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Reinventing Naples

ITALY'S BEST PIZZA AND ARCHEOLOGICAL RUINS ARE LINKED TO A CITY WITH A FORMIDABLE REPUTATION

writing and photography by DAVID SWANSON

Once upon a time, a young travel writer-to-be exploring Italy, ventured south to Naples with an eye to touring the ruins of Pompeii. But his trusty *Let's Go Europe* guidebook warned of Naples' violent gangs, of social upheaval and crushing poverty. Upon exiting the train station, a quick glance at the chaotic streets encouraged his worst suspicions.

Great Italian cities such as Rome and Venice have seduced travelers centuries over — but Naples? Many a reader would be surprised to find that, although this young writer spent time dabbling in one corner of the boot after another in Naples, he was not pickpocketed, nor found a stench of uncollected garbage. Instead, museums held exquisite archeological relics, eye-filling castles anchored the waterfront and mouth-watering pizza was served everywhere as an essential food group.

These elements were all in place before, of course, but how many other potential visitors have been intimidated by the sordid reputation of Italy's third-largest city?

The Recent History

It wasn't always this way. In the 19th century, Naples (along with London and Paris) was a central axis of the "Grand Tour" made by aristocratic Europeans. Greek, Norman, French, Spanish and Austrian rulers had all left their colonial imprint here. For more than 500 years, the city was the capital of the Kingdom of Naples, but when Italy became unified in 1860, Naples didn't benefit from diminished status.

WWII dealt a harsh blow, with much

of the city's history and culture bombed by the Allies. The Camorra emerged from the rubble to use Naples as a transshipping point for heroin, and in 1980, a devastating earthquake killed 5,000 people. By the time of my first visit, Naples' reputation as a dirty, dangerous city was cemented. Nearby Capri and the Amalfi Coast retained their allure, but most tourists bypassed Naples.

Eventually local movers and shakers began a campaign to save Naples, using the G-7 summit in 1994 attended by President Clinton as a catalyst. Mayor Antonio Bassolino seized the occasion to bolster the number of police, clean up the streets and monuments, and relieve traffic congestion. Although the Camorra still has its fingers in the pie, their influence today

seating ranging from cossetting to abrupt, modern to antique. Guests are coddled with swank rooms equipped with pillow and linen menus, dazzling food (contempo Italian, classical sushi), and a rooftop spa where massages are lubricated by fragrant olive oil from Sorrento, infused with lemon.

The Romeo Hotel allows us to head out into La Bella Napoli revitalized and ready for new impressions. And at first sight, some of the city's old reputation remains intact. Naples still suffers from high unemployment, daunting traffic, and wears the unenviable title as Europe's most densely populated city.

But after a few days, the dominant impression becomes one of topographical flourish. If Florence is Italy's most cultured

a composed residential district boasting broad views.

One detail visitors may not recall from the pizzeria murals is Spaccanapoli — literally, "split Naples" — a narrow, perfectly straight thoroughfare that neatly divides the city in two. Viewed from above, Spaccanapoli looks like an aberrant gash through the heart of the city. From inside, however, it is a microcosm of lines of laundry flying overhead, fruit and vegetable stands, inviting cafés, one-of-a-kind shops, the clip-clip of delicious footwear and churches containing unexpected masterworks.

Although great works of art are not as abundant as in Florence, there are plenty to be found, including the remarkable "Veiled



is substantially reduced and petty crime is less prevalent.

With such societal changes, will Italy's trifecta of must-sees — Venice, Florence, Rome — soon gain a fourth leg?

A New Life

Grupo Romeo, one of Italy's largest property management companies, has forwarded this notion by opening Naples' first true, contemporary hotel, the Romeo, designed by Japanese architect Kenzo Tange. The property is situated alongside the industrious port where, a century ago, so many Italian-Americans-to-be began their journey to a new continent. But inside, the Romeo imposes order and calm, its lobby enhanced by commissioned art, counters of shattered impact glass, and designer

city, Venice the most exotic and Rome the most monumental, then Naples is perhaps the country's most beautifully situated landing.

