

Gems: rings on a skeleton from Herculaneum; Temple of Apollo at Pompeii, left; Piscina Mirabilis water cistern on the Gulf of Naples, below left

Telegraph magazine

28 September 2013

Drink in ancient Roman towns

Enjoy Pompeii and Herculaneum as their original inhabitants did, says **Bettany Hughes**

Perverse, I know, but I would argue that Herculaneum is one of Pompeii's best-kept secrets.

Millions of people flock to the larger, household-name ruin each year. But this is a tale of two towns. Charismatic Herculaneum (two-thirds still waiting to be

excavated), with its multistorey buildings and cosy streets jauntily framed by buzzing, modern-day Ercolano, gives a keen sense of what it would have been like to bumble along in Campania 2,000 years ago. Blasphemy perhaps for a

classicist, but I could easily take Herculaneum and leave Pompeii.

Still, if you're visiting this part of the world, do take the time to revel in both. In antiquity, Pompeii had a reputation for being a bit like Brighton: a pleasure-seeking, vigorous seaside resort. My advice? Don't come as a tourist, but do as the Pompeians did. Enjoy a wine-drenched lunch and think of your

fellow visitors as travellers in the Roman world (believe me, it makes them seem less irritating).

Global artefacts discovered here were clearly treasured by their owners: a statuette of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, kosher garum sauce, Egyptian deities. None entirely inappropriate, considering that today the streets of Pompeii are decidedly polyglot.

Go to Naples Archaeological Museum before your site visits. Most of the artefacts recovered from the two towns are stored here – so your head can spin with images of the Daliesque mobile ovens (with handles in the shape of hands), gold-and-gem jewellery and the fine sculptures of high priestesses that once filled kitchens, bedrooms and temples.

Don't get overexcited by the ubiquitous phalluses you'll see on lamps, wind chimes, serving jugs and even a stretch of pavement in Pompeii itself. These were simply bawdy good-luck charms – a bit of an in-joke for a relentlessly virile society. The proliferation of penises

certainly did not signify wall-to-wall brothels, too excessive even for Roman appetites.

Odd as it sounds, make sure you peer down into the drains. Pompeian poo – as well as the heat-blasted figs, grapes and loaves from Herculaneum – gives a detailed indication of the myriad delights of the Roman table.

If you stay at the gorgeous Azienda Agricola Le Tore – just over an hour away – you can dine on olives, grapes, broad beans, chicory, fruit and honey straight from the land; just as the Pompeians did.

Human hair has also survived in the towns' cesspits. We know from

contemporary sources that both men and women were keen on depilatory creams, even opting for Roman-period 'Brazilians'. So visit the bedrooms and conjure up the scent of resin, rose oil and goose fat – and add in the aroma of freshly baked bread wafting across from Pompeii's communal ovens. In essence, travel through these ruins as if they were the homes of the living rather than the dead.

In Pompeii's famously well-preserved House of the Golden Bracelet a truly exquisite garden fresco was discovered: golden orioles, fat pigeons and gentle nightingales swoop through an explosion of vegetation. Roses, carefully tied to reed stakes, tumble up the walls. And there are lilies, poppies, bushes of oleander.

The view from this house in AD 79 – the year Mount Vesuvius spewed six cubic miles of deadly volcanic material into the sky – would have taken in a formal garden and beyond that the sea. The elegant stone bench found here was the perfect spot for the owner, wine in hand, to rest for a moment of reflection.

Pause here and spare a thought for that original family of Roman inhabitants, discovered crouching beneath the stairs. This spot would have given them one last evening of peace and relaxation before all hell was unleashed.

A final tip – find a boat from Naples heading to the island of Ischia. Glossed with Fifties glamour (Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton filmed *Cleopatra* here, consummating their affair at the Hotel L'Albergo della Regina Isabella), the volcanic make-up of the island – super-lush, fissured with hot, bubbling springs – rams home what a rewarding, if perilous, business it must have been for the ancients to live in this seismically charged corner of the globe.

Investigate treasures beneath the church of Santa Restituta, left by early Greek travellers who imported those artistic styles the Romans went on to plagiarise so passionately. They are a poignant reminder that all lives are made the more beautiful by those who went before us.

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