



## From Rome to Naples: In The Shadow of Mount Vesuvius

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*In our second instalment of Rome to Naples, Happy Ali writer Trevor Hughes joins his fellow travellers in the back of a 7 seater for the journey to Napoli.*

As you drive down the autostrada the landscape changes. Sharp mountains rear up on both sides scarred by quarries and landslips. Ancient forts and towers, old farmhouses and small villages sit on the very top of these rugged hills. How do people ever get up there?

Napoli itself sits in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius one of Europe's last surviving volcanoes. When the Greeks discovered Napoli it was an area of fierce volcanic activity, spurting geysers, smoking volcanic hills, bubbling tar-pits, and the Greeks named it 'fiery fields'.

Now all that is left is one tired-looking pit from which clouds of sulphurous steam curl upwards and a tiny black mud-and-water pool bubbling away like the witches cauldron in Macbeth. My Chinese visitors are happy. "It looks like the laundry in Hebei City," they observe contentedly, looking down into the clouds of steam.



Kevin at Pexels

The view of Napoli is superb. A broad sweep of a bay with pleasure boats and fishing boats at anchor, steep hills with white-walled houses rising to a formidable castle glowering down over the city. A well-preserved fortress juts out into the sea pointing towards the Isle of Capri and over it all the towering bulk of Vesuvius.

The traffic is astonishing. There appear to be no rules of any kind. It doesn't seem to matter which side of the road you drive on, straight down the middle seems to be the favourite, while traffic lights are purely for decoration. The whole city is a free parking lot. Cars and vans and Vespa scooters covering every inch of pavement. There are even motorcycles parked in the middle of a traffic island, and the din is appalling. Every motorized vehicle has a loud horn and every driver is proud to demonstrate that fact to all his neighbours. The traffic in Cairo is marginally worse. Or maybe not.

The food at the Hotel Vesuvius is appalling but my companions seem happy enough and troop off to bed. I take my life into my hands by taking a taxi to the *centro storico* to do a little bar-hopping. Naples at night

is exactly the same as it is during the day: frantic, manic, utterly disorganized and great fun. I retire at a respectable hour: I have an early start in the morning.

Sunday morning is the time to visit the ruins of Pompeii. My Chinese guests are aghast. 'Sunday is a holiday.' They say. I point out that their entire trip is a holiday, but they do not agree.

'On Sundays in China, we rest,' they tell me.

'What will you do then?'

'Stay in bed.'

I am delighted, for it means that I am free to go there alone instead of acting as an impromptu tour guide.

Pompeii was a rich thriving town, deliberately built on a volcanic plateau because of the difficulty of access (and therefore of attack) from the sea. Unfortunately, they were not to know that they would be the victims of the world's first-ever aerial bombardment. In 79 A.D. in the early hours of the afternoon, Vesuvius exploded into the sky and within minutes Pompeii was obliterated. Those who tried to run were buried alive. Those who took shelter were suffocated.

I headed for the House of the Vanities. It was closed. However, what I really wanted to see was the House of the Mysteries. This was once the villa of a rich nobleman, thought to be a follower of the officially banned but widely tolerated cult of Dionysius. The house has a series of frescoes showing young girls being initiated into the cult. Lots of flagellation and bare breasts and the like. Just the thing for a wet Sunday morning.

Off I went, full of anticipation to find that the path was barred by a locked iron gate. It soon transpired that just about everything of interest in Pompeii was either closed to the public or had been carted off to a museum in Naples (closed on Sundays). What is the earthly point of opening to the public a site and then ensuring that nothing worth seeing is on view?

I walked to the walled amphitheatre of Pompeii (at least they cannot put that in a museum). What they had done was to disinter it from the ashes and then to leave it untended so that weeds grew knee-high on the floor of the stadium, and among the rough stones seats. Mercifully it was almost deserted, the other tourists presumably trying to find the House of the Mysteries, or tucked up in bed. I stood alone in the centre of the silent amphitheatre imagining the crowds roaring for blood and myself waiting for the entry of my opponent, knowing that within a few minutes one of us would die. For how many people had this been the last sight they ever saw on earth? Behind the amphitheatre, poignantly, is a graveyard.

One memory of Pompeii still remains. This is an area called the Garden of the Fugitives. Here ten or twelve people tried to hide from the wrath of Vesuvius, and all died. The shapes of their bodies are perfectly preserved by the ubiquitous ash which covered everything, even down to the expressions on their faces. One man lies on his side, eyes closed, peaceful as if he had lain down 1900 years ago to take a nap from which he never awoke. But another lies on his back, arms and legs raised in fear and torment, eyes bulging and mouth open wide, teeth bared in a long scream of agony which I imagined for a moment I could still hear, echoing down through the ages amid the haunted ruins of the town which dared to sit on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius and think itself safe.



The Ruins of Pompeii. Photo Credit: Jack Hunter on Unsplash

Sunday afternoon in Italy is the time of the modern-day gladiator. They do not fight with swords and spears but I am sure that the Romans of old roared no less bloodthirstily at their champions than today's crowds chant the names of their football heroes. I have my ticket to watch Napoli, chief gladiator Diego Maradona, the whingeing whining, complaining Argentinian who just happens to be the finest football player in the world, versus A.C. Milan; hero, Ruud Gullit, he of the Rastafarian dreadlocks and quicksilver reflexes.

My Chinese guests call an impromptu conference. Could watching football be classified as work? If so, they'll stay in bed. Two are for, two against. I have the casting vote and off we all go to the Stadio Sao Paolo, home of the Napoli soccer team.





Argentinian footballer Diego Maradona. Still a demigod in Naples. Jack Hunter, Unsplash

A hundred yards from the stadium the noise is already deafening and the excitement in the air so thick you can feel your pulse racing. Tough-looking youths were trying to climb the stadium walls and were repulsed by officials and police much as invaders used to be thrown back from the battlements of Naples' forts and castles in the old days. Some had ladders, others were thrown bodily at the tops of the walls by their friends.

I had five tickets to the best seats in the house and wondered what my chances would be if that were to become known to the youths trying so desperately to force their way inside.

If the noise outside the stadium is intense, inside it is unbelievable. Fireworks exploding continually; flares leaving huge swathes of red and white smoke hanging in the air; drum beats echoing incessantly round the ground; cymbals clashing and the crowd keeping up a continuous furious chanting ...'Napoli...Napoli... Napoli...'

I would not have been surprised to see a few Christians waiting for the lions to emerge.

The excitement became a frenzy as the teams appeared. At halftime, there was no score. As the game wore on the crowd noise built up higher and higher as they tried to whip their team into ever more frenetic action and then with five minutes remaining a Napoli forward was scythed down in front of Milan's goal. Maradona stepped forward and Napoli had scored. I thought the second tier of the cantilever stand would collapse as ten thousand delirious Neapolitans jumped up and down in unison amid the flash and roar of exploding fireworks. It seemed that nothing could break the hysteria but in the very last minute, as Napoli celebrated their impending victory Gullit drove home the equaliser and the silence could be heard almost as loudly as the victory celebrations earlier.

I turned to my Chinese companions to see what they thought of Gullit's dramatic finish to the game. They were all – all four of them – fast asleep.

As I walked away I could not help but reflect on the earlier part of that Sunday when I had stood in a stadium where there were no honourable draws; where every contest had a winner and a loser, and the loser could not walk away afterwards hoping that his luck would be better the following week.