The operatic backdrop was certainly familiar — it's the same one immortalized in murals adorning the walls of many a pizzerias in the U.S. Positioned at the north end of the sweeping Bay of Naples, the cityscape drapes over a series of pronounced hills. Vesuvius, the volcano that enveloped Pompeii in ash in AD 79, dominates the panorama to the east, while the spunky profile of Capri floats in the bay, just south of Naples, almost kissing the promontory of Sorrento. A harbor brimming with ships and ferries sits at the foot of this tableau, which can best be taken in by riding a funicular to a perch in Vomero,



Christ" by Giuseppe Sanmartino, a marble masterpiece hidden away in the Capella di San Severo, now a private museum. Located just off Spaccanapoli on a side street, the "Veiled Christ" is emblematic of a local obstacle: Much of Naples' best art takes a little effort to uncover (a good reason for choosing a hotel with a quality concierge). Several noteworthy Caravaggios live in the city, one of which is improbably sequestered on the second floor of Banco Commerciale Italiana on Via Toledo.

The city's major art horde is found at Capodimonte, one-time Bourbon hunting lodge, now a crowd-free museum containing works by Michelangelo, Titian and Masaccio. But the real gem — a must for all visitors headed to or from Pompeii — is the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, reputed

as southern Italy's top archeological collection. Most of Pompeii's best paintings and exquisite tilework are found here, rather than at the once-buried city.

Also worth discovering is the Museum of Contemporary Art Donnaregina, the city's five-year-old trove of modern pieces, by artists ranging from Warhol and Schnabel to contemporary Italians.

Classic Food

If food is an art form, then Naples' medium is pizza. The pie was invented here, or (depending on whom you talk to) adapted from the Greeks who cooked unleavened flat bread when they established the city in 500 BC. Still, tomatoes didn't reach Italy until the 16th century, and the creation wasn't ready for prime time until 1889, when Queen Margherita of Savoy praised the tomato, basil and mozzarella pizza prepared

by Raffaello Esposito as her favorite. Hence, a classic was born.

Today, Neapolitans proudly lay claim to the world's best pizza, and there are very specific qualifications: The crust is neither doughy-thick nor crispy-thin, but with a texture that is moist and steaming inside with a blistered rim that flakes when a piece is folded, the way Neapolitans handle pizza.

A formal pilgrimage to locate the best pizza is in order, and everyone is happy to advocate for their favorite. Elizabeth Gilbert devoted a memorable passage in her bestselling novel, *Eat, Pray, Love*, to 140-year-old Pizzeria da Michele a Forcella (with Julia Roberts at the table, the movie adaptation was filmed here last fall).

No expert opinion here, but the pies spilling from the plates at Pizzeria Gino Sorbillo were splendid. The 75-year-old restaurant serves the classics, plus

Esterina Sorbillo's crew of 21 sons oversees 21 different pizzas of their own: Choose Raimondo's for a topping of ham, smoked mozzarella and rocket; or Gennaro's for ham, corn, basil and cream.

Of course, the food of Naples is more than pizza. The seafood — mussels, cuttlefish and octopus are the marquee stars — often rivals that of Venice.

Naples Today

Between the cuisine and the ambience on the streets, if there's a unifying theme to Naples it's the unpretentious feeling that permeates the air. A far cry from the rough-hewn reputation the city once wallowed in, today's Naples is welcoming, and happy to surprise its visitors with a vital and vibrant slice of southern Italy — one worthy of the accolades usually reserved for Rome, Venice and Florence.



