

Coastline is one of Italy's best-kept beauty secrets

The sun-soaked Amalfi coast is undeniably beautiful, but it can be pricey and overrun with tourists. For a real flavour of Italy drive straight past to the mountains and beaches of the unspoiled Cilento region. **PHILIP DUNN** explores this lesser-known area.

THERE'S a socialist attitude to the use of buckets, spades and other sandcastle-building paraphernalia on the little stretch of beach attached to our hotel in Santa Maria di Castellabate.

The brightly-coloured items are left under the staircase which leads from the gardens of the stunningly beautiful 17th century Palazzo Belmonte, our home for a few days, to the sandy beach below where nut-brown Italian children play alongside their fairer-skinned counterparts and blissed-out parents recline on loungers beside a turquoise Tyrrhenian sea. The coastal village of Santa Maria di Castellabate is just a two hour drive south from the bustling chaos of Naples, but with its lazy-days vibe and laid back insouciance, is a world away from the big city's frenetic pace.

The village of Santa Maria di Castellabate is strung out around a sandy beach, surrounded by noble palazzi and fishermen's houses. It is jam-packed with restaurants, shops selling all manner of inflatable beach toys and gelaterias boasting a delectable array of ice-creams. But most surprisingly Santa Maria has its very own prince - Angelo di Belmonte who lives in the Palazzo Belmonte where we stayed. Unfortunately we didn't have any royal sightings, but according to another guest, a regular at the hotel, he can often be seen strolling around the grounds or down at the beach.

Despite not meeting royalty, we enjoyed the royal treatment at the Palazzo. Just a few minutes stroll from Santa Maria and with a beach on its doorstep, its location couldn't be more perfect, indeed its promotional literature describes it as one of the "most idyllic locations in the Mediterranean".

As you drive through the imposing gates and pass through the archway into the beautiful flower filled courtyard, the Palazzo starts to work its magic. Before unpacking we decided to have an al fresco lunch at the restaurant. A caprese salad with delicious San Marzano tomatoes and buffalo mozzarella, a regional speciality, and fresh basil, sated our hunger pangs, whilst the stunning view over the glistening sea was balm for our tired eyes.

The Palazzo and the adjoining Edoardo's House occupy three wings of the main building around the courtyard, whilst in a hidden part of the gardens, is the more modern and informal Villa Belmonte.

We stayed in Edoardo's House, in a ground-floor suite with its own patio. The rooms, furnished in white fabrics, antique furniture and terracotta floor tiles, were light, airy and very comfortable.

Following a recommendation, we sought out Il Cantuccio restaurant in the Piazza Lucia in Santa Maria di Castellabate, for the first of many pizzas we would enjoy during our week in Italy. It was wonderful, a world away from the cardboard offerings often served up at home, reasonably priced and with very friendly and helpful staff. Afterwards we joined the locals for the evening passeggiata. We settled down outside a

seafront cafe with obligatory prosecco to watch this wonderful Italian tradition where Italians don their finery to promenade slowly, slurping on a granita or licking a gelato. It would be easy to while away a week lazing on the beach or by the Palazzo Belmonte's swimming pool, but we decided to see a bit more of the local area. A zig-zagging road and hair-raising 10-minute drive leads to the medieval hilltop village of Castellabate. It was siesta time when we arrived, so the locals were (sensibly) snoozing, whilst us and a few German tourists seemed to be the only ones braving the sizzling sunshine.

Perched nearly 300m above sea level, overlooking the Cilento coast, Castellabate is incredibly atmospheric. It is dominated by a 12th-century castle, once used as a retreat from Saracen raids, we bought our tickets and had a look around. After half an hour a portly porter approached us rubbing his belly, a signal that it was time for him to lock up and have his lunch.

Chastened we went back outside to marvel at the sight of the cliffs tumbling into the sea far below. Castellabate is the Italy of your imagination; winding alleys, pretty piazzas, and black-attired mamas lugging bags of shopping. A few minutes up the road is San Marco di Castellabate, Santa Maria's little sister and another buzzing seaside village with a great beach, lovely churches and some fine eating establishments.

But it would be criminal to holiday in this part of Italy and not visit the ancient site of Paestum, which was founded by the Greeks in the sixth century BC and colonized by the Romans in 273 BC. There are three fabulous golden-stone temples which look hardly touched by time. This was the first important city of the Greek



Aerial view of Palazzo Belmonte

period. Paestum survived the centuries because of the unpredictability of nature. Around the fifth century AD the city was abandoned because of severe flooding and it became a mosquito-ridden swamp. Malaria decimated the population and by the ninth century the city was abandoned and gradually was taken over by thick forest.

