



Above, the best way to enjoy the town of Positano. Opposite, café society and crumbling stucco in Ravello

IT'S ONLY ABOUT THREE MILES, as the plummet falls, from Ravello on its crag-top plateau to sea-level at Amalfi, but the swooping drive down into the gorge and around the foot of the mountain can take half an hour if there's a coach ahead. It's not time wasted. This coast has been under attack for millennia from maritime marauders. As a result every headland has its crumbling watchtower, every viewpoint its guardian castle, every chasm its tiny church gleaming bone-white against the cliff-face as it teeters above an awful drop. No journey here is dull.

The grandest ruin hanging over the Ravello road is the roofless apse of a Romanesque basilica, a mighty screen of interlooped round arches opening on nothing but sky and stone. They tell you it was once the largest building in southern Italy. Peering up from the road below, I was ready to believe it. But on my last day I walked along the ridge, following footpaths which repeatedly mutated into flights of rock-cut steps, until I found myself standing where the west door would once

have been and realised that the church, viewed from its own level, was nothing like as titanic as it appeared from way down below. I had been marvelling at the buttresses, which extended at least as far down the cliff as the walls rose into the sky.

Moments of disorientation like that are frequent around Ravello. The steepness of the terrain has forced builders into flights of fantastic ingenuity. The town is a three-dimensional tangle in which your next-door-neighbour's doorway may be three flights of stairs above your own, where a dark and ferny underground tunnel may debouch onto a terrace with a view of dizzying expansiveness, which terrace is itself the roof of a three-storey house whose back wall is the cliff through which you've just passed, and whose garden may descend, each level densely planted, until its bottom-most row of lemon trees is up against the parapet of the next street's roof-tops. Glancing through an arch I saw a pretty courtyard: walls of crumbling melon-coloured stucco, a flight of white-stone steps, an immense gnarled wisteria – just the sort of glimpse one goes to Italy for – but



RAVELLO UNRAVELLED

WHERE TO STAY

On my own private terrace at the **Hotel Caruso** I had four lemon trees in waist-high terracotta pots, a medium-to-large flower-bed full of white roses and – on three sides – parapets hedged with musk-scented white carnations and opening onto a view as beautiful as it was immense. Other hotels can offer marble bathrooms, fashionable pale-coloured upholstery, and half a dozen kinds of delicious home-made bread with breakfast, but the Caruso's situation allows it to provide – as well as all those things – a prospect so wonderful that the view from your room truly is worth the voyage. The main building is aristocratically pretty rather than dauntingly grand. Its core is a 17th-century palace, its walls and vaulted ceilings decorated with fanciful *grotteschi*, all now restored in watery, wild-flower colours. The restaurant, with its double columns and

Byzantine arches, opens onto one of several terraces where you can eat and drink, and there's an indoor-outdoor bar with a vaulted stone ceiling and a great log fire in case there's a night-time chill. The service is sweet-tempered and considerate, not stately. There are other fine hotels in Ravello: **Palazzo Sasso**, a strawberry-ice-cream-coloured 12th-century palace, and the smaller, grander **Hotel Palumbo**, with public spaces full of ducal-looking carved wood furniture and rich damask. Each shares some 60 per cent of the Caruso's view. **Villa Cimbrone** has a pre-Raphaelite picturesqueness and the best gardens in town: hotel guests have them to themselves at night. But after a day wandering through medieval alleys or negotiating rocky cliffs, there is something uniquely restorative about the Caruso's breezy, human-scaled elegance. And since

you come to Ravello for the view, you might as well choose the widest and the best.

Hotel Caruso (00 39 01 852 67890; www.hotelcaruso.com; doubles from €825).

Palazzo Sasso (00 39 089 81 81 81; www.palazzosasso.com; doubles from €528).

Hotel Palumbo (00 39 089 857244; www.hotelpalumbo.it; doubles from €250). **Villa Cimbrone** (00 39 089 857459; www.villacimbrone.com; doubles from €345)

