

# Condé Nast Traveler

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2006

# TOP 1000

READERS' CHOICE AWARDS

## THE BEST IN THE WORLD

HOTELS, CRUISES, AIRLINES, ISLANDS, CITIES

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Foreign/Canada \$5.50



## HOTELS



A superlative hotel for every day of the year. Our latest findings yield 365 noteworthy hotels, more than ever before. The British Isles have the highest-scoring hotel in Readers' Choice history: **Buckland Manor**, a thirteenth-century Cotswolds hostelry with perfect scores for Rooms, Service, Food, and Location. For the highest-scoring hotel on the Continent, look east: The **Four Seasons Gresham Palace** in Budapest received 100s in Rooms, Service, Location, and Design.

This year's results boast both height (the scores) and breadth: The number of Asian properties has mushroomed to 75, led by Singapore's **Fullerton Hotel**. Both Africa and the Middle East continue to add top-notch properties: 10 world-class hotels in the Middle East this year and 15 in Africa, including the new **Four Seasons Cairo** at Nile Plaza. Meanwhile, at home, more than 100 U.S. mainland hotels score 85 or better: In the top five, famous Chicago and New York sites rub elbows with the **Watermark Hotel** in San Antonio and Portland's **Hotel Lucia**.



- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. <b>Four Seasons Gresham Palace</b> , Budapest 98.8       | 26. <b>Le Sirenuse</b> , Positano 91.8                       |
| 2. <b>Château Les Crayères</b> , Reims 97.8                 | 28. <b>Four Seasons</b> , Milan 91.6                         |
| 3. <b>Four Seasons George V</b> , Paris 97.4                | 28. <b>Grand Hotel de la Minerve</b> , Rome 91.6             |
| 4. <b>Palazzo Sasso</b> , Ravello 96.6                      | 30. <b>Hotel Savoy</b> , Florence 91.5                       |
| 5. <b>Four Seasons</b> , Istanbul 96.4                      | 30. <b>King George II</b> , Athens 91.5                      |
| 6. <b>Ritz-Carlton</b> , Istanbul 96.1                      | 30. <b>La Réserve de Beaulieu</b> , Côte d'Azur 91.5         |
| 7. <b>Il San Pietro di Positano</b> , 95.3                  | 33. <b>Londra Palace</b> , Venice 91.3                       |
| 7. <b>La Bastide de Moustiers</b> , Provence 95.3           | 33. <b>Ritz-Carlton</b> , Berlin 91.3                        |
| 9. <b>Villa San Michele</b> , Tuscany 95.0                  | 35. <b>Domaine des Hauts de Loire</b> , Onzain 91.2          |
| 10. <b>Palace Luzern</b> , Lucerne 94.9                     | 35. <b>Luna Hotel Baglioni</b> , Venice 91.2                 |
| 11. <b>Château de la Chèvre d'Or</b> , Côte d'Azur 94.7     | 37. <b>La Colombe d'Or</b> , Provence 91.1                   |
| 12. <b>Le Meurice</b> , Paris 94.1                          | 37. <b>Victoria-Jungfrau Grand Hotel</b> , Interlaken 91.1   |
| 12. <b>Park Hyatt Paris-Vendôme</b> 94.1                    | 39. <b>Hotel Imperial</b> , Vienna 90.8                      |
| 14. <b>Hotel Taschenbergpalais Kempinski</b> , Dresden 93.9 | 39. <b>Hotel Monaco &amp; Grand Canal</b> , Venice 90.8      |
| 15. <b>Beau-Rivage Palace</b> , Lausanne 93.8               | 39. <b>Hotel Ritz</b> , Madrid 90.8                          |
| 16. <b>Grand-Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat</b> , Côte d'Azur 93.7     | 42. <b>Château Eza</b> , Côte d'Azur 90.4                    |
| 17. <b>Ciragan Palace Kempinski</b> , Istanbul 93.2         | 42. <b>Mandarin Oriental</b> , Munich 90.4                   |
| 18. <b>Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria</b> , Sorrento 93.1   | 44. <b>Raffles Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten</b> , Hamburg 90.2    |
| 18. <b>Hôtel de Paris</b> , Monte Carlo 93.1                | 45. <b>Westin Excelsior</b> , Florence 89.9                  |
| 20. <b>Hôtel Plaza Athénée</b> , Paris 92.6                 | 46. <b>Beau Rivage</b> , Geneva 89.8                         |
| 21. <b>Katiki Hotel</b> , Santorini 92.3                    | 47. <b>Hotel Hassler</b> , Rome 89.7                         |
| 22. <b>Hotel Santa Caterina</b> , Amalfi 92.2               | 47. <b>San Domenico Palace</b> , Sicily 89.7                 |
| 22. <b>Hotel Villa Cipriani</b> , Asolo 92.2                | 49. <b>Baur au Lac</b> , Zurich 89.6                         |
| 24. <b>Hôtel d'Europe</b> , Avignon 92.1                    | 50. <b>Tivoli Palácio de Seteais</b> , Sintra, Portugal 89.5 |
| 25. <b>Hotel Cipriani</b> , Venice 92.0                     | 51. <b>Four Seasons</b> , Prague 89.4                        |
| 26. <b>Château de Bagnols</b> , Beaujolais 91.8             | 51. <b>Hôtel Ritz</b> , Paris 89.4                           |

