

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL



## Amalfi Coast, the quieter way

On our Explore tour, we stayed at an agriturismo near the hiking trails and guides were adept at finding quiet spots along the famous coast

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A view of Castiglione, on the road to Ravello, on the Amalfi Coast, Italy.

JIM FENG/ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

Somebody once gave me a book about the world's greatest hikes. It was reading for an armchair traveller. I'm an enthusiastic day hiker on Ontario's Bruce Trail, but I'm unlikely to ever conquer the five-day West Coast Trail on Vancouver Island let alone Mount Kinabalu in Borneo.

And yet here I was, on a warm October day, hiking one of its top 50: the Path of the Gods, from Bomerano to Positano on Italy's Amalfi Coast. There is no coastline as magnificent, with its pockmarked limestone cliffs, steep green slopes and terraces of lemon groves and vineyards, all overlooking the infinite blue waters where the Bay of Naples flows into the Mediterranean's Tyrrhenian Sea.

I came to Italy with Explore Worldwide, a travel company based in the U.K. that offers hiking, cycling and tourism holidays for small groups. Our six-day itinerary, billed as leisurely to moderate, would take a group of 16 on five- to 10-kilometre walks along hiking trails that crossed high hilltops and wandered through forests, or descents that navigated long flights of stone steps leading into bustling tourist towns.



Hiking the Amalfi Coast offers stunning views.

EXPLORE WORLDWIDE/SUPPLIED

On the isle of Capri, we pushed past the crowds checking out the souvenir shops and the luxury boutiques to walk the six-kilometre Pizzolungo. It took us around Capri for a view from above of the boats circling the famed Faraglioni, a dramatic trio of rocks jutting out of the sea at the southeastern tip of the island.

On a day off from hiking, we travelled to Herculaneum and Pompeii, two archeological parks featuring well-preserved remains of ancient Rome. When Vesuvius erupted in 79 A.D. it showered ash and pumice stone on Herculaneum, smothering the town so rapidly it preserved the second storeys of shops and houses. That site covers the equivalent of a few city blocks – three-quarters of it is still buried under the contemporary city that has been built on top of it.

Pompeii is a much larger site – 66 hectares, of which about two-thirds has been excavated – including villas, smaller houses and shops, an arena and a theatre, many of these featuring original mosaics and frescoes. It would take several days to see it all, but our tour gave us the highlights, including a section just opened in 2024 where visitors use a catwalk to observe excavations of the House of the Chaste Lovers going on below. During our visit, we were interested in seeing a restorer painstakingly clean one tiny section of a fresco. Meanwhile, next door, a bulldozer was at work on the initial stage of an excavation, moving soil out of the way before the finer work begins.



Ancient ruins in Pompeii, the Roman city near modern Naples destroyed and buried under volcanic ash during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD.

LARISA SHPINEVA/ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

The highpoint of our trip was the Path of the Gods, so named because of connections to Greek mythology, and the winged sirens that were said to lure sailors to their deaths. Starting at Bomerano, it passes underneath high cliffs, climbing 330 metres to provide unparalleled views of the coast before descending 1,700 stone steps (and 900 metres) to Positano.

The town was once a quaint fishing village, too picturesque for its own good: It is now an international tourist destination, packed with people shuffling along streets filled with shops selling gelato, ceramics and anything on a lemon theme. We had walked 10 minutes out of town to join our bus – the town centre is a pedestrian zone and parking at its edges would be impossible – before I finally spotted a business selling something locals might need: a hardware store.



The Path of the Gods stretches from Positano (pictured) to Bomerano.

EXPLORE WORLDWIDE/SUPPLIED

Italy suffers from overtourism. The town centres of Positano, Capri and Amalfi are all spoiled by the crush of people on the streets, although this doesn't seem to bother the residents: Italian is notoriously the language with no word for privacy.

What to do? One partial solution is an agriturismo, a B&B set on a small farm that offers simple accommodation and a taste of local production, including wine, tomatoes and mozzarella. The concept dates to the 20th century and was launched in an attempt to halt the rural depopulation that took hold in the 1950s, but today it helps spread some of the tourists, and their money, around.

We stayed in San Lazzaro, a small town perched above Amalfi where locals and hikers can enjoy a coffee or a beer side by side in one of several bars and cafés. Our inn was the Luna d'Agerola Agriturismo which offered cheerful rooms with private bathrooms, home-cooked meals eaten communally at long tables, and a pasta and mozzarella-making demonstration.

Explore's guides were also adept at beating the crowds. We entered Pompeii at the third and quietest gate; on Capri we hiked out to the Villa Lysis, once the property of a dissolute French count, now a largely empty house with a beautiful garden and a vista across the water back toward Sorrento. Visitors urged each other not to miss the basement where Count Jacques Fersen had installed his own opium den after he fled sex charges in Paris to settle in Capri in 1904.



A footpath from Atrani to Villa Cimbrone in Ravello.

JIMFENG/GETTY IMAGES

In Ravello, a picturesque town that is slightly less busy, we walked for about 10 minutes to the Villa Cimbrone, once the haunt of the Bloomsbury Group artists, now a luxury hotel where a fine garden is open to the public for €10. You can walk the Avenue of Immensity to the Terrace of Infinity with its view of nothing but sparkling blue water all the way to the horizon.

As is so often the case in a busy tourist centre, a walk of a mere 15 minutes can get you well away from the crowds.

And we hikers, a congenial group of British, Australian and Canadian travellers, were eager to walk much farther than that, whether along beaten paths or down stone steps. The steps, and steep alleyways intended only for pedestrians and the occasional delivery cart, replace what would be streets in flatter towns. Many in our group used hiking poles to spare the knees; some also brought along bathing suits, ending hot walks with a plunge in the Mediterranean from one of the narrow beaches with dark sand that are typical of the area.

Others figured a gelato or cool beer was the best way to end the day before returning to the inn for dinners of pasta, chicken and fish, or striking out into San Lazzaro to try the pizza at the three-star, family-run Hotel Risorgimento. Its dough is made using a starter fermented from water, honey and apple skin, according to a 100-year-old family recipe.

The hotel's dining room looks out over the Tyrrhenian Sea, and some of our group made sure to return there for a sunset dinner one night. We enjoyed our pizza and pasta while a flaming orange ball descended into the seemingly infinite waters of the Mediterranean – without a single boat nor human in sight.



The Pizzolungo trail is a six-kilometre hike that wraps around Capri.

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## **If you go**

The Amalfi Coast is spectacularly beautiful – and spectacularly busy. The best times for hiking are fall and spring.

Consider staying at an agriturismo outside the main centres. There are several in San Lazzaro. Bomerano, the starting point for the Path of the Gods, is a more relaxed hiking centre rather than a tourist town.

Explore's Amalfi Coast agriturismo walking tour starts with a pick-up at Naples airport, with most meals and all transfers between towns included. The groups are led by licensed guides, and walk together. The eight-day tour starts at \$2,620, flights not included. [exploreworldwide.ca](http://exploreworldwide.ca)

In May, Air Canada begins direct flights to Naples, four times a week from Montreal. Visitors flying into Rome will find regular train service to Naples.

*The writer was a guest of Explore Worldwide, which did not review or approve this article. Stories are based on merit; The Globe does not guarantee coverage.*

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