



**See Naples and die
Ideally not as a direct consequence.**

*A respite in Covid-19 restrictions afforded us a road trip to Apulia in southern Italy, beginning and ending in this City of Poetry.
This is how it went.*

Like many of the best things in life, Naples is hard work. Our hotel, in the heart of the old town, was a perfect base from which to toil in order to see for ourselves a selection of the city's jewels, including Caravaggio's Seven Works of Mercy in the Pio Monte della Misericordia

and Giuseppe Sanmartino's Veiled Christ in the Cappella Sansevero, and wonder how a sculptor can render white marble seemingly transparent. In any other city, you would have to queue or book to get a close look at these masterpieces and it is perhaps a measure of the sheer abundance of its treasures that in Naples you can just saunter in and gawp at your leisure.



The hard work is in navigating the narrow, crowded, frequently unnamed streets, paved with ancient stones displaced unevenly by centuries of use. If, between dodging motor-bikes, cars, trucks and other tourists, you notice that the bricks sometimes visible beneath the crumbling plaster of

innumerable once-splendid buildings lining every street look a lot like the roman bricks you see in pristinely-displayed Roman ruins in archaeological sites elsewhere in Europe, then you are on to something.

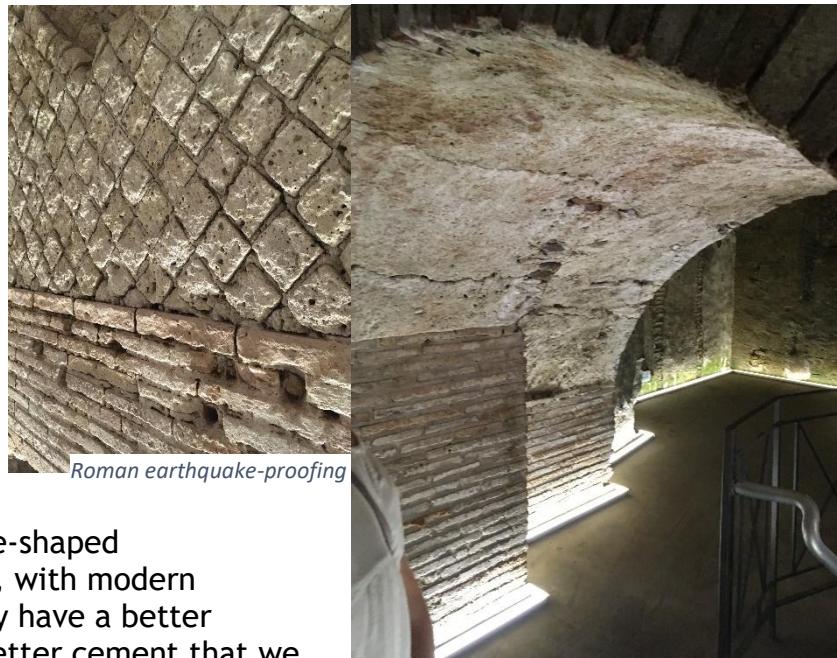
Arriving at the object of your quest, you find that the opening hours do not correspond to what it says on the website and you have to buy your tickets somewhere else and come back. Once you've gained entrance, though, the relative calm of a capella, chiesa, duomo or museum, and the invitation to calm contemplation, unimaginable only a few moments ago, is pure magic.

If, having climbed and descended countless narrow stairways that looked like short-cuts from one part to another, you can still countenance several hundred more steps, then visit Napoli Sotterranea, a network of vast subterranean chambers you never imagined could exist. A guided tour will fill you in on the what, why and when and much besides. You learn, for example, that, over the centuries, new buildings were routinely built on top of existing buildings, using the latter as foundations for the former. The bricks you saw are indeed Roman and you wonder that they have for so long supported the massive weight of the edifices piled on top of them. When you find out that parts of the old town sit on top of what was a Roman theatre, you wonder what lies beneath the hotel you are staying in, the restaurant you are eating in, the bed you slept in.



It turns out that vast underground caverns are also useful for disposal of garbage and anything, or -one, else you might want to get rid of; they can also make great water reservoirs and bomb shelters, though not all at the same time.

