

CIAO SORRENTO, ITALY 2010

Friday 16th July

I'm not entirely sure why Sorrento was chosen as a holiday destination by Alan, his brother Douglas and me back in dark, freezing January – except perhaps for the lure of visiting Pompeii, which is a very valid and really rather wonderful reason all by itself. I was vaguely aware of the song *Come back to Sorrento*, but it meant little. About two weeks before we flew, however, I found out we would be able to travel along the famous Amalfi coast road and we could walk to the top of Mount Vesuvius. Things were looking up. It was just a pity we had to go up in a 737 for 2 hours and 35 minutes, from Bristol airport to Naples. One day I might just seek out some kind of therapy for my abiding and intensely annoying fear of flying.

The flight turned out to be smooth, but as I stepped euphorically off the plane at Naples airport, I was reminded of opening a fan oven door – one that was actually on. We were then taken by airport bus to a building that seemed to have once been an aircraft hangar, where our passports were looked at very perfunctorily. The good news was that the hangar had huge cooling fans in the ceiling, but the bad news was that the air they cooled hardly reached the tired, hot, incoming passengers standing underneath them, waiting for their cases. Bright, cheery decorative suns hung from the ceiling, adding to the impression that we had arrived at a very hot place. This made Douglas immensely happy, but most other people stood around uncomfortably, waving anything they could find in front of their faces in an attempt to cool down. **Condescending tip number one** is to buy some bottled water at your home airport.

Having failed to buy any bottled water at our home airport, I ate a couple of fruit pastilles to keep myself alive, wilting pathetically as the conveyor belt failed to convey any cases for what seemed like hours. A lone luggage label, obviously from a previous flight's case, was forlornly appearing in front of us at regular intervals. The third time it passed before us, Douglas had a Lionel Richie moment and sang, "Once, twice, three times a label..." I must have been in quite a weakened condition, as it made me laugh out loud.

Everyone was eventually reunited with their luggage and we were herded outside to where the holiday reps, coaches and minibuses were waiting to take people to their hotels. It was such a relief to be sitting in the air-conditioned coach, adjusting our watches to an hour forward and looking out at densely populated Naples (Napoli). One of the first sights the rep pointed out was Mount Vesuvius (Vesuvio) rising on our left above the urban sprawl through which we were passing. Apparently 3,000,000 people live in the red danger zone – are they mad?



Vesuvio slumbering dangerously close to Napoli

Eurovision song contest type music from the radio aided us on our way and the drive was punctuated by the sound of horns from many vehicles, including our own coach. The rep told us that earlier in the day the temperature had reached 36 degrees C, but was now a mere 33C! She pointed out the chain of mountains in the distance, called the Milky Mountains because they are limestone. The famous Buffalo Mozzarella cheese originates from this area – in about 600 AD, water buffalo from India were imported into the Campania region of Italy and it was discovered that their milk produces the famously unique white cheese product.

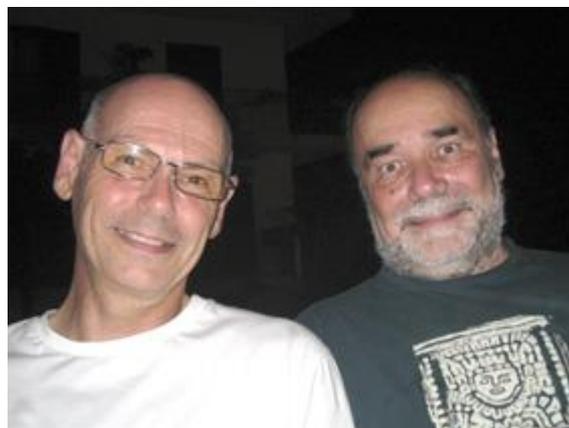
It was about an hour's ride through Napoli, through a couple of tunnels and then out into the Sorrento area. We'd travelled in a great horseshoe around the Bay of Naples and Vesuvio was now on our right. It was quite a surprise to see that Sorrento is situated on top of cliffs with a sheer drop to the sea – which is picturesque, but means it's a bit of a haul up and down the cliff to the harbour.

Sorrento apparently comprises four towns – Seiano, Meta, Piano and St Agnello. As we approached our holiday area, we saw several interesting sights, including a castle next to the sea, a palm tree that was planted on a very small island in the sea at around mid May to indicate the beaches are open and the island of Capri in the distance.

The coach started to deposit people at their hotels, with ours being the third drop-off at Hotel Florida. The young man at the desk spoke English fairly well and told us food had been left for us in the dining room, as dinner had finished at 20.30 and it was now just after that time. It was a very welcome cold platter of salad, pasta, two types of cheese and some Parma ham (which non-meat-eating Alan and I sadly left) complete with rolls, a lovely big juicy peach and some bottled water. It certainly hit the spot, which before we ate had become very empty.

When we went to our rooms, though, there was no air conditioning and the sweat immediately began to trickle. Our room was above the pool and bar, where some noisy people were being ... noisy, especially one shrieky woman. However, when we went down to the pool-bar area and tried the Tuborg beer, it was very pleasant sitting out in the balmy evening air under a large sun umbrella, with lemon trees above us. There was a festival somewhere quite close and fireworks enlivened the evening with flashes and bangs.

Exhaustion finally overcame us and so it was to bed. Alan had asked about air conditioning and was under the impression that it would be coming on soon, but it never did. I thus spent the first night in Sorrento feeling as if I could hardly breathe properly because of the suffocating heat and trying to cool myself on various body parts with a damp flannel. **Condescending tip number two** is to sort out your hotel's air conditioning before your first night!



Two sinister faces loom out of the dark Sorrento evening

Saturday 17th July

Day 2 – after a bit of a short night. The noise from outside in the pool area and beyond was very loud until very late. I heard sirens, motor bikes, dogs, fireworks, people and all that noise combined with the heat was not at all conducive to sleep. Alan said he'd slept for about an hour, when he was plagued by a nightmare concerning our passports that hadn't been given back to us yesterday on checking in. However, at 07.00 we rose and faced the day, as you do. Alan met with success when he requested the return of our passports.

The dining room is quite small, as this is obviously a family run business. There are several hotels close by and they seem to be connected, or else just very friendly with each other. Hotel Florida is pleasant and clean and although breakfast didn't offer a huge choice like the bigger hotels, it suited us well. There was sliced meat, hard boiled eggs, cheese, cereal, yogurt, rolls, toast, fresh fruit, individual sponge cakes in a packet, fruit juice, tea and coffee.

We were due to meet with the rep at 10.30 at the hotel next door. In the meantime, we waited outside in the pool-bar until it was time to move over the road to La Pergola Hotel and sit in their garden for a while. About 25 people had congregated and the rep was very pleasant in a vivacious kind of way. She passed around a small drink that tasted of slightly alcoholic strawberry and proceeded to tell us lots of information about the area and then the tours on offer. She was an ex-teacher and obviously very knowledgeable, so we trusted her when she advised us that the guided tours in air-conditioned coaches were far more enjoyable than the crowded, bumpy, over-intimate local buses. Having viewed Italian driving on our way here from Naples yesterday evening, this made great sense. We thus decided to book for three of the tours: Pompeii and Herculaneum; Mount Vesuvius (Vesuvio); and the Amalfi coast drive.

Feeling quite pleased with ourselves, our next mission was to walk into the town so that Alan could cancel the hire car that had been part of the package offered by Thomas Cook. He'd decided that driving the Italian way would lead to him going home feeling twice as stressed as when he'd arrived. As it happened, the hour or two we spent trying to find the car hire place led to elevated stress levels, not to mention elevated heat levels. It was a 20 minute or so walk into the town along pavements next to very busy roads and in several places the pavements disappeared altogether. The rep had warned us that waiting by a pedestrian crossing for cars to stop like we do in England would result in us being there all day – the scary Italian way is to step off the pavement onto the road and start to cross anyway.

As my 200 ml of sun cream had been confiscated at Bristol airport (it should have been only 100 ml in hand luggage or packed in my suitcase) we stopped at a local pharmacy to buy a replacement at a pricey €15. As Nivea *Latte Solare* Light Feeling, it seems superior to what was confiscated, but **Condescending tip number three** is not to forget about liquid restrictions in hand luggage, so as not to be forced to buy pricey items at your destination!

