

The town of Castellabate overlooks the Tyrrhenian Sea

Italian DELIGHT

Ruggedly beautiful, the Cilento Coast is best explored on foot, says Chris Morley

Reaching the crest of a dusty path, high above the Tyrrhenian Sea, a postcard-worthy view unfolds – emerald pine trees framing a white speedboat, anchored in sparkling turquoise water. I'm halfway along a self-guided trail that follows the untamed Cilento Coast in Italy's

Campania region. Falling within a national park and a marine reserve, this is an uncrowded landscape of cool forests, golden shores and fishing villages. While it's lovely to stretch my legs, this gentle break also weaves in time to go sightseeing, enjoy sea dips and indulge in long, lazy meals.

Follow this footpath along the Cilento Coast



Historic wonders

My trip kicks off at one of Cilento's biggest draws, an archaeological park containing three of the world's best-preserved ancient Greek temples. I board a speedy train from Naples (£15 first class) and arrive at Paestum. After lunch in the garden of my hotel – a terracotta-painted mansion surrounded by lemon trees – I wander the eerily quiet UNESCO World Heritage site, marvelling at the temples' 30ft-high fluted columns. You don't need to be a history buff to be blown away by these time-travelling structures, still standing after 2,500 years.

Local flavours

The area around Paestum is also mozzarella country. On a guided tour of an organic farm



The ancient ruins of Paestum

(tenutavannulo.com), I watch shaggy-coated water buffalo munch hay, get a rub-down from a massage machine and line up for milking. These dark-eyed beauties produce enough creamy milk to make 300kg cheese a day, all sold fresh from the farm shop. I peer through a plate-glass window into the dairy, seeing mounds of raw cheese being hand-rolled into pearly spheres and, in a show of skill, woven into a fancy plait. Biting into a focaccia sandwich of just-made mozzarella and home-grown tomatoes, the sweet, tangy cheese is a world away from the rubbery supermarket version I'm used to.

The beach in Santa
Maria di Castellabate



Scenic walk

The next day, I take the train to Agropoli on the southern tip of the Bay of Salerno. With time to spare before I start walking, I step into the cool interior of 16th-century church of the Madonna of Constantinople, and admire frescoes of sailors adrift in storm-tossed seas watched over by the Madonna.

From the church, it's an easy route out of town and on to a marked trail through oak forests and sun-blasted clifftops. After a couple of hours, the path ends in a ribbon of soft sand lined with beach umbrellas and crowded with families. Splashing contentedly along the water's edge, I eventually arrive at Santa Maria di Castellabate, my base for the next two nights.

Santa Maria is a charming place with a higgledy-piggledy hilltop old town and lively modern beachfront. Popular with Italian families in peak season, it's otherwise off the tourist radar. After a day spent in hiking books and shorts, it's a joy to dress up, sip an *aperitivo* at a pavement cafe and watch locals on their evening stroll. This laid-back lifestyle, coupled with a Mediterranean diet, is thought to be why people in the Cilento are more likely to celebrate a healthy old age.

Sirens path

There's one more path to walk before I head back to Naples.



Enjoy a focaccia sandwich with
freshly made mozzarella

Named after mythical sea nymphs who bewitched passing sailors with their enchanting melodies, the Sirens Path is a beautiful finale to my trip. Starting from Santa Maria beach, I take an undulating path that sweeps down to the ancient harbour of San Marco, where Greek and Roman ships once anchored.

By the time I pass Licosa, a rocky islet named after one of the Sirens, the midday heat is beginning to build. It's time to cool off and, amazingly, there's a pick of deserted beaches to choose from. Splashing around in the cool, glassy water brings a spring back to my step. Donning my boots, I retrace my way back to the hotel, already anticipating one last cocktail in the evening sun.

BOOK IT

* A five-day 'Paestum and the Cilento Coast' self-guided break costs from £679 per person, excluding flights, with Macs Adventure; macsadventure.com

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