In a region that has more than its share of earthquakes and volcanos, you might wonder that anything at all is left at all of those Roman buildings! But then you learn how Roman architects proofed buildings against those earthquakes using lattice-shaped configurations of bricks. Not only that, with modern microscopy and volcanology, we finally have a better understanding of why Romans made better cement that we manage today - without using massive amounts of electricity - in fact, no electricity at all.



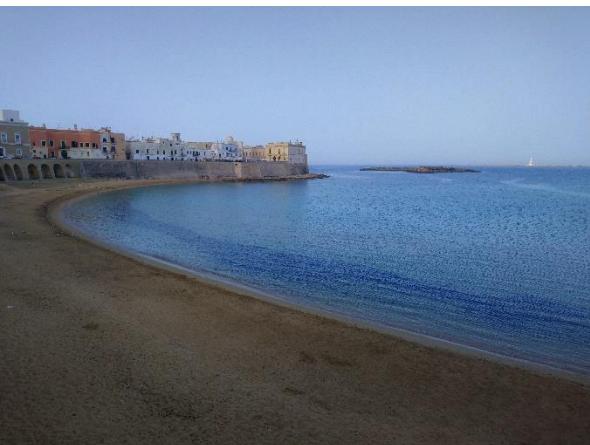
Even if you've already "seen" Pompeii, go there again: there's more of it than there was, or at least they've uncovered more of it since you were last there. And now marvel again at the sheer size and complexity of this prosperous city. Its dedication to and sophistication of its art and manufacturing is mind-boggling and you puzzle at the forces that caused western civilisation to regress for the next thousand years. Could that happen again?

You may find that your energy levels and tolerance of Neapolitan abundance and chaos is limited. And so it was that, after two days, a deep breath was taken, and in a rented car, we set off toward Apulia, the heel of Italy, for the relative respite of countryside and pleasures of a more rustic nature.



Our first stop was Alberobello, to stay in a trullo, one of hundreds of trulli, the main attraction of this picturesque, sixteenth century farming community. More quaint than comfortable, staying in a genuine pixie cottage is something you should probably do at least once in your life.

From there to Gallipoli. Not the better-known one on the Dardanelles in Turkey, this Gallipoli (which means beautiful town in ancient Greek) sits on the west coast of Salento. For us, the appeal was a sandy, public beach in the middle of the historic centre, built in a twelfth century citadel abutting a medieval fortress.



The sea water is crystal clear, something that is, alas, becoming harder to find these days, wherever you are. But the town management has yet to master the trick of keeping streets and water-side free of human waste, chemical and biological. Hundreds of cats do a laudable job of keeping the local rat population in check, but occasionally you sense that their success rate is not quite 100%. If you had in mind a relaxing dinner cooled by a gentle marine breeze and serenaded by the lapping of calm Mediterranean waves or some of Italy's near-unrivalled trove of traditional and classical music, then you might be

disappointed. Dreary, synthesised, thudding "music" and a cocktail of distinctly un-marine odours are ubiquitous to the Gallipolitan sea-front. We ate inside.

Our hotel gave directly on to the water-front and we stayed two nights, mainly to cool off at the end each day the very convenient beach. A bonus was a visit to the Basilica Concattedrale di Sant'Agata Vergine, with its rich carvings, frescoes and marble inlays that perfectly reflect the fabulous wealth once enjoyed by this city.

If you're really into baroque cathedrals and basilicas, then make a bee-line for Lecce. Even if you're not a baroque art nut, these places are delightfully cool inside, and generally don't feature synthesised noise. The treasures of Lecce are so abundant that you have to be choosy. In forty-degree heat, we lurched from cathedral to a remarkably well-preserved Roman amphitheatre, before escaping to our next stop in Ostuni.

Like nearby Aberobello, Ostuni perches on a steep but pretty hillside overlooking lovely countryside. Its narrow streets are lined with picturesque white houses, one of which was our lodging for the night. The Italian holiday season had by then begun and the town had already filled with tourists, so the best way to appreciate its charms was a very early-morning stroll while everyone else was still asleep.