We drank plenty of water as we walked along to find the train station, which was where the Plymouth travel agent had advised us we would find the car hire place nearby. She was wrong. We eventually found the station right in the town, realised it was wrong, backtracked, became very hot and tired (well, I did) and still couldn't find it. Alan asked a couple of people and became somewhat anxious, so it was a great relief when he eventually found it further out of Sorrento beyond our hotel. During our pavement (or not, as the case may be) pounding, I was amused to see a car that had a wing mirror stuck on with Sellotape. I would have taken a photo, but the car's swarthy middle-aged owner was lurking nearby.

We then retraced our steps back into the train station and on into the town centre, stopping as soon as we could to sit down and drink something wonderfully cold – *granite di limone* for Alan and me and peach iced tea for Douglas. It felt like a life saver. Upon sighting a fruit shop, Alan bought three bananas, which we consumed in the shade near the *Banco di Napoli*.



Alan with his *granite di limone* on the left and Douglas with his banana on the right!

Feeling slightly more vitalised, we continued walking until we reached Piazza Tasso, where we stood on a walkway and took photos of the road way down below us that leads to the Marina Piccola and the harbour. Walking even further brought us to the old part of Sorrento, which seemed more interesting and picturesque than newer Sorrento. The rep had told us there was a festival taking place this weekend – the Festa di Madonna del Carmine. We're in RC country again, noticeable by the amount of churches, roadside shrines and the ubiquitous religious icons suddenly encountered in odd places.

We followed our noses down narrow alleyways until we found ourselves in a small garden with a few flowering bushes and palm trees near the Hotel Continental, where there was a great view of Vesuvio in the distance – I still couldn't get over the fact that I was gazing at a live volcano – not to mention the fact that so many people lived their lives around it so casually as if it was never going to erupt ever again! There was a seat in the shade for Alan and me, while the sun worshipper (aka Douglas) sat in the sun.



Alan photographs Vesuvio in the misty distance

After resting and gazing for a while, we walked down some steep, narrow alleyways to have a closer look at Grand Harbour, although to be honest it didn't seem especially grand. It was very interesting, though, absolutely full of colour and people enjoying the afternoon. However, the need for sustenance was surfacing again, so we retraced our steps to old Sorrento and bought our first Italian ice cream of the holiday – I chose hard core chocolate, as survival levels were waning. Despite drinking lots of water, I had developed a headache that refused to disappear, although the ice cream helped. The heat was indescribable, it must easily have been in the mid 30s.

We continued walking in an attempt to find where we could buy tickets for boat trips, but this proved unsuccessful. We did, however, chance upon the Foreigners' Club, in which the highly recommended American Bar was to be found. Tourist Information was just inside the entrance, but was unfortunately closed for the weekend. By this time (around 16.30) I was having real trouble with the heat and was afraid of succumbing to heat exhaustion, so we made our way back to the hotel.

It was somewhat unpleasant walking along hot, trafficky roads feeling as if I might drop on the spot underneath a crazy Italian vehicle driven by a mad, Italian motorist. Even Alan said he was really tired and had a couple of very red places on his legs, despite having twice applied some of the extortionate Factor 50 *Latte Solare* Light Feeling. Sun mad Douglas (or possibly just mad Douglas) said the heat doesn't affect him, so all I can say is that he must have asbestos impregnated skin!

Back at the hotel, we sat at the pool-bar sipping Tuborg until dinner time at 18.45. The food was worth waiting for, with some wonderful home made tomato soup (Alan and Douglas had pasta) for starters; the local speciality of Caprese salad with cubed fried potatoes for main course; and some more ice cream for dessert – this was chosen for its coldness over tiramisu or a chocolate mousse, as I still felt very hot sitting in the dining room. Chilled water also helped, even though we had to pay extra for it.



Lemon trees by the hotel's pool-bar

After this, we were due to meet the rep at La Pergola Hotel to pay for our booked tours and receive the relevant paperwork. She was running late, so we sat and drank tea/coffee. Douglas wanted to go and sit at the pool-bar and have another beer, but I couldn't face it, as my energy levels were screaming at me for some peace and quiet – which seems suspiciously like an oxymoron.

Alan joined Douglas for a drink, while I resorted to drugs for my headache and stood under the shower to cool down blissfully but temporarily, as the bedroom was as hot as ever. Earlier in the day, Alan had ascertained from the man at reception that to have air conditioning we must pay €7 per day. We paid! By 23.20 it had failed to come on, so Alan went downstairs to ask, beg, become hysterical, bargain, blackmail – whatever it took to get some conditioned air. He came back to bed as the miracle finally happened and we thankfully slipped into sleep...

At La Pergola Hotel:

Alan: We've been here a fair old time.

Doug: Ah, Egyptian time.

Alan: What?

Doug: Pharaoh time.

Sunday 18th July

Day 3 – in which the alarm woke us at 06.00, feeling a little cold in the air-conditioned room! The three of us were first to arrive at breakfast, where I was amused to see the remaining tiramisu and chocolate mousses from last night's dinner alongside the usual breakfast fare. There were no bananas on offer, but I secreted an apple about my person, to put in my bag for later in the day when heat and the will to live would no doubt vie with each other.

Unfortunately, the apple didn't fit in my bag with the insect repellent, Factor 50 *Latte Solare* Light Feeling, camera and two bottles of water, but there you go – and there we went as soon as we were ready, walking the short distance to meet the coach. As we stood expectantly against the wall in the already hot Sorrento morning, I was pollinated by a large flower that fell from a tree above my head and brushed against my chest, smearing me with its strange, fertile yellow dust. **Condescending tip number four** is to beware of standing underneath strange trees that may drop their flowers on you when you least expect it, pollinating you against your will.

However, the pollen brushed off and the coach arrived on time at 08.25. Our guide was called Christine, a wonderful English lady in her 60s who was quite obviously an archaeologist/historian/ex-teacher, or possibly all three. She was so knowledgeable and had a lovely voice. In fact, I was sure she must be the mother of Carezza Lewis who used to be in *Time Team*.

As we drove along from Sorrento in the direction of Napoli, she plied us with such a good and easily understandable historical background for our first destination of Herculaneum/Ercolano, that I actually took notes, which is no mean feat in a moving coach, particularly in Italy:

The Greeks named Naples in 600 BC – *Neapolis*, where the *nea* means new and the *polis* means town. Herculaneum and Pompeii were both occupied by Greeks – there have been buildings there for 2,500 years (with no cement in the buildings, of course). The Greek God Hercules had a temple in Pompeii and the Greek language was still a live language until the French Occupation in the Middle Ages. Other people also came down from the mountains to the coastal towns of the Bay of Naples in 400 BC, as it was such a lovely place. All of the Bay of Naples is volcanic, but the Sorrentine Coast is limestone.

By 200 BC the Romans had the upper hand in many areas of development, such as making cheaper clay and having access to the best materials from Greece, Turkey and Egypt. However, as a fighting people they had to upkeep their armies at a considerable cost, resulting in high taxes, which in turn led to civil war. From 80 BC to 79 AD there was Roman rule. They wanted amenities in colonial towns such as Herculaneum and Pompeii like they had in their big cities, including amphitheatres for their gladiatorial fights.

Pompeii is south of Vesuvio in a fertile valley and its main industry was market gardening. Rich businessmen also exported paper and woollen garments, as well as fruit. 12 to 13 thousand people (farmers and businessmen) lived in 165 acres. Herculaneum is on the cliff overlooking the Bay of Naples, on lower slopes of the north side of Vesuvio. Facing south, it's drier and warmer and it supported fishermen, tradesmen, shopkeepers and a bit of farming.

In the first century AD, Romans came to stay in the two towns. Nero even married a Pompeian and noble Romans followed suit, so that the area was a thriving place – there were spa developments from the sulphuric springs under the sea that emanated from craters. Thus the Romans were buying property in this popular holiday resort, but there was a divide between locals and rich holidaymakers. No change there, then!

There was a bad earthquake in 62 AD that caused much damage, followed by the devastating eruption in 79 AD. Vesuvio had originally been much higher than it is today - there were vineyards and very steep slopes covered in vegetation. Seismologists believe that 100 years before the eruption, Spartacus may actually have hidden at Vesuvio (and therefore would have needed forests for concealment).

There was no Latin word for volcano and it was believed that earthquakes and eruptions happened because the gods were angry. Pliny the Elder, a naval commander based in Misenum (a town across the bay from Napoli and Herculaneum) ordered some of his ships to be made ready. He took them across the bay and was able to rescue a number of people, but died when he was overcome by ash raining down from the volcano. His nephew, Pliny the Younger, wrote letters to the historian Tacitus that have yielded much interesting information about the previously unrecorded sequence of events of a massive volcanic eruption.

