



Peer into Praiano, Italy, and its breathtaking sights.


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## Hey, Neighbor

By Nicole Cotroneo  
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From lounge chairs on the beach or hilltops in town, Praiano shimmers by the sea. (Nicole Cotroneo - Nicole Cotroneo)

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Maybe I was too excited by the online photos of the villa's rooftop terrace, with its uninterrupted views of the Tyrrhenian Sea, or the description of Praiano as a dreamy little fishing village on Italy's Amalfi Coast. Or maybe it was the relatively affordable rental price. Something must have distracted me from the part about the steps -- endless, unrelenting steps -- that I'd have to climb to gain entrance to my private piece of the divine coast.

It was right there on the Web page: "This apartment lies in the upper part of Praiano, in a tranquil and very panoramic area with a view of the gulf of Positano. You get there up a flight of about a hundred steps . . ."

I am toned and fit. I go to the gym. I wouldn't let a flight of steps deter me from renting a villa in which I planned to spend one week of unparalleled relaxation.

Three thousand six hundred steps later, about 36 trips up and down the stairs leading from the street to my villa -- two with luggage, several with grocery bags, all under the heat of a late June sun -- I am a more humble person . . . with tighter buns.

I ended up in Praiano for two reasons. I wanted to be in a town away from tourists, where I could experience town life by living it instead of watching it; and I wanted to cook. I had been traveling through southern Italy for two months, a journey that was nearing its end, and I wanted a winding-down period after all the moving around -- and a celebration of all the good food I'd eaten along the way. I also wanted my American friend Phil, who was joining me for this last week on the coast, to understand and experience a culture that had imbedded itself in my heart.

### **Between Sea and Sky**

The humidity ruffled itself into a voluminous pale gray haze and settled over the Tyrrhenian Sea, softly obscuring the horizon and making a shadow of the distant island of Capri. At times the sky was indistinguishable from the sea, and Praiano seemed to be floating somewhere in between.

When nearby Amalfi was the seat of a powerful maritime republic during the 10th and 11th centuries, the dukes made their summer residence here. They chose Praiano for its beauty and its privacy. Eye level with clouds and birds in flight, they must have felt like gods in this place.

The locals say the wealthy and powerful still come to Praiano, but only the discreet ones. The town calls itself "il cuore della Costiera Amalfitana" -- "the heart of the Amalfi Coast" -- but that is only true in a geographic sense. Its bundle of whitewashed villas, churches, hotels and restaurants clings to the bluffs nearly equidistant from two of the most popular destinations on the coast: 3.7 miles east of Positano and 4.3 miles west of Amalfi. If you want to see or be seen, either of those towns will do nicely.

Sipping coffee in the morning at Bar del Sole or slurping a gorgeous, peach-colored, fresh-fruit smoothie in the afternoon, Phil and I watched tour buses hulk through town, their refrigerated passengers sometimes asleep against the windows. The buses never stopped. There wasn't even a parking lot in which to stop. Praiano wasn't a destination. You were supposed to drive through it, admire the lovely blue-and-gold majolica dome of the cathedral dedicated to San Gennaro, and move on.

A tragedy for them. Delightful for us.

Praiano is peaceful and real. It is a place where people live.

Alimentary shops outnumber retail shops. Tourists are so few that they stick out with their pale skin and rubber flip-flops. Across the bay in Positano, however, there are so many at this time of year that it's the locals who stick out.

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