



BELMOND
HOTEL CARUSO
AMALFI COAST



PRESS KIT

Belmond Hotel Caruso introduced by Kate Patrick

OVERVIEW

Situated in the most spectacular location, almost suspended between sea and sky, Belmond Hotel Caruso occupies a former medieval palace at the highest, quietest point of Ravello, overlooking the rocks and cliffs of Italy's Amalfi Coast and the Mediterranean (or, more correctly, Tyrrhenian) Sea. With frescoed salons, arched stone vaults and just 50 highly individual rooms and suites occupying every shape and corner of the ancient palace's architecture, it is an intimate retreat with an intriguing sense of history. But above all, with its rose arbour leading to one of the world's most spectacular infinity pools, with sunlit or candlelit dining in the Belvedere Restaurant, and with a rich sense of its past as a retreat for presidents, writers and film stars, the hotel is almost impossibly romantic.

On the doorstep is Ravello, a centuries-long inspiration, escape and must-do on anyone's Grand Tour of Europe. About 65 km from Naples, Ravello is smaller and somehow more refined than its coastal neighbours Positano, Amalfi and Sorrento. It was founded in the 6th century, and has a 12th-century cathedral, houses built in Arabic-Sicilian style and a preponderance of mismatching marble columns and pedestals, brought back from ancient Greek and Roman sites by Amalfitan wood traders anxious to profit from the return journey. Villa Cimbrone is a magnificent lookout point in the town, and there's a summer music festival on the terrace at Villa Rufolo, whose garden inspired Wagner's Parsifal. La Dolce Vita was surely born here, surrounded by lemon trees in the lazy, hot climes of southern Italy.

Among many accolades, Belmond Hotel Caruso was Travel & Leisure's Best Hotel in Italy in 2012; one of Condé Nast Traveller's Top 50 Hotels in Italy in 2013; and listed in Fodor's Best Hotel Pools in the World 2013.

HISTORY & BACKGROUND

Belmond Hotel Caruso was originally built in the 11th century by a patrician Roman family who set out to reach Constantinople, the new centre of the Roman Empire, but failed because of a storm at sea. So they arrived in Ravello almost by accident and, grateful to have survived, built a new symbol of their dominance, Palazzo d'Afflitto – the name (meaning 'the afflicted') a reference both to the shipwreck and to 'afflictions suffered because of faith' by the family martyr Eustachio. Over the following centuries, as the Italian republics squabbled, Ravello and Amalfi were destroyed and the palace fell in and out of ruin. By the 16th century, it had been completely rebuilt, with the addition of a splendid colonnade in the raised garden, which led to a lookout tower with small stone benches – perhaps still the best place in Ravello to lose yourself in the view.

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, local fresco painters from surrounding Campania amused themselves by painting pastoral scenes, iconic imagery, abstract designs and fantasy 'grotesques' onto the walls and ceilings; a painted chapel (cappellina) was added; and Roman marble columns and 13th-century lions brought from nearby churches to add grandeur to the entrance and baroque angels were later used to embellish the front door. Eventually the frescoes started to crack and fade and, during the 19th century, were whitewashed out by cash-strapped Neapolitans.

A further period of neglect followed, until 1893 when Pantaleone Caruso, a hotelier and vineyard owner, and his wife Emilia Cicalese, rented five rooms in one of the palace wings. They opened as the Pensione Belvedere, named for the splendid view of the hanging garden plunging down the mountainside to the sea. Caruso was probably most interested in developing the gardens, having worked for the Scottish botanist Sir Francis Neville Reid laying out the parterres at Villa Rufolo in the centre of Ravello. The salons remained largely chalked-out and used as service areas, with the chapel employed as an office. The hotel came to occupy the entire palazzo, with 24 rooms, and its name was changed to Hotel Caruso Belvedere.