ON THE TOWN

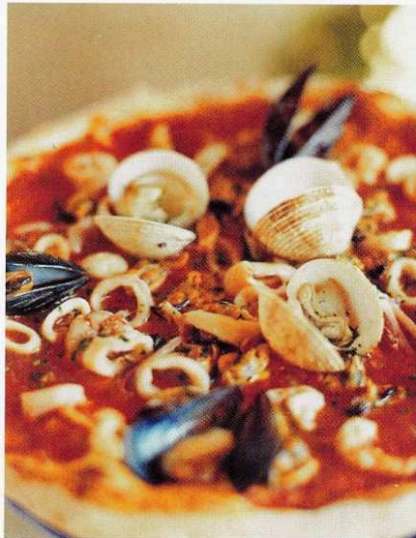
There are visitors to Ravello who rise from their pool-side recliners only to eat or go to bed, and they probably have a wonderful time. But the town, for all its smallness, offers plenty to see. The **central piazza** is fun in the evening, when the locals come out. The wide paved space (free of cars, like all central Ravello) fills up with children running races around groups of elderly gentlemen who stand there for hours, smoking ➤

unusual in that three cats were precariously but sedately seated, one above the other, each blinking at me from different levels of the creeper. In Ravello even cats arrange themselves on the perpendicular.

This is a world of benign surrealism, where the back wall of somebody's cellar may form part of the apex of a campanile, where a cave may be the back entrance (at attic level) to a palace, where to see treetops you look down and to admire wildflowers you look up (the walls are all curtained with them), where one of the best places to enjoy the view of the sea lapping against the chalk-pale towns at the mountains' feet is a crypt. Even the agriculture here is split-level. The terraces which climb so improbably high up the mountains are roofed with trellises, over which vines spread their leaves to make a green shade beneath which broad beans, onions and lettuces grow in neat rows. Nature made this terrain a grand, romantic jumble of rock and water, of jagged, mountainous horizons and a coastline so indented it takes three hours to drive 20 miles. Human endeavour has made it into a garden.

Ravello is a country village full of palaces, where everyday sounds include both the hee-haw of donkeys and the screech of peacocks. In Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (set about 1,000 years ago when Amalfi was one of the richest states in the peninsula) a cardinal, plagued by awareness of his own wickedness, has nightmares in which he looks into a pond in his garden and there sees something nameless and appalling, a 'thing with a rake'. Webster had never visited Italy, but he was surely right to imagine that a prince of the Amalfitan church would have had a garden, and my guess is it would have been in Ravello, where the aristocracy built their villas, adorning them with oriental splendour. They grew rich exporting timber to the desert countries of the eastern Mediterranean, and their ships were ballasted for the voyage home with pieces of worked stone. The ancient churches of Ravello are splendid with booty from buildings more ancient still – capitals from Palmyra, Alexandrian plinths. And the town's medieval builders used marble columns rather as modern British ones use RSJs. You see them propping up a house corner, supporting a lintel, embedded deep in a tumble-down wall, or, best of all, framing a long vista of cypresses and roses in one of Ravello's flamboyantly theatrical gardens.

Ravello has long attracted a highbrow crowd. On one house alone there are plaques commemorating the sojourns of DH Lawrence (who wrote *Lady Chatterley's Lover* here), EM Forster and Albert Camus. But most significant for the town's self-image was the visit of Richard Wagner, who rode up from Amalfi on a donkey and declared that the Villa Rufolo was everything he imagined Klingsor's castle to be. The Villa, back in the 11th century and 12th centuries, was home in turn to several kings and the only English pope. Its gardens – tumbling, of course, over several levels, each one affording a differently framed but uniformly dizzying view of the sea below – are full of pleasingly Wagnerian ruins: a massive



tower, fragmentary fortifications overhanging geometric parterres, an arabesque cloister whose black and white arches form an arras of stone lace. This part of Italy – inaccessible by land until the coast road was constructed by Fascist-era engineers – has always been as closely linked with Byzantium as with Rome, and as open to Arab and African cultural influences as it was to Saracen invasion. An inscription by the Fountain of the Moors quotes Theodor Adorno, who wrote to Alban Berg in 1925 (see what I mean about high-brow visitors?) that an evening in Ravello is ‘a look towards the orient’.

The town’s second great garden is that of the Villa Cimbrone. The plateau on which Ravello sits is boat-shaped. Its prow is now occupied by the Hotel Caruso’s wonderfully sited swimming-pool, the stern by the Cimbrone’s belvedere, where you can drink a Negroni with nothing but empty air in front of you, except for a row of corroded marble busts coolly turning their backs on a drop sheer almost all the way down to sea-level. The gardens, like those of the Rufolo, were the work of Italophiles from these islands. It was a Scot who turned the ruins of the Villa Rufolo into a Wagnerian fantasy and Lord Grimthorpe, designer of Big Ben, who restored the Cimbrone, installing gazebos and parterres and a jasmine-scented long walk (the only entirely horizontal one in town) in a fantastically hybrid blending of Byzantine and Arabic elements with a 19th-century fantasy of classical splendour.

