

Luxury, lemons and literature:

AN ITALIAN TALE

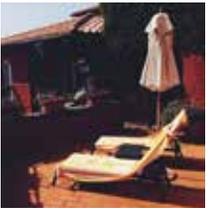


*Gone are the days of the Grand Tour;
for a cultural rite-of-passage
today modernity decrees
that a woman must drive herself,
but herein lies the ultimate
indulgence: freedom. Armed with a
list of longed-for destinations,
and dreams of literary
heroes and jet set parties, Sophie Bew
set off to scale Italy by road*

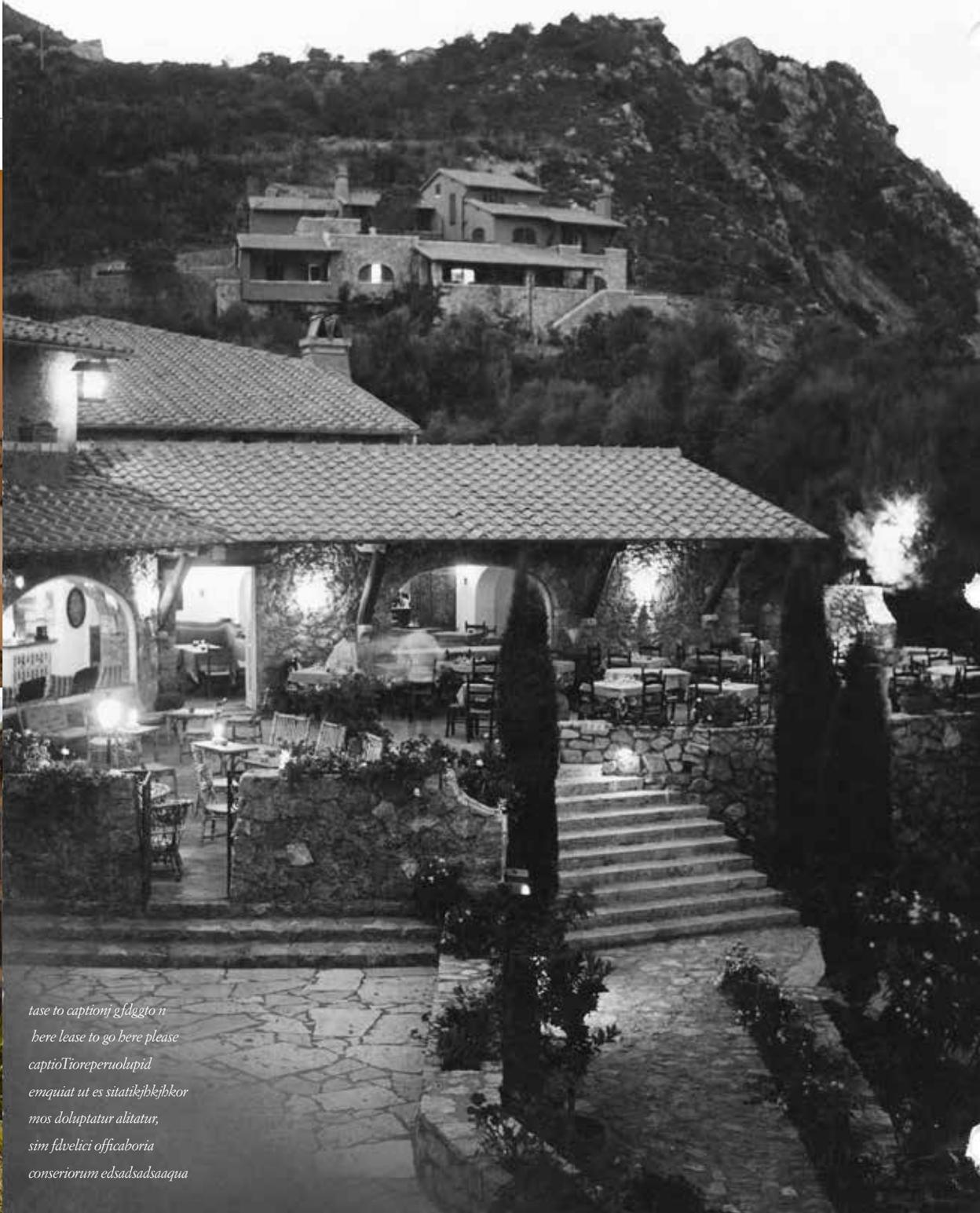
DRIVING DOWN THE slender ventricle that is strada statale Regina is a breathtaking experience. Dipping beneath stone archways, this road – scarcely wider than two Fiat 500s – will see you grazing creamy limestone villas on your right while mopeds shave past the wing mirror on your left. Pastel pink houses with cool blue shutters give way to rows of fir trees so large that the road begins to resemble an alpine ravine. Only the brave need apply for this trip – though glimmers of the sparkling Lake Como, gleaned between the tall trees, make for a jewel-like reward.

