

Positano

The town that enchanted Steinbeck

by amalficoasting.org

“Positano bites deep. It is a dream place that isn’t quite real when you are there and becomes beckoningly real after you have gone. Its houses climb a hill so steep it would be a cliff except that stairs are cut in it. I believe that whereas most house foundations are vertical, in Positano they are horizontal.

The small curving bay of unbelievably blue and green water laps gently on a beach of small pebbles. There is only one narrow street and it does not come down to the water. Everything else is stairs, some of them as steep as ladders. You do not walk to visit a friend, you either climb or slide.

Nearly always when you find a place as beautiful as Positano, your impulse is to conceal it. You think, “If I tell, it will be crowded with tourists and they will ruin it, turn it into a honky-tonk and then the local people will get touristy and there’s your lovely place gone to hell”...

There is a story that on one Holy Saturday, a Positano ship was in trouble from a great storm. The bishop, who was officiating at the altar declared the rule off, rang the bell himself and then joined the population on the beach and in his vestments helped to pull the crippled ship ashore. Like most Italian towns Positano has its miraculous picture. It is a Byzantine representation of the Virgin Mary. Once, long ago, the story goes, the Saracen pirates raided the town and among other things carried away this picture. But they had no sooner put to sea than a vision came to them, which so stunned them, that they returned the picture...

In the 16th and 17th centuries Positano became very rich. Its ships went everywhere, trading in the Near and Middle East, carrying the spices and precious wood the Western world craved. Then the large and beautiful baroque houses that stand against the mountain were built and decorated with the loot of the world.

About a hundred years ago a tragedy came to the town. Steamships began to ply the ocean. Positano could not compete; year-by-year it grew poorer and more desperate. At that time there were about eight thousand citizens...

In a few days we became aware of Positano's greatest commodity – characters. Maybe they aren't marketable, but Positano has them above every community I have ever seen. There are the men who have lived in America and have come again to bask in the

moral, physical, political and sartorial freedoms, which flourish in their birth town”.

John Steinbeck

The area of Positano was among the first to be inhabited on the Amalfi Coast. On the main road toward Amalfi there is a large cave about 200 yards below the main road towards Amalfi, which gives evidence of the prehistoric past, including a stone with an animal on it, weapons going back to 15,000 years ago, and objects used by



S. Maria Assunta, or Chiesa Madre



- 1 Piazza dei Mulini
- 2 Church of S. Maria Assunta
- 3 Marina Grande,
- 4 Fornillo
- 5 Arienzo.

Mesolithic hunters 10,000 years ago.

According to tradition Positano was founded by the inhabitants of Paestum, after their city was destroyed by pirates. It was therefore called Pestano or Pesitano. Most likely, however, the name derives from the Posidii, Emperor Claudius' freedmen who owned property in the area.

The remains of a Roman villa show that the area was already inhabited back then.

Branching off from the Coast road, viale Pasitea dips sinuously through the town.

At the bottom is Piazza dei Mulini. From there, one can take via dei Mulini, a foot path in the direction of the sea to the a small piazza with the **Chiesa di Santa Maria Assunta** (#1 on the map).

Founded in the 13th century, the church has the beautiful majolica dome, which is pictured in most landscapes of Positano. Under its surface lies a medieval church and below that the remains of a Roman villa.

The Collegiate had a Byzantine floor, traces of which can be found in the apse. On the main altar there is a Byzantine an oriental icon of the Black Madonna with Child (13th century), a panel in cedar believed to have arrived here by sea.

Inside, in the transept, there is a Circoncisione (Circumcision) by Fabrizio Santafede (16th century); in the apse, two niches with Maria Addolorata and a Christ (1798), a Cristo sulla croce (Christ on the Cross) (16th century); the reliquary of San Vito (1506), a great example of the Neapolitan goldsmith's art. The lower half of the bell tower is decorated with a bas-relief (13th century) depicting imaginary animals.

The separate bell tower incorporates a medieval relief with a sea monster, fish, and a fox.

The wall and the pavement of the square in front of the church, **piazza Flavio Gioia** (#2), is decorated with mosaics by Neapolitan artist Mimmo Paladino.

Just next to the church are the remains of a **Villa Romana** (#3), an ancient Roman villa, discovered in 1758 by Carlo Weber, the archeologist in charge of the excavations of Pompeii.

Local records show that the remains were found at the end of 1600 when the some ancient pieces were found and sold in Naples by the local priest in order to raise money to enlarge the church.

In his annotations of what he found, Weber writes about rooms with painted walls and

two large columns covered with deep red plaster. He also found evidence of a quadrangular garden, surrounded by a corridor with plastered pillars and a large basin in the center.

At the time of the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D the villa was probably covered with a blanket of lapilli, which was then hardened by the torrential rains that followed the eruptive process and by the debris that came downstream from the Lattari mountains above the area. The process of burial and destruction of this villa was similar to that of Herculaneum.

Some think that at least part of the villa could be traced back to

the first century B.C. although, according to others, the villa was typical of the later Julio-Claudian period.

In the early Middle Ages, on the ruins of the villa, an abbey was built, the only remain of which is a slab that can be seen inserted in the bell tower of the Church.

From the piazza of the church one quickly descends to the main beach of **Marina Grande** (#4), with a beautiful view of the coast.

To the West (toward Sorrento) is the beach of **Fornillo** (#5).

Another nice beach, to the South-East, is that of **Arienzo** (#6).



Positano seen from the beach