The energy released from the eruption in 79 AD was a hundred thousand times more powerful than the Hiroshima atom bomb and Pompeii was the largest of four towns devastated by the eruption – the other three being Herculaneum, Stabiae and Oplontis. The Pompeians had a choice of whether to try to flee or to seek shelter in buildings, where they must eventually have heard the sound of pumice and ash collecting on the roof until some of the roofs gave way, crushing their inhabitants.

Later, pyroclastic flows of deadly gases and hot rocks hurtled down the side of the volcano, killing everyone in their path. The heat made the sea steam and all the debris from the volcano pushed back the sea for half a mile. Pompeii was left completely buried in ash, while Herculaneum was covered in boiling mud. The solidified mud was very hard to move.

Pompeii remained undiscovered until the late 16th century when some inscriptions were found when a tunnel was being dug to divert the river Sarno. This part of Italy had been a Spanish colony for 200 years, but at the end of the 17th century, the King of Spain had died with no direct heir, resulting in quarrels between other families – the French Bourbons and the Austrian Hapsburgs. The French won the war and Charles of Bourbon, who became King of Naples, began regular excavations of Pompeii in 1748.

Herculaneum was discovered in 1709 by an Austrian prince, who was mainly interested in looting marble, columns and statues. When the Austrians left Naples, they took statues they had found with them and sold them privately in the German area. With the arrival of King Charles of Naples, however, the plundering stopped and planned excavation began in 1738.

Very few skeletons were found in Herculaneum, whereas many had been found in Pompeii. In the 1980s, Professor Maggi reasoned that the population may have tried to escape by boat and so he excavated at a very difficult dig at the port, where 150 skeletons were found. Their bones and bone marrow were black and their bones had splintered, which indicated that the bodies had just exploded in the heat.

Another important find at Herculaneum in the 18th century had been the papyri written in Greek by Philodemus. There had been an extensive library in the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum and although the papyri were carbonised and flattened, they were preserved.

Wow! The wonderful history lesson was over – how I wish Carenza’s mother (but I must call her Christine) had taught me history while I was at school, with all this on the curriculum. However, such idle fancy had to stop, as we’d arrived at Herculaneum. It was hot! Christine had opted to take us to Herculaneum in the morning, as by the afternoon it would be “as hot as hell” whereas Pompeii would have sea breezes.

We’d all been handed audio sets with an earpiece, but the trouble was that all the earpieces were for right ears and my right ear is deaf. So, I had to attach the earpiece upside down to my left ear, which worked up to a point – roughly three o’ clock in the afternoon, when my ear became quite sore and the earpiece kept trying to drop out. Douglas contrarily opted to put his earpiece in upside down anyway, for reasons known only to himself...

So, Christine started to talk to us through our earpieces (wisely stopping only to turn the system off temporarily when she joined us in the queue for the WC!) Herculaneum is considered a better archaeological site than Pompeii, due to the better-preserved buildings. Whereas Pompeii has been three quarters excavated, Herculaneum is only a quarter excavated. The medieval town of Resina was built on top of the volcanic material covering Herculaneum, but in 1969 it was renamed Ercolano (the Italian modernisation of the ancient name). It just amazed me again to see towns and people living so close to a live volcano!



Looking down on Herculaneum

We wandered along in the morning heat, cameras at the ready for every corner we turned and every doorway we looked through. I kept glancing down at the ground, incredulous to be walking on the stones of a Roman road that so many Roman feet had walked on so many centuries ago. I wished I could have recorded what Christine was telling us, as she so effortlessly brought it all to life, telling us for instance how the Romans deeply respected Greek culture and therefore had lots of Greek images in their homes (where the ‘noble hero’ was always naked, but the women were always covered). It was amazing to stand and gaze at walls still decorated with Greek images. The frescos were wonderful – faded and cracked in places, but still looking very much alive and continuing to tell their story.



The Myth of Hercules fresco

I have to confess that at one point when we were being led to see the playing fields, the three of us lingered rather too long while taking photos and somehow managed to lose our brilliant guide altogether, both visually and audibly. This was slightly alarming for several minutes, as we scanned the buildings surrounding us and listened to the silence. Thankfully, Alan managed to see her in the distance and we began to hear some welcome static coming through our earpieces, followed eventually by the sound of her voice once again. It felt a little odd to rejoin the group from the wrong end as they emerged from the playing fields, but Christine never mentioned it. We didn't get to see the playing fields, but that serves us right. **Condescending tip number five** is to keep your guide within sight at all times in order to avoid dashing along under a burning sun in a slightly fretful panic!

After about two hours, the site that had been almost empty when we'd arrived was beginning to fill with people – and we were all really hot and tired – so it was time to leave and head to a nearby eating place for lunch. A laid-on group meal was fortunately optional, so the three of us stayed outside at a table under a sun umbrella and ate the cheese and tomato sandwiches we'd ordered (which turned out to be panini). Another couple stayed outside next to us – they said how they'd recently been in Rome where it had been hotter than when they'd visited Egypt. We appear to have come to Italy during a heat wave!

It was then time to move on to Pompeii, a much larger site. As I entered and walked along first of all to the vast amphitheatre, I could hardly believe I was actually in Pompeii, breathing Pompeian air and walking on ground that was still incredibly ashy. As we walked along the avenues behind Christine, listening to her through our earpieces, it was very easy to imagine Romans going about their daily life amid the houses, vineyards, temples and gardens, completely unaware of their fate.



A typical view of Pompeii

As the afternoon wore on, however, the huge site nevertheless filled up with hundreds of people, many of them in groups like ours, following a guide holding aloft an umbrella, parasol or other visible item of their choice. In Christine's case, she often used her cream coloured parasol to shade her from the sun. My Tilley hat was doing sterling service, but I did wish I

was using a parasol instead (except that would have made it ten times harder to take photos, which was one of my main occupations of the day).

What sticks in my mind mostly from that long, sweltering, incredible afternoon was walking along the network of paved Roman roads that seemed to stretch for miles, never knowing what amazing sight was around the corner. The bodies were a horrifyingly fascinating sight – human bodies that had been covered by volcanic ash during the eruption had left a hole when they had putrefied. When Guiseppe Fiorelli had been excavating in the 19th century, he devised a method of using plaster casts to recreate the exact form of the bodies as they had died. Other memorable sights were remains of villas; huge columns; private altars; a gym; a brothel; an Egyptian temple; the Forum; a mosaic entrance to a house that said *HAVE* meaning *hail to you* as a welcome in Latin; statues; amphorae; paintings – it was all rather overwhelming – which is how I felt upon reaching the Forum, although it was the heat that was threatening to overcome me at that point.



Caught by the poison gas

Everyone I set eyes upon all the time we were there was sweating profusely and drinking copious amounts of water – some people were even pouring it over themselves in a somewhat vain attempt to cool down a little. The good thing about Pompeii is that at certain intervals there are taps from which empty bottles can be filled with water – this has probably saved many lives!

I think people had begun to wilt terminally after about two hours, so Christine took us to a couple of final sights before we headed slowly towards the exit. On our way, still passing wondrous buildings and remains of great temples, we passed a fantastic looking altar, but both Alan and I *carried on walking past it* in a completely exhausted daze. Nothing like this has ever happened before – in normal circumstances it would have been absolutely unthinkable – but the desperate need for coolness had resulted in survival over photography, it was as simple as that. I could have been walking across the Elysian Fields themselves and would still have carried on to the exit. Thankfully, the happily heat resistant Douglas stopped and took a photo of the altar (at the temple of Vespasian) so all was not lost.

As soon as we were outside the ruins, mingling with hordes of tourists (although there had been hordes inside) we bought an ice cream, which fittingly tasted like nectar of the gods. This particular flavour of nectar was strawberry (*fragola*) for me, tiramisu for Alan and banana for Douglas. It was wonderful! Shortly after this, we climbed into the air-conditioned coach and were driven back to our various hotels with tired smiles, very dusty feet and sweaty clothes – Douglas had salt crusted patches on his t-shirt from all the sweat!

After showering, we convened by the pool for a pre-dinner beer, which is so refreshing in such heat. Dinner was lovely – asparagus soup (and I don't even like asparagus) followed by fish with French fries and salad, followed by lemon profiteroles, all washed down with water. It seemed the right thing to do to sit outside at the pool-bar again afterwards, people-watching and gazing at the sky as it turned from daylight blue to evening dark blue, with one or two stars twinkling high up above Sorrento. *Buonanotte!*

In the coach:

Alan: *It's a fair old way to Herculaneum.*

Doug: *The Egyptians were there?*

Alan: *What?*

Doug: *You said the Pharaoh way.*

Monday 19th July

Day 4 already – after I'd slept quite well, but not long enough, due to another early rise at 06.00. Douglas said he was probably more tired than Alan and me, as he'd been woken at around midnight by loud bangs that seemed to be right outside his room. I hadn't actually gone to sleep by then, but that's not important right now. We presented ourselves for breakfast at 07.00 and thence to the meeting point for the coach at 08.25 once again.

