

slow living

Next door to glittering Amalfi is low-key Cilento - one of Italy's best kept secrets. We spent the night at the region's most charming Locanda and lived life at a leisurely pace.

Text Elin af Klintberg *Foto* Buster Duro

To say that Sebastiano Petrilli has a green thumb would be an understatement. Rather best to say he melted, merged and became one with his overgrown garden. He sneaks around it, which to me looks only like weeds, barefoot with eyes shining. Baikal, his dog and faithful companion, follows each step he takes.

Suddenly, Sebastiano squats down to examine a clump, and then proudly displays some dandelion leaves. "This, my friend, is the mustard plant which is a key ingredient in my Miraculousoup" says Sebastiano in impeccable English, revealing his background as an entrepreneur in London for over 20 years. A stay which came to an abrupt end. One day five years ago, Sebastiano decided he had had enough. He hung his jacket on the chair in his lavish office and returned to his boyhood Italy and the Medieval village of San Giovanni a Piro in Cilento, where his family lived for generations.

"The longing for a different life became too strong. I could no longer run around and around the hamster wheel, where a straightforward career and a fat bank account is the measure of success. I wanted to work with my body again. "

He returned to a region of southern Italy, which looks almost the same today as when he left it. Just a one hour drive away is the dazzling, but heavily exploited, Amalfi with its postcard beautiful views that has attracted jetsetters, tourists and the curious since the fifties.

There is none of that glamour to retrieve in rustic Cilento. A man looking starry-eyed at restaurants, boutique hotels and lavish yachts should stay with the neighbours in the north. But look carefully, and the more untouched and odd Cilento is *the* place to see.

At the same time, here, you have to know where to look. Jolting around in Sebastiano's 4x4 Fiat Panda, the region Campania paints a diverse landscape. On the one hand with charming port towns, stunning beaches, genuine locanda and historical mountain villages—and on the other hand, abandoned construction sites, carelessly built apartment complexes and plastic chairs in droves.

“Cilento is slow... The food, the music and lifestyle. Everything is slow,” says Sebastiano, as he presses hard on the gas to make it up the little dirt road leading to afternoon shade under the oaks at Locanda San Fantino.

The view from here is amazing. In clear weather, you can see the 25-meter high statue of Christ in Maratea across the bay. There are undulating hills sloping into the clear blue salty sea that this same morning, we bathed in. For a small fee, from the port of Scario, one can jump on a boat and ask to be driven to one of the many small beaches only accessible by sea. When Sebastiano packs a hearty lunch and a bottle of wine, you don’t just get a very private buzz, but an actual lifestyle.

“We always buy white lime-sized figs and small red artichokes to bring home. The fruit and vegetables from here have more taste as they matured in the sun in peace” says Paola.

An older couple stays a bit off to the side. It turns out they founded and run one of London’s hottest clubs. Now they have come to Italy to rest up a few days. He and his wife say that they are looking for a house in the area. “Brits and Italians understand each other, unlike the French” he says.

The tourist boom in Cilento still hasn’t arrived. According to Sebastiano, this is because two major road constructions in the region dragged on and on, making the area difficult to reach, and that there were no good places to stay overnight.

Sebastiano and some other followers have solved that problem.

The sand-coloured main villa has seven spacious and beautiful bedrooms: whitewashed walls and terracotta floors intermingle with crisp bed linens and the exciting findings Sebastiano and his wife have discovered by the nearby river. In the large, eclectically decorated family room with fireplace, are homegrown furniture, a piano and long tables, gossipy photo books, piles of National Geographic, torn-out recipes and a big record collection of jazz and opera music, belonging to the owner.

For so it is, to check in to the San Fantino is about surrendering in Sebastianos hands, and accepting that you will never get to see the traces of any menu or wine list.

For breakfast, guests are treated to homemade yogurt, freshly baked bread and plum jam. Ask for a croissant and Sebastiano would only snort. Dinner is served at the long table, with the other guests, and solemnly Sebastiano, the amazing host he is, presents the four-course meal he has cooked for several days. Chubby pasta, called “cavatielli”, lamb in rosemary and garlic marinated vegetables adorn the table.

“Everything I serve comes from my own estate, except for the vodka” says Sebastiano and replenishes our glasses with San Fantino Rosso from 2010.

But it all starts with Miraculous Soup, the bright green soup prepared according to a secret recipe—and the smoke from our deep red soup plates. A silence settles at the table as the smooth, tasty soup winds up our palates. Someone sighs with pleasure. Sebastiano gazes out over his guests and looks genuinely happy.

Beaches for a whole day - the water here is the cleanest in the country, thanks to the many marine reserves set up along the wild coastal strip adorned with caves.

By the beautiful, newly finished pool outside the hotel, some of the guests are relaxing and reading. A young Italian couple from Milan is in Cilento for the food's sake. "Regional buffalo mozzarella and ricotta is the best in the country ' says Paola. Together with her bearded boyfriend, she visits the region at least once a year. "We usually eat at farms and rustic taverns. This is not only slow food".

Tips

Top 3

Here's where to stay: Locanda San Fantino (Sanfantino.com) –approximately 1500 SKR per night.

Bonus: Do not miss a swim in the nearby River Bussento, crystal clear turquoise water with small waterfalls.

Best food: Seafood that melts in your mouth can be found at the tavern U'Zifaro (Via Lungomare 43) down by the harbour in Scario.

"Fruits and vegetables have more taste because they mature slowly in the sun ... Here slow food is not just a buzzword, but a way of life."

Travel

Italy