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Forget Positano—This Picturesque Town Is the Amalfi Coast’s Best-Kept Secret

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Photo: Vito Fusco / Courtesy of Casa Angelina

Think of the Amalfi Coast and visions come to mind of verdant hillsides brimming with pastel-color buildings reflected in the coruscating Tyrrhenian Sea. But just a few turns off the main drag is a relatively obscure town that might be the best-kept secret on the famed Italian *costiera*. Tucked in the mountains between Positano and Amalfi, the coast's namesake, Praiano is an ancient fishing village that was the favorite summer retreat of first-century Roman emperors and the medieval-era doges (dukes) of the maritime Republic of Amalfi. Whitewashed homes with terraced gardens cascade down dramatic stone cliffs; historic sites and natural wonders pepper this hilly expanse of the Sorrentine Peninsula, and small boutiques sell locally made wares, all minus the tourists who throng the streets of Praiano's better-known neighbors.

Fishing and artisanal craftsmanship remain the two main industries in this town of only 2,000 permanent residents, which means visitors can enjoy just-caught seafood at the many alfresco trattorias that dot the mountainsides and stock up on handcrafted majolica ceramics. But the main attraction in Praiano remains what everyone comes to the Amalfi Coast to see: jaw-dropping vistas visible from every nook and alley in the hamlet. (Praiano, after all, is derived from the Greek term for "open sea.") Here, where to stay, eat, and what to do when going off the beaten path in Praiano.

How to Get There

Most international visitors fly into Naples Capodichino airport. Ferries and buses from Naples run throughout the day but for the classic Amalfi Coast experience, rent a car for the scenic hour-and-a-half drive that meanders along hairpin curves—known as “the road of 1,000 bends,” Strada Statale 163 was built in 1852 atop a road laid out by the Romans—with sun-dappled views of quaint villages that abut the Gulf of Salerno.

Where to Stay

At the town's only five-star hotel, Casa Angelina, a white-on-white palette punctuated by parti-color Murano glass sculptures from the owner's personal collection allows the attention to linger on startling views that showcase the languid glamour of Positano and the three *faraglioni* peaks of Capri, where Ulysses heard the sirens' song. The four Eaudesea Experience guest rooms, converted from old fishermen's huts hewn into the rock and reached via 200 steps down from the main building or a glass-fronted elevator, are set a few feet above La Gavitella. One of the town's two blissfully secluded beaches, La Gavitella's westward direction allows it to catch the last rays of the coast's unbearably romantic sunsets even as the rest of the seaboard is cast in darkness. (For an even more pleasure-inducing experience, book a spot on a mindfulness retreat at Casa Angelina in April led by meditation guru-slash-musician Biet Simkin, who combines art, music, and fashion with self-inquiry.)

At the bucolically elegant Casa Privata, a former fisherman's home, six private bedrooms in a rustic-meets-mid-century style come equipped with sprawling terraces and an idyllic lawn that winds down to the rocky seaside. Looking for a cheaper option? Opt for the 25-key Hotel Onda Verde, where simply dressed rooms perch above the hypnotizing rhythm of boats swaying in the town harbor.

Where to Eat

Located in a former boatyard on Marina di Praia beach, Da Armandino makes up for its lack of frills and a menu with fresh seafood prepared simply and succulently. You can't go wrong with the fish of the day. Fine-dining enthusiasts can indulge at Casa Angelina's Un Piano Nel Cielo, where an inventive twist on regional Campanian cuisine like sautéed squid and lobster spaghetti is made with locally sourced ingredients. End the night at Il Pirata with a limoncello-infused aperitivo—the citrusy liqueur is made from lemons grown on the Sorrentine Peninsula—on the restaurant's terrace, where live music keeps beat with the gently lapping waves.



What to Do

History buffs will rejoice at the many well-preserved historic sites, from medieval monasteries to Renaissance churches that have survived in Praiano. Start off the day by following the town's enchanting mazelike streets to Church of San Gennaro, dating to 1588 and redone in the Baroque style in 1772. Every summer during the festival of Luminaria di San Domenico, its wide-open terrace is lit with thousands of candles to honor the cultural heritage of Praiano.

