

TRAVEL

Ciao Cetara!

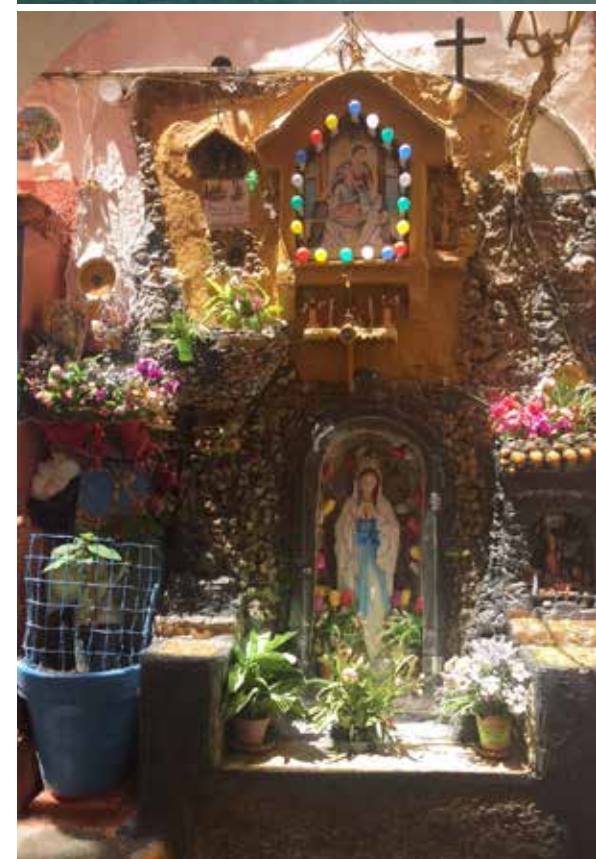
A “write” way to experience Italy’s Amalfi Coast is to enroll in Sarah Lawrence College’s weeklong summer writing program abroad

WRITTEN BY *David Masello*

A writer can work anywhere. But the muse is especially accommodating in a tiny town called Cetara, cradled within hills on Italy’s Amalfi Coast. There, amid the dull clangs of fishing boats, hourly choruses of church bells, and the effusive greetings of townspeople as they course the cobblestone streets, the material for a story or a poem seems as available as the region’s sunshine.

It is here, in an airy room filled with sea breezes atop the town’s 14th-century fortress *torre*, or tower, that students gather daily for the Sarah Lawrence College writing program, I among them. This is the ultimate example of a working vacation (this year, classes run May 25–June 1), though the labor involves penning stanzas and the opening paragraphs of memoirs and novels—which make for the best souvenirs.

Upon awakening every morning in the apartment provided by the college atop one of Cetara’s steepest inclines, I would open the shuttered doors and step onto my terrace. I would have to remind myself every time that what was before me, sparkling in the near background, was the Mediterranean (technically the Tyrrhenian Sea). The vista is so ethereally



For one excursion, the Joe Papaleo Writers' Workshop of Sarah Lawrence College takes its participants to the ancient city of Paestum, noted for its Doric temples. Clockwise from top: Cetara, on the Amalfi Coast, is the setting for the week-long program; the Basilica di Santa Trofimena in nearby Minori; the main via of Cetara; the visiting writers gather on the terrace of the town's *torre*; a shrine erected by a local in Cetara.

HALF PAGE AD

beautiful and the body of water so charged with history, ancient to the present, that it is a privilege to see and smell it, bodysurf its waves, ferry among its towns. The muse and I would happily awaken together to a sight that embraced the glinting domes of the town's churches, the surrounding hillsides growing with lemon trees and grape vines, and most conspicuous of all, laundry flapping on clotheslines strung along the cascading terraces, a townscape configured so densely over the centuries that it resembles a Cubist painting.

My walk to class, a bit more involved than that of my fellow students, meant descending ninety-two steps through winding arcades and narrow passageways, something akin to a stage-set for *Romeo and Juliet*. With my laptop and notebook in hand, I came to know my neighbors, who would greet me with the traditional *salve*, a regional greeting somewhere in between *ciao* and the more formal *buon giorno*. Small boys cradling their soccer balls would bashfully say *ciao*. Elderly women would stop their sweeping to nod. Even leashless dogs, would pause for a petting.