- 53. **Hotel Alfonso XIII**, Seville 89.1
- 54. **Hotel Lungarno**, Florence 88.9
- 55. **Hotel Goldener Hirsch**, Salzburg 88.8
- 55. **Hotel Gritti Palace**, Venice 88.8
- 57. **Marriott Hotel**, Berlin 88.4
- 57. **Trianon Palace**, Versailles 88.4
- 59. **Hôtel de Crillon**, Paris 88.3
- 60. **Grand Hyatt**, Berlin 88.2
- 61. **Hotel Bauer & Bauer II Palazzo**, Venice 88.0
- 62. **Hotel de Russie**, Rome 87.8
- 63. **Grand Hotel Quisisana**, Capri 87.7
- 64. **Hotel Kämp**, Helsinki 87.4
- 65. **Le Meridien**, Vienna 87.3
- 66. **Grand Hotel**, Florence 87.2
- 66. **Palais de la Méditerranée**, Nice 87.2
- 68. **Kempinski Hotel Corvinus**, Budapest 87.1
- 69. **Four Seasons Hotel Ritz**, Lisbon 87.0
- 70. **Hotel Arts**, Barcelona 86.9
- 71. **St. Regis Grand Hotel**, Rome 86.7
- 72. **The Grand Amsterdam** 86.6
- 72. **Westin Palace**, Madrid 86.6
- 74. **Principe di Savoia**, Milan 86.5
- 75. **Hotel Sacher**, Salzburg 86.2
- 75. **Rome Cavalieri Hilton** 86.2



- 1. **Rialto Hotel on Collins**, Melbourne 94.2
- 2. **Park Hyatt**, Sydney 92.5
- 3. **Lillianfels Blue Mountains**, Katoomba, Australia 91.1
- 4. **The George**, Christchurch, N.Z. 90.9
- 5. **Langham Hotel**, Melbourne 89.7
- 6. **Huka Lodge**, Taupo, N.Z. 89.3
- 7. **The Westin**, Sydney 88.9
- 8. **The InterContinental**, Sydney 87.4
- 9. **Millennium Hotel**, Christchurch, N.Z. 86.7
- 10. **Four Seasons**, Sydney 86.6
- 11. **The Observatory**, Sydney 86.1
- 12. **Grand Hyatt**, Melbourne 85.9
- 13. **Sheraton on the Park**, Sydney 85.1
- 14. **The Westin**, Melbourne 84.7
- 15. **Kilauea Lodge**, Big Island 82.4





Rapturous vertigo: Positano fashions a romantic legend from sheer rock.

Italy

## With the Angels

*Sir Harold Evans wakes up and thinks he has gone to heaven. In Positano, that's an easy mistake to make. And when he comes back to earth, there remains a mystery to solve...*

AT MIDNIGHT IN NAPLES' EMPTY AIRPORT terminal, there were no porters and no baggage carts and no sight of the driver we'd booked. A catch-22 ensued. Yes, said the solitary and grumpy customs agent, I could go and look for the driver. But no, I couldn't come back to help hand-wheel our family luggage through. Next time, backpacks.

The driver, when we found him, was exuberant. Our destination was the small town of Positano, 25 miles

east of Salerno on Italy's Amalfi Coast. He zipped down the autostrada, turning to us and pointing into the darkness, "Pompeii! Pompeii!" Then "Vesuvius! Vesuvius!" and another set of gestures, before he raced into the terrifying corkscrews of the Lattari Mountains. We knew we would never see Vesuvius again. The precipitous twisting road, the kind where you meet yourself three times coming back, was broad enough for maybe one and a half vehicles driven with consummate care. The bus coming at us would surely stop while we negotiated. It didn't. It just took a year off our lives. The volubly charming and dexterous Luigi, continuously spinning the wheel, was in his element. "Positano! Nice, but you go to the wrong place. Amalfi better! Amalfi! I drive you there tomorrow, yes?" We were in no mood to contemplate anything but the prospects of our own survival.