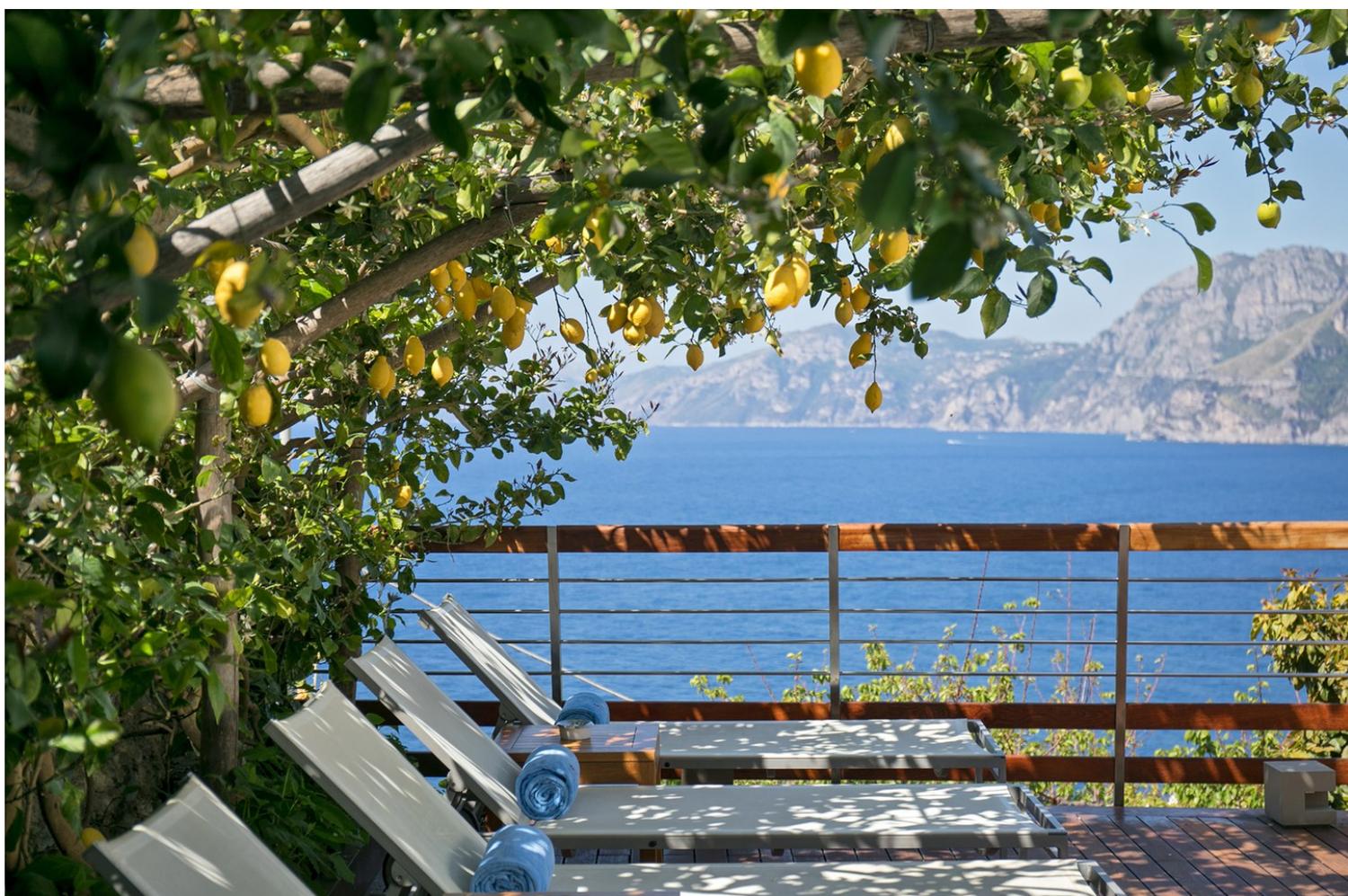


Photo: Courtesy of Casa Angelina

In July, crowds gather to cheer on participants of the annual Mediterranean Cup High Diving Championship that involves a 92-foot jump into the Tyrrhenian Sea. If terra firma is more your speed, hike the Path of the Gods, named for the

Roman temples that once stood there, where tears of joy-inducing views are the reward for the challenging climb. Stop by at artist Paolo Sandulli's studio, housed in a defensive tower erected to protect the city from medieval marauders, and snag one of his "heads" with sea-sponge hairstyles.

Praiano's central location makes it an ideal base from which to explore the rest of the coast. Book a space on one of the many boat charter companies that transport visitors from one town to the next. Ride out to Capri and take a swim in the famed Grotta dello Smeraldo, which emanates a greenish light from beneath the cave's underwater arch. After you've worked up an appetite, jet over to Ravello and delight in a sfogliatella at the gorgeous Monastero Santa Rosa Hotel & Spa, a former monastery that was the birthplace of the shell-shaped almond cream-oozing pastry. For a dash of sultry Italian style and to channel your inner Sophia Loren, hop on to Positano for a spot of shopping at Pepito's, a 50-year-old boutique that tailors effortlessly stylish linen dresses at its store-adjacent atelier.

In 2016, Praiano introduced the NaturArte Project and transformed itself into an open-air museum of sorts by lining its streets and walls with majolica plaques and sculptures along eight routes. For the most picturesque path, stroll along Via Massa, a narrow cobblestone lane that meanders above the coastline. Embedded within the facades of the matchbox homes hugging the craggy cliffs are beautifully glazed tiles that depict frolicking dolphins and octopuses, while figurines of saints keep a protective eye on the town and its celebration of la dolce vita.