

Keeping it sweet

Lara Brunt escapes the crowds along Italy's citrus-scented Amalfi Coast. Pictures by **Glen Pearson**.

I had expected Ferraris. Instead, I find Fiats, scooters and three-wheeled Piaggios. After a couple of hairpin turns and a close encounter with a bus, I quickly realise why.

Known as “the road of a thousand bends” – or more prosaically as the SS163 – the Amalfi coast road from Sorrento to Salerno is a 40 kilometre-long ribbon of asphalt that separates the Mediterranean Sea from soaring cliffs. It requires nerves of steel – and a tiny car. Commissioned by the Bourbon King Ferdinand II and completed in 1853, it was ample for horse-drawn carriages. Today, I find myself leaping forward to tuck in the passenger-side mirror of our pint-sized Mazda MX-5 as a bus whizzes past centimetres away.

If you can take your eyes off the road long enough to look, the Amalfi coast is undeniably spectacular. Sprinkled with million-dollar yachts, the azure sea sparkles in the spring sunshine, while pastel-painted villages tumble down terraced slopes thick with lemon and

olive groves, and cliff-top monasteries hover serenely above.

It has long attracted a glamorous crowd, from Hollywood stars to hedge fund managers; yet beyond the luxury hotels and helipads, the Amalfi coast is home to fruit farmers and fishermen. Further inland, the hills are given over to dairy farming for cheese such as *fior di latte* (cows' milk mozzarella).

The day-trippers tend to descend on Positano and Amalfi itself, but we continue along the road to Minori. Set in a valley at the foot of the Lattari Mountains, it is a pretty little town of some 3,000 people with a buttercup yellow basilica and a sandy beach. It feels more lived-in than its celebrated neighbours, where tourists far outnumber locals in summer.

It may feel undiscovered but, of course, we are not the first to admire Minori's beauty. At the far end of the seafront are the impressive remains of a Roman nobleman's holiday home, the first-century Villa Romana. The small harbour also has a

lofty history. Between the early ninth and late 11th centuries, it was an important port for the Republic of Amalfi, which dominated Mediterranean trade routes.

We snake our way up the hillside until we spot a sign for Villa Maria, a lemon farm with lodgings overlooking the bay. Owner Vincenzo Manzo meets us at the roadside and transfers our luggage to his battered green Fiat Panda. We make the final ascent on foot, along a stone path lined with yellow-laden trees.

The whole family comes out to greet us like we are old friends. Manzo's wife, Maria, proffers a pitcher of home-made lemonade while their granddaughter plays at her feet. A bleating goat and the odd scooter punctuate the quiet.

Manzo scratches the skin of a plump lemon and waves it under our noses. “Only Amalfi lemons smell like this,” he says, as we inhale its zesty scent.

Amalfi's pointy *sfusato* lemons are prized for their intense aroma and sweet flesh. They are protected under European



Getting there: Cathay Pacific (www.cathaypacific.com) flies daily from Hong Kong to Rome. The Amalfi coast is about 280 kilometres from the Italian capital. Most towns are well connected by ferry, jet boat and hydrofoil. Avoid driving the traffic-clogged SS163 coastal road in peak season (July and August).

Clockwise from main picture: the Amalfi coast road looking towards Positano; lemon groves at Villa Maria, Minori; the villa's owner, Vincenzo Manzo; his wife, Maria; a tourist beach on the Amalfi coast; the stage set up at Villa Rufolo for the annual Ravello Festival; a plate of antipasto served at Villa Maria; tomatoes grown on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius.



Union law as a unique product of the region. Each year, the orchards at Villa Maria produce about 25 tonnes of the fruit, which is harvested by hand as it ripens, from February to December. They are brought down the precipitous stone steps on the backs of workers or mules. With each basket weighing 60kgs, it is backbreaking work.

“In some places there are 1,000 steps from mountain to road,” says Manzo.

Turning a profit in the boutique lemon business is increasingly difficult, thanks in part to cheap imports. This has prompted many growers such as Manzo to explore agritourism and open their farms to visitors. Villa Maria’s six rooms are charming, with their shabby-chic decor and French doors, although we spend most of our time on the terrace, captivated by the coast below.

“Everyone thought I was mad when I started the *agriturismo*. They said all the hotels and restaurants needed to be by the beach,” says Manzo. “Now, people want to

stay somewhere quieter and they want to come here to taste real local food.”

With its simple, fresh ingredients, the Campania region is home to some of Italy’s most famed exports, including pasta and Neapolitan pizza. Minori is renowned for *ndunderi*, an ancient Roman dumpling similar to gnocchi.

Maria’s home cooking is legendary, too. Minori-born chef Gennaro Contaldo, mentor to Britain’s Jamie Oliver, stops by for lunch whenever he is in town.

“Everything is home-made,” says Manzo, as he sets down an antipasto plate brimming with cured meats and cheese. “The meat we make from our pigs, and the cheese is a mixture of sheep and goat.”

We feast on hand-rolled fusilli with San Marzano tomatoes and garden-fresh aubergine, and freshly caught anchovies stuffed with mozzarella, crumbed and fried. Dessert is a bowl of rich red strawberries doused in lemon and sugar, chased down by a chilled glass of limoncello, the traditional lemon liqueur.

The following morning we tackle Minori’s punishing steps. A thigh-busting hike leads us to Ravello, an exquisite town perched high above the coast. We amble along cobblestone streets to Piazza Duomo to admire the cathedral’s ancient bronze door, before heading to the gardens of the 13th-century Villa Rufolo.

Planted with cypress trees and fragrant hydrangea, the gardens were used by German composer Richard Wagner as inspiration for his opera *Parsifal*, and each summer the town hosts the Ravello Festival partly in his honour. A vertigo-inducing stage is set up in the villa’s gardens, suspended between sky and sea.

We continue down to Atrani, a fishing village with tiny alleys and a beautiful baroque church. A stone’s throw from Amalfi, Piazza Umberto is gloriously empty. We pull up chairs at an outdoor cafe and enjoy a simple lunch of pizza margherita and Peroni beer. Along the world’s most glittering coast, *la dolce vita* – the sweet life – is not so hard to find.