Italy's northernmost luxury destination marks the beginning of this dream trip. Hotel stay hoarder that I am, I've acquired quite the collection of hard-to-reach hideaways for my travel to-do list. Armed with a felt-tip drawn route down the west coast – but also, obviously, a Tom Tom – dreams of private coves, homemade limonata and a very wide-brimmed hat, I hit the Italian hills. Whether traversing the rugged Swiss-Italian border, or jetting straight into Milan, all guests will enjoy this same winding route – rolling under ivy-clad bridges and wrought-iron balconies that jut out overhead – before pulling up outside the very vertical Grand Hotel Tremezzo. With its creamy buttercup facade standing wide and tall, the hotel is perched at the very edge of the lake. Steep staircases wind their way up to reach orange-canopied terrazzas and intricate rows of narrow windows. Grey blue lettering announces the noble moniker, written in a typeface redolent of Wes Anderson's latest *Grand Budapest Hotel*.

Tall and wide though it is, the building is surprisingly shallow – the result of which is that the property hosts only lake-view rooms. As the bags arrive, I survey the scene from the resplendent vantage point of the balcony: cars whizz past below, while gleaming wooden speedboats skim the »



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molten surface of the vast lake in front of us. Said lake has a square pool right out in the middle of it and here guests are catching the late afternoon rays; I opt for a sunset dip in the garden pool, set deep into the sloping hills behind.

A day of lolling with a book in the tallgrass, hours spent rambling through the same orange scented groves as Gustave Flaubert and Mary Shelley had centuries before and it's clear that one could lose count of the days here. Though that will not be my fate – over a bowl prawn and saffron spaghetti by the glittering lake that next evening, I plan the next leg of my route. Tremezzo was a peaceful first stop – offering quiet convalescence from hectic home life that steeled me for the trip ahead.

Waved off by the bell boys, with a chilled San Pellegrino in hand, I weave west to Bologna. It's a three and a half hour drive if you're determined but at the last moment I pulled off at picturesque Parma; winding green banks lined the way, brimming with voluptuous irises and hoards of flickering, flame-red poppies. As I devoured a caprese salad beneath a chestnut tree, I savoured this taste of spontaneity: it was indulgent, grown-up and peppered with fresh basil.

Bologna is known in Italy as la dotta, la grassa e la rossa: the learned, the fat and the red. Home to the oldest university in the world, celebrated as the foodie capital of the luscious Emilia-Romagna region and host to both buildings and political principles of a red hue, it's this rich tapestry of philosophies that has enchanted travellers to Bologna, century after century: an essential spot for Grand Tour travellers to soak up some sun-filled, cultural enrichment.

Having passed through a red-bricked gateway overlooked by two soaring medieval towers, pulling up outside the Grand Hotel Majestic Già Baglioni feels a little like parking right under the Eiffel Tower. With its gleaming golden entrance set under a beautiful arch of the Via Indipendenza – one of the city's busiest shopping streets – and just a few metres from the foot of the staggering Cattedrale Metropolitana di San Pietro, it's an arrival scene right out of a movie; perfect for the city's only five-star hotel.

