TravelSection

Ravello—The Amalfi Coast's Best Kept Secret

By RICHARD LEVY

Thinking about taking a romantic vacation in Italy-- maybe to Capri, Positano, or Sorrento on the Amalfi Coast? Well forget about them and keep heading down the Amalfi Drive, both hands on the wheel, until you reach the charming, historic seaside town of Amalfi. Take a sharp left at the Ravello sign and make your way up the twisting, winding mountain to the "Amalfi Coast's best kept secret": the incomparable Ravello. This mountain top village perched high above the entire coast has some of the most breathtaking views you'll ever see.

In the 6th century, Ravello was home to rebellious noblemen who resisted the ruling dukes of Amalfi, due to Ravello's easily defensible, high mountain location. For hundreds of years, nobody ever talked about Ravello, until by chance, composer Richard Wagner came to the town, in 1880, and fell in love with Ravello's serenity and beauty, raving about it to all his opera friends. Many years later, the controversial literary figure Gore Vidal almost single-handedly spoiled the secret of Ravello by building a spectacular villa he named "La Rondinaia," on a cliff overlooking the Amafi Coast. He invited lovers, famous actors, writers, composers and political figures to La Ronindaia, including JFK and Jackie. The media reported his lavish antics and before long, trendy celebs made it their secret destination.

Ravello is an idyllic, charming, historic and importantly, a largely tourist-free town with beautiful gardens and fountains everywhere. Ravello has one of Italy's most spectacular grand plazas, surrounded by places to eat, drink, shop and people watch. Or perhaps you will prefer to just sit in a café, leisurely sipping cappuccinos as you gaze out at Ravello's non-stop, magnificent vistas.

Where to stay? Well, for the one decadent splurge of your holiday, try to get a reservation at the world famous, (and expensive) Five Star Caruso Hotel, (check it out online). The Caruso features a stunning infinity pool that appears to go right to the edge of a cliff, high above the Amalfi Coast. And there are other charming, more affordable hotels, like Il Ducato di Ravello, La Moresca, Hotel Bondies or my favorite, the Villa Maria, also with incredible views and a fabulous restaurant overlooking the Amalfi coast. Visitors can also find affordable apartments to rent by the week or by the month. But if you're an old fashioned romantic type like me, stay where we did, in fabulous designer apartment justifiably named "La Dolce Vita." It was total heaven. (Check it out at *apartmentsravello.it*) La Dolce Vita has two corner terraces offering spectacular vistas of the Amalfi Coast. We had breakfast on the terrace, sunbathed during the afternoons and sipped wine at sunset while devouring tidbits of fresh mozzarella, wrapped in slices of prosciutto. By the way, the "La Dolce Vita"'high season rate is $145 Euros a night, and worth it - April-October; and only $110 Euros off season November-March.

There are a few small family-run restaurants in Ravello serving authentic Italian home cooking. My favorite was Cumpa Cosimo, Via Roma, 44; where "Netta," the owner, recommends her delicious "Five Pasta Entrée: small portions of five delicious gourmet pasta dishes. She'll come by, as you're finishing, ask which you liked best and say, *"Maybe you'd like some more?"* And she'll give you more! My other favorite restaurant was also Gore Vidals: Vittoria, Via Dei Rufolo, 3.

The must see historic places in Ravello are Villa Ruffalo, which is right in town, and Villa Cimbrone. Villa Ruffalo is very beautiful and they have concerts every week. Richard Wagner used their huge color-filled gardens as his inspiration for the home of the Flower Maidens, in his opera Parsifal. Villa Cimbrone, is a medieval-style villa with magnificent rose gardens made famous in part, because Greta Garbo liked to stay there.

Be sure to make reservations for an event at the sleekly spectacular Ravello Auditorium, designed by Brazilian architect Oscar Neimeyer. Ravello is also renowned for having one of Italy's best music festivals - check out The Ravello Concert Society schedule of concerts from March through October, also known as The Amalfi Coast Chamber Orchestra.

View From Our "La Dolce Vita" Apartment In Ravello.