It was another hot morning as we stood by the wall (avoiding the freely pollinating tree). Christine from yesterday was waiting for her coach and came over to say hello. Alan and Douglas chatted with her and found out she's a history graduate, specialising in mediaeval history. She married an Italian man and has been living here for 37 years. It appears she's not the mother of Carezza Lewis from *Time Team* after all, which is strangely disappointing.

However, our coach to Mount Vesuvius/Vesuvio arrived and our guide for the half day trip was a young Italian woman with wavy dark blonde hair called Martina, while the driver was called Lorenzo. Martina was very friendly and gave us all a smiley face sticker to set the mood for a happy trip. I like smiley faces, so I liked her! She talked to us a lot on the way from Sorrento to our destination. Due to heavy traffic, which was apparently people on their way to the beach, we were stuck in a tunnel for about ten minutes, but Martina talked us through this slightly alarming development.

She told us that first of all we would be stopping at a mineralogical museum in a town called Vico Equense, which would help to give us an idea of volcanic happenings. She also mentioned that the temperature today was 36 degrees C – groan! There were a few children on the coach and unfortunately, when the one opposite Douglas stood up to get off on arrival at the museum, he promptly threw up on the spot – the spot right in the middle of the aisle, so that we had to step over it in order to get off the coach. Not such a happy start after all, but it was all cleared up by the time we got back on the coach and the boy in question was moved right to the front.

As soon as we stepped off the coach, there was a lovely view of Vesuvio from across the bay. Martina and her flowery parasol led us through the town until we reached the mineralogical museum, which was small but perfectly formed and seemed to be a private collection. We all tramped inside the limited space in a politely intimate manner and had an interesting talk from a very engaging young Italian man called Mika, who apologised that he was a student of geology and not English. He actually spoke very well and cut a fine figure, standing there in his shorts and loafers, with his dark good looks and smouldering Italian eyes.

He pointed out and talked about some of the better pieces of minerals and fossils in the cabinets – I found it fascinating to see the Italian names of many rocks and minerals familiar in English. Mika showed us a piece of vesuvianite, which had first been discovered on Vesuvio in 1795 by Abraham Werner. He told us how geologically similar specimens from other volcanoes are also rather confusingly called vesuvianite, but it doesn't mean they are from Vesuvio. He showed us a picture of the old funicular and explained how the song *Funiculi Funiculà* was written to commemorate the opening of the first funicular cable car on Vesuvio (this car was later destroyed by the eruption of 1944). He mentioned that it was going to be very hot on Vesuvio today...

After this educational interlude, we walked back to the coach and proceeded into the Vesuvio National Park. It was rather like having a lecture and then going out on the field trip. Martina reiterated that 3 million people live in the Red Zone – meaning that they are in the immediate danger zone when Vesuvio erupts again, which it is apparently due to do within the next 20 years. It's such a fertile area, though, that I suppose the living is good – if not a little foolishly

dangerous. Martina intimated that the Red Zone inhabitants are religious and fatalistic, but I maintain my belief that they are mad!

Once in the National Park, we started to climb up a rather winding road. There was a surprising amount of vegetation (a word that Martina seemed to enjoy using and that Douglas later said irritated him somewhat!) There were wildflowers growing, as well as a lot of highly scented yellow broom and mysterious paths led through some wooded areas, which I would have loved to explore. A few quirky statues decorated the roadside, but it was impossible to take photos of them, as the coach weaved around the narrow, winding road with Lorenzo freely and wisely using the coach's horn.

The views were stunning as we wound around the volcano, especially looking out over the Bay of Naples. Soon we reached the car park situated at 1000 metres altitude, which is where our adventure really started. That is, after we'd queued up to pay 50c each for the privilege of using a very smelly toilet with no toilet seat, used by both genders and without any running water in the manky hand basin. I suppose some weird people might think of that experience as part of the adventure. **Condescending tip number six** is always to carry some tissues and wet wipes in your pocket for those manky toilet situations that catch you unawares!

However, we were then free to ascend the final 200 metres to the top of the volcano in the unrelenting heat. The Rough Guide had described the climb to the top as "...a medium to strenuous stroll." I did wonder about the word 'stroll' and decided that Martina had been more accurate in calling it a hike. We began to ascend the fairly wide path that consisted of small pebbles of pumice, with water bottles and cameras at the ready. At the start of the path, people had been selling bamboo canes to stop people slipping on this almost scree like surface. However, with my trusty Merrell sandals, I experienced no trouble at all. I should mention here that when we booked this trip, the rep had advised us to wear decent trainers, but since I had none with me, she advised me to wear socks with my Merrell sandals. **Condescending tip number seven** (borrowed from the rep) is therefore to wear either trainers or decent soled sandals with socks when walking up volcanoes.

The climb began – Douglas went on ahead, preferring to climb as quickly and doggedly as possible to the top. I think if I'd adopted his method, I would have had a heart attack! It was mind-bogglingly, suffocatingly, unforgivingly hot and I had to stop at frequent intervals to gulp water, breathe properly again and take photos of the stunning views – the Bay of Naples far below, the matchbox houses, the surrounding peaks and the vegetation, all highlighted by the prolific broom. The scent of the gorgeous yellow broom, mixed with the pumice dust and the heat created a unique smell that was quite pleasant and even a little exhilarating.



The ubiquitous, aromatic broom

There were a surprising amount of people both ascending and descending the pumice scree path and the crunching sound of their footsteps was a constant background noise. I saw one man who must have been in his 80s, very slowly and very determinedly making his way to the top with his bamboo cane – and I would have taken my hat off to him there and then, except I would probably have developed heat stroke, which would have been quite annoying.

Finally and most gratefully, I made it to the top. The last part had seemed steeper and hotter, but maybe that was just my imagination. There was an opportunistic but welcome kiosk that sold drinks, postcards and souvenirs and a few yards further on, another smaller kiosk right opposite the crater, or caldera.

The caldera was magnificent! I have to say that I never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would ever be standing at the top of Mount Vesuvius looking down into its great, gaping caldera. It was awesome to think that it had erupted so cataclysmically in the past and at some time in the future would erupt again. There were now a few wildflowers growing in its gigantic, ashtray-like bowl. Martina had told us that it had once been called Monte Somma, standing at 3,000 metres high, whereas today it's a mere 1,200 metres. Such incredible power to blast half a mountain into the sky!



Flowers now grow in the caldera from hell

After the three of us had taken lots of photos, I chose a few postcards at the kiosk opposite the crater. The woman selling them proceeded to stamp them with a special *Vesuvio* stamp, which was a nice touristy touch. Alan then espied some half geodes for sale at €15 and asked the woman if they were from the volcano. They were indeed and she ended up offering him a whole geode for €28, which he accepted – it really is a sparkly, handsome little number, which pleased us both a great deal.

There wasn't much time left to walk back down to the car park, so the three of us descended the path together quite quickly. Once while Alan took a couple of minutes out to take photos of an interesting rock formation that he'd missed on the way up, Douglas and I noticed a lizard that very kindly stayed still long enough for me to photograph it. I was really quite sorry when we reached the end of the path – I don't think I'll ever forget the evocative smell, the crunch of people's feet on the dusty pumice gravel and the intoxicating thought: 'I'm walking on Mount Vesuvius!'

Still, life goes on and we had to really hoof it back, arriving just a couple of minutes late. It didn't matter, though, because some people were still waiting in line outside the coach for Lorenzo to blow the dust off people's shoes with a compressed air hose before they got back on. It felt a little funny when it was my turn and he hosed my socks.

The drive back to Sorrento was straightforward – Martina's English was sometimes very endearing when she made minor errors such as "wineyards" and "hair conditioning" – bring on the hair conditioning! She certainly made my day a smiley one :-). We were dropped off at the hotel, or rather a little way before the hotel because Douglas and Alan thought we were closer than we were.

After refreshing ourselves by resting for five minutes, washing and changing some clothes (and I also consumed a small sponge bar I'd sneaked out from the breakfast table) we walked into Sorrento in search of bananas and ice cream as a late lunch. Although the Vesuvio trip had been described as half-day, it had turned out more like two-thirds of a day and therefore really good value. **Condescending tip number eight** is to book half-day trips for really good value!

