

Client: Romeo Hotel
Source: The Times
Date: 2 November 2019



THE TIMES Saturday November 2 2019

Travel 41

A weekend in... Naples

It's raining buckets, or *piove a secchiate*, as they say in Naples — and it continues all weekend. No matter. Elena and Lila, the resilient characters in Elena Ferrante's bestselling Neapolitan novels who stand up to the Solaras mafiosi, wouldn't be floored by a shower. Armed with enormous umbrellas, we head out to find the Naples described in minute geographical detail in *My Brilliant Friend*, the first novel in the series about the friendship between two poor, clever girls in 1950s Napoli.

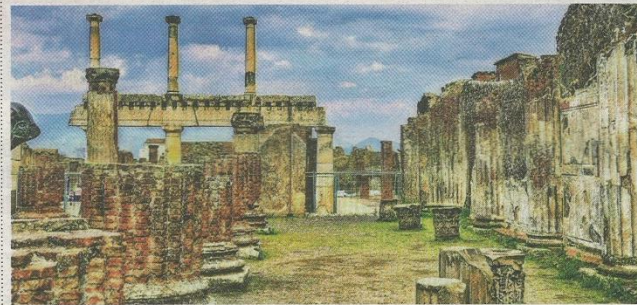
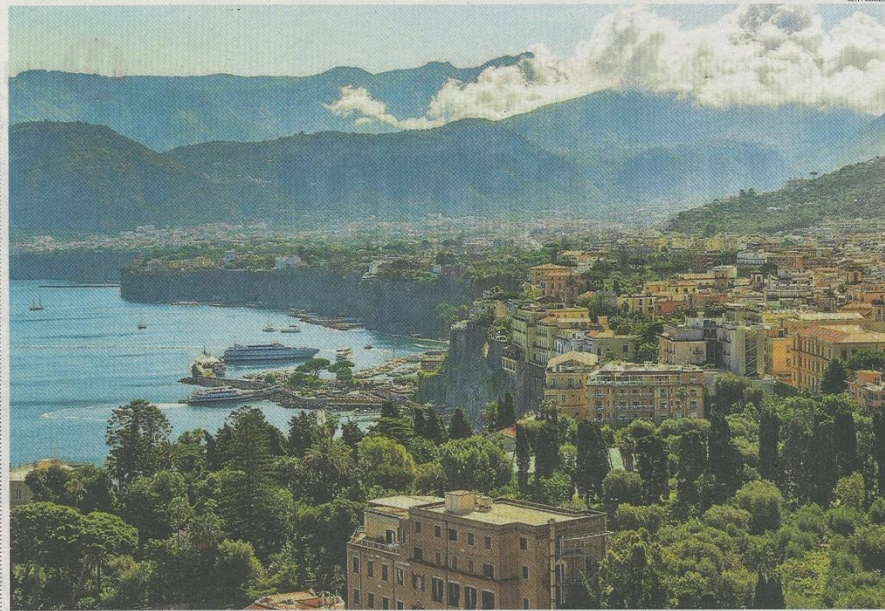
Ferrante may not have done for Naples what Peter Mayle did for Provence (phew!), but, thanks in part to her novels, the southern Italian city is becoming a favourite destination for literature-loving mini-break enthusiasts.

Last year the television adaptation of the first book, shown on Sky Atlantic and mostly shot in the more scenic town of Caserta, north of the city, further whetted our appetites. A second series is on its way. Now, as if we needed it, there's another reason to visit. Ferrante is publishing her new novel, *The Lying Life of Adults*, on Thursday in Italy, with an English translation out on June 9. Tantalisingly, the first paragraph has been released, and Naples — a character in its own right in her books — remains the setting. It begins: "Two years before leaving home my father said to my mother that I was very ugly." So far, so Ferrante.

Back in the city, if the Italian clouds bring rain, Sophia Seymour, who makes documentaries and runs Ferrante walking tours, provides the sunshine. She scoops us up from Romeo hotel, the luxurious (if rather odd), modern Japanese-themed hotel in a former shipping office, with astonishing views of the Bay of Naples, Vesuvius and Port Santa Lucia (from where in the book Elena caught a boat to the island of Ischia in the summer). We piled into a taxi heading to Rione Luzzatti, the working-class neighbourhood east of the central station that inspired the books. Seymour is a Brit who has lived in the city for more than a decade; her big personality, fluent Italian, and love of Ferrante and the city made her the perfect wet-weather friend. We stop on Via Taddeo da Sessa — the *stradone* in the books. We are surrounded by the old — four-storey fascist-era housing blocks — and the new — enormous Chinese warehouses where cheap goods are stored and sold to be transported around Europe. The factory-made shoes we see for sale are not a patch on Lila's bespoke creations in the novels. We coo at the library, still open, supposedly the same one that fed disciplined Lenu the literature that became, with her teacher's help, her ticket to Rome, leaving her friend Lila behind.

