



TRAVEL

Exciting ways to get away from it all

**Santa Maria di
Castellabate – a
bustling village
steeped in history
and folklore**

Italian ODYSSEY

Chris Morley takes a slow, soulful journey
along southern Italy's wild Cilento Coast
and to the romantic isle of Ischia



Top: Santa Maria di Castellabate; above and opposite: Agropoli; below left: the Bay of Naples from Posillipo hill



Boarding a train south from Naples, high-rise suburbs give way to small farms and peaceful towns, lush with lemon trees and date palms. I'm travelling with my husband, Dean, to trade the busy, touristy city for five days on the serene Cilento Coast, where oak and chestnut forests surrender to craggy coves and the turquoise Tyrrhenian Sea. Our plan? To explore this lesser-known area via a mix of easy hikes, cultural wonders, good food and luxurious loafing.

Divine temples

An hour after we've left Naples, we step off the train at Paestum, a near-deserted station where the only sounds are the coo of pigeons and the rush of wind in the trees. We've come to this sleepy town for its superstar attraction – some of the world's oldest and best-preserved Greek temples, still towering amid a ruined Roman settlement some 2,500 years after they were built. After checking in at our hotel, we walk to the site in the late afternoon and watch the lowering sun set the travertine stone temples aglow. Standing among these monumental,

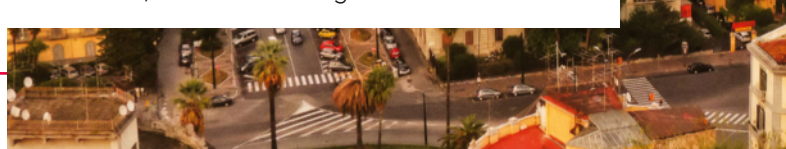
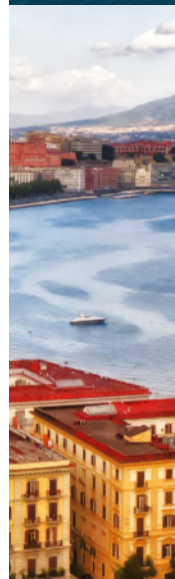
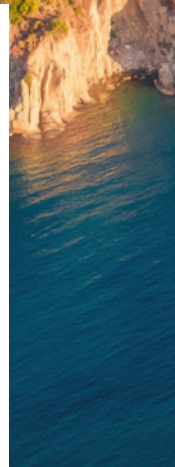
roofless houses of the gods, dedicated to Hera, Athena and Neptune, time feels suspended. The fact that this UNESCO World Heritage Site is so quiet adds to the spine-tingling atmosphere.

Later, we visit the National Archaeological Museum of Paestum to view remarkable artefacts, like terracotta grave figurines, used in long-forgotten rituals. The Tomb of the Diver is particularly moving – a delicate fresco of a male figure gracefully diving into the afterlife.

Pristine coast

The next day, from Paestum we catch a short train ride south to Agropoli town. It's a bank holiday weekend and carriages are packed with Italian families carrying everything required for a day on the beach. We walk to a high point overlooking the marina, and take in the rugged outline of the Amalfi Coast and the Isle of Capri across the Bay of Salerno.

Leaving the seaside town behind, we start the Punta Tresino, a quiet track through tangled woodland and Mediterranean scrub. We tramp the stony path, sending tiny lizards skittering into the brush, and watch lime-and-tangerine butterflies flicker





*‘WE SIGH
AT THE
IMPOSSIBLY
BLUE SEAS’*



over sun-bleached grasses. We don't rush – it's too hot and too beautiful – and regular stops are required to sigh at the impossibly blue sea and breathe in the cool, aniseed scent of wild fennel.

After a couple of hours of rough terrain, our feet find a soft, needled path that descends through the shade of Aleppo pines to the long sandy beach at Santa Maria di Castellabate. We unlace our boots and splash through the shallows, past ranks of sunloungers, until we reach our hotel.