I didn't find it enjoyable walking along the busy street in the burning heat, but sun-loving Douglas on the other hand had discarded his sunglasses, hat, bottle of water, camera and multi-pocketed sleeveless jacket in order to feel the full benefit. I felt myself inevitably wilting as we walked along and when we arrived at the fruit stall, there were no bananas. No bananas! Thinking about it, however, any bananas put out for sale in this type of heat would be black before the afternoon.

So I soldiered womanfully on into the old part of Sorrento, where Alan found a brilliant shop that I believe is renowned for its enormous variety of ice cream flavours. It was expensive but fantastic, with newspaper articles and intriguing pictures of famous people who'd visited adorning its walls. It was a shame all the accompanying writing was in Italian...

We all had a tub or *capetto* of two different flavours – mojita and caffè for me. The kind old man who took our money let us sit inside at a table to eat them. We must have looked like hot, exhausted tourists, which I most definitely was!

After that, we walked to the nearby Foreigners' Club (*Circolo dei Forestieri*) for even more refreshment in its famed and highly recommended American Bar. Before we sat down, though, Alan and Douglas found out about tomorrow's planned boat trip from a somewhat school-mistressy old bat in Tourist Information, who was the only really semi-miserable Italian we came across all week.

I was happy to find it was reasonably empty in the American Bar at that time of day, so we were able to take our pick of the sought-after tables on the verandah underneath huge sun umbrellas, overlooking the Bay. We sat there for quite some time, sipping iced tea and chatting desultorily, while gazing out at the boat and ship activity in the harbour, with Vesuvio brooding all the time in the distance.



Cooling down in the American Bar

It was so pleasant sitting there that Douglas suggested ordering another drink, which we did. We suddenly noticed, however, that Vesuvio had disappeared from view as the white clouds that had been hugging the mountains to our right swirled to the left and thickened, obliterating all of Naples and the volcano.

It was fascinating to watch how the cloud turned a deep shade of grey and must have been dropping heavy rain in the distance. A few people came and went in the American Bar, but we still sat there, nursing our drinks as the cloud began to skulk in across the Bay.

The sky darkened and a flash of lightning was seen over the mountains. Gradually as we sipped, more flashes came with rumbles of thunder. The cloud, which had seemed as if it would pass behind the mountains to our north-east, seemed to be heading towards us and the wind began to pick up noticeably in the treetops right in front of us, which began to sway and rustle quite alarmingly. The hi-tech motorsailer cruise ship picturesquely anchored in the harbour, put up its sails and headed out to our left.



The trees in front of us sway and rustle alarmingly

As the thunder and lightning came closer, a waiter came to take down the huge sun umbrellas, which wasn't easy with the wind blowing. Douglas wondered if we should sit it out and have another drink, but we came to a democratic decision to skedaddle! At first as we left the American Bar, the air was still hot and people were walking along in and out of the shops normally amongst the odd flashes of lightning and consequent thunder. As we continued walking, though, the first big raindrops fell and then suddenly multiplied rapidly, causing people (including us) to take shelter underneath the shop awnings or arcades.

The streets soon emptied. Across the way, two scooters collided, having slid on the slippery road surface, but luckily neither rider was hurt, even though one had fallen off. It looked like a British wet Sunday afternoon in winter – apart from the palm trees, maybe. After a while, when it looked like easing a little, we walked up a bit further to another sheltered spot and did this several times until the rain eventually stopped. The air had been cooler during the rain, but as soon as it stopped, it became hot again.



The Sorrento streets are suddenly deserted!

I began to feel really exhausted and was forced to eat the fruit pastilles left in my bag from Bristol Airport, in order to give myself a quick fix blood sugar level rise. Alan said he was also very tired, but we made it to the hotel, where we both fled to our room to recuperate until dinner time, whereas the indomitable Douglas went to the pool-bar.

On the dinner menu tonight was the endearingly named *Mushrooms soup*, which we all chose. The waiter was an older man who joked with Douglas by ladling Alan's and my soup into our bowls and then just putting a drop into Douglas's bowl and walking away. He did eventually come back and fill Douglas's bowl! This wonderful soup was followed by vegetable omelette with croquette potatoes and salad, followed by more lemon profiteroles. Instead of

accompanying water, we decided to try the local wine, called *Lacryma Christi del Vesuviano Doc – rosso* (red). It was very good indeed, although I was so hungry after the exertions of the day that I think almost anything would have tasted great. Afterwards, we retired to the pool-bar, where Alan and I enjoyed a very tasty hot chocolate and Douglas had a glass of fresh orange juice. I then retired to the wonderful air conditioning of our room, while Alan stayed with Douglas for an hour. The holiday is halfway over!

At dinner:

Doug: There's a fair old amount of food on this plate.

Alan: Aha! Egyptian food!

Doug: Oh no, I've been caught out with my own joke...

Tuesday 20th July

Day 5 – not a noisy night, but I didn't sleep for long enough. However, it was good to take our time and not mosey down the marble stairs to breakfast until 08.00. Douglas told us he'd had a dream involving us in a Roman trireme rowed by slaves, sailing down the coast to map the coastline. He described how the slaves disliked stopping so often once they'd got into their rowing rhythm – obviously a past life dream!

We'd decided that the order of the day was a boat trip along the Amalfi coast, to see it from the sea. The walk into Sorrento town was as hot, noisy and trafficky as ever. **Condescending tip number nine** is to book a hotel close to the town if you don't fancy catching the local buses (for which you have to pre-buy tickets from local *tabacchi* shops).

When we finally reached the quayside after walking down many steps, it was incredibly hot and incredibly crowded. It was also a bit of bother trying to find the right kiosk from which to buy the tickets, but when this was accomplished, we were able to stand/sit in the shade of nearby trees to await the ferry. Our tickets had cost €11 each and although this was only for one way (as we'd been unable to buy return tickets) it seemed good value.

The ferry arrived on time and was big, clean, smooth and fast. As we climbed aboard and were going up the steps to the upper deck, Alan tripped slightly, which resulted in the Italian crewman shouting out to everyone, "Watch your steps!" Although the ferry was quite crowded, we found a good spot next to the rail on the coast side and took out our cameras.

We weren't disappointed! It was rather hazy, but still very dramatic and beautiful with cliffs right down to the sea; houses perched precariously on cliff edges; old fortifications; churches with their ceramic cupolas gleaming in the sun; hotels; small old villages and the visible eye-widening Amalfi coast road, all underneath a lovely blue sky complete with a few photogenic fluffy white clouds. It was fascinating and we were comfortably cool with a sea breeze.



Positano clinging to the cliff face

The ferry made a quick stop at Positano, a small town that seemed to be built mostly on the cliff face, but we stayed on until we reached the larger town of Amalfi. We had simply wanted a boat cruise along the coast, but due to ferry policy we had to get off at Amalfi whether we

wanted to or not. So, we disembarked onto a sweltering quayside and walked along to the ticket kiosk to buy our tickets back to Sorrento. Here we found out that the 12.00 ferry might not be running and if we bought tickets for that, we couldn't use them on the next ferry, which was for 13.50. Interesting! So we had about two and a half hours to while away in Amalfi.

This turned out to be perfectly enjoyable, as first of all we headed towards a caffè called *Il Giordino delle Palme* and ordered three iced teas. Coolness, wetness, ice cubes - beautiful! We then went wandering along the sea front, looking at the colourful modern murals on the street walls contrasting with the old towers and fortifications that were visible from between buildings, high up on the cliff behind. Amalfi is obviously a very popular seaside resort and the whole place was humming in a very vibrant and somewhat chaotic way. The *carabinieri* were in evidence, on motorbikes and in cars, so presumably a police presence is needed to keep in check the hordes of people both on the beaches and in the town itself.



A modern Amalfi scene

We turned around to amble back to the quayside once more, which leads directly up into the town centre. As we passed a small ice cream shop, the familiar question came nonchalantly from Douglas: "Do you fancy an ice cream?" The familiar reply followed swiftly: "Yes, why not!" Since it was still in the realm of coffee time, I chose cappuccino flavour.

We had about an hour left until the ferry, so walked slowly up the road where there were a lot of colourful, interesting shops. The speciality of the area is very bright, colourful ceramics, as well as the local lemon drink of *limoncello*. I can understand why Amalfi is so popular, with its caffès, souvenir shops, striking cathedral, strange fountains, intriguing alleyways and overall atmosphere of simple exuberance. Just up from the cathedral was a shop displaying red chillies outside with a notice proclaiming: "Natural Viagra!" A town of contrasts, in true Italian fashion.