We—my wife, Tina, and our two teenagers, George and Isabel—finally shuddered up to the door of our hotel, Le Sirenuse, an hour and a half later. "Ah," said the night porter, rubbing his hands, "Evans? Yes, Evans, we have a little problem with your accommodations..."

**T**HE NEXT MORNING, while the others slept on, I was borne up

out of these mortal coils by a miraculous act of levitation. I opened my eyes to find that I was floating in a bright sky within fingertip of the orb and cross on the dome of Santa Maria Assunta. Beyond, there beckoned an azure sea. I had clearly been received into heaven, and at that precise moment the Benedictine friars rang the church's bells to celebrate my ascension. (Later that day, it was arranged that we would all be happily ensconced on the same floor—in beautiful rooms, with unintimidating antiques, bed linens perfumed by lavender, and a circular Jacuzzi in the bathroom.)

I never got over that transcendental feeling at Le Sirenuse. Early every morning I walked out on our high, flower-scented 10-by-20-foot terrace, then stretched my wings in graceful circuits over church and town, a happy marriage of the spiritual and the secular. Positano is a riotously high-tiered wedding cake. Colonnaded houses cascade down the steep rocky cliffs into the Tyrrhe-

nian Sea in asymmetric terraces colored iced pink, ocher, crimson, cream, and vanilla. The hectic descent is punctuated by palm trees and lemon and olive groves, perfectly in harmony with the gold and green mosaic of Santa Maria Assunta's majolica dome.

When I came back to earth from my morning levitations, I sat on my terrace laced with bougainvillea and pink poinsettias and, over coffee, croissant, and strawberries, brooded on a mystery: The bells



High water: The pool at Le Sirenuse has views of the beach far below.

"Such a cosmopolitan crowd," I said, whereupon a party of eight announced, "Hi, we're from Hoboken. You?"

had stopped, and I couldn't hear a thing. Le Sirenuse, an eighteenth-century palazzo built into the cliffside, is embraced by the town, and the town has 3,862 souls (not counting the cosmopolitan visitors). Italians are not noted for their reticence. They shout, they ride noisy scooters, and, of course, to make up for that they sing marvelously: Pavarotti was in my room giving vent to "Nessun Dorma," courtesy of the management, at the touch of a button. So why the silence?

The entire population couldn't all be out in the tiny painted fishing boats and sailing craft bobbing about in the bay, or embarked on the ferry to Capri. Clearly, I would have to investigate by leaving the extraterrestrial terrace and venturing into town on foot.

The silence of the town from the terraces of Le Sirenuse was, it turned out, no more than the hush of the theater before curtain up. Within two minutes of walking out of the hotel and down the Via Cristoforo Co-

lombo, my family and I were extras in Act I on an operatic set. A staircase from Colombo led sharply down to the slender winding Via Mulini, which was thronged with people (no vehicles allowed). The buzz never reaches Le Sirenuse because the walls everywhere are so thick and the descents so steep and convoluted. The Via Mulini is festooned with blossoms and filleted by intriguing passageways and little squares. Boutiques line your path, draping fine cottons, linens, silks, and chiffons on the walls, while artists hang their paintings, jewelers display their rings and brooches, and master cobblers stand by to measure you for instant sandals. An arch invites you into a garden restaurant; more steps and more steps, polished by thousands of feet, lead to the Piazza Flavio Gioia and the church. A bevy of pretty miniskirted young women mince by, jewels of some sort adorning bare midriffs. Vows of chastity are clearly required.

**A**CT II OPENS ON the esplanade fronting the beach, Spiaggia Grande. It's an apron stage with such a spectacular backdrop that you can see why it is the venue for the ballet prizes awarded every September in the name of the Russian choreographer Léonide Massine. Massine,

Diaghilev, Nijinsky, Fonteyn, Cranko, and Nureyev all came back to Positano, if not Sorrento. The beachfront restaurants and bars were jolly but packed. We wended our way round to the little Via Regina. Empty tables dotting the slope at O'Capurale were unpromising: Why was nobody about? But it was late, we were hot, and there was shade. It turned out that O'Capurale copes nicely with the linguistically challenged, and the recommended fish was superb. Tina, who, on our voyage to Europe, had routinely denounced the coffee on the *Queen Mary 2* as "diluted mud," gave O'Capurale's her seal of approval, and the fettuccine and the putanesca passed the only test I know for our teenagers: They stopped talking to eat it all.

