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The beach at Sperlonga.

Two weeks in the seaside town of Sperlonga — the ultimate Italian experience

My husband, Jack, and I are longtime subscribers of *International Travel News* and have gleaned much from readers' advice over the years. However, a September 2014 trip to Italy was the first we took from an ad we found in The Mart section, printed at the end of each month's magazine — a small ad that finally drew me in after years of reading it.

With our first phone call, I immediately took to June Morrocco, owner of To Italy With Love Tours (*Grants Pass, OR; 971/706-9328, www.toitalywithlovetours.com*). She sent me materials that were interesting but, frankly, not similar to a professional publication. But I would discover that June was a genuine, caring, capable woman who loved, loved, loved Italy and wanted to pass that love on to others. And *that* she did during our two weeks of traveling with her!

Sperlonga

Jack and I flew on Delta Air Lines

from Boston to Amsterdam to Rome, where we met June and five other travelers who had flown with her from the West Coast.

We were staying in Sperlonga, Italy, for our entire 2-week stay. The name Sperlonga comes from the Latin *spelunca*, meaning cave, and one of them, known today as the Grotta di Tiberio, was incorporated into a luxurious villa by the Roman emperor Tiberius.

From the fifth century, the villa, of which ruins are still visible, was occupied by a monastic community. In the ninth century, the monks moved for greater safety to the rocky promontory where most of the older parts of Sperlonga are currently found.

That was the beginning of the picturesque present-day town, cut

into the slope overlooking the sea, the steep slopes, steps and archways providing sudden views of the sea.

Sperlonga is situated almost exactly halfway between Rome and Naples. On either side of its rocky promontory are long, sandy beaches



that are among the very few on this part of the Mediterranean coast still free from pollution. The climate is one of the mildest in the world.

Settling in

We checked into **Hotel Marconi**, which would be our home for the entire trip. Hotel Marconi was a delightful, attractive, comfortable B&B located in the center of beautiful Sperlonga and directly on the waterfront, with a private beach just a few steps away. We took walks along the beach early every morning.

Most of the 16 rooms have views of the beautiful sea from their private balconies. During the two festivals that we were fortunate to be there for, we watched the bands, enjoyed the singers and were enthralled with the fireworks right outside our balcony.

This charming hotel is managed by Italo and Teresa Marconi, family owners since 1940.

We all went with June for a 10- to 15-minute walk along the beach, walking out into the bay until waist deep. Everyone just soaked in the warm water, the golden sun and gorgeous cliffs and rocks all around us. This was the time for our group and June to get acquainted, and this experience told me this was going to be a different kind of vacation.



Hotel Marconi, our home for two weeks.

Our second day was to be relaxing, a day to adjust to our travels and the time change. After breakfast, most of us sat out on the ground-level porch area of the hotel, where June told us that this was the weekend of the festival of Saponi di Mare (Flavors of the Sea).

We began to hear music, and we all turned to find a marching band of perhaps 25 men and women in uniforms. They stopped in front of us and played a couple of songs, including an American song. They told June they played to welcome us, leaving us all with a good feeling.

We took a morning walk on the streets of Sperlonga, exploring and familiarizing ourselves with the town. That evening we walked the path along the sea, partaking of the festivities with the Italians eating sandwiches and specialties made at the festival.

From the balcony of our room, we listened to the music and later watched the fireworks — so wonderful!

Day tripping

Traveling from Sperlonga, we visited area sites by van, with our first stop at Split Mountain (Montagna Spaccata).

While Jack and I chose to view

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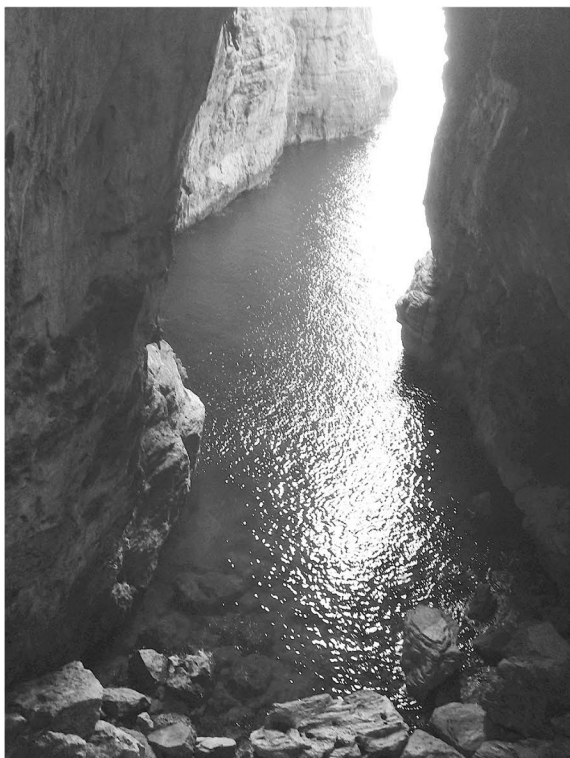
the spectacular sight from the first landing, the younger members of the group climbed the almost 300 steps to see the cavern with the water rushing through it. We heard it was fantastic. Then we moved on to Gaeta to visit the Santuario della Santissima Annunziata, a church famous for its Golden Chapel, and continued to Via Indipendenza for some shopping.

