

## History of Sorrento

By Meagan Wilson

Perched on cliffs overlooking the Bay of Naples, Sorrento enjoys a beautiful location and has been a popular tourist destination since the 1800s. Amalfi, Naples, Positano, Capri and Ischia are easily accessed from Sorrento, and the city affords views of Vesuvius, Naples and the Isle of Capri. Though originally known for its wine, fish and its Greek red-figure pottery, the most famous modern product of Sorrento is probably Limoncello, a delicious citrus liqueur.

Like many Italian cities, Sorrento predates the Roman Empire, with the oldest, Oscan, ruins dating from approximately 600 B.C. Greek influences can still be seen in the city's original layout. Sorrento, or Surrentum, as the Romans called it, boasted the only temple to the Sirens in the ancient Greek world. A temple to Athena was also important to Sorrentines of the time.

After the assimilation of the Italian peninsula by the Roman Republic, Surrentum remained subject to the valley's chief town, Nuceria, until the Social War of 91-88 B.C. Surrentum joined many other Italian cities in rebellion against the Roman Republic in a bid to establish a separate nation, *Italia*. The Roman Republic prevailed, partly because they did make several concessions to the angry Italians in 88 B.C.

Surrentum was damaged by the 79 A.D. earthquake that caused the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and Pompeii's destruction. The following year, Emperor Titus restored the town's clock (horologium) and its architectural adornments. Around 420 B.C., Sorrento became an Archbishopric. It was made part of the Ostrogoth Kingdom of Italy at the decline of the Western Roman Empire, and later ruled by the Byzantine Empire. In the late 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the Lombards, a Germanic tribe who subdued much of Italy, unsuccessfully laid siege to Sorrento.

In the middle ages, as the Byzantine Empire waned, Sorrento developed into an independent duchy, which battled nearby Amalfi and took part in Christendom's fight against the Saracens. The Norman conqueror Roger II of Sicily gained control of Sorrento in 1133, absorbing it into his Kingdom of Sicily.

Spain ruled the southern half of Italy in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, until Giovanni Grillo led a revolt in 1648. Ninety years prior, in 1558, Sorrento had been attacked by a Turkish fleet as part of the Ottoman Empire's war with Spain. The city was plundered, and about 2,000 people were carried away as captives. Plague ravaged Sorrento in 1656, but the city retained its importance as a center of trade nonetheless.

Sorrento joined the very short-lived Neapolitan Republic in 1799, a state which existed for just under six months. The following century saw Sorrento becoming an increasingly popular tourist spot, and the city's economy flourished, augmented by agriculture and trade. In 1861, Sorrento became part of the Kingdom of Italy, established under Victor Emmanuel II.

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Modern Sorrento thrives on tourism, agriculture and traditional wood inlay. No ruins from ancient times survive inside the city proper, but the remains of villas, Greek and Oscan tombs and the underground aqueducts can be found in surrounding areas. Today, Sorrento boasts numerous luxury hotels, and is a prime location to enjoy the Mediterranean culture and climate of southern Italy.