In 1903 a New York Times journalist visited, and his article inspired many wealthy and influential Americans, overwintering on the European rivieras, to visit. It became a favourite haunt of Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group. After the Second World War, the hotel was run by Caruso's sons, Paolo and Gino, and subsequently by Paolo's son, also Gino. Attracted by the cocoon of privacy, guests included Greta Garbo, Gina Lollobrigida, Humphrey Bogart, Jackie Kennedy and Dustin Hoffman; they enjoyed the peace of walking among the vines in the colonnaded gardens, the sound of the stream trickling down from Monte Brusara, the taste of authentic Neapolitan cooking and a charming atmosphere away from prying lenses. Nina Caruso once acted as a decoy, leading the press pack on a wild goose chase around Naples while Greta Garbo stayed at the hotel, "to be alone".

Restoration

Belmond (previously Orient-Express Hotels) acquired the Hotel Caruso Belvedere in 2000 and began a painstaking, four-year restoration, remodelling and upgrading of the hotel, working closely with the Italian Fine Arts authorities. Renowned architect Gennaro Passerotti was engaged to create additional rooms in previously unused parts of the building, and builders, stonemasons, tile-makers, restorers, decorators, pool-builders and landscape gardeners started work. Archaeologists had to be called in when the foundations of the medieval palace were uncovered adjacent to the main buildings.

A leading restoration expert and art historian, Professor Antonio Forcellino, happened to be working on the cathedral pulpit in Ravello, and became involved with uncovering the frescoes at the hotel. Under his direction, local craftsmen removed the whitewash to reveal the faded colours of ribbons, flowers, cornucopias, Arcadian scenes, cameos, goddesses and nymphs. The ceiling in the hall revealed a pair of griffins facing each other, almost as if guarding four frescoes depicting Ravello – probably the earliest paintings of the town. Gradually the frescoes were restored or revealed in three salons, the drawing room, the chapel, the bar, the reception and one bedroom. Then, in came VIP interior designer Federico Forquet, whose task was to bring the design up to date, with appropriate levels of luxury and 21st-century technology, without losing the authenticity of the palace itself or the Neapolitan spirit. At the time, he said, "It was a great pleasure when I set foot in the magical palace of the Marquis d'Afflitto once again. My aim was to recreate in our rooms the atmosphere of a residence of old."

Forquet sourced ancient terracotta tiles from demolished palazzi to recreate an authentic atmosphere, used handpainted majolica tiles made using traditional techniques and simple 18th-century patterns, recreated ancient Neapolitan patterns in the floors and had local craftsmen piece together old mosaics. He had textiles specially created, and collected together oil paintings depicting seafaring scenes, a bronze-and-crystal chandelier with 30 candles, beaten copper lamps by local craftsmen and oversized stone planters, among other showpieces for the public areas. "Ravello has always been considered a privileged town thanks to its location, and rich merchants built their mansions and villas on the hills to make the most of the amazing views. The aristocratic origins of Hotel Caruso, as the ancient mansion of the patrician D'Afflitto family, are evident in both the restoration and the decoration," he said.

By the time the hotel reopened the hotel in July 2005, the stunning infinity pool had been built and 15 of the rooms on seven levels down the hillside had their own private garden terraces. There are now 50 rooms and suites, skilfully incorporated but without losing any of the palazzo's intrinsic personality. Guests are still greeted by the frescoes, Norman arches, portico, gardens and pergolas, the two stone lions guarding the entrance and the fabulous view that had defined the hotel right from the beginning.

FEATURES

Rooms and suites

While the hotel's public areas are a visual delight of frescoes, mosaics and gilded door frames, the 23 rooms and 27 suites are more muted, so as not to detract from the stunning views of the coastline, the gardens or the square visible through their expansive, often arched windows. Mainly painted soft white or 'Naples' yellow, using a watercolour technique that evokes Ravello's seascapes, they have subtle neo-classical references such as lamps shaped as urns, bathrooms with mosaic-framed mirrors, and terracotta floor tiles bearing the handprint of the artisan who made them. Fabrics are fresh and simple – apple green, textured cream, muted red-and-blue floral schemes or designed to look like majolica tiles.

