



18

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AREAS OF POMPEI, HERCULANEUM AND TORRE ANNUNZIATA

“When in Stabia the visibility was good, from the sea the prodigy seemed to be over, the population was safe on the beach, they had moved there with all their possessions – from the ships you could see horses and furniture and trunks. I could see very little, but I had a deckhand beside me, so I asked him: ‘What is it that shines down there?’ ‘Women, captain: women covered in jewels.’”

La fortuna, Valeria Parrella

The attention of Lucio, the protagonist of Valeria Parrella's *La fortuna*, was captivated by women's cries. Terrified by the fury of the volcano, they were rushing out into the streets holding their most precious belongings, in the hope of saving their lives. A first-hand testimony of a dreadful day, one that would change the life of Lucio and his hometown, Pompei, forever – 24 October (August?) 79 A.D. Today, we can evoke memories of that tragic day in the archaeological areas of Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Torre Annunziata. No experience of ancient remains compares to the emotional involvement and wonder of a tour around Pompei and the Vesuvian area. No other spot inspires such a sense of regret for not being eyewitness of a terrible yet breathtaking sight as the sky over the Bay of Naples set ablaze by the eruption, which turned the day into night. The archaeological areas of Pompeii, Herculaneum and Torre Annunziata require visitors to use an open-hearted approach to life, death, and misfortune, to the abyss and the sublime, so to hear the inhabitants' cries of pain resounding in tufa. This is the only place where you can recollect the last heartbeat of the town and its evanescent bliss.



SERIAL CULTURAL HERITAGE

UNESCO DOSSIER: 829

PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: NAPLES, ITALY

DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 1997

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The ancient towns of Pompei and Herculaneum and the villas of Torre Annunziata, Europe's first open-air museum, give a vivid impression on urban life in the 1st century A.D. The rediscovery and history of these areas have captured public imagination century by century and, to this day, continue to amaze the world with new finds.





“My uncle changed plan at once and what he started in a spirit of scientific curiosity ended as a hero. He ordered the large galleys to be launched and set sail. He steered bravely straight for the danger zone everyone else was leaving [...] to rescue Rectina and many others alike [...]”

In a letter to Tacitus, Pliny the Younger chose these words to narrate the fate of Pliny the Elder, his uncle, who perished in an attempt to rescue citizens of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Today, the Vesuvian area enjoys a much quieter atmosphere, so much so that you can visit it as a *tour-ist* for all intents and purposes, i.e., as a descendant of the *Grand Tour* travellers. The ancient villas have only been partially exposed, and yet what is visible compensates for the invisible and could be enough to fill a thousand and one nights of reveries and dreams of the ancient world.

Your personal tour of *Campania Felix* begins at **1 Herculaneum**. Unlike modern Ercolano, the ancient city lied along the seashore, but its 20 hectares settlement, a network of streets lined with small taverns, shops, and sumptuous public buildings, has been excavated only by a quarter. Do not miss the area of **Fornici**, where some 300 people had waited in vain for rescue, in addition to **Casa dello Scheletro** with its stunning mosaics, and the intriguing **Villa dei Papiri**, owing its name to the hundreds of Greek texts unearthed there. Proceed to the excavations of **2 Oplontis**

from Herculaneum to visit **Villa Poppaea**, one of the most spectacular in Campania – let your gaze be drawn to the frescoes in the Great Hall, the magnificence of the *triclinium* and the sensual elegance of the *cubiculae*. In Boscoreale, just a short distance away is **3 Villa Regina**, the core of a small wine production, providing a glimpse of the hard-working side of Rome, before proceeding to the gates of **4 Pompei**. As you schedule your visit, we recommend at least one full day there to appreciate its numberless treasures – for those who have visited it before, look for the **Antiquarium**, the most

recent discovery including the famous casts made on the last bodies found in the excavations as well as a magnificent treasure trove containing amulets. Finally, push on to Castellammare di Stabia for **5 Villa San Marco**, renowned for its impressive thermal baths, and the huge **6 Villa Arianna**, where fragments of highly refined paintings are visible, along with lavish atriums and gymnasiums. Before leaving Stabia, have a tour of the brand-new **7 Libero D’Orsi Archaeological Museum** that houses precious artefacts and findings from the Vesuvian area.



CAMPANIA FELIX

“This stretch of coastline has so many mansions that it looks like a single village of villas extending for kilometers. Sometimes you cannot even tell where one ends and the other begins, or where property boundaries are.”

The three days of Pompeii, Alberto Angela quoting Strabo

The Gulf of Naples, one of the most densely inhabited areas in modern Europe, has a millennial tradition of human presence across its territory – Strabo’s works described it as a patchwork

of houses and villas. The fact that most of them are still buried under two millennia of layering makes the Vesuvian area a tiny Eldorado for archaeologists. The proximity to a volcano, in fact, made the soil extremely fertile, not to mention the mild climate and the abundance of thermal baths and seaside resorts. This is why the Romans would build their villas here and relax with a mix of mysticism and wine, rituals and banquets, vices and squandering. Destroyed by the 79 A.D. eruption, the *Campania Felix* has been revived by the archaeological excavations that have taken place over the last three centuries, thereby unleashing its natural bliss.