Dinner was followed by an evening walk with the locals in Sperlonga.

Another day's excursion included a visit to the landmark Grotta di Tibero, in which 15,000 fragments of sculpture were found in the late '50s. There is now a fascinating museum on site that houses the laboriously reconstructed sculptures. Outside, archaeologists continue to uncover additional ruins and artifacts.

There was a whole area of ruins to explore. Jack liked it so well, he went back another time.

On day eight of our tour, our group left very early for a day trip



Split Mountain.

to Rome, located about two hours away. We visited the Colosseum, Roman Forum, Vatican and St. Peter's Square, followed by another of June's great restaurant selections.

In the evening we visited Piazza Navona and the Pantheon and got in a bit of shopping among the street vendors. Visits to all of these sites in one day was possible because we traveled by van from one spot to the next, saving time as well as wear on our feet.

A park, Pompeii and Positano

Jack and I were celebrating our

55th anniversary, and June honored our request to visit a garden.

The Garden of Ninfa, located about 50 miles southwest of Rome, is an Italian national monument created in the ruins of a medieval city. The garden had just closed for the season, but June managed to arrange a private opening for our group. All I can say is it was romantic, magical — a 10+. Thank you, June.

We had another early departure for our trip to Pompeii and Positano.

Pompeii, an ancient Roman city located near modern-day Naples, was buried under volcanic ash when Mount Vesuvius erupted in AD 79. The city was rediscov-

ered, almost intact, and excavations began in 1748. It was a fascinating site.

Following a breathtaking drive along the Amalfi Coast, we lunched and shopped in what's known as the "jewel" of the Amalfi Coast, the beautiful village of Positano.

Final details

For a final time, Jack and I walked the 196 steps to the top of the cliffs of Sperlonga, where restaurants, stores and incredible scenery could be found at every curve and outlook, before we, sadly, packed. Then we got ready for our evening celebration dinner.

Without exception, every lunch and dinner on this trip was superb. June introduced us to the chefs, we could visit the kitchens, and the wines and beers were excellent. The quality of the food and the taste and presentation were above anything we have ever experienced in our many years of traveling the world.

June knows the restaurants and the chefs, and it was like being with friends. What wonderful eating experiences we had throughout our two weeks.

I'm a vegetarian, and June went

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Booths set up for the Saponi di Mare festival in Sperlonga.

out of her way to ensure I had delicious meals.

Jack and I felt we received value for the money spent. The total cost was approximately \$4,465 per

person, including round-trip airfare from Boston to Rome (\$1,500). We paid for our restaurant meals daily and the hotel bill upon departure (included in our total cost), so our

trip insurance needed to cover only a portion of the total trip cost, making it less expensive.

I suggest you put this trip on your bucket list!

Feel free to contact me with any questions (rrubin110@gmail.com).

P.S. Does anyone know of a “June Morocco” who runs a similar-style tour in Ireland, the British Isles or...? ◆

Shanghai Disney delayed

The opening date for **Shanghai Disney Resort** (shanghai.disneyresort.com.cn), initially set for

December 2015, has been pushed back to spring 2016.

The resort will include a traditional Disney theme park (at the center of which will be the largest Storybook Castle of any of their parks) with Disneyland-style rides, two themed hotels and a 495,000-square-foot shopping-and-dining complex called Disneytown.

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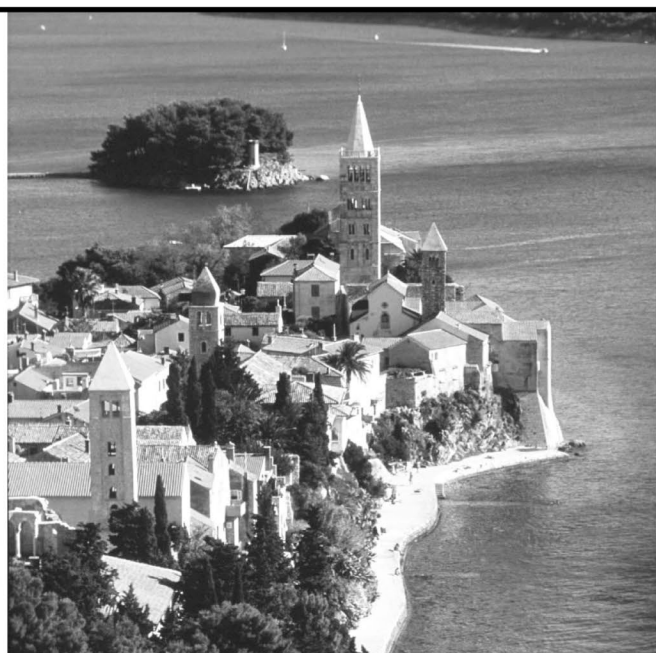
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