All the rooms come with king-sized or twin beds, marble bathrooms, writing desks and wi-fi; junior suites have sweeping private terraces, balconies or even a private garden planted with Mediterranean herbs, flowers and olive and lemon trees. There are three top suites physically located in the gardens, built around original stone foundations. Some rooms have the same stone arches that would have been part of the original palace.

Pool and gardens

The gardens at Belmond Hotel Caruso have been over 100 years in the making: a collection of terraces and scented walkways, with olive trees for shade, and lemon trees and herb beds providing fresh mint, thyme, rosemary and bay for use in the kitchens. Roses bloom and climb at every turn, most memorably over the colonnade that leads up steps to the highest point of the property.

This is where the infinity swimming pool was built in 2005: an architectural triumph which appears to be suspended over the Amalfi coastline. Indulgent pool services include the concierge delivering an iPod pre-loaded with your choice of music, or a fresh fruit appetiser or cocktail to the side of the pool as you swim.

Belvedere Restaurant

The greatest challenge for the chefs, sommeliers and maître d's at Belmond Hotel Caruso is to provide a dining experience which surpasses the view. From their beautifully set round tables on the atmospheric Belvedere terrace, day or night, guests can revel in panoramic views of the Bay of Salerno and the rocky coastline of Amalfi, dropping away over 350m below. The terrace is shaded by a canopy, so that guests can eat outside without being affected by the sun. At breakfast, or at cooler times of year, there is also an elegant indoor dining room just behind the terrace, which affords glimpses of the same view.

Chef Mimmo di Raffaele has the advantage of world-class fresh produce at his fingertips, grown by small farmers in the region or caught by fishermen, and he believes in keeping it simple so that the freshness and taste of the ingredients shines through. But he is also an innovator, ensuring that the hotel's knowledgeable clientele are presented with some surprises. His menus typically offer some unexpected flavour combinations that will delight experienced diners.

Pool restaurant & bar

With the stunning infinity pool as the backdrop, this relaxed alfresco restaurant, surrounded by ancient rose bushes, offers an easygoing menu of Italian favourites, a lavish salad bar and authentic Neapolitan pizza straight from a wood-fired oven. Hugely enjoyable pizza-making masterclasses are held for whole families, and indeed the hotel is renowned for its pizza-making. Lunch is available from 1-4pm.

The poolside bar offers refreshing daytime drinks from 10.30am to 7pm, allowing guests to soak up the sun or enjoy a cocktail topped off with fresh lemon mint from the gardens, in the shade of a parasol.

Cocktail & Piano Bar

Indoors, the Cocktail & Piano Bar is a sophisticated spot for an early evening cocktail or a late-night digestif. This is one of the hotel's public rooms which benefits from having magnificent, restored 18th-century frescoes, and if you can take your eyes off the ceiling, there are also views over the Amalfi coastline. The atmospherically lit bar area, with its immense wooden bar, offers an extensive list of cocktails – Italian favourites and new mixes – and a wide selection of wines, champagnes and delicious local prosecco.

Fitness and wellness centres

Belmond Hotel Caruso has a small villa in the gardens with an air-conditioned gym on the ground floor and spa treatment rooms upstairs. The gym, though small, has a full range of cardio equipment and weight machines, all positioned in front of a window with a distracting, panoramic view of the coastline – the perfect way to forget how hard the workout is. A personal trainer is also available.

The first-floor wellness centre offers a well-constructed menu of essential treatments using products by Aromatherapy Associates and Sothys. Treatments are tailored for face, body, hair or beauty, with massages and aromatherapy experiences offered alongside specialist rituals, such as a 140-minute mothers and daughters wellness package.

One opportunity not to be missed is to have your treatment alfresco in the gardens, surrounded by rose bushes, and cooled by a fragrant breeze under a clear blue sky.