"WHEN I WAS SIX OR SEVEN YEARS OLD, POMPEII WAS STILL TEEMING WITH WORKERS WHO CAME FROM EVERY COUNTRY. THEY HAD WONDERFUL LITTLE BOXES OF CHISELS AND TOOLS AND COLOURS, ON THE STREETS YOU COULD HEAR THEM SPEAKING INCOMPREHENSIBLE DIALECTS, SAYING FILTHY THINGS THAT MADE US LAUGH."

Lucio, the protagonist of *La fortuna* by Valeria Parrella, was a Pompeii native who used to scamper around houses and shops as a boy. Once in Pompei, be as adventurous as he was: this itinerary through the excavations, tracking down signs and scribbles is bound to enthrall children and adults alike, as long as you have a hat and plenty of water with you to put up with the local heat! Crossing the entrance at Piazza Anfiteatro, set off with the **1 Palestra Grande**, a large central space surrounded by a portico, featuring a swimming pool in the middle, that tempts you to run free in the neat lawn! Now a venue for temporary exhibitions,

it was once the place where gladiators would shape their herculean bodies. Beside is the **2 Amphitheatre**, dated 80 B.C., i.e., one of the oldest masonry theatres in the Roman world. However, it is **3 Via dell'Abbondanza**, the main artery of Pompei, that gives you a real hint of the city. As the main street leading to the Forum, it was crowded at all hours and lined with *thermopolia*, i.e. small taverns serving hot food, still recognisable from their marble counters with circular holes from which wine was drawn. The building walls bear red-painted inscriptions – see who can find them all! They might be *rogationes* (calls to vote for either candidate at election time), or the signs of *cauponae* (inns that often had menus written on the outside). Take a side street of Via dell'Abbondanza to reach **4 Orto dei Fuggiaschi**, named after the casts of 13 people from a single family who were swept away by the pyroclastic fury of the eruption. The casts have been made from 1863 onwards using the technique devised by Giuseppe Fiorelli, whereby liquid plaster is poured into the cavities imprinted on the volcanic material by the bodies. Heading to the west side of the town, look for **5 Casa del Poeta Tragico** featuring the well-known dog mosaic with the *cave canem* (beware of the dog) inscription, then proceed to **6 Casa del Fauno**, whose mosaic depiction of the Battle of Issus, where the armies of Alexander the Great and Darius III confronted each other, remains awe-inspiring (the original is preserved in the National Museum in Naples). Conclude your tour in the **7 Forum**. Today a large space surrounded by colonnades where tourists escape from the heatwave, it was once the heart of Pompei's civil, political, and commercial life, as confirmed by the solemn, propaganda-like inscriptions on the friezes.



KIDS



POMPEI AND HERCULANEUM in books

Reading suggestions to recall the days of Mt Vesuvius eruption.

- **Pompeii**, Robert Harris (2003). A historical novel set in August 79 A.D., 24 hours after the tragedy. It recounts the story of Atilius, a young engineer who tries in vain to save the city and its inhabitants.
- **Le ragazze di Pompei**, Carmen Covito (2011). Regarded as a kind of feminine *Satyricon*, Carmen Covito's novel is set in pre-eruption Pompei and gives a journalistic account of the world of women. Tirrena, the protagonist, is a woman who has divorced following the loss of her child; she struggles in a male-dominated society seeking a chance for emancipation.
- **The three days of Pompeii**, Alberto Angela (2014). Alberto Angela, Italy's most adored author and science

promoter, provides a lucid yet poetic account of the last three days of Pompei and the fate of the towns in the Vesuvian area. This book is suitable for anyone who wants an exhaustive description of the event free from the complexity of a historical essay.

- **Fifty letters of Pliny**, Pliny the Younger (2019). The only eyewitness account, albeit indirect, of Mt Vesuvius eruption. It is a letter sent to Tacitus by Pliny the Younger regarding his uncle Pliny the Elder who, being the commander of the fleet stationed at Misenum, died while attempting to approach the eruption site to rescue the victims.

- **La fortuna**, Valeria Parrella (2022). The fascinating tale of Lucio, a Pompeian street boy who finds himself joining Pliny the Elder's fleet in October 79 A.D. An excellent work that paints a vivid picture of life in the ancient world, letting the reader experience all the most tragic moments of this event; this is also a coming-of-age novel that

addresses the meaning of Latin *fortuna*, closer to the idea of destiny and free will than to the idea of modern sense of luck, thus not necessarily endowed with a positive meaning.

- **The Wolf Den**, Elodie Harper (2021). The "wolves" are five women enslaved to prostitution in a Pompeian brothel (lupanar). Their personal stories intertwine in a gripping novel about hope, sisterhood, and opportunity. The second and third episodes of the saga are *The house with the golden door* (2022) and *The Temple of Fortuna* (2024).

Children's books:

- **Rissa nel termopolio**. **Livia e i segreti di Pompei**, Nicola Barile, Giulio Peranzoni (2022). The story, set in the thermopilium which was unearthed in 2020, tells the vicissitudes of Livia and the treacherous Mantis, a masked character who spreads fear in Pompei.