

Naples

Seize The Moment

By Dominick and Susan Merle

"Incendio! Fire! Incendio!" It was one hell of a wake-up call at 1 am in our sixth-floor room at the Hotel San Francesco al Monte, followed by a loud knock on the door. In both languages, we were told to quickly leave the building via the stairs. By the fourth floor we smelled smoke and the thought occurred to me that even though the hotel was actually a converted miracles-filled monastery, we were nonetheless descending into a hellish inferno.

Building on that premonition, a devilishly handsome fireman sporting a villainous moustache greeted us in the main lobby. "Buon giorno!" he said as he motioned for us to wait across the street with the other disheveled guests.

The fire, confined to a small area of the fourth floor kitchen, was extinguished quickly and we were told it was safe to return to our rooms. But the view of the Bay of Naples was captivating, and before long hotel co-workers, firemen and complete strangers were engaged in animated conversation.

Neapolitans have a saying that loosely translates as "seize the moment." They believe that even under the most distressful situations, some degree of pleasure can be found. I was about to witness an example.

A hotel employee cranked up a lobby espresso machine to fuel the discussions. As I walked back into the building small groups of firemen and hotel workers, cups in hand, were laughing and talking, enjoying the night air and the



Piazza Dante

ساحة دانتي

spectacular view. I headed back to my bed—they had seized the moment.

This is the face of Naples that rarely makes the press or word-of-mouth accounts. For

the most part, tourists regard this port city as the bad boy of Italy, and use it merely as a stepping stone to the nearby attractions of Pompeii, Capri and the Amalfi Coast. Even some northern Italians get a little jittery when they set foot in Naples.

Of course it's true that in addition to seizing the moment, some Neapolitans are just as adept at seizing your wallet or your purse. But with a little common sense and precaution, if you give it a chance, it can also steal your heart.

My wife Susan and I were part of a small group operated by Cantalupo Tours to Italy. Our tour leader and program director, Michael San Filippo, is a 40-something New Yorker who is passionately intent on improving the image of southern Italy and Sicily.

"Look around you," he said as we began our walking tour of "Old Napoli" and the waterfront. "Do you feel frightened?"

The narrow cobblestone streets were shared by pedestrians, motorbikes and cars. There were no rules, no sidewalks and no traffic signs; yet it all seemed to be working in perfect harmony. Neapolitan ➤



Fruit & Vegetables

الفواكه والخضار

women were returning from the markets and the aroma of simmering tomato sauce was evident everywhere.

We stopped for lunch at a two-floor pizzeria named Lombardi near Piazza Domenico Maggiore. It was packed with locals and we had a 15-minute wait for a table. It's universally agreed that pizza originated in Naples, and most Neapolitans still prefer it the classic way--thin crust, covered only with tomato, mozzarella and basil. This results in a red, white and green pizza, the colors of the Italian flag.

Since seafood is plentiful here, mussels, squid and other fish are also used for toppings. And the locals eat their pizza with a knife and fork, not with their hands. The pizzas come in one size, generally enough for one.

After lunch, we headed for a tiny, winding street known as "Nativity Row," where hand-crafted elaborate scenes of the birth of Christ are sold year around. As it was nearing the Christmas season, the shops were adorned with nativity scenes and many of the craftsmen could be seen at work.

My wife and I stopped at one small shop



Seafood pizza

بيزا الأسماك

and, instead of a nativity scene, were intrigued by a legendary figure known as "Il Gobbo," a hunchbacked man with a strange assortment of paraphernalia draped over him--peppers, horseshoes, fish and an umbrella. He supposedly wards off the "evil eye" with his witch's brew.

I asked the young man in the shop the price of Il Gobbo, and after we closed the deal, it was only while he was wrapping the wooden figure that he realized he had misquoted---by about 80 Euros less than the actual price. Through saddened eyes, he insisted I could have it at the greatly reduced price.

Either he was a very good actor and had "seized the moment," or I was a lucky shopper who had been given a good deal. I choose to believe the latter, as he had nothing to gain by revealing the higher price at that stage.

We walked the crowded streets of Old Napoli several times during our stay here, individually and with the group, and found the locals and the shopkeepers eager to help if we could make ourselves understood. I don't recall seeing many international tourists along the way.

So where do they all go, those hordes that arrive by cruise ship or plane? Capri, for openers, and that's what was on our itinerary for the next day.