The beach itself is not much, consisting more of gritty volcanic deposits than of sand, and you pay a small fee for sharing a few pebbles kneecap to kneecap with merry families. George and Isabel were happy causing international incidents in a rented

kayak; we slumped on beach beds with our books. "Such a colorful, cosmopolitan crowd," I remarked to Tina, whereupon our neighboring party of eight introduced themselves. "Hi, we're from Hoboken. You?" Looking up, I could see the beguiling Sirenuse. To the east and the west of our station, medieval watchtowers stood on the heights. After we'd spent an hour on the beach, I was ready to run into the hills with everyone else when the bronze cannons in the towers opened up on an invading armada of Saracen pirates. You don't have to imagine it if you are in Positano on August 15, when each year the Positanians reenact a legendary piratical raid from the middle of the twelfth century, or maybe it was the thirteenth century: There are various versions of the story.

No matter, there is a desperate battle on the beach between the defenders in armor and the half-naked cutthroats. Despite the valor of the Positanians, swarms of pirates reach the altar of the church and carry off into the night a marvelous gold panel painted with a dark-faced Madonna and Child on a throne of embroidered red fabric. But before their boats escape from the bay, a bright and flaming angel appears in the sky. They are overcome by repentance, return the icon to the town, and convert to Christianity, which is the cue for much singing and marching.

John Steinbeck, who wrote a love poem to Positano in 1953, told how at the end of World War II, General Mark Clark gave the town, in lieu of an avenging angel, a surplus Air Force barrage balloon that they could set afire. Whatever, today you can see the gold Madonna in the church where it has hung for centuries. (The thirteenth-century artist is unknown, but the church was dedicated to the Virgin Mary in 1159 by the archbishop of Amalfi, John II.)

**B**ACK AT LE SIRENUSE, ONE'S first instinct is to beg to borrow from the lobby the leather-lined eighteenth-century palanquin in which noble ladies were carried around. I'd left my wings on the terrace, and sustaining the climb back from the beach requires imagining pirates at one's heels (there are porters in town who ferry people around on baggage carts). Curiously, the ascent seemed nothing the next day.

Anyone who is into fitness must rejoice in the hotel spa designed by the celebrated architect Gae Aulenti. It is so elegant—with glass walls and teak floors and state-of-the-art Life-Fitness equipment, laptops, and TV screens—that an hour later you feel you haven't done a thing. (Anyone who feels

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otherwise can retreat to the sauna, bio sauna, and steam bath.) The main swimming pool, on the upper terrace, with a breathtaking view of the town, is also as much an aesthetic pleasure as an athletic facility. The crystal-clear water is maintained at a perfect temperature (unlike so many glutinously overheated American pools). You can take an alfresco lunch around the pool and look down with equanimity on the hot beach below.

A five-star hotel does not stay as fine as Le Sirenuse has for years unless somebody without pretension, but with taste and discrimination, is dedicated to it. The Marchesi Sersale family from Naples has performed that service for 50 years. The core of the hotel is a small house in Positano that the family stopped using before World War II because it had no running water and no electricity. "Naples was continuously bombed in the war," recalls Franco Sersale, the president of Le Sirenuse. "My father, Luigi, was seriously injured, so we escaped to this house in Positano. I had four elder brothers in the war. When they all returned

safely, we kept on living in Positano because by that time it had become an attractive place—very interesting people, pretty women, et cetera."

In 1951, two of the sons converted the house into a hotel with 12 rooms. Marquis Paolo Sersale, the first of the family to manage the hotel, had the distinction of being the only Communist in the royalist town, so with inscrutable logic they elected him mayor. They kept on electing him after he left the Party in 1947. Through a series of expansions that went on into the early seventies, the brothers took the hotel to its current size of 65 rooms on five floors, all descending from the street-level lobby. Most have views, and every floor has some art treasure or another: bronze casts of Ferdinando II and Maria Cristina di Savoia, earlier king and queen of the two Sicilies; a rare Sicilian seventeenth-century crucifix inlaid with mother-of-pearl; two swords inscribed to Ferdinando IV; a model of a sailing vessel executed by prisoners in 1662; and much evidence of the Sersale lineage. There's a framed passport issued to an Ambassador Sersale at the court of the two Sicilies, a painting of a Sersale in the uniform of the Knights of Malta, and a portrait of Cardinal Antonino Sersale (1702–1775) by Carlo Amalfi.

