



Clockwise from top left: the sleeper to Naples; picturesque Procida; squid fisherman in Procida; Murals in Naples



Get packing

Go Return fares from London to Naples start at £283 in standard class with accommodation in a three-berth sleeper, rising to £471.50 for a single-sleeper compartment.
www.raileurope.co.uk

Package Do the Amalfi coast bike-and-boat tour with Freedom Treks, from £1,150 per person (based on two people sharing) for seven nights on a boat, including bike hire, Italian/English-speaking guides, maps, port and harbour fees for five nights.
www.freedomtreks.co.uk

If you make your own way to Italy, book through local tour firm Verde Natura. Call +39 059 680 035 or visit www.verde-natura.com.

Read Get Time Out's 'Italy: Perfect Places to Stay, Eat & Explore', available online (www.timeout.com/shop) at £11.99 (RRP £14.99).



guide revealed plenty about Pompeian society, and though most of the artefacts (mosaics, cooking utensils and a collection of 'sexually explicit finds') are now housed in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples, there was still plenty to see – including heartbreaking casts of the victims, bent and cowering as they tried to protect themselves from the cloud of burning pumice after the eruption of Vesuvius in AD79.

The ride from Sorrento to Cetara (21 miles) was one of the toughest, the initial part involving five horrifyingly steep ascents; then it was hard going as we quickly climbed to 310 metres above sea level. But even on this stretch, the effort was repaid tenfold. The winding roads cut into cliffs that plunges straight down into the clear turquoise sea – and in spite of the seeming impossibility of building here, the route is punctuated by pretty villages clinging to craggy outcrops. It's a photo opp at every turn, at least once you catch your breath.

In the tenth century, the city of Amalfi was the capital of a powerful duchy and was a trading hub – these days its highlights are the paper museum, its spectacular duomo and the Pansa chocolate shop. Only the mad keen did the extremely steep climb up that came next; the rest of us took the bus and alighted at Villa Rufolo (the inspiration for the garden in Wagner's 'Parsifal') before visiting its duomo where the blood of St Pantaleone, contained in

reliquaries, is said to miraculously re-liquify each year. Cetara was my favourite stop – an authentic working fishing community, where sun-wrinkled fishermen bring in their catches of anchovies and tuna and, as the sun goes down, sit mending nets or repairing boats.

The bikes allowed us to cover quite a distance and at the same time gave us the freedom to stop whenever we liked – to take pictures, pick up fresh fruit from roadside stalls or just rest a while. And, as if the days weren't varied enough, there was the sea as well: we got out of the saddle to sail to the islands of Capri, Ischia and Procida, and the journeys there gave us a chance to kick back, have a shower, read, sunbathe on deck and take in the coastline from the sea.

One of the most satisfying aspects of the trip was looking back at the last hill we'd climbed, or, once at sea, marvelling at how much of the coast we'd cycled along. Coming into port was always an event, drawing crowds who were impressed by our beautiful boat. In Capri, the harbourmaster even brought a bottle of bubbly to welcome us. Then there was the food, cooked on board by chefs Tania and Betul, who served up incredible three-course meals every night.

Crews vary, but on all trips the captain is responsible for assessing the weather and deciding if it's safe to set sail for the islands, or should the boat stay in port? We were lucky

the weather didn't upset our plans, but Alex was ready for any eventuality. On the one night conditions took a turn for the worse, the boat heaved but I eventually fell asleep to the sound of creaking timbers and slapping waves.

On day six, we lunched on Ischia's San Francesco beach, cycled up to a high point and freewheeled all the way down to the picturesque port of Sant'Angelo for a beer and some fried fish. It was our last day of cycling, and, in spite of my initial reservations about a 'holiday' where I'd be cycling most days, I felt sorry it was all over. To cure my sadness, I booked another lunch in Naples. This time, I headed up to the eighth floor of the Romeo Hotel to the new rooftop Beluga SkyBar, where I had a feather-light, pan-fried panzotti filled with ricotta and salami, and my final spaghetti with clams (brought up to date with some additional courgette and a hint of chilli). It definitely raised my spirits.

On the train home, I shared my cabin with a couple of friendly Italian ladies, and in spite of the elder *signora's* snoring, I slept like a top. The next morning, we had coffee together and congratulated ourselves on having 'let the train take the strain'. As a way of gradually immersing yourself in a trip, I couldn't recommend it highly enough. And train travel is just so much more fun – I'm already planning how to combine it with my next cycling trip.

What's it all about, Amalfi?

Our top five tips...

On the overnight train, breakfast is included, but remember to **take something to eat and drink**.

My cycling trip was ranked as not very demanding, but even though it was only 120km in total, **the hills were very challenging in places**.

Buy (or borrow) the **best pair of shorts you can afford**, with plenty of padding.

Don't wear underwear when cycling! The extra material causes chafing.

Don't overpack. One advantage of train travel is all the stuff you can bring back at no extra cost: bottles of wine, jars of anchovies, cheeses...