An unusual fountain in Amalfi

Once we'd finished investigating the shops, we returned slowly to the quayside with still half an hour to kill, so the best thing to do seemed to have another drink at *Il Giordino delle Palme*. Alan and Douglas had another iced tea, while I enjoyed a truly lemony and most heavenly *granite* served in a dessert dish complete with spoon.

It was nearing ferry time, so we joined the small queue that was forming in the full sun. Douglas was holding his ticket and as a rather flustered elderly lady with a small suitcase came along to join the queue, she glanced up at him and was about to hand him her ticket. Alan kindly told her that the tickets were collected on the ferry, as she'd obviously thought that Douglas was the ticket collector!

The ferry was fortunately on time, as it was extremely hot just standing still. This time the ferry wasn't quite so full and we each had a seat on the coast side. It was very pleasant sitting in the shade and watching the coastal scenery go by. Douglas decided to go and stand in the sun, but I was so comfortable in my seat that I could have fallen asleep. I kept having to tell myself not to close my eyes so I wouldn't miss the lovely view.

We arrived back at Sorrento and it was out into the blazing sun once more, this time to walk up the steps. I was so mind-explodingly hot and tired that I felt quite unfit dragging my reluctant self up to the top with quite a few people overtaking me. However, we were right by the Foreigners' Club, so it seemed fortuitous to go inside. I took my perspiring self to the Ladies, took off my hat, looked in the mirror and didn't half look a sight! I was glad I had a comb in my bag to try to fluff up the flattened locks, but I still felt rather scruffy for what is essentially quite a posh place.

It was 15.00 and we were happily able to choose a table with a sea view again. Having only eaten two rolls and an ice cream all day, I felt tired and empty, so ordered with my lemon tea ... a rum baba. Now in my long-lost younger days, I used to enjoy many a rum baba for a weekend treat, but over the years they seem to have disappeared almost entirely from English shops. I can happily report, though, that this rum baba was the best ever and surpassed all others that have gone before. I was so impressed, I even took a photo of it:



A rum baba to die for!

It was most relaxing sitting there, sipping our drinks and looking out over the sea and distant, sleeping Vesuvio. Douglas suggested we have another drink, so he and Alan ordered another beer, while I decided on another iced lemon tea. I can't deny I would have liked to order another rum baba to go with it!

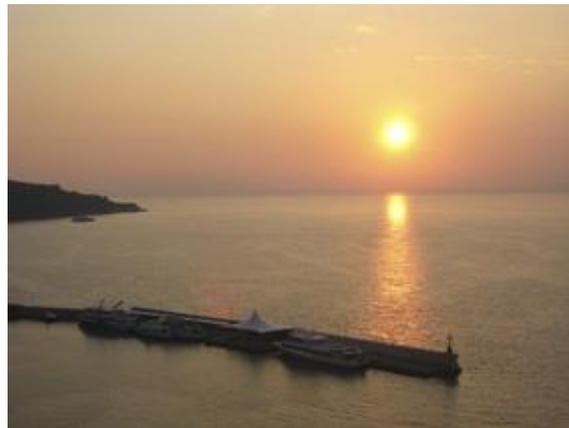
A small wedding party consisting of bride, groom, bridesmaid and best man came in and sat down not very far away from us. It seemed wrong that they all looked so smart, while we all looked so ... touristy. Nobody seemed to mind at all though, and it was good to see them enjoying themselves and hearing the odd champagne cork or two popping.

Alan and I began to wilt, despite the delightful environment. Our feet were swollen and my waistband felt tight – this is never a good sign! The thought of the walk back to the hotel along

hot, trafficky roads loomed, so we eventually made a move, having decided to return to the American Bar tomorrow evening for a meal.

For this evening, though, dinner at Hotel Florida was very good – cheese crêpes, Florida salad and ice cream, accompanied by a bottle of the excellent *Lacryma Christi del Vesuvio Doc – rosata* (rosé). Alan wanted to attempt a sunset photo shoot, so we didn't linger at the dinner table, but hurried along (as much as you can hurry in the early evening temperature of an Italian heat wave) on another road to a spot we'd discovered earlier, with wooden benches and a view that took in part of the harbour and Vesuvio.

It was obviously a popular spot, as while it had been empty in the late afternoon, there were now about 20 people looking out to sea, some of them with cameras. However, we found a spot by the wall and began taking photos, as the sun was already hanging low and orange, casting a reddish reflection over the sea. It wasn't going to be a great photographic sunset and it wasn't happening over the volcano, but it was still good to be there and it was definitely a pretty, atmospheric sight.



The sun sets over Sorrento

Douglas, who had been sitting on a bench and chatting to some Scottish visitors, decided to join the people who were walking into town for the evening, as he fancied seeing the night life. Alan and I, on the other hand, were quite content to walk back to the hotel and chill in our bedroom (it's a pity the air conditioning is centrally controlled). *Buonanotte!*

While sipping drinks:

Doug: Have you heard about the guy who thinks he's found a cure for Alzheimer's?

Alan: Yes ... he thinks he has, but he just can't remember.

Wednesday 21st July

Day 6 – how can a week go by so quickly? I slept much better last night, so was bright and perky-ish this morning, ready for our day strolling around Sorrento to do a little bit of shopping. Douglas was also bright and perky-ish as we wandered down the marble stairs to breakfast at 08.00, saying how vibrant the town had been last night, filled with happy people enjoying themselves eating, shopping or just generally walking around.

At about 09.30, we headed into Sorrento along a different road, which didn't seem quite as noisy as the other one. It also seemed less hot, at a mere 29 degrees C. We made our way through a small, shady place with trees into the shopping area and on into old Sorrento, where it actually didn't feel too hot for once. That is to say, I remember remarking that it seemed slightly cooler, just as I felt the first trickle of sweat of the day running down my back! The narrow streets were full of life, with all sorts of wares on display outside the shops. Some of the shop and caffè owners/assistants are a little pushy, but most of them are fine. We just wandered along slowly, going inside some shops for a closer look.

In one shop, we were looking at some bottles of *limoncello*, when a sales assistant came up to us and offered us a taste. She gave Alan a small cup of *limoncello*, while Douglas and I

sampled a similar melon drink. Douglas was so taken with the melon drink that he decided to purchase two large bottles, while Alan and I bought three pretty, small bottles of *limoncello*.

As we continued to walk along, we came across a street caffè with a sign saying: "Coffee Time" – now there was a thought. There was a small, old Italian man standing by the sign, quietly inviting people to sit down. I'd already had a sneaky peek at the menu, where a cappuccino was very reasonable at €2.50, so we went and sat down at a table that was directly opposite an old opera house with painted murals on its walls. Fascinating. People were strolling up and down the street in front of us – Italians generally seem a happy people, they're just maniacs behind a wheel, or sitting on a scooter or bike! The cappuccino was small but lovely, far surpassing some of our English attempts. Douglas enjoyed an iced coffee and said that was excellent too.



Coffee time Sorrento style

Happily caffeinated, we set off once more, stopping to look and occasionally to buy. There was a profusion of scarves and pashminas at very good prices, so it made sense to buy a few! Douglas showed us a shop he'd discovered last night that sells hand made marquetry made on the premises. It was all beautifully crafted and one of the boxes on display was made with such a pretty colour blue... I'm very fond of boxes and so was quite happy when Alan bought it in advance for my birthday. The young man who sold it to Alan is the grandson of the man who makes the marquetry, which somehow feels very warming.

We'd stopped for a few minutes after coffee time to consume a banana each that Douglas had bought for us. However, by the time we'd wandered further on to where we passed by a *gelateria*, we knew it was that time of day again – ice cream time! The number of flavours to choose from was quite remarkable. This time I chose rum baba and *frutti di bosco* (fruits of the forest) and it was as beautifully unusual as it sounds! Once again, we were allowed to sit at a table inside the shop – and it was a very cool shop, with water cascading decoratively and gently down the beautifully tiled walls.

After this delight, Douglas showed us another shop he'd found the previous evening that sold pieces of rock from when Vesuvio had erupted. We naturally had to buy a piece each, as they were sparkly black from the extreme heat of the eruption – and cheaper than pieces sold at the volcano itself. However, it was then time to quit the shopping and walk back slowly to the hotel. The temperature had crept up to 32 degrees C. Douglas kept saying "Scorchio", to which my reply was "Sweatio" – I have never, ever sweated so much in my entire life before as I have on this holiday.