Wake of boat as it leaves Positano

In the Plaza of Ravello, you'll find the beautiful Romanesque cathedral of San Pantaleon with it's mosaic-laden pulpit and its bronze doors, designed by Barisano da Trani, featuring 54 panels depicting the Passion of Christ. Be sure to spend some time (and money) at the famous Ceramiche d' Arte ceramic factory, which makes the most artful, gorgeous dishes and ceramics in all of Italy. Mention my name to owners Madalina or Pascal and they'll give you a ceramic gift from their factory.

The Amalfi Coast is famous for its' gigantic lemons, the size of oranges and super- aromatic, used to make the local liquor: Limoncello. Bring home a bottle to remind you of Ravello!

If you're in good shape, take the scenic, hour-long hike down the mountain to the seaside village of Minori next to Ravello, enjoy lunch and a local wine in a seaside restaurant, then catch the bus back up to Ravello.

You must take two very memorable day trips to Positano and Capri by boat from Amalfi's harbor, right below Ravello. Positano, the former jet set hot spot, is totally beautiful. Have lunch on the beach at Le Cambusa restaurant; order their mixed hot and cold appetizers and fish of the day. Rent beach chairs and soak up the golden Amalfi sun. Walk off your lunch by strolling the winding fashionable shopping street that runs through town. *(Wear comfortable shoes because it's all up-hill.)* The moment your boat approaches Capri, the colorful, breath-taking harbor filled with luxury yachts, will blow you away. Have a delicious lunch at any of the outdoor restaurants overlooking the harbor. Take the funicular up to Ana Capri and just wander around, shop, stop in a café and take a taxi around the island; your

Continued on page 9

TRAVEL

Ravello—The Amalfi Coast's Best Kept Secret

Continued from page 8

driver will point out all the villas which dot the island.

While staying in Ravello, do plan to spend some time in the seaside village of Amalfi. Visit the Duomo di Saint Andrea Cathedral, a unique blend of Moorish and Gothic architecture. Have an Amalfi lunch at Il Tari restaurant a few minutes North of the Duomo. Order local *'Scialatielli alla Sarana"* extra long pasta with their home-made sauce and wash it down with a pitcher of the fruity Amalfi wine.

Between the scent of all the fragrant flowers, lemon trees and salty air, breathing in the Ravello air is so intoxicating, it's almost an aphrodisiac. Maybe that's what makes it such a romantic place! When it's time to leave Ravello, you'll probably say like most people lucky enough to experience the magic serenity of Ravello, *"Ohh, I can't wait to come back!"*

Getting to Ravello is easy. Just fly from New York to Rome, spend the night, have dinner at my very favorite restaurant, La Rampa a few blocks up from the Spanish Steps at Piazza Mignanelli 18. We loved their fried artichokes and stuffed zucchini blossoms appetizer, followed by the Vongale: pasta with baby clams. For dessert, make room for their chocolate covered meringues. In the morning, take the express train to Naples, and then a taxi from Naples to Ravello. It's a million times safer than driving. Make reservations before you go, and contact Michelle at ravellotaxi.it. The cost is about $100 Euros and worth it: you don't want to be on the Amalfi Drive unless you are a former Grand Prix driver. Michelle will have a driver waiting for you at the Naples station. On the very scenic, two-hour, drive you will pass the infamous Mt. Vesuvius and city of Pompei.

Hopefully I've managed to convince you to consider spending your next vacation in Ravello. And if you go, please don't tell too many people just how fabulous Ravello is, you see my girlfriend and I are returning in September and we like it just the way it is. And whatever you do, don't write a travel article raving about what a great, "must go to place," Ravello is. After all, it's been the Amafi Coast's best-kept secret for hundreds of years and we want to keep it that way! Grazie.

Our Rented "La Dolce Vita" apartment in Ravello.

The Ravello Auditorium Designed By Brazilian Architect Oscar Neimeyer

The Building And Terrace View Of Our "La Dolce Vita" Apartment

The Infinity Pool At The Caruso Hotel In Ravello

Positano