

TRAVELLING WITH GUTSY WOMEN

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The sun is setting over the Bay of Naples and the softly lit, elegant lounge of the Europa Palace Hotel in Sorrento, Italy, is starting to fill with guests for a pre-dinner aperitif. Among these guests are seven women and their tour escort gathering for a get-acquainted drink. It is late September and this is one of Gutsy Women Tours last Amalfi Coast trips of the season.

Introductions reveal that two of the women are sisters, two are mother and daughter, and two are roommates paired by Gutsy Women. Most are in their sixties. All are from the United States. The seventh participant is an adventurous Canadian great-grandmother taking a break from a six-week stay in Florence. Webster's Dictionary's definition of "gutsy" as "courageous" is certainly a fitting description for the group.

Gutsy Women began offering these women-only tours over ten years ago. They provide a wonderful selection of worldwide, upscale tours from one to two weeks in duration with usually a maximum of twenty participants and a minimum of five. And beginning with their 2012 tours, they are based here in California in partnership with Trafalgar Tours.

Our group of seven will spend seven nights at the four star 19th century Europa Palace in the heart of bustling Sorrento enjoying day trips throughout this southwestern part of Italy. Dramatic views of Mt. Vesuvius north across a sweeping curve of the Bay of Naples, and the mountainous Isle of Ischia in the opposite direction, greet you from the hotel's many windows and terraces.

The hotel is perched on a cliff some 200 feet above the bay. But a hotel elevator quickly whisks you down inside the cliff to the hotel's private pier which juts out into the harbor. A hotel attendant provides towels and sets up chaises and umbrellas. Stairs on either side of the pier allow easy access to the sea. Small passenger ferries bound for Capri and other off-shore islands along the Amalfi Coast, as well as Naples further north, come and go creating gentle waves to float over. Showers, changing rooms, refreshments are readily available. Some 50 feet above, in a terrace setting, you'll find the hotel's swimming pool. There couldn't be a more perfect environment to unwind in after a day of travel or sightseeing.

Located on a peninsula at the southern end of the Bay of Naples, Sorrento is a bustling cliff-top community of 20,000 with lots of first class shops and restaurants. Some of them are on a traditional main street with honking traffic; others are down intimate, centuries-old alley ways. Beautiful views greet you no matter which way you turn.

The Europa Palace couldn't be better situated for enjoying all this. A three-block walk brings you to the shops and the train station, but the hotel is quietly secluded surrounded by parks and residential apartments.

The Gutsy Women, I am privileged to be traveling with, will enjoy all that Sorrento offers during their seven-night stay here, but first Pompeii is waiting to be explored some forty-five minutes away.

Organized tours are planned for each day in a comfortable twenty-one passenger mini-van—great for navigating the winding, coastal roads and tiny towns. The group's charming female Italian tour escort will be joined each day by a knowledgeable local guide to provide more insight into the day's events.

Despite the crowds, Pompeii doesn't disappoint and getting there early is definitely a plus. Hard to believe this ruined city at the base of a volcanic mountain, now some five to six miles from the sea, was a bustling port with ships from all over the ancient world tying up at its docks. Our private group tour seems to avoid all the bottlenecks and hassles at this busy venue while providing us with a wonderful look back at life in this upscale, ancient Roman community.

Lunchtime finds us back in the Sorrento area, but high in the hills above the town. We're touring a lemon and olive grove farm—one of the many dotting the peninsula's rugged slopes. Salvatore, the farm's owner, has opened a small restaurant and gift shop in conjunction with his olive oil producing business. We enjoy wine tasting with lunch, shopping and a demonstration of the farm's mozzarella production effort. Our afternoon ends with another relaxing dip in the sea and then an evening enjoying pizza and rousing guitar music at a local restaurant.

The following days are similar: (1) an easy high-speed boat ride to the Isle of Capri 5 miles away with touring to include Emperor Hadrian's summer retreat and a catamaran sail around the island visiting Capri's green (not blue) grotto; (2) driving along the arm-gripping Amalfi Coast to visit Ravello with its cliff-hanging concert venue and magnificent gardens surrounding medieval villas followed by a stop in the town of Amalfi with its charming churches, beautiful beach and clear blue water; (3) a long-anticipated visit to Paestum south of the peninsula with its three marvelously preserved Greek temples including a stop en route at Dandere's water buffalo farm which produces buffalo mozzarella for Italy's elite; and (4) finishing the week with a trip to Naples to tour the city's world famous Archaeological Museum and view its castles. Of course, each evening we enjoy dinner and entertainment in a different Sorrento restaurant.

Only one rainy day befalls us, but fortunately it is the day of our cooking lesson at the Sorrento Cooking School where we prepare our lunch of mozzarella frittata, potato gnocchi, sea perch in tomato sauce and tiramisu. What a way to spend a gray day.

And all too soon it is over!