Alan and I rested for a while in the coolness of our room, until about 15.20, when we went down to join Douglas at the pool-bar. We were looking around to see where he was and then espied him in the pool. He got out of the water and came to sit at a table with us soon

afterwards and we all had a cool drink. As usual, Douglas was attempting to sit in the sun, while Alan and I were doing our best to sit in the shade! Alan then disappeared for five minutes and reappeared in his fetching new swimming shorts, whereupon he launched himself into the pool and stayed there for all of five minutes. At least he'd sampled the delights of the pool and cooled himself down in the process.

We sat there sipping our cold drinks (I had fresh orange juice made from the abundance of orange trees that grow freely in this area). After a while we went to wash and change for our evening's outing to the American Bar, setting off at 17.45 in the still hot air. Lots of people were making their way back from town, whereas we were among the first to be walking into town for the evening. It paid off, as when we arrived at the American Bar we had a choice of sea view tables. **Condescending tip number ten** is to arrive early in the evening at the American Bar for a sea-view table.

However, we discovered that the evening menu is significantly different from the daytime menu we'd seen previously – this one was a proper Italian job (I had to get it in somewhere) with lots of choices written in Italian for the four or five courses that Italians favour. Fortunately, there was an English translation in brackets! We still fell into a slight quandary of confusion for a few minutes, but managed to pull ourselves together.

So with sanity and calm finally supreme, we all chose grilled swordfish with side dishes of potato croquettes, rocket and tomato, French fries and two strange plates of food – one a salad and the other filled breadcrumb/pastry items that arose from a mix up when Alan was ordering and Douglas said something that the waiter wrote down. Incidentally, Alan bravely ordered in Italian, after which the waiter said: "Very good! You teach me Italian and I'll teach you English!" Another happy Italian who obviously enjoyed a joke.

We chose a bottle of rosé (or I should say *rosata*) that complemented the swordfish very pleasantly. I'm no 'foodie' but I know really decent food when I eat it – and this was extremely decent – all of it, including the food we'd ordered by mistake. We decided to push the Italian boat out and ordered dessert. Alan chose rum baba, I chose a Sorrento special lemon sorbet made with vodka and Douglas chose a cheesecake that was unlike any cheesecake ever offered in Britain. Alan took a photo of all three desserts, as they looked so good! The pace was unhurried and I felt warm and expansive. Time enough for dieting on our return home...

Many more people had arrived for the evening and were sitting in the body of the Bar. Apparently, a couple had come in and the woman was most displeased that there were no sea view tables left. I had my back to her, but Alan said she looked like a sour old bat and was making a fuss until the maître d' came along and calmed her down. Her husband was sitting back and taking no part in it, poor man. I sneaked a look and could see she was a real cow (crabby old woman).

Anyway, we consumed the delightful desserts as the sun started to set and cast an ethereal pinky red glow in the clouds and over the water. We could just see the sun to our extreme left as it turned into a fiery red ball before it sank below the horizon – it was a much more colourful sunset than the previous evening. Alan took out his camera and leaned over the railings by our table to take photos as the inspiring scene changed minute by minute. I sat there, hardly believing I was sitting in the American Bar (at a sea view table) in Sorrento, watching the sun set over the Bay of Naples with Mount Vesuvius in the distance and Capri just visible too – an incredibly good feeling!

By this time the crabby old woman and her husband had somehow inveigled themselves at a sea view table with someone else (who I assume they knew) but Douglas said that whenever Alan leaned over the railings to take a photo, she glared at him. I really don't know why, because other people were taking photos, but maybe Alan was first in her line of vision over the much-coveted sea view.

We ordered coffee to round off the evening, which also meant we could legitimately stay at our table until the sun had completely gone and night was falling. It had been a glorious sight, one

I'll never forget. Live music had begun to play at about 20.00 – a very mellow sound. The American Bar is a large place with other areas in which to have a drink and relax. It also seems to be a place that just-married couples choose for their reception, as two more such newly wed couples were at the Bar this evening.

However, *tempus fugit* and it was time to go and witness the street night life of Sorrento – and the streets were certainly full of life. Hundreds of people were sitting outside *caffès* enjoying a meal or just a drink in the cooler temperatures of the evening and many people were still shopping at gone 21.00. Some places were lit by coloured floodlight, including the statue of St Antonino, the patron saint of Sorrento, who stood blessing the town.



St Antonino attempts to hail a taxi

Alan and I were definitely tired, as a somewhat fraught misunderstanding arose about buying more scarves from a shop we'd seen earlier that morning. However, it was sorted – the scarves were found and purchased and it was time to meander back. The sound of a lone Italian male voice rose melodically into the air and further on, a lone young woman stood very confidently at a large illuminated tray of glasses filled with varying amounts of water, making a gentle, musical sound.

Douglas said that on the previous evening he'd seen a fire juggler. It feels as if you never know what you might see around the next corner – and in fact we saw a Roman centurion standing perfectly still, dressed in full, colourful regalia. Douglas said loudly: "How would you fancy having your picture taken with him Kay?" I found this a mite embarrassing, as Douglas had obviously not realised the centurion wasn't a statue! However, it all added to the whole experience of the evening and illustrated quite clearly that the Italians have a real zest for life.

It was approaching 22.00 and we had an early start in the morning, so we walked back slowly to the hotel. Part of the main town road is cordoned off in the evening, which added to the sense of freedom. The walk back was cooler, but still like a very hot, muggy night in England!

Sitting at the pool-bar:

Doug: I haven't seen any t-shirts with amusing logos, I'll have to try to think of a logo myself.

Kay: Pizza off?

Thursday 22nd July

Day 7 – last day! I couldn't get to sleep for ages last night, possibly due to the coffee and the excitement of the evening. Then a very melodic but vocal bird woke me early this morning, but I was determined to enjoy our drive along the Amalfi coast road – the *Costiera Amalfitana*.

After breakfast at 07.00, we set off to meet the coach at 08.00. Our guide was a petite, dark Neapolitan young woman called Sonia, who was wearing an absolutely lovely sundress that she

said was typical of what's on sale at the fashionable town of Positano. It was mostly brown and quite floral with flounces at the bottom, which sounds horrible – but it was so pretty, chic and feminine and suited her so perfectly that I almost felt like asking her to pose for a photo!

The famous Amalfi drive began and we soon left the Bay of Naples to look out over the Bay of Salerno instead. It seemed exceptionally hot. Sonia told us that this sort of weather is what they usually have in mid August and is much hotter than normal July temperatures. Hmm. The coastal scenery was beautiful – the Amalfi coast is listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site and I can understand why. Alan was sitting in the seat next to the window in order to take photos, so I didn't see any of the sheer drops up close! **Condensing tip number eleven** is to grab a seat on the right-hand side of the coach for the Amalfi coast road drive.

Sonia spoke very good English and may have been a drama student, as she kept saying "Mamma mia!" whenever we came to a particularly scary stretch of road. She pointed out rocks we passed that looked like Garibaldi, the Madonna and a group of three rocks that apparently resemble Sophia Loren sunbathing! We passed by houses that belong, or once belonged, to famous people, including the iconic Italian Sophia Loren. The 'vegetation' was pretty, with the bougainvillea unusually, but fortuitously for us, still in flower.

We drove slowly (or according to Sonia, "Piano, piano!") past Positano, the vertical town on the cliff. It must be quite a trial to live there, as it's impossible to get anywhere without ascending or descending hundreds of steps. Even the cemetery is an arduous climb up the cliff face with a coffin, but the inhabitants must be exceptionally fit. It was very picturesque to drive past, but I can't say I would have liked to stop there.

I did like stopping where we did, though, as it sold coffee and gifts. It was filled with beautifully-made, brightly coloured ceramics and there were stunning views from outside on the balcony. We resumed our coach journey (Alan and I having swapped seats) and continued along the narrow, bendy roads. Sonia had told us earlier that the Amalfi coast road has 1,108 bends – I wonder who counted them? The coach stopped often at traffic lights, where the road was only wide enough for one vehicle. There are cameras along the Amalfi coast road and if a car doesn't stop for the red light, points are automatically added to the driver's licence.



View of the Amalfi coast from our coffee stop

We reached Amalfi at around 10.00 and found out there was an optional boat trip. Douglas very kindly treated us to this unexpected pleasure for €10 each and we followed Sonia and her bright orange parasol down to the quayside in the burning sun. Here we stepped onto a well looked after boat and spent the next 50 minutes cruising up the coastline, past where the ferry had taken us on Tuesday. At the furthest point of our boat ride, we were taken into a cave that had pretty blue and purple walls, not unlike Malta's Blue Grotto. I found it a bit difficult to see, however, as I was sitting between people in the middle of a bench seat.