The food of Bologna is truly astounding – quite the claim in a country where motorway-side petrol stations resemble the Harrods food hall. In Bologna each and every vendor offers his or her craft from a place of almost celestial beauty: a store proffering hand cut and rolled egg pasta is a cathedral to food, its offerings tied up with hat box-like formality. Narrow alley ways of grocery stands heave with gnarled red tomatoes and soft white peaches and even the local barber holds court in a palace of pampering. The most banal of details are delivered with absolute luxury here and with this in mind, it might seem strange that the Majestic is still the only luxury destination in the city. Actually it's not so strange. The exclusivity of this marble-lobbied and oil painting-clad institution epitomises Bologna in its intimacy, delicacy and attention to detail. Just like the hotel, Bologna seems small on the outside but from within it is grand and

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T H E B O O K



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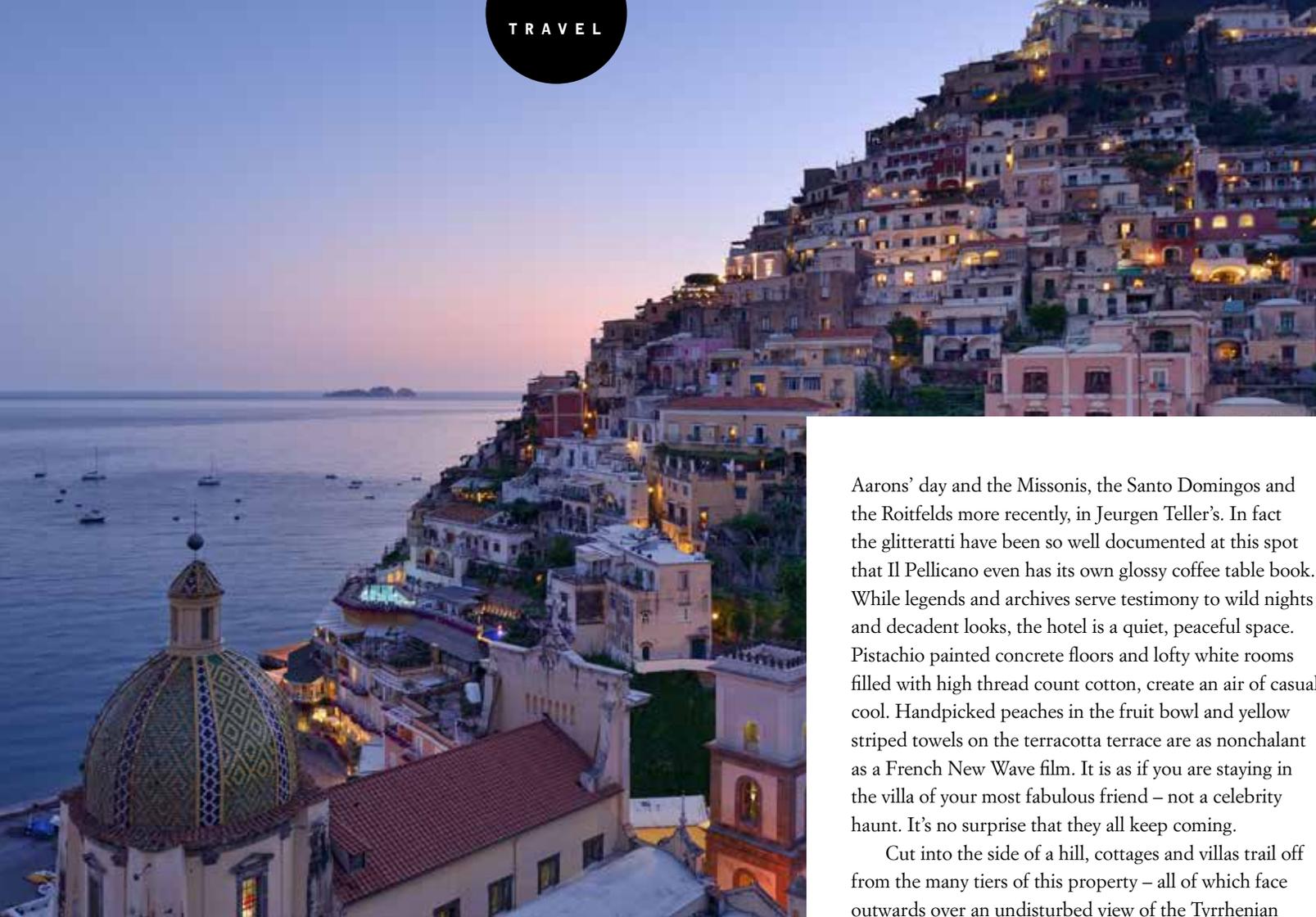
What to do for a day in the city? Feast. On architecture: the 1088 launched university and school of Dante, Petrararch and Pasolini; the porticoes of Piazza Santo Stefano; the vista of a thousand red rooftops, snatched from your hotel suite terrace. On art: Niccolò dell'Arca's haunting Compianto is a terracotta rendering of grief, frozen in time; Lombardi's recently reconstructed dramatic Transit of the Madonna; the intricately carved mahogany ceiling by the Carracci brothers in the drawing room downstairs. On ragu: the rest of the world may refer to it as Spaghetti Bolognese, but to the Bolognese people it's just ragu. Take a late dinner downstairs in the cellar of De Nello round the corner, sample the meltiest ragu you'll ever find and vow to take to do it again when you're home – there's nothing like a beautiful dinner alone to make you feel invincible. And besides, as the Bolognese will tell you, luxury is for everyday.