In the gardens of the Villa Rufolo I noticed a curious wooden grid set into the paving and protected by a sprawl of roses. Later I saw it again from below: it was a trellis from which long tassels of mauve wisteria hung down over the partially subterranean street which passes beneath the villa. The multi-level structure of Ravello dissolves the distinctions between indoors and outdoors (a staircase beneath a barrel-vaulted ceiling may be a street) and between public and private (a house roof may be a café-terrace, the arch beneath which you pass on your way to the piazza is someone’s floor). Best of all, it abolishes the difference between enclosure and openness.

The Hotel Caruso is a very secret place. The colonnaded walk through the highest garden is a stone’s throw from the street, horizontally speaking, but on such a drastically different level that only a passing eagle could pry into it. And at its end is the pool, the remaining fragment of a medieval portico which is now a bar, a pergola hung with roses, and a prospect, occupying some 320 of the available 360 degrees, of – in descending order – cloud, crag, convents perched crazily on pinnacles, forest, and then a precipitous terraced patchwork of lemon groves and vines and houses and more lemon groves, all exuding their piercingly delicious scent, and – way, way below – the domes and spires and beaches of coastal towns. I see now why people go mountain-climbing. You can risk your life toiling up some horrid cliff. Or you can go to Ravello. Either way you can have the world at your feet. 📍

➤ and talking and rapping their walking sticks on the cobble-stones. Stay here long enough and you’ll almost certainly see a wedding party coming down the cathedral’s broad steps (Ravello seems to be every bride’s dream location). Inside the **Duomo** you’ll find not one but two gorgeously decorated Romanesque pulpits: one grand, its spiralling columns inlaid with gold mosaics, the other comical, with images of saints being swallowed alive by a sea monster. There are half a dozen other churches in town, each with some treasure – a Renaissance altarpiece, a massive wave-patterned stone altar – and throughout the summer you can combine visits to them with **concert-going**. Ravello is a musical town: at twilight its streets are full of curly-haired young men in dinner jackets, each one lugging a cello or dandling a lute. I heard Mozart arias in **Santissima Annunziata**, the

church whose two domed towers surprise you from below if you lean over the parapet at the Villa Rufolo, and in a cool vaulted room in the Villa itself I heard Brahms’ violin sonatas, one of the series of concerts that run three days a week throughout the season, moving in high summer to the gardens beneath the ancient tower.

You’ll eat well in Ravello, and if you’d like to learn how, you can enrol for a morning’s cookery class with **Mamma Agata** (00 39 089 857019; www.mammaagata.com; €180). Her house, her vegetable garden, chicken runs and rabbit coops, and the shady terrace where you’ll eat what you’ve cooked, along with some excellent local wine, are all beautifully set beneath a rocky outcrop and above the sea.

IN THE COUNTRY

Whichever way you set out from Ravello you will find

yourself walking downhill with the sea beneath you and mountains above and behind. There’s a useful map published by Carte Guide, on sale everywhere, which describes enough **walking routes** to keep you busy for a week, but it really doesn’t matter where you go. There are paths traversing every one of these vertiginous slopes, through lemon groves and tiny villages stacked up the hillside. A couple of hours will bring you down to sea-level, and if you don’t want to take a taxi you can buy a *gelato* and wait on the waterfront of Minori or Amalfi for the SITA bus to carry you back uphill.

Until the end of the 18th century, the plain around Paestum was a malarial swamp inhabited only by buffalo and their drovers. Now the land has been drained, but the buffalo remain. At the **Vanullo organic buffalo farm**, idyllically sited between two rivers near the ➤

➤ archaeological site, you can see the great black beasts wallowing in the mud, you can watch mozzarella being made, and then you can eat it for lunch.

AT SEA

This is not the place for a bucket-and-spade holiday. The beaches are small and, if they're not inaccessible, they're overcrowded. But that doesn't mean you should stay away from the water. Get in a boat, be it a hired *gozzo*, or one of the numerous ferries and hydrofoils, and you will be able to get the measure of this spectacular coast.

AMALFI

There's only room, between the two mountains flanking Amalfi, for one street, but the town's a vital, sophisticated place, the metropolis from which Ravello is the retreat. There are handsome dilapidated palaces along the waterfront, alleyways which become tunnels, then staircases, then open out into hidden squares high above the centre, and there's a grandly Byzantine cathedral, at the head of a flight of steps – taller than the building itself – where lovers roost, leaning against each other, of an evening. There are relics of St Andrew in the lavish baroque crypt, massive jewelled mitres and a lovely *quattrocento* Madonna in the museum and an exquisite little white arabesque cloister.