Next stop was a final night in Naples. This time, with a new mission: having seen and learned so much about Pompeii, we now had to see the treasures that had been sequestered in the city's archaeological museum, safe from sticky tourist fingers. The mezzanine and first floor will amaze you all over again. How on earth did they make frescoes that could withstand one of the most violent volcanic eruptions ever? And what about mosaics assembled from tiles measuring no more than three millimetres square? We spent two hours in this wonderfully cool, spacious, sixteenth century building, twice as long as our previous record for a museum. In the end, we had to leave in time for our flight back to Paris.

We also managed a tour of the Teatro de San Carlos, which we learned is the first modern opera theatre in the world, built in 1737 with an astonishing six rows of loggia boxes to meet the city's fabled love of fine music, though it at first failed to appreciate Caruso, one of Naples' most celebrated offspring and now seems to have forgotten its musical patrimony.

Do you ever wonder what was the source of the colossal wealth behind the construction and decoration of these monuments? The answer lies mostly in the thousands of hectares of ancient olive groves you drive through just about everywhere you go in Apulia. Its not just that they were all mad about aïoli, though they probably were, but as a video display in the fortress of Gallipoli explains, the oil was sought throughout Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa for lighting, as it could be carried around in a neat little lamp, of the Aladdin variety, and neither dripped wax everywhere nor emitted nasty, toxic fumes.



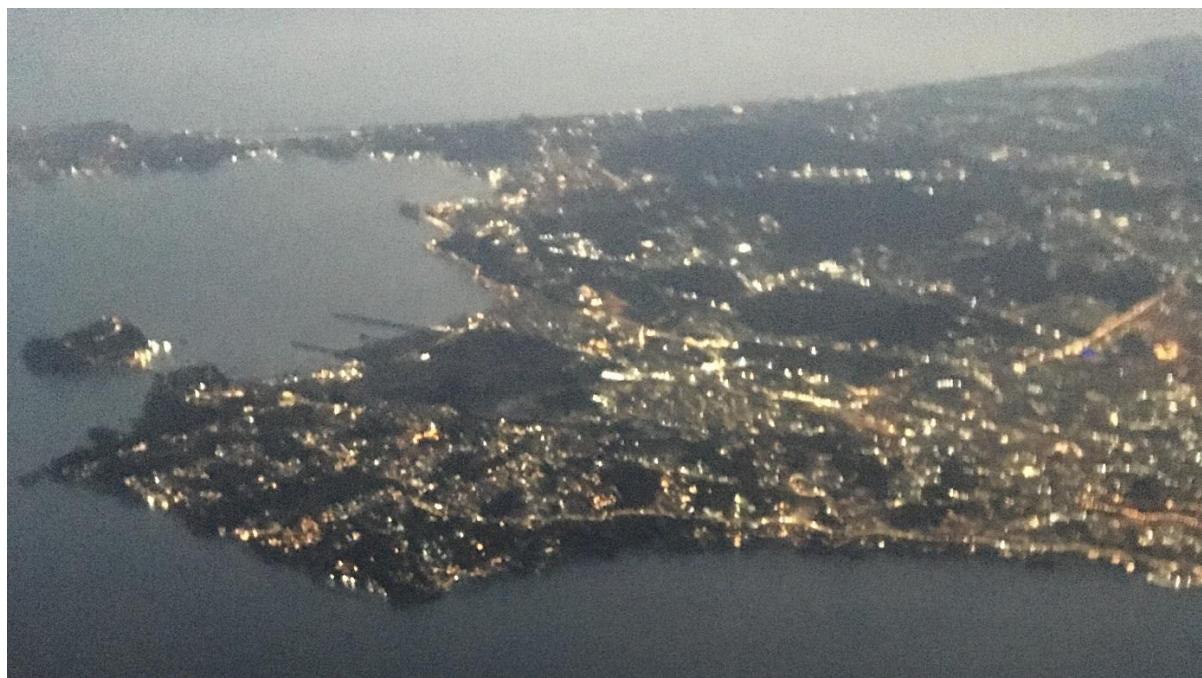
The extraordinary edifices, frescoes and mosaics of Pompeii were, on the other hand, created with income from farming wheat and wool, which were processed into textiles and flour for distribution and trade via nearby deep-water, Mediterranean ports, of which Naples was a departure point for prodigious agricultural abundance for a globalised economy.

