

Travel

Take a different approach to *Italy*



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ISLAND HOP
A STRESS-FREE
ESCAPE TO
CROATIA



As travel from Ireland is finally possible again, are you eager to see the sights but feeling wary of the crowds? *Yvonne Gordon* shows how you can visit two Italian hot spots while avoiding other tourists – even in peak season

Sunrise in
Positano on
Italy's Amalfi
Coast

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AMALFI COAST

What draws people to the Amalfi Coast in Italy is its dramatic setting, with steep rocky hills and ravines plunging down from the Lattari mountains to the sparkling blue Tyrrhenian Sea below. It seems logistically impossible that anything could have been built along these mountainsides, but the famous Amalfi coast road hugs the cliffs here, winding its way in and out of steep gorges cut deep into the hills, with villages dotted along the way.

Look up from the road and you can see magnificent villas that seem to cling dangerously to the tiny rocks they're built on. Above these are layers of vineyards and lemon groves along rows of steep terraces reaching high up to the hills, accessed by thousands of steps.

Look below, towards the sea, and you'll see inlets and coves, and more magnificent Italian villas balanced precariously on more rocky ledges, their lavish gardens set on cliffs overlooking the waters. The twists and turns of the road are full of vehicles of all types, from Vespas to tour buses, whose occupants have come here to admire the views but must avoid getting distracted by them while journeying between towns such as Positano and Amalfi, which appear and disappear again as the drivers swerve around each bend.



Left to right: spectacular views of the Amalfi Coast from the walking trail known as the Path of the Gods; the Ponte Vecchio in Florence; rafting is a popular way to see Tuscany's many waterways

In high season in normal times, the buzz of tourists browsing the souvenirs and menus in those two cliffside communities can be as thrilling as the adrenaline-fuelled drive between them, but there is a peaceful way to escape the bustle, see the same views and soak up nature. The Sentiero degli Dei, which translates as Path of the Gods, is a walking trail high up in the Lattari hills above the roads, villas and villages, with the same incredible coastal views.

We started our walk in Bomerano, a half-hour drive from Amalfi, setting off on the trail from the village; the tinkling of goat bells in the background giving it a rural feel. As the path ascended, it opened out onto the first incredible cliff-top view – the dark blue hills of the Sorrentine peninsula stretching off into the distance, with the shimmering sea below.

We filled our bottles with cool water from a fountain and breathed in the fresh air. As we walked the path, we marvelled at the steep terraces slotted into the hills for vineyards. We heard a goatherd whistling for his charges from a stone cottage high on the hill, the whistles echoing around the peaceful hills.

We passed old stone houses and caves along the path and marvelled at the views along the coast and down to the blue sea way below, sparkling in the sun. Boats moored outside the town of Positano looked like white dots; a small cruise ship was weaving its way slowly towards shore.

Part of the path is through trees and shaded from the sun, while later parts are over rough terrain. After a couple of hours, we arrived at the village of Nocelle and opened the door of a tiny bar to a roomful of hikers who had done the same walk and were sipping cool drinks while resting their feet and chatting. There were baskets of lemons and oranges, and plants blowing in the wind on the balcony.

The walk from Bomerano to Nocelle is 6km and takes approximately two hours – there are loose stones in parts so you need hiking boots. From here you can walk on to the village of Montepertuso, another 2km, and then down the steps to Positano, and take a boat back to Amalfi,



to see the view from the sea. We decided to walk back along the trail. We had taken the upper path on the way so we returned on the lower path, the cliffs and rocks turning golden as the sun lowered in the sky, the end to a perfect, crowd-free day.

FLORENCE AND TUSCANY

Beautiful Florence, the jewel of Tuscany, is a crowd magnet at almost any time of year. But this less-travelled approach offers a quieter way to see the familiar sights while soaking up the outdoors: arrive by raft on the River Arno. In a break from the masses travelling by tour buses on hot roads, an “urban rafting” session gives you a chance to admire the famous city from a new angle.

We started on the south bank of the Arno, meeting our guides Enrico and Sebastian from the locally based river rafting company T-Rafting, for our morning outing. They launched the large yellow raft on the sandy Lungarno Serristori beach, near the historic neighbourhood of San Niccolò. Enrico gave us our paddles and a “flatwater

briefing” – telling us when to paddle forwards, backwards or stop.

