

## The Amalfi Coast Sorrento Peninsula, Italy



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**The Costiera Amalfitana, or Amalfi Coast, is widely considered Italy's most scenic stretch of coastline, a landscape of towering bluffs, pastel-hued villages terraced into hillsides, precipitous corniche roads, luxuriant gardens, and expansive vistas over turquoise waters and green-swathed mountains. Deemed by UNESCO "an outstanding example of a Mediterranean landscape, with exceptional cultural and natural scenic values," the coast was awarded a coveted spot on the World Heritage list in 1997.**



## **Overview**

The Amalfi Coast lies along the southern flanks of the Sorrento Peninsula, a cliff-edged promontory that wanders out from the mainland at the southern end of the Bay of Naples. Its most famous towns—Amalfi, Positano, and Ravello—have captivated and inspired artists for centuries, from 14th-century writer Giovanni Boccaccio to 19th-century composer Richard Wagner and 20th-century playwright Tennessee Williams.

## **Begin in Salerno**

The coast's most convenient access point is Salerno, a busy port best known as one of the main Allied beachheads during the 1943 invasion of Italy. From Autostrada A3, you pick up the SS163 at Vietri sul Mare, a village celebrated for its ceramics, and one that offers sweeping views of the dramatic coastline. The road weaves past viewpoint after viewpoint—the one at Capo d'Orso may be the best—and skirts the villages of Maiori (sandy beach) and Minori (ruins of a first-century A.D. Roman villa) before a junction close to Atrani (two tempting churches) whisks you inland to Ravello.

## **Ravello**

Ravello is considered one of the most romantic and beautiful small towns in southern Italy. Perched on steep, terraced slopes—closer to the sky than the sea, according to French novelist André Gide—it is a place blessed with lush gardens, quiet lanes, sleepy, sun-drenched corners, and a lofty setting—1,198 feet (365 meters)—that provides unforgettable views over the azure coast below. At its heart lie an 11th-century cathedral and the Villa Rufolo (Piazza del Vescovado; tel. +089 857 657), the latter one of two villas for which the town is famous. Built in the 13th century, the villa's guests have included popes and kings, as well as Richard Wagner, who composed part of his opera *Parsifal* here in 1880. Views from its idyllic gardens are magnificent, as are those from the nearby Villa Cimbrone (tel. +089 857 459).

## **Amalfi**

Dropping back to the coast from Ravello, the corniche road brings you to Amalfi, in its day one of Italy's four powerful maritime republics (with Venice, Pisa, and Genoa). All sea trade in the Mediterranean was once governed by the 12th-century Tavole Amalfitane, one of the world's oldest maritime codes. Today, the town's scenic seafront setting, many cafes and shops, and mild climate make it a hugely popular resort, so steel yourself for high prices and high-season crowds.

## **Duomo di Sant'Andrea**

Pride of place in Amalfi goes to the Duomo di Sant'Andrea, fronted by an intricately patterned façade, redone in the 19th century. Founded in the ninth century, the cathedral's subsequent alterations have spared its principal glory, the main portal's 11th-century Byzantine bronze doors. Next to the church lies the Chiostro del Paradiso (1268), or Cloister of Paradise, whose somber Romanesque tone is enlivened by the Arab elements in its sinuous columns.

## Valle dei Mulini

To escape the bustle of Amalfi, hike into the hills above town. Consult the visitor center for more details (tel. +089 871 107)—or take the popular walk along the Valle dei Mulini, a steep-sided ravine dotted with ruined watermills—*mulini*—once used to make paper, an industry for which Amalfi was, and still is, famous. The small Museo della Carta (Via delle Cartiere 24; tel. +089 830 4561) offers displays related to the industry.



## Praiano and Positano

Continuing west from Amalfi, the increasingly spectacular corniche road passes Grotta dello Smeraldo, a marine cave of luminous emerald waters that you can visit by boat, elevator, or rock-cut steps. Just beyond it, the road passes the Vallone di Furore, one of the coast's most impressive gorges (worth exploring on foot), before arriving at the villages of Praiano and Positano, two more scenic and majestically situated coastal villages. From here the road runs around the tip of the peninsula to Sorrento, a popular package tour resort, although none the worse for that. Other roads to Sorrento and the peninsula's northern coast—notably the SS366 from Vettica Minore near Amalfi— provide firsthand views of the interior's beautiful Lattari Mountains.