We close our umbrellas to walk through the famous tunnel in the novels. We chat about the relationship between the mafia, the more recent Chinese immigrants to this area and the African refugees who have a tough time making the city their home thanks to ruthless landlords. The tunnel is the gateway to the neighbourhood and, in *My Brilliant Friend*, the girls' escape route when they bunk off school to see the sea — with disastrous consequences.

Despite the grey skies and our soggy feet, as we come out the other side the area feels less downtrodden than we imagined. One writer I met on our trip told me that the word "gritty" was added to her



copy after she had filed an article about this area because the need for it to be working-class and run-down is so great. In fact, sorry romantics, it's rather respectable and well kept.

Seymour takes us to the basement Pasticcio bakery (Via Vesuvio 3C) that has been attracting folk to the neighbourhood for years. It is famous for *pagnattello*, a Neapolitan street snack made from eggs, ham and cheese, baked in bread. Signor Spagnuolo, Gigliola's father, would have baked these as a picnic lunch for workmen at the central station. We step down into the shop and sample the fresh bakes; they are delicious and warming.

At the hardware store, Seymour catches up on local news and translates so that we feel included. At the vegetable stand in the street near by, she greets the seller as she might an old friend, and points out the bitter green (*friariello*): a Roman broccolini-like speciality grown on the slopes of Vesuvius that the Ferrante friends might have munched in their cramped apartments. She takes us through a park to a block of flats with grates in the floor that look down into basements, similar to where Lila threw Elena's doll, Tina, to her friend's distress. I peer down into the black, close my eyes and imagine the girls'

Main: Bay of Naples. Above: Pompeii

fear that the terrifying Don Achille is down there.

Seymour tries to make contact with an Italian friend, Maurizio, who claims to know, really know, "Ferrante" — who writes anonymously — from "his" time in these parts. He's tied up, but we leave feeling honoured to have had such a personal tour. Before we say our goodbyes, Seymour

recommends a classic restaurant, Taverna dell'Arte (Rampe San Giovanni Maggiore) and books us in. It is the culinary highlight of our trip. We eat fava beans and chicory, and sliced beef with black truffles, accompanied by delicious local house wine.

Our hotel is well placed for trips to Pompeii and Herculaneum, but we have been there, done that on previous trips, so save the second day of our short weekend for the refurbished Museo di Capodimonte (Via Miano 2), a grand Bourbon palazzo heaving with Neapolitan paintings. We ogle works by Giotto, Caravaggio, Mantegna, Titian, Bellini and Vasari, and walk the glorious gardens, which are certainly getting a good drink. The place is particularly known for its displays of porcelain and majolica; a workshop where tiles are made still exists in the grounds.

We return to the Romeo hotel for an exquisite feast of many tiny, elegantly presented Italian dishes — food sized for Tina the doll, perhaps — at Il Comandante, the Michelin-starred restaurant on the tenth floor. The rain keeps coming, but we have the history of Neapolitan art in our heads, Ferrante's streaks in our hearts and we can see the brilliant lights on the other side of the bay. We plot a sequel.

Alex O'Connell

Need to know

Alex O'Connell was a guest of Original Travel (020 3582 4990, originaltravel.co.uk), which has a four-night trip to Naples and the Amalfi Coast from £2,665pp, including flights, transfers and a private guided tour of Naples and Pompeii. Sophia Seymour is available for tours through lookingforlila.com

Budget hotel



The Bellini House is a quirky B&B with seven rooms near Piazza Dante, on Piazza Bellini, in the heart of old Naples. The breakfasts are excellent and the location is handy for museums and galleries. There is a cool kitchen-bar area with sofas and works by emerging local artists. Rooms cost from £74 a night (houseinnaples.it)

Luxury hotel



Romeo is a modern hotel that has spectacular views of the Bay of Naples and the Port of Santa Lucia and, if you like contemporary art and bamboo-look walls, you'll be at home. There is also a rooftop pool where you can look out to Vesuvius, a spa and the Michelin-starred restaurant Il Comandante. Rooms cost from £350 a night (romeohotel.it)