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TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE A NEW LEASE OF LIFE FOR POMPEII AND THE WINES OF CAMPANIA

THE RUINS of Pompeii attract more than 2.5 million visitors a year but long-term neglect and Mafia kickback scandals have bedevilled the ongoing 'Save Pompeii' scheme. Yet after reading Mary Beard's award-winning book, *Pompeii: The Life of a Roman Town*, it's clear that today's shenanigans would have come as no surprise to the citizens of the ancient port. Although the city was destroyed by ash and lava in 79 AD, Pompeii's citizens lead very modern lives in other respects. Advertising in the form of signs played a significant role for bakers and brothel owners alike, and political graffiti denouncing the dirty tricks and under-the-table dealings of the officials of the day is splashed on walls

won't find a better berth than the Grand Hotel Cocumella. A former 16th Jesuit monastery built on the cliff's edge, it has 50 antique-filled rooms and suites, a swimming pool, a private chapel and spa. In spite of the myths propagated by old sandals-and-togas films such as *The Last Days of Pompeii*, more than 17,000 of Pompeii's estimated population of 20,000 managed to escape. The eruption of Vesuvius wasn't a sudden event; the volcano had been rumbling for weeks. When the town was first rediscovered in the 18th century, the houses were sparsely furnished because their owners loaded up their best furniture onto carts before fleeing. Many of the major artworks and artefacts left behind are

The place that still boasts the longest queues, as it probably did during its heyday, is Pompeii's largest brothel. Local lore has it that Mozart visited Pompeii's Temple of Isis and was inspired to write *The Magic Flute*. While the House of the Tragic Poet, the town's most luxurious villa, supposedly featured as the house of Glaucus in Bulwer-Lytton's 19th century potboiler, *The Last Days of Pompeii*.

The Stabian Baths, the biggest bath complex in the town, straddles the Via dell'Abbondanza, Pompeii's main drag, from the Forum to the palaestra – the former gym and wrestling school. It's bristling with stucco work, frescoes and coffered ceilings, and you're left in

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all over the 'frozen in time' town.

The destruction of Pompeii wasn't viewed as a major disaster at the time, and paled in comparison with catastrophes like the Great Fire of Rome which occurred 15 years earlier. The Bay of Naples area was studded with the villas of the rich and famous of the first century, yet most Pompeiians were resolutely middle class. Life wasn't a breeze for any strata of society, though. They might not have been as malnourished as the plebs, but the local elite suffered from appalling dental problems such as industrial-strength plaque and major cavities.

A visit to Pompeii ranks as the most popular day trip from Rome. Most tours average 13 hours and include Naples, which makes for a very long and tiring day. I prefer to stay in Sorrento, at the other end of the Bay of Naples, and you

to be found in the National Museum of Archaeology in Naples, not at Pompeii. We wandered through Pompeii at will with an audio guide, starting at the magnificent Forum. Pompeii is a huge site, though, so don't linger here too long. The most ghoulish and moving attractions are the 'dead bodies' – the remains of the old, the ill and the optimistic who couldn't or wouldn't leave. But for all their seeming reality, the figures are moulds. A savvy 19th century archaeologist thought up the idea of pouring plaster of Paris into the cavities that surrounded the skeletons left after the flesh and clothes decomposed to create a 'living image'. Modern technology has further improved on the technique and scientists have been able to re-create gardens, flowers and trees from the impressions they left behind.

no doubt that this was the town's main entertainment and social complex from the steam room through the hot and cold baths, bowling alley and dining areas. King Francis I of Naples declared that many of the notorious erotic artworks of Pompeii should be seen only by "people of mature age and respected morals". Many were hidden away for decades. The most famous sensual wall painting in Pompeii is located in the Villa of Mysteries (Villa dei Misteri) just beyond the city walls. Although I don't think anyone then or now would be baffled by the explicit nature of the subject matter – huge phalluses, flagellation, a virgin and the god Bacchus, slobbering and three sheets to the wind. A timely reminder that the ancient locals loved their wine. Greek settlers planted the region's first vines in the 7th century BC but

following the demise of the Roman empire the indigenous grapes of Campania largely propagated by 'promiscuous cultivation' until the late 19th century. The first Campanian winery of note was Mastroberardino in Avellino, which pioneered the red wines of taurasi and near-defunct white varietals such as fiano. In the mid-1990s, the archaeological superintendent of the ancient site asked Piero Mastroberardino to recreate the wines of Pompeii. Campania is better known for its whites but he selected two red varietals – piedirosso and sciascinoso – for the job; the blend Bacchus was probably drinking in the fresco. Following Roman methods of cultivation and techniques, Berardino produced 2000 bottles of the 2001 vintage under the label Villa dei Misteri, of course.

Apart from this momentous project, which also led to the discovery of vineyards and wine cellars within Pompeii's city walls, the Mastroberardino family are credited with launching the red wine revolution of the Italian south. The company's taurasi wines are known as the 'Barolos of Campania' and they also gained global attention for the local grape varietals lacryma christi and greco di tufo. Over the past 20 years, more than 130 wineries have sprung up in Campania. Many are close to Avellino and provide a great day or two's touring for wine lovers. The largest is Feudi di San Gregorio, a state-of-the-art winery near Serbo Serpico. Mastroberardino remains the second-largest producer in the area, followed by Terredora. Other must-stops on a drive through Campania wine country include Marisa Cuomo, Luigi Maffini and Villa Matilde. Just don't get as merry as Bacchus on some of the small, winding roads.

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