After paying the bill for what must have been the most exclusive parking spot ever known, we're back on the road. Porto Ecolo, Grosseto is the next stop. As I leave behind the green rolling hills of Northern Italy and make my way south west, the fresh air gives way to a heavier-set Tuscan heat, the warm earth yielding to dryer, hardier trees. I'm not sure why, I try to decide which I like better – until I realise there's no need. As the maker of my own destiny, I get to choose both. I skim by Florence and Siena – both exquisite cities that I've visited before – but I'm keen to get to Hotel Il Pellicano. It had been a long-time coming.

For years I've flicked through the saturated tones of Slim Aarons' society pictures: photographs of the jet set from the '70s and '80s, filled with yolk yellow towelled bikinis, turquoise pools, hot red geraniums, gold earrings, chestnut tans and kohl-rimmed eyes. Il Pellicano was a repeat destination on Aarons' list – a five-star hotel so exclusive it posits itself as your "Tuscan home away from home."

Since American couple Michael and Patricia Graham launched the property in 1964, it has played host to the rich and beautiful, from the Borgheses to the Puccis in





Aarons' day and the Missonis, the Santo Domingos and the Roitfelds more recently, in Jeurgem Teller's. In fact the glitteratti have been so well documented at this spot that Il Pellicano even has its own glossy coffee table book. While legends and archives serve testimony to wild nights and decadent looks, the hotel is a quiet, peaceful space. Pistachio painted concrete floors and lofty white rooms filled with high thread count cotton, create an air of casual cool. Handpicked peaches in the fruit bowl and yellow striped towels on the terracotta terrace are as nonchalant as a French New Wave film. It is as if you are staying in the villa of your most fabulous friend – not a celebrity haunt. It's no surprise that they all keep coming.

Cut into the side of a hill, cottages and villas trail off from the many tiers of this property – all of which face outwards over an undisturbed view of the Tyrrhenian sea. Following the cascade of stone steps you will make your way past two restaurants – the michelin-starred and eponymously named Il Pellicano and the more relaxed Pelligrill – to the saltwater swimming pool which is perched elegantly on the cliff-edge like an old school infinity pool. Should you continue round, you would wind along a lemon tree-lined path and find yourself looking down over the umbrella-dotted cement beach. This mid-century marvel, packed into the rock face of a cove facilitates an elegant entry straight into the crystal blue sea, courtesy of a pretty picture-perfect jetty. Many a star has been snapped on this beach but this private enclave has hosted a whole lot more than stylish sun-soakers. One summer Stavros Niarchos and his 170ft boat *Creole* – complete with his own Van Gogh collection – stopped by; another year John Wayne's 136ft converted minesweeper pulled in at this bay with a drinks order so large they were mixed in buckets. There's little more to do here than float – the steep winding roads down to this isolated spot declare it inescapable. If I could, I'd be here every summer – just like Charlie Chaplin and Britt Eckland before me.