The five of us climbed into the raft, paddles in hand and started our journey on the river. It was all very relaxed and we were soon on our way, paddling gently as we floated along the water, which had barely a ripple.

Under the heat of the Tuscan sun, we admired the rows of cream and yellow buildings along the waterway as we travelled deeper into the city, passing the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale (National Central Library) which, according to Enrico, contains 6.5 million books. We admired the ornate buildings with their balconies and shutters, the elegant street lamps, and the tall cypress trees in riverside gardens. Floating along must be one of the most relaxing ways to find out the history of an ancient city.

We dipped our paddles into the water in harmony as we worked our way upriver towards the distinctive arches of the Ponte Vecchio. I had seen the bridge in photos but it looked magnificent in real life, with its long, low archways and jumble of buildings on top.

From the bridge, we could see people above looking down. They were taking

our photo and we were taking theirs. Just then, Enrico popped open some prosecco and handed us each a glass, and as we floated beneath the famous bridge, we toasted the occasion.

T-rafting takes visitors on all types of watersport trips in Tuscany, including white-water rafting on waterways such as the upper sections of the Arno river, which has rapids, springs and waterfalls you can only get to by water. In the 13th century loggers used the rivers to transport timber from the Casentino forest to Florence and Pisa. The timber was used for construction of churches and buildings, and some for ships.

Waterways have always been important in Tuscany – many of them were used before roads, and nowadays you can take to them on a raft, kayak or paddleboard, floating over the lakes, rivers and reservoirs, through nature reserves and past old mills.

Go rafting on the Ombrone River and you'll float past the typical rounded Tuscan hills with cypress trees, olive groves and vineyards. Or try packrafting, where you carry a 4kg raft and paddle in a backpack and then inflate it on the river bank. On another calm sunny day, I joined a group to try this out. We took a gentle walk through the wooded area from the Bosco ai Frati convent in the Mugello area of Tuscany, and paddled the rafts across on Lake Bilancino, stopping on the other side for a picnic and swim. In Florence, after our leisurely journey up the river, we disembarked on the river bank for a walking tour of the city, climbing to the top of the cathedral for rooftop views. It was fascinating, but even pre-pandemic it was more crowded than I was used to – I was looking forward to getting back on the river.

THE BRIEF

Aer Lingus (aerlingus.com) flies to Naples or take a train from Rome. Stay at Palazzo Avino in Ravello, built for a noble family in the 12th century (www.palazzoavino.com) or Villa Barberino in Tuscany, an old castle from the 13th century (villabarberino.it). For rafting trips in Tuscany see T-Rafting (t-rafting.com), or for biking and walking tours see S-cape Travel (s-capetravel.eu).



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TAKING OFF

The most eye-catching trips to book from Ireland now



ROUND THE BEND

Walk the Danube Bend – the most picturesque stretch of the iconic river – this summer or autumn on a seven-night guided trip with TDActive Holidays. You'll be based in the medieval castle town of Visegrad, above, in Northern Hungary

(known as Hungary's Camelot) and head out on daily walks to regional highlights such as Nagymaros, Zebegeny and the Pilis Mountains, and enjoy a half-day guided tour of Budapest. Accommodation and five guided walks with packed lunches and flights

from Dublin with transfers are included. Choose from moderate or challenging walks: moderate walks are 7-11km daily while challenging walks are 12-20km, with a maximum daily walking duration of up to 6.5 hours. From €1,239pp, tdaactiveholidays.com

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

Travalue, the Irish cruise specialist, has announced its cruises for 2022, and among them is the best of northern Europe cruise, a seven-night journey through the Nordic nations aboard the Royal Caribbean Voyager, right. Ports of call include the key Nordic cities of Copenhagen,



Oslo, Kristiansand and Gothenburg, and it departs April 2022. The price is from €974pp and includes flights from Dublin with

checked luggage, transfers and accommodation in an interior cabin with meals and tips included. travalue.ie

OPEN SEASON

Before booking a holiday, it can be tricky to research individual country rules around Covid – who needs what type of proof of vaccination, where is still insisting on quarantine and who looks for PCR tests for your kids? The goalposts are constantly

moving. Re-open EU is a handy website and app run by the European Union, that provides information on the various Covid measures in place across the EU. It's updated frequently and includes local Covid case rates. reopen.europa.eu