After this cool experience in both meanings of the word (it's wonderful how it feels much cooler being on the water) we had another hour at Amalfi. As we'd already investigated the immediate town on Tuesday, we decided to go once again to *Il Giordino delle Palme caffè* and

have a drink. I enjoyed another *granite di limone*, while Alan and Douglas chose iced tea. When Alan went inside to use the toilet, the owner of the caffè approached Alan and shook his hand, as he'd recognised him from Tuesday. He asked if we came to his caffè every day!

After a short walk around to pass the time, we returned to the coach at 12.10. Coach drivers in Italy are not allowed to turn on the air conditioning when the engine is off, on penalty of points on their driving licence, so it was stiflingly, suffocatingly hot inside and a huge relief when we finally drove off along the road once more. There was more breathtakingly beautiful scenery as we made our way slowly up into the mountains. At the top, grapevines grew on trellises, while lower down the hillside there was an abundance of olive trees, on which the olives would ripen by September.

Our lunchtime stop was at a place called Ravello, where we could eat a three-course meal at a 4-star hotel (Hotel Bonadies) for €13. Although this was brilliant value, we just didn't want to partake – the forthcoming evening's dinner at Hotel Florida was a special 'Sorrento Evening' menu – and besides, it felt too scorchingly hot to eat much. Sonia said we could have a drink and sandwich at the bar, which seemed a much more sensible option.

It was cool inside and quiet, as we were the only ones at the bar, where a half pint of beer and a tuna sandwich (that turned out to be a roll) was most enjoyed. I have to say that the tuna we've tasted in Italy has been far superior to what we buy in tins at home. The toilet facilities at this hotel were the best too, at the end of a marble staircase down into the coolness of sumptuous luxury.

The three of us ventured out into the blasting heat again and slowly made our way down through the hot Ravello streets, passing an ancient archway and a colourful ceramics factory.



Alan peers into the ceramics factory

We continued into the Piazza del Vescovado, where the lunching contingency (that is, everybody except us) would be meeting at 13.50. The piazza was filled with people who were enjoying lunch at an outdoor caffè or wandering into the gift shops and around the cathedral.



The cathedral in Ravello town square

Sonia and the lunching contingency were a little late, but when they arrived, Sonia gave us a short talk about Ravello. She then said we had an hour in which we could visit the cathedral, look around the piazza, or visit the nearby Villa Rufolo garden. Douglas chose to stay in the piazza, while for Alan and me there was no contest – we chose the garden and it was brilliant!

A thousand years of Arab influence were very evident in the building and the decorative cloisters. To my surprise, the garden had a big open-air theatre overlooking the sea, with a stunning range of mountains in the distance. I have to say, quite reluctantly, that it outshone the small but perfectly formed Minack Theatre in Cornwall for sheer breathtaking beauty. I later learned that this garden was loved by Wagner and inspired him for his opera *Parsifal*.



An iconic tree and a heavenly view



The theatre (stage right) with the stunning view



The delightfully colourful under-planting

The flowers, shrubs and trees were beautiful – intensely pink bougainvillea cascaded from an overhead trellis and many palm trees looked magnificent growing up above under-planting of many brightly coloured flowers. It was mind-bogglingly, body-drenchingly hot, though. We just stood there sweating for England and drinking in the beauty along with the life saving bottled water. There was no way we could see everything on offer in such a short time, as we had to reconvene at 15.00, but what we did manage to see was so well worth it.

We emerged from the garden just in time for Douglas to thrust money into Alan’s hand and direct him to a nearby ice cream shop to buy the final ice cream of the holiday. This time it was chocolate and *frutti di bosco*. It was an extremely popular little shop, as lots of flavours had actually sold out. Then at 15.00, everyone was ready to follow Sonia on a seven minute or so walk along the hot Ravello pavements to where our coach was parked.

We drove back to Sorrento along the mountain road, as coaches are no longer allowed to use the Amalfi coast road in that direction. It would be too unsafe (I can vouch for that) and would cause huge traffic jams, as it apparently used to do in the past. I felt a bit overheated and not exactly comfortable on the journey back, even though the scenery was amazing – perhaps the thought of the following day’s flight was encroaching. So although I really appreciated seeing the Milky Mountains up close, I was glad to return to the soothing coolness of our hotel room, where I gathered my melting self together and packed my trusty small purple suitcase.



A peak of the Milky Mountain range

The ‘Sorrento Evening’ special dinner, which I must confess I’d been viewing with some trepidation, was rather a low-key affair, as only four tables were occupied. My heart sank a little as we walked into the dining room and saw our places already set with what looked like three blobby white objects the size of fishcakes. I felt I had no choice but to smile graciously and dig in. They turned out to be filled with vegetables and tasted of mayonnaise – rather odd, but the *Lacryma Christi del Vesuvio Doc – bianco* (white) certainly helped.

The next course was spaghetti with a tomato sauce and parmesan cheese, which the waiter ladled out generously from a large saucepan. He seemed reluctant to cease ladling when I asked him to stop and went on to fill Alan’s and Douglas’s bowls to capacity. Alan succumbed to a hot flush while attacking his large portion and ordered water to help himself cool down.

The next course arrived and jolted Alan and me into turmoil, as instead of the pizza that had been on the menu we’d perused the day before (checked out by Alan with the waiter for its meat-free qualities) it turned out to be a turkey escalope in a tomato and herb sauce, with three potato croquettes. Hot, dazed and not wanting to offend, we ate the damn thing. Well, I left some to be honest, but still felt as if I’d committed some personal, moral crime. Even the small portion of ice cream I chose for dessert didn’t really help, but there you go – and there we went from the dining room, realising that we’d spent a week in Italy and not a morsel of pizza had passed our lips. That also felt like a personal, moral crime!

After discovering I’d gained two fresh mosquito bites because I’d forgotten to spray my arms and legs with insect repellent, I remedied this oversight. I’d obviously become lax in the insect

repellent department, having been bitten twice soon after arrival and thereafter applying the dreadful stuff every day. **Condensing tip number twelve** is to remember the dreadfully repellent insect repellent all the time!

I then joined Alan and Douglas at the pool-bar for a final evening drink. I had orange juice, Alan had coffee and Douglas had a pint, which he managed to make last for one and a half hours! A live band was performing in Hotel La Pergola next door and while it was fine listening to it while we were outside, it was a huge nuisance when we finally retired to bed at 22.15, knowing we had to rise at 06.00 in the morning. I guess that's holidays for you – great experiences amid the greatly annoying ones. So, *Buonanotte* for the last time this holiday!

Confession of the day

After we'd stopped for lunch at Hotel Bonadies, I took a photo of the hotel and remember exclaiming that on the roof there was a statue of a saint blessing the town. I took a close up of this statue ... and it was only later in the evening when I was looking through the day's photos that I realised I'd actually taken a photo of a folded down white sun umbrella!



A folded down white sun umbrella blesses Ravello!

Friday 23rd July

Day 8 - travelling home day, which began at 05.55 with an alarm call rap on the door from Douglas. We rather blearily washed, dressed and finalised packing before going down the marble stairs for the last time to the dining room (Alan had sought special dispensation from the young waiter to appear at 06.50, ten minutes before breakfast actually started). We had to be very quick, as the coach was arriving just down the road at 07.15 to pick us up. It drew up just as we arrived and as we were the last pick-up, it was a straight hour's run into the airport. One of my final memories of this holiday is of gazing out of the coach window for the last time at Vesuvio, still somnolently sinister over the slums of Napoli.

At the airport, check-in was very organised and relatively smooth (if you don't count the intermittent stopping of the conveyor belt system that weighs cases before they disappear into the hands of baggage handlers). I became stupidly nervous as usual, though, which was exacerbated by a flight delay of over an hour because of a fuel spillage on the runway. However, I survived and lived to reflect on the week's experiences.

The one thing I found very hard to cope with was the overwhelming, exhausting heat. This, however, is no fault of the area and it's a truly magnificent area – steeped in history and fertile in every sense of the word, with its proximity to both mountains and a beautiful coastline. The walk up to the top of Mount Vesuvius is uppermost in my mind, with Pompeii and Herculaneum vying for supremacy. The heat detracted from my visit to Pompeii, so I would love to pay another visit there in much cooler temperatures, to be able to wander around the marvellous site without the threat of dropping in a sizzling heap on a Roman mosaic floor, or in a temple of some god or other. **Condensing tip number thirteen** is to avoid the sizzling hot months if you want to explore the area with your wits about you.

Come back to Sorrento? Sì!