Stay

The Romeo Hotel offers exemplary food, a world-class spa and a rooftop infinity pool with Vesuvian views. Use the Romeo as a base for exploring the entire Bay of Naples.

romeohotel.it

Visit

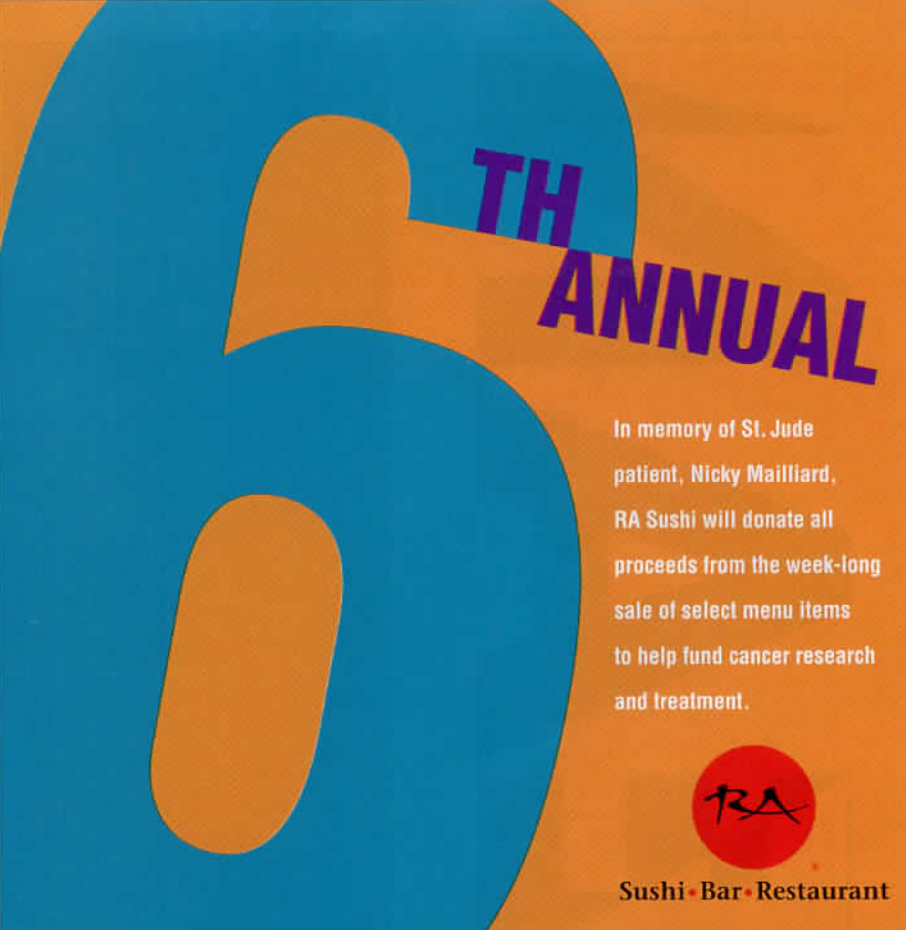
Pompeii | One of the world's great archeological sites, a "living" museum created by the catastrophic eruption of Vesuvius. The effort to uncover the ruins began in the 19th century, yet every year new areas are opened to the public. Pompeii is located 11 miles south of Naples, reached easily via the Circumvesuviana railway (but watch your belongings).

Erculaneum | The sister site to Pompeii, this smaller city was buried in seething mud during the same volcanic eruption, allowing many buildings — even furniture and wooden balconies — to survive relatively intact. Easily combined with a visit to Pompeii as a day trip. Vesuvius, the graceful, 4,203-foot volcano that slumbers in the backdrop, is reachable via a bus from Naples, which goes to a small parking lot 900 feet below the summit. From here, a trail snakes 30 minutes to the crater rim, which last saw activity in 1944.

Palazzo Reale | Twenty miles north of Naples in the town of Caserta is the "Versailles of Italy." Be dazzled by the scope and beauty of this 1,200-room royal palace of Charles of Bourbon, replete with spectacular gardens and elaborate fountain system. Easily reached by train.


Massa Lubrense | Sequestered between Sorrento and the Amalfi coast, and once the home of mythical sirens, this quiet town is a delightful escape from the frantic city. Mountain walks reveal hillsides covered in olive and citrus trees; sample fine olive oils and lemoncellos made by local families. Take the Circumvesuviana train to Sorrento, a taxi to Massa Lubrense.

Sorrento, the Amalfi coast, Paestum, Ravello, Ischia and Capri — all are reached within an hour from Naples by train, car and ferry (respectively).




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