

ITALIAN LOVE AFFAIR

“You may have the universe if I may have Italy,” – Giuseppe Verdi.



These are no doubt the words of a true Italian patriot. After all, there's nothing more quintessentially Italian than a Verdi opera, especially if performed in front of a rambunctious crowd at the Rome Opera where the audience is known for its vociferous appreciation... or otherwise. We've heard hisses and even boos when the tenor misses his top A.

But it's in Naples, just over an hour south of Rome by express train, that the true flavour of Italy can be seen, felt and heard in all its glory. And, we might add, tasted. For earthy Neapolitan cuisine captures the soul of the city and its pizzerias are arguably the yardstick by which all pizza places around the world are measured. We've known people who have included Naples in their itinerary just to indulge in the legendary *Pizza Napolitana*.

There's no doubt that Naples gets a mixed press. It would be too easy to read some reviews and reschedule your trip to bypass the city and head straight for the Amalfi Coast, Pompeii or indeed anywhere else. Reports of pickpockets, Mafia, littered streets, dodgy vendors and taxi touts are not unknown. Conversely, you'll find rave reviews of the food, the history, the palaces and monuments, the museums and churches... and the people. For the Neapolitans, life is to be lived to the fullest. And you're invited to go along for the ride.

And what a ride it is! Arriving from Rome we hailed a taxi big enough for three, with luggage. Yes, there's a meter, which will be conveniently ignored. After a helter, skelter 20-minutes up narrow winding streets we're checking in at Grand Hotel Parker's, one of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World. It's a civilised, genuine welcome



to a sanctuary that will be our home for the next few days. And the concierge, Marco, becomes our best friend... he knows everything and everyone.

Now, on the balcony, we begin to understand the contradiction that's the city of Naples. There's the beauty of the harbour, the bay shimmering at dusk, the lights reflecting off low-slung clouds. Closer beneath us, the chaos of the streets, the bee-like buzz of humanity, the senses awakened with culinary anticipation. How could anyone not be in love with this taste of the real Italy, the one we see in movies or read about in a marvellous book called *Naples – A Way Of Love?*

Next morning we're up for a decadent breakfast on the terrace with the sun streaming in, and then it's off downtown to meet Walter, the knowledgeable tour guide whom Marco has arranged for us. The old, historic part of the city teems with life in narrow alleys where scooters come hurtling towards you and veer at the last moment, keeping the adrenalin pumping. There is so much to see and experience that three hours is hardly enough... medieval churches, old palaces, an underground labyrinth, even a museum of purgatory; and to satisfy true believers, rows and rows of stalls selling religious objects and elaborate nativity scenes.

For lunch, we indulge in slabs of cheese and fresh bread from a local deli, eaten on the steps of a cathedral where we watch people and they watch us. It's a favourite Italian pastime, and everyone wants to talk to you, especially if they know you're Australian. Every single person in Naples has relatives in Australia and they all seem to be called Giovanni or Maria. Of course, we know them all.

This is how Naples is for an open-minded tourist. We spend hours roaming the alleys and the squares, following our guide or guide book, grabbing a gelato and taking it all in. But at the end of the day, there's "Parker's" as it's known, and the prospect of a splendid dinner on the terrace, or a takeaway from the nearby *pizzeria*. Washed down, of course, with something very Italian indeed... a complimentary *limoncello*.

Feeling sad to leave at last, we rent a car and head for Pompeii where we spend a day looking at the ruined city so much written about and photographed. It's an experience none should miss, but beware of the rough cobbled streets (heels not advisable) as well as the multitude of touts. The audio guide is your best friend.

Then it's on to the Amalfi Coast, another half-hour away if you drive like an Italian... fast and furious. We turn 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... Positano and Amalfi on the coast, and Ravello high up on the mountainside. They all have loads of charm, but are very different: Positano for trendy boutiques and trattorias specialising in seafood; Amalfi for a busier vibe and nightlife; and Ravello for its uber-cool 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 few days of relaxation in a quieter location and so we return to the village of Praiano near Positano. It has a more of a village feel to it, and some really good restaurants like La Brace, whose pizzas are legendary. There's also a bar/café where the locals congregate in the evening and will happily practise their English with you as you sip a Campari or a *prosecco*.

Thus begin several days of magic. We've found Casa Angelina, another 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 a unique 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 number one 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 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 an act of love by the owner, Signor Cappiello, who bought this property in poor condition, spent a fortune on creating a monument to good taste, and named it after his mother. Italian style and a sense of humour prevail, as seen in the glass sculptures by Mexican artist Sosabravo. The 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 meets Italian cuisine in a very happy marriage.

Naples and Praiano... city and coast, both beautiful in their own way. It's easy to fall in love with either, or both.

Definitely an Italian Love Affair To Remember.

For information visit comune.napoli.it, grandhotelparkers.it, amalfitouristoffice.it, casangelina.com.





THALA BEACH LODGE: STRICTLY FOR THE BIRDS

Phil Hawkes finds a place where tweets are natural.

It's a fair bet that many of us have been to Port Douglas. Probably it's the best Winter destination in Australia. And with good reason.

There's a huge range of accommodation from five-star luxury hotels to apartments and backpacker lodges. Moreover, the food scene is probably the best in Tropical North Queensland, although fine dining comes with Sydney prices, it has to be said. Nothing like a little indulgence once in a while.

Reef trips, the Daintree, Cape Tribulation and Cooktown all beckon for day trips or longer; but at the end, there's always the more sophisticated embrace of "PD" awaiting with its boutiques, craft shops and spas. Plus a couple of lively pubs.

Now, there's more. It's a resort to be found just 15 minutes south of Port Douglas, shielded from the town's activity in a coconut plantation fringing a deserted beach. This is the Thala Beach Nature Reserve, a private eco-friendly lodge with just 83 rooms, which are so secluded that you can hardly believe anyone else is there.

The "rooms" are in fact luxurious bungalows dotted randomly around a headland, with dense vegetation and magnificent trees creating that feeling of isolation. Depending on your choice of room (and price), the views of the Coral Sea or the jungle surroundings from your balcony are the stuff of picture postcards. Owners, the Prettejohn family, are justifiably proud of what they've created from this historic old plantation.

It's a perfect spot to enjoy some down time for a few days, but if you feel like re-engaging with the human race there's a bar/lounge and Ospreys, a casual restaurant with extensive breakfast offerings, plus a "modern Australian" dinner menu created by Chef Catherine Pacey... and a fine wine list to match. No doubt it's one of the finest tables in North Queensland.

The highlight of our stay was undoubtedly the range of onsite nature experiences on offer. First and foremost is the "Bird Tour" with guide David. Armed with binoculars provided by the resort, we're privileged to spot a multitude of feathered varieties, including two ospreys and their chick, nesting at the top of a power pole on the property. We watched in awe as the male returned from the sea

with a large fish to feed the family. Kind of inspiring!

There's also a nature and garden walk guided by Brett and his team, exploring 145 acres of the plantation with a variety of native flora and rare littoral rainforest. And later, a long beach walk was perfect to help digest an indulgent lunch.

Monday nights are notable for the Indigenous culture program with Harold Talley, an elder of the Kuku Yalanji people, helping our understanding of the history of the Mossman region.

Port Douglas has certainly come of age. If you thought it was a top place years ago, it will delight you now. Even better, there are now much cheaper flights from Brisbane since Tigerair started flights to Cairns... there's a daily service at a convenient time around noon, so you don't have to arise with the birds. Wait until you arrive at Thala Beach Nature Reserve for that.

Visit visitportdouglasdaintree.com.au and thalabeach.com.au for more information.