Franco's son, Antonio, runs the hotel today. It still has a family feel about it, which is not to say that it has home cooking. Le Sirenuse serves high-quality Neapolitan cuisine and has its own cooking school, limited to 15 people and dedicated to the nineteenth-century creations of Don Ippolito Cavalcanti, duke of Buonicicco. The service throughout, from the concierge to the cheerful Italian chambermaids, is unobtrusive: Another mystery: We saw no waitresses in any dining place in Positano. Of a morning, when you select your breakfast from a sumptuous display, Franco Sersale sits on the terrace too, preoccupied with his newspaper. Antonio will more often be in the glamorously casual night bar or at dinner in the candlelit dining room, where lemon trees separate the tables and bougainvillea covers the vaulted arches. Once you have gotten used to the vertigo of being poised on the edge of a cliff for anti-pasti, you can watch the sun slip below the headland and gaze at the warm lights of the town, suggestive of a thousand secret lives.

To adapt Samuel Johnson, a man who is tired of Le Sirenuse is tired of life, but there are temptations to which one should yield. A beautiful young woman approached me on the beach from under a little awning that read NOLEGGIO BARCHI LUCIBELLO ("Luci-

bello Rent a Boat"). What she had to offer was boat trips along the coast. We invested \$65 to join another six people for the 50 minutes to Capri, stopping at grottoes on the way. It was a good value and pleasant, but at this time of year the pretty hilltop town and seafront are engulfed. Ristorante Faraglioni, along the fancy Via Camerelle, provided a refuge—at about twice the price of lunch at O'Capurale.

If you stay at Le Sirenuse, there is a grander way to explore the coast. The Sersales make available their vintage speedboat designed by Carlo Riva. What Steinbeck wrote in his elegy to Positano is true of our day with the Riva: It wasn't quite real when we were there and has become beckoningly real now that we've left. I have potted about in all sorts of powerboats for years and want to emphasize that the Riva is in a class apart, not so much for its horsepower (750 hp in two engines) as for the ingenuity of its design for hedonism. It is beautiful to behold, sleekly graceful in mahogany and chrome; its bench seats behind the cockpit are comfortable in high surf; it has a long sunbathing deck; and it is the easiest boat I've encountered for facilitating one's return to the deck from a swim. We all swam through caves and in grottoes with nobody about. Around lunchtime, we anchored just offshore from a restaurant called La Conca del Sogno, near a little private beach for lotus-eaters. We were seduced, as is everyone, by the laid-back charm and fresh-fresh cuisine of Anna and Franco: They keep the catch of the day in big basins of seawater.

On the way back at sunset, we brushed the small archipelago of Li Galli, made up of the three islands representing Parthenope, Leucosia, and Ligeia, the winged Sirens (respectively, "virgin," "white goddess," and "bright-voiced") who Homer tells us tried to lure Odysseus with their melodious voices, lyre, and flute. They took their own lives when he escaped, having bound himself to the mast and stuffed the crew's ears with beeswax. Le Sirenuse takes its name from the myth. We heard its sweet song, and we succumbed. □



Places & Prices

Don't Miss . . .

★ A week does not begin to exhaust the promise of Positano. Unforgettable **Pompeii** is only an hour away (but go early in the morning), the temples and tombs of sixth-century **Paestum** only an hour and a half. For orientation in Positano itself, take the bus that loops through the town (about \$1.25) and stop for lunch at **Da Vincenzo** (172 Viale Pasitea; 39-089-875-128; entrées, \$19–\$28). Above Positano, you can walk the mountain paths, stopping in a tiny trattoria for mozzarella roasted on lemon leaves; or take the bus to **Montepertuso**, a village perched at 1,000 feet—where there is an astonishing hole in the mountain (with a legend attached to it)—and walk back. Recommended Positano restaurants include **Lo Guarracino**, with a fine view (12 Via Positanesi d'America; 39-089-875-794; entrées, \$10–\$24), and **Ristorante Max**, down a staircase, with indoor and outdoor dining in the midst of art and antiques (22 Piazza de Mulini; 39-089-875-056; entrées, \$19–\$65). **O'Capurale's** excellent seafood and fun atmosphere make it a local favorite (12 Via Regina Giovanna; 39-089-811-188; entrées, \$15–\$38). Doubles at **Le Sirenuse** range from \$385 to \$550 in the off-season—which includes November (39-089-875-066; [sirenuse.it](http://sirenuse.it)). —H. E.