Events spaces

Belmond Hotel Caruso has two excellent business suites: the Wagner Room, opening onto the private Wagner Gardens, and the Colonne Room. Each can accommodate 60 people theatre-style and the two rooms can be combined for larger meetings and events, such as an AGM or a celebration banquet. Audio-visual equipment, interactive communications and high speed wi-fi are offered, alongside the services of a dedicated events team. Private dining can be arranged for up to 170 guests in the Wagner Gardens.

Small, private meetings can also be set up on the Belvedere Terrace, and the Arcade Bar is ideal for cocktail receptions or small banquets for up to 40 guests.

PEOPLE

Franco Girasoli, General Manager

Franco was appointed as General Manager of Belmond Hotel Caruso in 2008, having previously worked for the group from 1983 at Belmond Villa San Michele, where he fulfilled various roles from front office manager to hotel manager.

Having studied at Hotel Management School in Montecatini Terme, graduating in 1982, Franco began his career in the hospitality industry in 1979, working in food and beverage operations at the Hotel Eden Roc on the Côte d'Azur. He then worked in F&B management in England, Germany and Switzerland. Returning to Italy, he made the transition into the room division at Villa San Michele.

When not taking care of the guests and the business at Belmond Hotel Caruso, his favourite pastimes are tennis, cycling, fishing, motorsports, reading, travelling and watching TV on the Discovery Channel or Bloomberg. His children are his "life's treasure", and he loves to throw surprise birthday parties for close friends. Although he speaks English and French fluently, Italian remains his favourite cuisine... and he makes a seriously good pizza.

Of his love of being a hotelier, he says tongue-in-cheek, "Once I wanted to pursue an ambassadorial career. It wasn't possible, so instead I became an ambassador of Italian taste all over the world."

He is quick to pay tribute to the loyal and dedicated staff at Belmond Hotel Caruso. "They are so proud of this place, it is as if they owned it themselves. They take such good care of guests that sometimes we find the guests in tears as they leave. It's really touching."

Mimmo di Raffaele, Executive Chef

Born in Caserta, a city in the south of Italy, Mimmo di Raffaele was raised among the abundant orchards, vineyards and olive groves of an area which the Romans named 'campania felix' – happy country. He calls the region "a hidden treasure of flavour and history".

His early career saw him working in Cortina d'Ampezzo and, from there, he moved to Switzerland for formal training in Lausanne from 1993 to 1997. While studying, he worked at the restaurant of three Michelin-starred Swiss chef Frédy Girardet. Mimmo then returned to Italy to collaborate on the grand opening of the Marino alla Scala restaurant in Milan with the designer Nicola Trussardi, and during that period was lucky enough to meet the renowned

chef Enrico Derflinger, once personal chef to HM The Queen. He joined Enrico at the Eden Hotel restaurant in Rome, becoming sous-chef.

He moved to the Amalfi coast in 2007 and was subsequently appointed executive chef at Belmond Hotel Caruso, to whose kitchen ethos he emphasises the value of simplicity. "In my kitchen you can only find ingredients that derive from the locality, such as sfusato amalfitano lemon, anchovies colatura, provolone del monaco cheese or maialino nero casertano cured meat. I come from a territory where the mountain geographically blends into the sea, so I feel it's important to have dishes that represent these 'two souls', and I mix them in dishes – so lamb can meet prawns, anchovies, lemon and so on. Guests who choose the Belvedere Restaurant want to have the best of our regional tradition, and our aim is to satisfy their wishes."

Inspiration, he says, comes from everywhere: the hotel's views, the Mediterranean gardens, visiting local markets and farmers, other chefs, the flavours of the region – all inspiring him to combine ingredients he loves "in a creative, artful and tasteful way". Even the hotel's historic building, and its great history, has encouraged him "to stay loyal to our cooking traditions".

That said, every chef puts his own twist on tradition, particularly with a sophisticated and knowledgeable clientele to please. "My ambition," says Mimmo, "is to surprise, to challenge preconceptions. The reason I go to work every day is to come up with new ideas all the time and improve myself and my team."