As I passed the small residences, doors ajar, I could hear their inhabitants within chatting in an Italian dialect that my own Italian immigrant grandparents had uttered when I was a boy. My Nana and Papa had come from this same region, Campania, though their small towns were closer to Naples, some forty miles from Cetara. Downstairs from my apartment lived a young boy who seemed to leave his home at exactly the moment I left mine (I think he purposely timed it so as to see a visiting American writer). He and his dog would greet me. Had my Italian been better, I would have initiated a greater conversation with him. I discerned during my days in the town that he had a part-time job walking dogs for other families. And as I looked at him, I thought this could have been my long-late grandfather awakening to this task in his own town. At about the same age as this boy, twelve or so, my grandfather in 1907 boarded a ship to America, alone, and never returned to his native land.

Like most of my fellow classmates, I was a middle-aged professional in search of a vacation in which I wanted something to happen, where I would come away accomplished, having learned something that would endure. To my surprise, other souvenirs I collected were the enduring friendships I forged with my fellow students. All of us shared a desire to express ourselves on paper, in words and images, since the program included a painting component.

While it may be true that a person cannot be taught to write well, any person can be taught to write—and such was the daily experience in our classes. Led by Pat Dunn, director of the Writing Institute of Sarah Lawrence College, and Kathy Curto, a writing teacher at the college, we were given prompts in class, with no time to dawdle over crafting the perfect opening sentence. What resulted—essays about

childhood memories, loves and deaths, imagined or real dialogues with locals—were later read aloud in class and critiqued, but never criticized. The trip concluded with a public reading of our work in an eighteenth-century church in town.

We wrote every day for three hours in the morning. And like the locals, I quickly adopted the ritual of siesta, buying from merchants my mozzarella di bufala, sliced prosciutto, and fresh fruit, then reclimbing the stairs to my terrace. Upon finishing an al fresco meal, I would close the shutters to my room, and as would the rest of the town, take a nap. With this traditional break, every day feels like two days.

Because no writer can work in a vacuum, we were taken on excursions to the region's notable sites, though a dip in the teal-blue sea, solitary walk along terraced pathways, or a ferry ride to another Amalfi coastal town, were equally inspiring. One afternoon, we were driven to Paestum, the ancient Greek and, later, Roman city. There amid a landscape of spilled ruins are three of the greatest extant examples of Doric temples anywhere, an assemblage of buildings so exceptional that the entire excavated compound has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Unlike other important archaeological sites, here a visitor can occupy the ruins, walk right into them without barriers. You enter the very homes and rooms people inhabited beginning in 600 B.C. Though now roofless, the stone houses situated along the grid of streets are where families lived and ate, conversed and played, fought and loved. Part of the Sarah Lawrence experience involves daily painting lessons with renowned local artist Bill Papaleo (the summer program is officially named for his late father, the artist Joe Papaleo). While at Paestum, classmates took out their pastels or watercolors to depict the ruins, capturing the tapering pillars of the ancient temples, the rocketing cypresses, the remnants of a city that flourished until around 500 A.D. before suddenly, and mysteriously, ending.

Because we Americans were immersed in the daily life of Cetara, eating in its restaurants, sipping espresso at its cafes, occupying apartments in its neighborhoods, participating in the evening *passeggiata* in which the whole town takes part, we, too, became vital elements of the townscape. In Cetara's small *piazze*, little kids would kick a soccer ball to me, while one of the women in my class, Antoinette Iemma, became so friendly with local women that they invited her to sit with them every evening to converse in Italian (these many months later, one of those women still texts Antoinette every morning to wish her *buon giorno*).

To be a tourist in a place this historic and beautiful makes for a memorable experience. But to become a local in a town for awhile is to temporarily assume a new identity. And when you return home, the experiences you have had are ones you can write about. ■

HALF PAGE AD