

The Amalfi Coast on a budget

It has been a magnet for the rich and famous for 50 years, but you don't have to be wealthy to enjoy Italy's most celebrated shoreline. John Brunton has a miser's guide to the millionaires' coast

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Hillside heaven ... The chic Positano resort. Photograph: Corbis

The Amalfi Coast, south of the Bay of Naples, can claim to be Europe's most magnificent stretch of coast. It's not just its breathtaking scenery but also the glamorous resorts hidden away on the spectacular cornice that winds its way past lemon trees, olive groves, vineyards and tiny villages clinging on to jagged cliffs that plunge straight into the sea. Every turn along the Amalfi Coast brings you to another legendary destination, be it Positano, Sorrento, Ravello or Amalfi itself. Virtually cut off from the rest of the world until the mid-19th century, when a road was built linking all the villages along the coast, this unique region was first discovered by the aristocratic Grand Tourists of Europe, who made the Costiera Amalfitana an obligatory stop-off.

Then came artists seeking inspiration, such as composers Wagner and Grieg, painters JMW Turner and Joan Miro, writers and poets including DH Lawrence, Tennessee Williams and Andre Gide. It wasn't long before the film stars arrived too - Greta Garbo, Sophia Loren, Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart - all seeking a perfect hideaway.

Today it remains the ultimate romantic getaway. As a holiday resort of the rich and famous, the Amalfi Coast has a reputation as being ultra-expensive, and

there is certainly no shortage of luxury hotels, Michelin-starred restaurants and exclusive bars where an aperitif will set you back a small fortune. But behind the ritzy facade you'll discover that a holiday here doesn't have to break the bank. Base yourself in a simple hotel or B&B, seek out the excellent and reasonably priced old-fashioned trattorie, and use the brilliant local boats and buses to save a fortune in car parking costs.

Ravello

Ravello sits like an ornate decoration atop a fancy wedding cake in the hills above Amalfi. Every villa has picturesque gardens, and two that are open to the public, Villa Rufolo and Villa Cimbrone, are among the finest in Italy, with perfectly laid-out flower beds, palm trees, sculptures and fountains. Rufolo has a vast terrazza that seems to hang right over the sea far below and is the venue for the renowned concerts of the Music Festival. To secure tickets, book as long as possible in advance. For all its genteel airs, Ravello has a lively street market every Tuesday morning, where you will find wine, fresh mozzarella and olive oil, but also discount designer clothes from Milan.

Where to eat

Ristorante Salvatore

Via della Repubblica 2, Ravello, 0039 089 857227

www.salvatoreravello.com

A far better choice than the touristy places in the centre of Ravello, this excellent restaurant combines a romantic view, smart service and dishes that surprise with both creativity and quality. Try the tender totani squid on a bed of pureed chick peas with a hint of spicy peperoncino. In the evening, part of the Salvatore is transformed into a casual pizzeria and, frankly, you won't taste a better wood-fired pizza anywhere on this coast.

Where to stay

B&B Ilimoni

Via Gradoni 14, San Cosma, 0039 089 858056

www.bb-ilimoni.com

Doubles from €70

Up in the hills above Ravello, this B&B is part of an organic farm producing lemons, olive oil and honey. Its lovely terrace overlooking the sea is the ideal place to try the lethal local after-dinner liqueur, limoncello. Room rates include a hearty breakfast, and the location is ideal for country walks.