It seems incredible that it took about nine hundred years for its glory to be revealed when a road was built through the area. It probably would not have survived the centuries had it not been for the preservative qualities of the swamp that covered it for so long. It is now classified as a World Heritage Site.

We decided to stay in the area and stumbled across a lovely, family-run place called Villa Rita, a short walk from the temples and close to the beach. The owner Luigi and his daughter Rita (the hotel is named for her grandmother) were extremely welcoming and the home-cooked meals delicious. The hotel also boasts lovely gardens and a great pool. Before our holiday I had read about a small seaside town called Agropoli, one of whose claims to fame is the Pizzeria Anna, a humble establishment which is gaining a reputation for serving the best pizza in Italy. As Agropoli is not far from Paestum we

decided to check out the claims.

Situated on the seafront, alongside tacky souvenir shops and gelaterias, the Pizzeria Anna is definitely not much to look at. We sat outside at a plastic table with wobbly chairs and ordered the pizza a sorpresa, the surprise, which turned out to be divided into eight sections, each representing a different selection from the menu. There was a ham and mashed potato slice; another with cooked squid and prawns; another with creamy mozzarella, basil and fruity tomato sauce.

We have travelled many times to Italy and have eaten plenty of pizza, but this was definitely something special, despite the less than glamorous surroundings. Indeed, so delicious was it, that it had given us a taste for Agropoli, so we decided to check out the town that evening. The old part of town (centro storico) is a steep climb up some steps to the top of the hill. This is as atmospheric as it gets; old stone houses, children playing round a water fountain, a church, a small piazza and blessed views to the bay below. With seafront restaurants packed with diners (mostly locals) and others just strolling contentedly along eating ice-cream, Agropoli, like the other towns and villages in the Cilento, is Italy at its best. Bella!



A Greek temple at Paestum

Travel facts

The Palazzo Belmonte (00 39 0 974 960211) is just five minutes' stroll from the village of Santa Maria di Castellabate. Prices start from 186 euro to 593 euro per room per night. For more information visit: www.palazzobelmonte.com or email: info@palazzobelmonte.com

Aer Lingus operate five weekly flights from Dublin to Naples. One-way fares start from €59.99 including taxes and charges. For more information and to book, visit www.aerlingus.com. Fares are subject to availability. Dublin-Naples is a summer route which ceases on October 29, 2011.

Late deals

■ **BRITAIN'S GOT TALENT:** Superbreak (0871 222 3055) offers B&B at Travelodge London City Airport and lower tier ticket to see Britain's Got Talent stage spectacular at 02 Arena on June 23 from £90.75 (two sharing).

■ **BON JOVI IN HYDE PARK:** Superbreak (0871 222 3055) offers two nights' B&B at four-star Cavendish Hotel in Jermyn Street and ticket to Bon Jovi performance in Hyde Park on June 25.

■ **DU MAURIER'S CORNWALL:** Luggar Hotel (01872 501 322) offers dinner, B&B plus wine on arrival and Du Maurier novel of your choice for £190 per room per night, to catch Du Maurier festival (May 12-21).

■ **SEAPLANES IN GLASGOW:** Hotel du Vin (0141 339 2001) offers two-night escape for £295 per person, saving £85, incl breakfast, seaplane flights and Highland tour, supper at Cameron House on Loch Lomond and chauffeur transfers.

■ **CORNWALL:** Classic Cottages (01326 555 555) offers Church Cottage, sleeping four, near Boscastle from May 14 for total £408, down by £102.

■ **BRUGES:** Taste of Inntravel (01653 617 000) offers two nights' B&B at four-star Hotel Prinsenhof from May 13 for £267, incl Dover-Calais ferry crossings.

■ **MONTE CARLO:** Cresta (0844 879 8014) offers three nights' B&B at three-star Novotel from £435, ex-Luton with easyJet July 11 and incl free helicopter transfer.

■ **CORSICA:** VFB Holidays (0800 171 2160) offers villa in Cargese sleeping four for total £879 (rental only), saving £292, during May. Same operator offers 25% savings on various villas this month.

■ **ANTIGUA:** Kuoni (01306 747 008) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at four-star The Verandah Resort & Spa from £1,259 on early-Sept depts through to Sept 24, saving up to £314 per couple.

■ **MUSTIQUE:** www.whiphotels.co.uk (0844 573 2460) offers seven nights' B&B at Cotton House from £1,899, saving up to £426, incl private transfers and share of Cottage Room. Price based on depts June 1-Sept 3, if booked by May 31.

■ **MUMBAI:** Flight Centre (0844 800 8628) offers Oman Air returns from £403, for travel until June 30, if booked by June 15.

■ **AUCKLAND:** Flight Centre (0844 800 8628) offers Royal Brunei returns from £674 for travel by June 22, if booked by June 14.