Just a short walk east round the point is **Atrani**: smaller, quieter and even prettier. The coast road is hoisted up on a viaduct here, leaving Atrani in perfect tranquillity. A fine 19th-century clock surmounts a church nearly a thousand years

older. The pink-and-umber and cream-coloured houses are draped with washing lines and small dogs sleep almost undisturbed in the main square which opens, through a series of arches, onto a beach.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Visit the **Grotto Smeraldo**. The main tourist attraction for miles, it's a mildly interesting natural phenomenon rendered hideous by the number of guides stirring up the water ('Looky, British lady! Emeralds for you!').

WHAT NOT TO DO, EVER

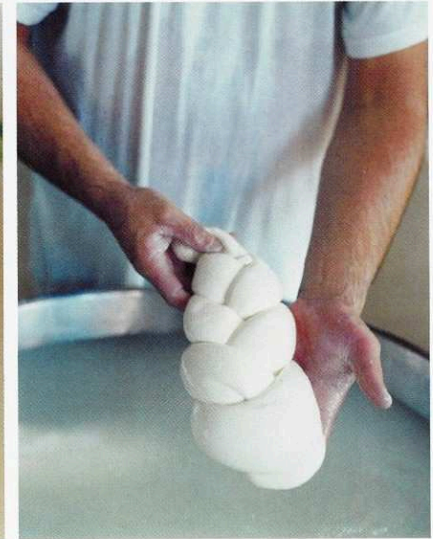
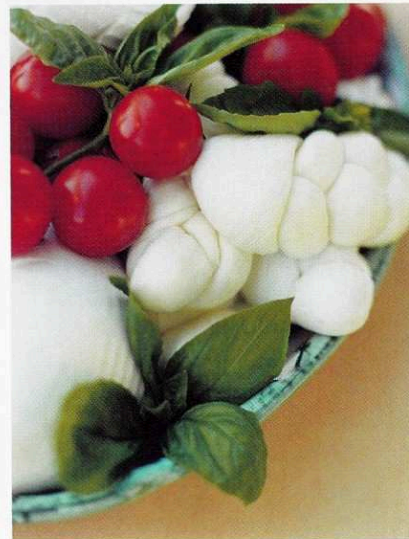
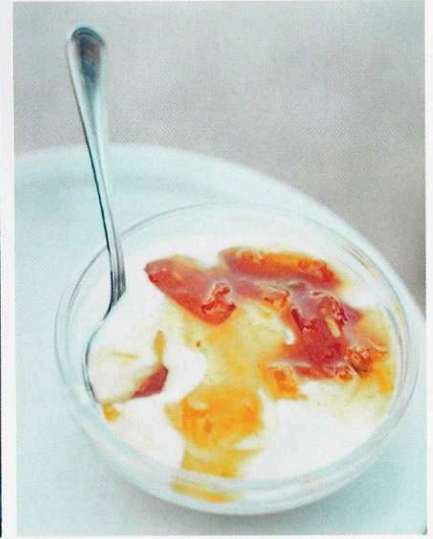
Drive. There are taxis (very pricey) everywhere. There are the SITA buses whose drivers are the kings of the jam-packed coast road. It's true the views are wonderful, especially east from Amalfi towards Salerno, but drivers glance at them at their peril, whereas, perched up high in a bus seat, you're looking over the parapet straight down the precipices the car-bound won't even see until they've toppled over. There are also fast hydrofoils which whizz you from Sorrento to Salerno in a tenth of the time it takes to drive the distance, and slow ferries stopping at all points in between.

For **bus** services, visit www.sitabus.it. For **hydrofoil and ferry** services to Amalfi, visit www.consorzioimp.it or www.metrodelmare.it

GETTING THERE

British Airways (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) flies to Naples from Gatwick from £110 return in June.

EasyJet (0905 821 0905; www.easyjet.com) flies from Stansted to Naples from £51.98 return in June.



Weather to go: Amalfi Coast

The Ravello Festival runs from 30 June to 30 Sept, with the Wagner Festival in July; but go later when there will be fewer tourists and the sea is still warm enough to swim in. **Best month:** September

Sunshine	Temperature	Rainfall	Humidity
8hrs	16°C min 26°C max	64mm	Medium