

Travel Italy



“Of course, whatever the season, the humble but lucrative lemon is king



THREE MORE OFF-PEAK ESCAPES

SAFFRON HARVEST IN MARRAKESH

Even the most committed heat-seekers can struggle with Marrakesh in the summer months. After that, though, temperatures are balmy, typically dipping only as far as the mid-teens — and with this many hammams to choose from, you can easily get steamy indoors instead. As well as an altogether less busy Medina, the post-summer shoulder season also heralds the annual harvest of saffron, above, in early November, when the Red City’s farms turn a delicate shade of purple. **Details** Seven nights’ B&B at the Mövenpick Hotel Mansour Eddahbi from £483pp, including flights (loveholidays.com)



There is, however, a far greater emphasis on spirituality and wellness come the colder months (although it’s practically tropical compared with Blighty) — lean in at the new Six Senses, which launches its Alma Festival (“a soul adventure”) next month. **Details** Seven nights’ B&B at the Six Senses Ibiza from £1,773pp, including flights (ba.com)

WINTER WARMTH IN CRETE

One of the warmest Greek islands, Crete is among the destinations aiming to cash in on “thermal tourism” this winter, as UK holidaymakers swap falling temperatures and rising energy costs for longer stays in southern Europe. Last month the Greek prime minister announced plans to extend the tourist season into November and potentially beyond to accommodate the anticipated demand. And while some Cretan businesses will close, the Palace of Knossos ruins, Psychro Cave, and the Heraklion Archaeological Museum (£5 or free on the first Sunday of the month; heraklionmuseum.gr) are explorably year-round. **Details** B&B doubles at Manili Boutique Suites & Villas from £94 (manili.gr). Fly to Heraklion **Hannah Ralph**

LOW-KEY CLUBBING IN IBIZA

The party is never truly over on the White Island — a low-key club scene lingers long after the final “closing parties” bring an official end to Ibiza’s season in early October. La Imprinta, for instance, maintains a lively event schedule until the end of the year, culminating in a sensational New Year’s Eve extravaganza. And Lío Ibiza, part of the legendary Pacha Group, has become the off-season spot since it started catering to winter crowds in 2019.

Clockwise from far left: the view of Minori from Ravello; the 18th-century Basilica of St Trofimena in Minori; preparing ravioli

AMALFI WITH NO CROWDS

The tourists have left and hotels are cheaper but the sun is still out – Emma J Page says winter on Italy’s seaside will steal your heart

Clear skies, crystal waters, chiselled mountains studded with lemon groves – picture the Amalfi coast and this is the scene you’re most likely to conjure. Languid summer afternoons that melt into aperitivo hour; the familiar sound of scooters; the occasional blast of a horn as an unwieldy bus navigates a hairpin bend. Having summured here on countless occasions, these are scenes I could revisit in my sleep. Until recently I had never wintered on this stretch of southern Italy. But from now on I’ve decided to ditch the high season for good. Why? Because travelling at this time means that you get to experience the Amalfi coast just as the locals live it.

known, postcard-pretty Positano, and is more appealing for it. It’s still lively at this time of year, with something always going on, from football games on the beachside court to a thriving weekly market. Nestled in a compact bay, west of its bigger sibling Maiori and northeast of the former maritime republic of Amalfi, a clutch of narrow alleyways lead off its main shop-studded artery, Corso Vittorio Emanuele, which runs perpendicular to the sea. It’s here that the locals enjoy a passeggiata at least twice daily, where children freewheel on bikes, espressos are downed at Patrizia’s modest kiosk and gossip is passed between locals like hot potatoes. Directly above sits the quieter hilltop village of Ravello, where Gore Vidal spent several summers writing from La Rondinaia – a villa clinging to the cliff’s edge in shady gardens with a bird’s-eye view of the ocean below.

The key to travelling here out of season is to manage your expectations. You won’t find ferries ready to run you between Amalfi and Positano whenever you feel like it, or an exhaustive choice of restaurants and bars. But what you will find instead is an unexpectedly mild climate (even in the depths of January you can breakfast on a balcony quite happily), an affordable bus service threading between coastal towns – useful when the boats are less reliable – and endless potential for scenic hillside walks in milder temperatures, all with virtually no other tourists. Yes, there are haphazard opening hours, but in exchange you can enjoy the near-empty beaches and daily strolls along the seafront, where the thumps of the ocean are punctuated by the tolling of church bells. And once you’ve worked up an appetite, there’s the comforting certainty of good food on tap without the usual queues or competition. Minori is a town with a long pasta-making tradition, particularly birboni, a wholewheat pasta similar to linguine, and ndunderi – gnocchi made with ricotta originally created using the by-products from the cheese production process. The pasta makers, affectionately christened *culi bianchi* (“white bottoms”, in reference

to the flour smudged on their behinds), used to hang row upon row of the stuff along the seafront to dry, and their passion for it can still be seen in the handmade selection of ravioli at the local *pastaita*, which sells portions in paper bags for simple home-cooking. Buying essentials here is a ritualistic experience, whether you’re choosing cherry tomatoes grown on the hillsides at Michele’s, one of the local greengrocers, or plump prawns at the fishmonger’s. Finding what you need involves keeping your eyes peeled: every store contains a charmingly jumbled array of produce – loo rolls balance on top of refrigerated goods; chocolate next to the toothpaste. If all that sounds like hard work, there are still excellent options for eating out. Gino and O’ Sarracino pizzerias offer crisp pizzas, from classic margherita to the more unusual toppings, such as pumpkin and porcini, starting at about £4. And on weekends Giardinello is packed with locals having Sunday lunch, whether it’s a simply cooked fresh white fish, such as local sea bream, or classic gnocchi with anchovy pesto (ristorantegiardinello.com). And the place is not short on culture either. The 18th-century main church,