Sirens' path

Santa Maria is a charming village with a medieval hilltop castle and a buzzy waterfront marked with a 16th-century fort. Staying in a boutique hotel – a 17th-century Spanish mansion tucked in a maze of backstreets – we set out to explore. It's not long before we discover a favourite bar (Di Matteo) and settle in for cocktails, and it's a prime spot for watching the evening passeggiata. The next day we start another hike, this >>

Clockwise: Forio, Ischia island; the Temple of Hera, Paestum; relaxation and memorable dining at Botania Relais & Spa, Ischia island; the Cilento Coast

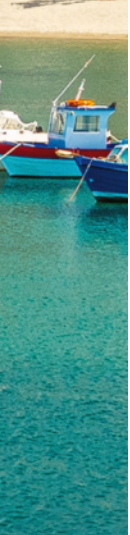
one 14km. The Path of the Sirens follows the thread of an old mule track past holiday villas, through San Marco harbour (an old Greek-Roman port), and finishes at the foot of Mount Licosa. According to Greek myth, this is where mermaid-like sirens serenaded passing ships, enticing them on to jagged rocks. Clever Odysseus tied himself to his mast and passed safely by, causing one siren, Leucosia, to furiously hurl herself into the sea, where she turned to stone. Her name lives on at Punta Licosa,

a rocky islet that you can swim to on the route.

This popular, well-marked trail is dotted with carob and pomegranate trees, and the most alluring, empty beaches. When we reach the end of the walk, I pick my way over the pebbles and float in the crystalline shallows.

Other temptations are pasta-based. At a pavement cafe in San Marco harbour, we polish off bowls of delicious

ISCHIA IS STEEPED IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY'



spaghetti alla Nerano (Stanley Tucci's fave pasta dish), slippery strands coated with an unctuous blend of cooked-down courgettes, and provolone and Parmesan cheeses. It's further elevated with a glass of Licoso, a silky white wine produced at an organic vineyard we stopped to admire earlier on the walk (ilcolledelecorsicano.it/en).

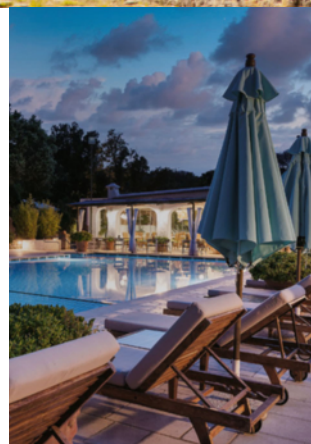
Ischia calling

Having walked, wined and dined, we finish our trip with two days of pure indulgence. We catch the train back to Naples and check in for a night at Grand Hotel Parker's (grandhotelparkers.it), a city institution and byword for old-school glamour. Sipping cappuccinos on the sixth-floor terrace (open to the public), nibbling *sfogliatella riccia*, Naples' signature shell-shaped pastries, the Bay of Naples pulses below – Mount Vesuvius and Castel dell'Ovo to the east, residential Posillipo to the west.

The next day we pick up the hydrofoil for a 50-minute trip to Ischia. Steeped in Greek mythology (it was the home of fire-breathing giant Typhon) and bubbling with thermal springs, it's a serene retreat. We drop our bags at Botania Relais & Spa and calm descends, the silence only broken by twittering birds. Rooms and suites

are artfully arranged around acres of garden embellished with spring-fed pools, an outdoor gym and a modern spa.

I start the morning with a restorative yoga session on the lawn, which banished any lingering aches from the journey. Then after a few lazy laps of the pool, I retreat to a shaded double lounger with Dean, book in hand, and snack on warm, wood-fired bread piled with mouth-watering home-grown organic tomatoes and fresh mozzarella *di bufala*. After five days of exploring on foot and by train, it's the ultimate slow, sun-soaked ending to our Italian odyssey.



HOW TO DO IT

To replicate Chris' trip, book:

✦ **The seven-day Neapolitan Treasures: Ischia & The Bay of Naples trip through The Luxury Holiday Company, from £2,730 per person, including UK flights; theluxuryholidaycompany.com**
 ✦ **Combine it with the five-day Paestum and the Cilento Coast Short Break trip by Macs Adventure, from £697 per person, including B&B accommodation and transfers from Naples; macsadventure.com**