Parting is such sweet sorrow, though an armful of the hotel's bespoke beauty products help. With thanks to Maître parfumeur Maria Candida Gentile my armoire is filled with little candy striped bottles – the clean cologne fragrance of her First Dive bath wash and salty yet minty scent of Windswept Hair shampoo serve to keep me feeling straight-off-the-yacht fresh for days. Throwing my bags onto the back seat I galvanize for the long journey »



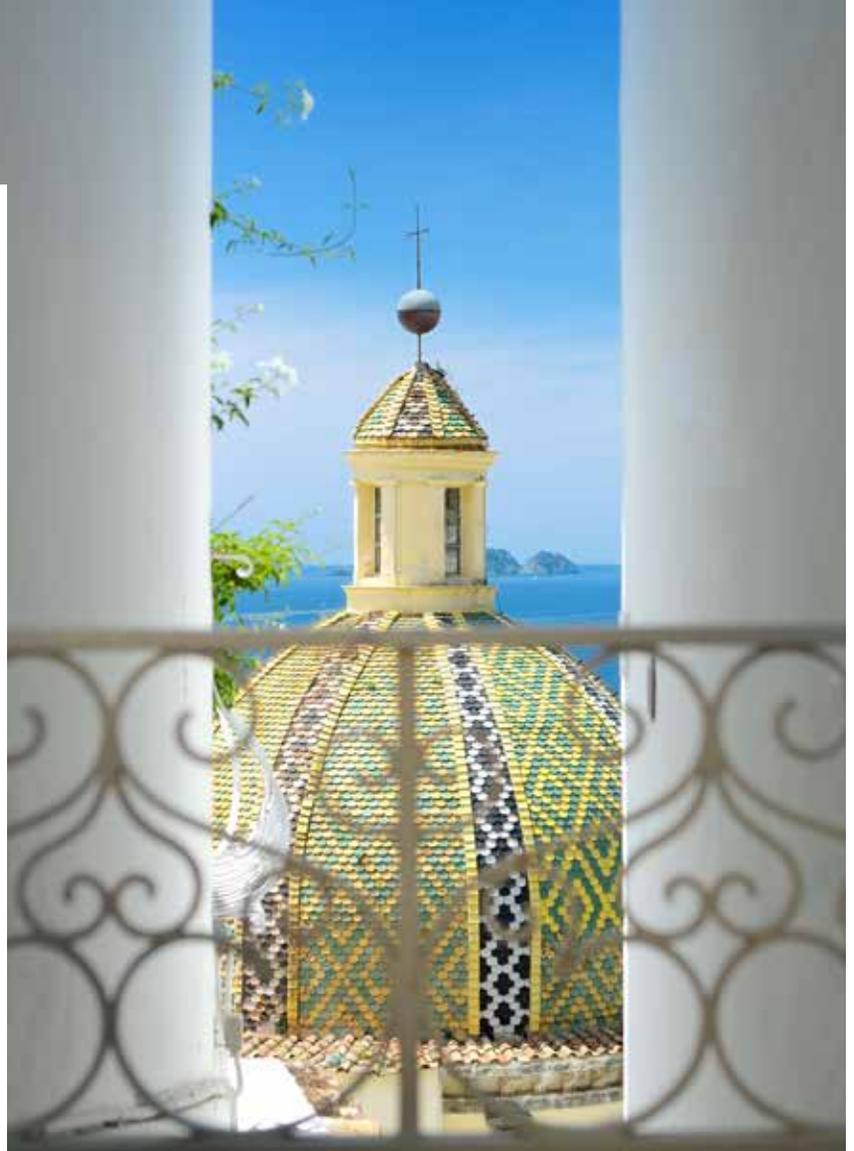
south to Amalfi. Driving off of the peninsula of Porto Ecole, irises wave me off, silhouetted by the bright blue water. Clinging to the coast for the best part of five hours, I whizz past Rome and Naples – it's not the tourist traps I'm after, it's the dizzying heights and movie magic of Positano.

"Positano bites deep," John Steinbeck wrote after his visit. "It is a dream place that isn't quite real when you are there and becomes beckoningly real after you have gone." After miles upon miles on a single lane, jutting round rockfaces and winding in to craggy coves, the tiny town reveals itself. The holy grail: a cliffside encrusted with hundreds of little villas – peach, white, cream and rust – each perilously perched above, beside and below the next. Hot pink bougainvillea and yellow hibiscus pour out of every nook and cranny.