Basilica di Santa Trofimena, features an opulent custard-coloured façade, a grey-and-white Wedgwood-like interior and an impressive bell tower; it chimes majestically at 5pm daily. Minori also harbours the remains of a semi-excavated Roman villa, incongruously sitting among the more modern buildings and partially covered by a quotidian car park. In the winter months you can have both of these to yourself. It’s precisely this kind of raw beauty that intrigues. It’s more than likely that scaffolding will be covering some of the finer buildings for repairs and that the outdoor votive altars will be being touched up. But it offers a kind of attraction that’s completely unfiltered – like seeing a new partner first thing in the morning, with all the imperfections suddenly revealed. It’s a visceral and ultimately more authentic connection with this eternally popular coastline. Of course, whatever the season, the humble but lucrative lemon is king. Every available hillside is populated with trees, including those that sprout the gigantic, gnarled fruits forever associated with Amalfi. So it makes sense to wander the Sentiero dei Limoni (Path of Lemons) that winds its way between Minori and Maiori

on a leisurely but sometimes steep trek that rewards you with breathtaking coastal views and a glimpse of the fruits, safely incubated under netting until late spring. Stay at the Limoneto Annunziata lemon grove, where the same family, headed by Ferdinando Bottone, have been farming for more than a century, still using the same ancient brass scales and secateurs of their forebears. Self-contained studio rooms, each with kitchens and panoramic views over Minori, are available from £51 a night, or you can book a simple *aperitivo* or a tour of the lemon grove (from £40pp; limoneto-annunziata.business.site). Winter’s milder climate is an ideal time to explore on foot the hills that connect these coastal towns – something that would be unthinkable in summer’s stifling heat. Minori is connected to Ravello via about 1,500 steps on a path that takes the reasonably fit (and those with good knees) past tiny churches, modest altars chiselled into walls and, of course, jaw-dropping coastal vistas of tree-studded hillsides, lemon groves, farm buildings and the vast expanse of Mediterranean beyond. Another option is to head to nearby Scala and its tiny suburb of Pontone. Walking through pine woods, inhaling the scent of fig trees and wild garlic

trodden underfoot, you can take the well-signposted mountain pathway to La Torre dello Ziro, the remains of a 13th-century watchtower built to guard against attack by Saracen pirates. From here it’s an easy amble down to Atrani and your reward: grilled amberjack and roasted vegetables served on hand-painted ceramics at Le Palme. For trips further afield Sita, the local bus service, can transport you to Atrani (10 minutes), Amalfi (15 minutes), Positano (40 minutes) and Sorrento (about 2 hours), with unlimited journeys on a 24-hour ticket available at the local shop for about £9, and singles for much less. In the other direction, the gritty port city of Salerno is a less obvious choice, but worth a visit; its run-of-the-mill main street winds up to crumbling 19th-century buildings fronted with wrought-iron balconies and scrawled graffiti. Here, on a crisp February morning, I had a coffee and freshly baked cream croissant that still makes my mouth water at Rex, little more than a hole-in-the-wall café.



A shrine to St Lucia on a Minori roadside

Having a guide will bring a new dimension to your experience – with their local know-how they can take you wine-tasting or behind the scenes in one of the mozzarella factories. If the budget stretches you can book a trip to see the Greek temples at Paestum, or impressive Vesuvius, combined with a stop at the ruins of Pompeii. Ravello Car Service, which runs the latter (from £350 a day) also offers affordable excursions, as well as brilliantly comfortable airport transfers (£130 each way; ravellocarservice.com). For behind-the-scenes trips to Naples look up the excellent Filippo Abbate (about £35 an hour; private-driver-amalficoast.com). Minori was just waking from its slumber as I prepared to leave. The scaffolding was coming down to reveal a finely repainted frescoed altar and the town once again spilled outdoors: schoolchildren chattered on their way home; parents lingered on the church steps; regulars relaxed over beers at Bar Bambi; two embroiled lovers were interrupted by the greeting of a passing priest. After spending a prolonged winter here, I can’t deny that this coast, usually so keenly associated with summer, tugged at my heartstrings in unexpected ways.

Emma J Page travelled independently. Five nights’ B&B for two from £330 (villaromanahotels.com); five nights’ self-catering for three in a seafront apartment with Amalfi dreams from £350 (amalfidreams.com); one night’s self-catering for three at CdApartments from £87 (cdapartments.it); scooter rental from £55 per day (cdarent.com). Fly to Naples