Naples, Pompeii, Gallipoli and Lecce were fabulously rich places. But, if you were part of the vast majority of their inhabitants, then you were probably either a slave (perhaps one who helped dig the gigantic subterranean vaults below Naples)

or you worked for starvation wages, with no prospect of shedding your lowly tag. This was an economic system, more feudal than democratic or capitalist, that makes our increasingly skewed distribution of wealth seem positively egalitarian. Labour was the cheapest of all commodities.

With over an hour to wait in the gate lounge, we decided to watch the second part of a documentary about Naples that we started before we left home. We learned that the region's geology cannot easily be separated from its history, architecture and art. When you learn about the gigantic caldera of Pozzuoli, slightly to the west of Naples, and Vesuvius, slightly to the east, which in 79 AD sent rocks and lava shooting 34 kilometres into the air, you get a tingly feeling. But then you learn about continuous, intensive monitoring of what is going on beneath your moulded plastic seat and about the detailed evacuation to give Neapolitans 72 hours' notice to get out or die. As you reflect on the likely outcome of this exercise, you feel slightly anxious to see that your flight has been delayed by fifteen minutes.

This was my fifth visit to Naples. We are already planning the sixth.

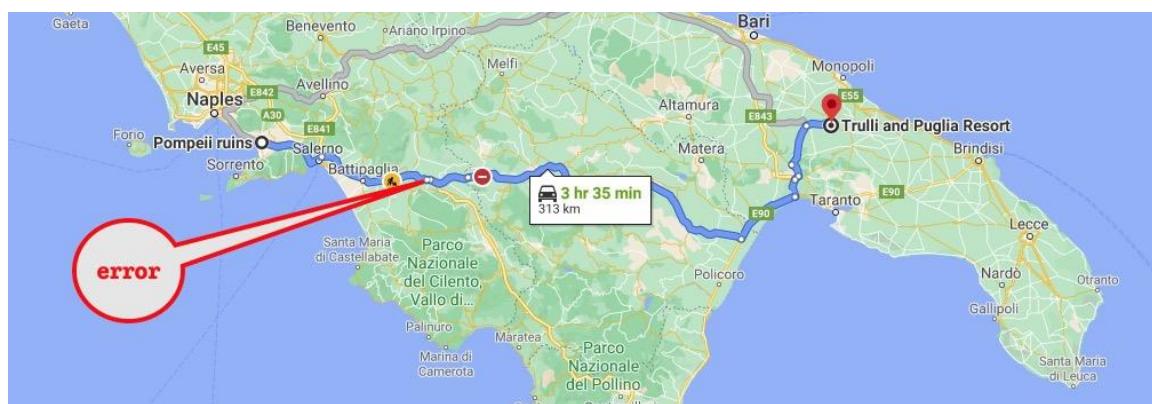


Alberto, who did all the hard work, recalls...

Beyond the artistic, architectural and geographical beauty that this voyage opened my eyes to, what I won't forget easily are some happy coincidences that spared us more than a little practical anxiety. Having not driven a car for at least two years, I suddenly found myself immersed in Neapolitan traffic, famous for its unruliness, guided only by an ageing smartphone (a 2016 model iPhone, to be precise), which did little to calm my nerves. A measure of my anxiety is that I resorted to adding Frances as a second driver in the car rental contract!

As it happened, we managed to get from car rental to the Pompeii *autostrada* without incident. But the comfort of the *autostrada* lasted only until we turned off to go reach Pompeii, which is when stress levels mounted again. Having already bought "avoid-the-queue" tickets for the archaeological site, we were keen to, erm, avoid the queue, but which was the right turn off? The tiny iPhone screen had a habit of changing too rapidly for me to get my bearings. Even Frances seemed a bit stressed. Seeking a quiet spot to look more closely at the phone's directions, we turned into a non-descript parking lot (which looked to me a bit like a supermarket). A young man walked toward us and directed us, in his own combination of English and arm-waving Italian, to park "there". Sensing our anxiety, he assured us we were in "the right place" (for what? one could ask, but didn't). Seeing our tickets, he said all was good, he would sort out our audio-guides and we didn't have to pay any more money. His name was Mario. Super-Mario. Its easier to remember that way, he said. But we must hurry, as our tickets were time-limited, and no, we didn't have another hour and a half to get in: Go! We went. It happened that the machines didn't let us in, but the woman substituting for the machines took the view that it was easier to wave us through than to endure our protests in three non-Italian languages.

