina. If only Keats were alive today, to discover this place himself.



On the streets of Praiano. Picture: Nicole Tujague

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