Expect, therefore, to find inventions such as Ricco e il Povero (mortadella cold cut and lobster); Tu vuo'fa l'Americano (tuna hamburger and chips); Sciuscio Napoletano (seafood and fruit) – all dishes which can be appreciated for both their taste, with the ingredients shining through, and for their visual appearance. "To me," concludes Mimmo, "a kitchen is like life. As in life, it is made of tastes and contrasts: and it's those same tastes and contrasts that I want to recreate in my dishes."

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY & ENVIRONMENT

For many years now, Belmond Hotel Caruso has been involved with the Ravello Music Festival which lasts from the end of June to the beginning of September. It takes part in fundraising events and also a scheme whereby the main road is closed off from the cathedral to the top of the town (where the hotel is located) and, in the atmosphere of a grand village fete, each hotel offers a kitchen speciality. The chefs prepare a table outside in the square and offer suckling pig and other treats, free of charge to local residents and visitors alike.

In a separate initiative, the hotel has for over 10 years supported its neighbouring church of San Giovanni del Toro, helping to fund the restoration of the bell tower and other building works within this beautiful church.

On the environmental side, the restoration of Belmond Hotel Caruso was a long and costly undertaking that involved working with the town council and various fine art organisations in Italy, in order to ensure that the historic parts of the building and its gardens were preserved or correctly enhanced. Today, with continued respect for its beautiful environment, the hotel takes care to recycle water, plastic and paper, working with the town hall wherever possible.

LOCAL EXPERIENCES

First-time visitors to the Amalfi Coast will want to see its picturesque towns, colourful houses clinging to the cliffside, endless blue horizon and lush green mountains through which the coast road winds and bends in hairpins that can be nerve-racking to drive. Most visitors will, at some stage, make a foray in to Positano, Sorrento, Amalfi or, a little further afield, the chic island of Capri. The ancient Roman and Greek ruins of Pompeii, Herculaneum and Paestum are convenient day trips from Ravello – all can be arranged by the hotel with private cars and expert guides.

However, Hotel Belmond Caruso's general manager Franco Girasoli believes that one of the main attractions for guests is to be able to escape the frenetic coastline and retreat to the traffic-free peace and cooler air of Ravello. He says, "We have lots of ideas for experiences we can arrange just for our guests, and our motto is never to say no, even if it's to organise a string quartet to play under someone's balcony."

The hotel provides complimentary shuttle buses between the hotel and Amalfi (six times a day) and between the hotel and Positano (twice a day).

In addition it offers a complimentary cruise aboard its traditional wooden boat, Ercole, every day between 10am and 12.30pm, from Amalfi to Positano and back. Franco Girasoli says, "There is nothing more 'dolce' than spending a lazy day aboard a 'gozzo' (typical wooden boat) along the Amalfi Bay. You just need to put on some sunglasses and a white Panama hat and all of a sudden life becomes relaxed and easy, with a splash of understated old-school glam."

Outings organised by the hotel with private guides exclusively for its guests include:

Tour of Amalfi by night with private guide

"A stroll along the ancient republic's narrow streets under the moonlight to discover the town's inner soul, made up of voices, hidden corners and unknown spots, as revealed by the passion of an insider guide who knows exactly what to show, where to go and how to surprise."

Helicopter ride

"For the more adventurous, I would suggest a helicopter tour: the views are insanely beautiful everywhere you turn. The helipad is based in nearby Scala, and we can organise these trips bespoke, to suit whatever a guest might want to do."

Driving tour

Tour the coast to Sorrento and back in a rally car, a vintage car or a convertible Fiat 600.

Fish-a-dish

Go out with a local fisherman, who will cook your catch for you there and then, on the boat. "If you travel by water, you discover spectacular stretches of coastline made of pastel, ceramic-tiled towns and hidden caves, some only reachable by boat."

Private picnic

Have lunch or dinner on a hidden beach.

Naples by Vespa

With the possibility also to experience 'underground Naples'.

Lemon tour

A tour by private car to a local lemon farm, to find out from the family owners how lemons are grown and used in cooking and how limoncello liqueur is made.