We took a hydrofoil from Naples (about an hour for roughly \$10) to the fabled and romantic island. As we approached Capri, it reminded me of one of those pretty Greek islands, like Mykonos, for example. When I mentioned this comparison to the tall blonde who would be leading our Capri tour, Rebecca Brooks, she politely pointed out that the beauty of Capri has no rivals.

Of course, Rebecca, who operates a company called Capritime Tours, is a tad biased. A transplanted New Orleans native, she fell in love with the island back in 1994, decided to move here full time and set up shop. She's now expanded to tours of Pompeii, the Amalfi Coast and has visions of Tuscany in sight. But Capri is where she now calls home.

We took a boat tour around the island, into its many grottos including the famous Blue Grotto where the waters change from baby blue to lime green, had lunch at a seaside restaurant with no menus ("I am the menu," said our waiter, as he melodically gave the day's specials) and then took the cable car to the mountaintop village.

Michael San Filippo, our tour leader, made arrangements for Rebecca to guide us through Pompeii the next day, and so it was back to Napoli by hydrofoil for another night in our converted monastery.

We drove down the coast to the historic Pompeii ruins early the next morning, about a 45-minute drive, and Rebecca greeted us for another tour. The entire population of this Roman city, about 15,000 residents, perished in 79 A.D. when Mount Vesuvius erupted. Yet what remains is amazing.

Much of the old city is still there, or at least half there--the houses, marketplaces, temples, public baths, it goes on and on. On display in glass cases are the remains of several victims "embalmed" by the ash, their final expressions of fear and anguish evident as death approached. One young boy appeared to be covering his face with a piece of cloth; a mother seemed to be protecting her young baby.

We were surprised to learn that several ➤

huge sections of Pompeii have yet to be uncovered. Several reasons were given for this inaction. One was there were not enough government funds to preserve what was already there, let alone unearth even more. Two was that it should be left for future generations to discover. Three was that some people were playing fast and loose with the entrance fee money.

The next morning we drove inland from Naples, south to the fashionable Amalfi coast, perhaps the most exquisite stretch of Mediterranean coastline. Its terraced villages, like Ravello and Positano, attract the world's rich and famous in high season. Controversial American author Gore Vidal has been a Ravello resident for many years, his home perched high atop the mountain. John Steinbeck, Greta Garbo, Anita Eckberg, Fred Astaire, Humphrey Bogart and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis also made this part of the world their private little retreats.

We had lunch in Ravello at the home of a 60-something woman who has known and cooked for quite a few of these celebrities. She's known simply as Mamma Agata, and today operates a cooking school along with her reservations-only restaurant in her villa overlooking the Amalfi coastline.

She was known as "Baby Agata" when at age 13 she began cooking for a wealthy American woman who was fond of organizing parties for visiting celebrities. She recalls Fred Astaire waltzing her around the courtyard after a lunch of spaghetti alla puttanesca, Anita Eckberg couldn't get enough pasta e fagioli (pasta with beans) and Jackie was content with a dish of mozzarella and sliced tomatoes.

But despite her fame and many brushes with celebrities, Mamma still doesn't speak a word of English. Her daughter, Chiara, handles the family business and does the translating during the cooking schools.

On our last night back in Naples, I asked a hotel employee if there was a typical neighborhood restaurant within walking distance offering simple Neapolitan food. He wrote down a name and pointed me in the right direction. There were four of us from our group having our final meal.

The restaurant was small and quaint, but



Limoneto

اللايميتو

seemed to be filled with tourists. Perhaps it had started out as a local eatery, but as more and more hotel guests were sent there, the locals were probably driven out and the typical restaurant had evolved into a typical tourist restaurant.

Our waiter was amiable, the food was very good, and he kept bringing special little "extras" to our table as the night wore on. We felt it was a good will gesture. But when we got our bill, the "extras" were neatly itemized and the total was double what we thought it would be. Still, the food, the atmosphere and the entertaining waiter sent us off on a happy note.

As we were leaving the restaurant, we noticed the "extras" being cheerfully delivered to another table of tourists.

As they say, seize the moment.

(Dominick and Susan Merle are freelance travel writers based in Montreal)

IF YOU GO:

We flew Alitalia from Toronto to Rome, continuing to Naples.

Our hotel in Naples was the San Francesco al Monte. For further information visit www.hotelsanfrancesco.it or e-mail info@hotelsanfrancesco.it

For further information on Capritime tours, visit www.capritime.com or e-mail info@capritime.com or call toll free 1-800-600-6814.

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