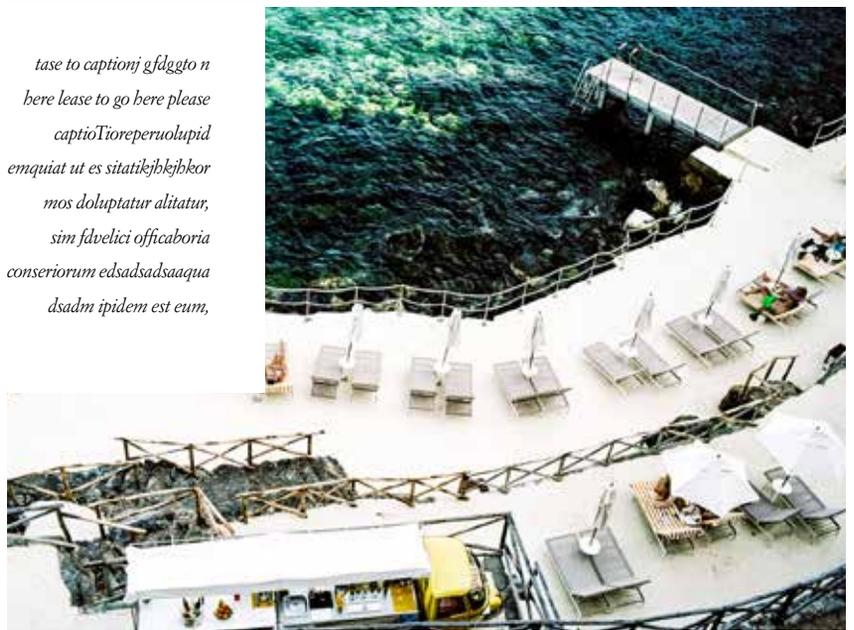
Le Sirenuse seems to sum up this Positanese blend of flavours: juicy green ivy climbs white-washed walls in the michelin-starred restaurant La Sponda; handmade floor tiles in spicy Southern hues stand in stark contrast to glossy Georgian-style walnut dressers; bright yellow corduroy couches look kitsch beside billowing palms. If you can bear to leave your terrace that hovers just spitting distance from the majolica-tiled dome of the Santa Maria Assunta, you'll find a nearly treacherous cobbled route down to the beach.

Arriving on the public beach, one is confronted with a plethora of choices; I opt for a beachside trattoria. Ultra fresh octopus and glistening seafood spaghetti make for the perfect seafront supper. The seafood continues to bewitch the next day at a pale pink La Sponda table where I'm presented with a row of perfect silver anchovies, glistening in oil that might be the most delicious fishes I've ever eaten. Wanting more, I order the walnut and anchovy spaghetti with Amalfi lemon. Embedded on that cliff-side watching little wooden blue boats ping along the sparkling coast, swimmers snoozing below their parasols, we're in a gluttonous daze. Once again it was time to leave; this time for good – but having soaked up so many sizzling sights, I was feeling revived, enlivened with the colours and flavours of this beautiful country.

Leaving pretty Positano behind, I make a pledge that the luxurious liberation of this trip would permeate life back home – that I'd infuse it with a just a dash of the Italian majesty I had seen. While driving, I pass stalls heaving with those famous Amalfi lemons. Huge, bright and zealously gnarled – they were irresistible, so on the backseat they went along with strings of sizzling red chillis. Once home I spend weeks trailing the deli counters, trying to find the perfect anchovy before it becomes clear: some things can only exist in one moment – not quite real when you are there, they become beckoningly real after you have gone. I guess I'll just have to do it again next year.



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FURTHER INFORMATION

- Grand Hotel Tremezzo - www.grandhoteltremezzo.com
rooms from 2750Dhs
- Il Pellicano - www.pellicanohotels.com -
rooms from 1900Dhs
- Grand Hotel Majestic - www.grandhotelmajestic.com -
rooms from Dh\$965
- Le Sirenuse - www.sirenuse.it - rooms from Dh\$6000

O V E R M A T T E R