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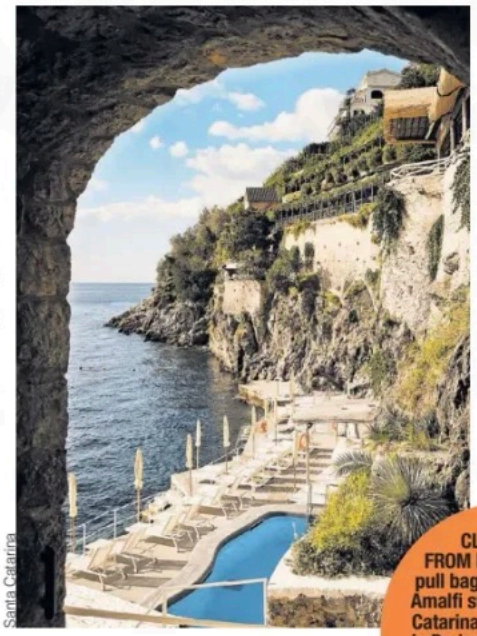
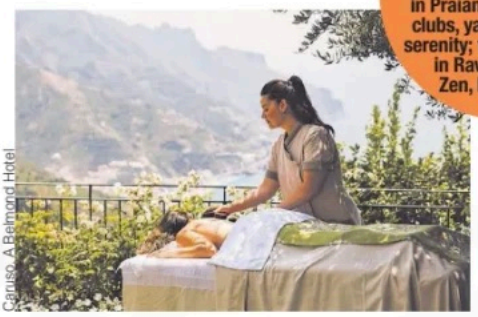


Santa Catarina



Caruso, A Belmond Hotel

Casa Angelina

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Bellhops pull bags from boats at Amalfi swish spot Santa Catarina; Casa Angelina in Praiano has it all, too: clubs, yachts and molta serenity; the Hotel Caruso in Ravello delivers Zen, Italian style.

BOON CAMPANIAN

This versatile Italian coast is the easiest escape for your most complicated friends

By BETH LANDMAN

SWISS Army knife destinations, well-suited for a wide variety of personalities, are nearly mythic. After all, is there really a place on this planet where a fly and flop beach reader can merrily move with an adventure junky, a health obsessive, and a history buff? Consider Campania.

Located just above the boot of the Italian Peninsula on the Tyrrhenian Sea, the region is loaded with a little bit for everybody.

Does someone in your party hate crowds. Do they crave sand? Start at Ischia, a volcanic island accessible by ferry from the capital of Naples. Surrounded by 20 beaches, it's lower key than nearby Capri, and you won't feel shabby in shorts.

History buffs can visit the 16th-century palace, Torre Guevara, and Castello Argonese, a 15th-century fortress. Even those who are not fascinated by the past, can appreciate crossing the stone bridge that connects it to the island and strolling the gardens.

There is lots to love for the spa set here. Ischia is known for its therapeutic and if you check into the Botania Relais hotel — a collection of villas set among lush grounds — you can walk to Negombo, a park filled with healing baths. Much of the food served at the hotel's restaurants is grown on premises, including ancient grain breads ranging from raspberry to turmeric, and vegetarian and vegan dinner plates at Il Mirto.

The sister property, Palazza Manzi, has a full wellness center, with Roman-style thermal pools, Turkish bath and therapies including mud facials, deep tissue massage, joint rebalancing and osteokinesiology.

When you are ready to say goodbye to Ischia, Amalfi is just three hours away. You can hop on a ferry, or make the voyage a highlight of your trip, by choosing a private boat tour. The travel company See Italy, whisks you up the Gulf of Naples, around the Sorrentine Peninsula, and into the Gulf of Salerno, passing Capri and a private island once owned by ballet brilliant Rudolf Nureyev. Your captain can take you into caves and grottos for a swim, or to a spectacular lunch.

If you choose a hotel like Santa Catarina, your boat pulls right up to the dock, where bellmen grab your bags. The pool is carved into cliffs here and after doing laps, the fitness-minded can climb winding stone steps down to the beach and back — a major workout (there is an elevator for the less ambitious). If that's not enough, you can hike the picturesque Path of the Gods, and then head to the spa for a massage with oil and local lemons.

If you can tear yourself away from the hotel, check out the town, filled with shops, cafes, and gelatarias, along with Duomo di Sant'Andrea, a 9th-century church (hello history heads).

Santa Catarina's Michelin-starred Glicine restaurant turns out artistic presentations of wagyu carpaccio with caviar, and pasta with cucumber, avocado and lemon, but if you are looking for a quintessential southern Italian meal, it would be hard to find a better place than Al Mare, also on property, where they serve seafood fresh out of the water, wood-fired pizza, and perfectly al dente pasta. There is also a new dining addition on the roof, Senzafine, that offers a more casual Mediterranean grill and raw bar.

For the ultimate in privacy, Casa Marchesa, just a five minute walk from the main hotel, is a collection of 12 elegantly appointed rooms, with their own stunning saltwater lap pool, solarium and landscaped gardens.

If you are looking for a serene retreat, Casa Angelina in nearby Praiano, has only 36 rooms overlooking Positano and Capri. There are two beach clubs, steps away, and the hotel has three yachts, available to explorers for sunset tours. Wellness seekers will love the spa treatments using products from cult favorite, Augustinus Bader, and the fact that you can choose room amenities from seven different lines of high-end toiletries.

One of the area's most spectacular properties is Hotel Caruso in Ravello, which has just opened Adagio, a botanic-influenced bar, and Il Pantaleone, a restaurant with four distinct tasting menus. The restored 11th-century palace, surrounded by fragrant gardens, also offers pasta and pizza making classes, as well as complimentary daily mini cruises. The infinity pool that makes you feel like you are swimming into the clouds, is legendary, and yoga classes offered there are a Zen experience.

Now take your yoga mat down to the beach, grab a homemade slice and a history book, and somehow everyone is happy.