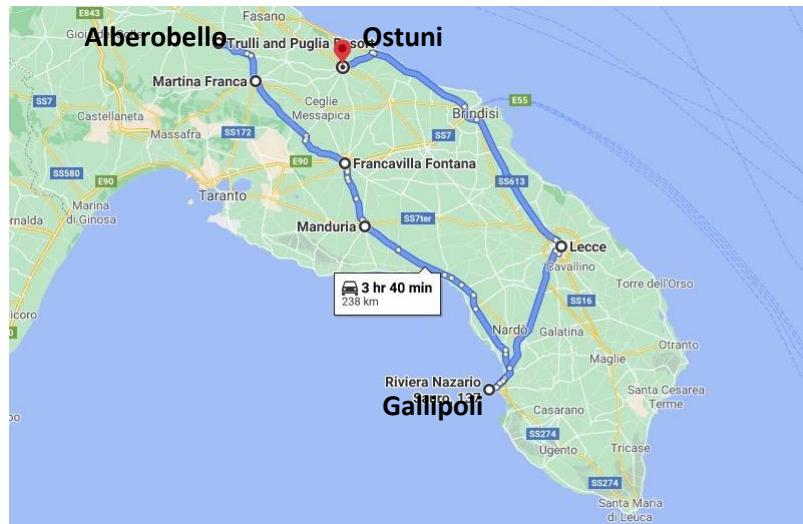
The road from Pompeii to Alberobello took more than four hours, partly because the road was quite busy and partly because the little telephone screen lead to the inevitable wrong turn and, naturally, straight into a tunnel with a traffic jam due to an accident up ahead.



A bit more than an hour short of Alberobello, we stopped at a service station to use the toilets and fill the petrol tank. This was not the ideal time to realise we didn't know what type of fuel the car took. Frances thought it sounded like a diesel, but this is something you need to get right. The booklet in the glove-box indicated a couple of models with different types of fuel. OK, but which model did we have (they do all look the same)? Eventually we found it - not diesel, so, luckily, we didn't listen to Frances. But we blinked in astonishment when, starting up the car again, now with the iPhone already plugged in to the USB socket, the screen on the car's dashboard suddenly lit up with our route now showing clearly enough that I could see it from the driver's seat. Bingo! Lower stress levels all round.

The trip to Alberobello and the Trulli & Puglia resort was exhausting for me, both physically and mentally, but I wasn't quite prepared for the experience of staying the night in a trullo - despite Frances' warning about the stone pixie huts dotting fields along the way.

From then on, the trip to Gallipoli, Lecce and La Dama Bianca in Ostuni, went smoothly. Having directions I could actually see, ~~s~~ one thing but also leaving busy autostradas for near-empty and quite picturesque local roads was a boon to my enjoyment.



Another surprise was waiting for us on the road from Ostuni to Naples.



This leg of our trip was entirely on the *autostrada*. At the first booth we came to, the machine spat out a ticket. Entirely illegible, we assumed it was a receipt left by the previous driver, gave it little thought and tossed it into the dashboard cavity. Some distance on, a young man, possibly homeless, and almost certainly begging, stood at the next booth, partially blocking our access to the machine there, and offering “help”. Of course, his “help” only made it harder to work out what was now required, not least because he kept insisting that I give him my credit card. The machine seemed to want a “ticket” and it finally dawned on us that it meant the ticket that had been spat out at us previously. We fed it the ticket, at which it merrily deducted €20 or so from the card and opened the gate. We were on our way. The lesson is not to throw away random tickets just because you don’t know what they’re for! That was our fourth happy surprise.

This map shows our round-trip from and to Naples.

