



# Searching Sorrento

A QUEST FOR THE PERFECT GIFT

BY MILES RYAN FISHER

From the cliffs overlooking Sorrento.

I shifted into low gear and pulled the silver mini-Fiat off the winding road, onto an overlook that sat at the edge of the cliff. I got out and stood before the cement barrier. Hundreds of feet below, the Bay of Naples splashed against rock. Miles in the distance, colorful houses speckled Sorrento's picturesque coast.

After four days in Rome, walking on its stone-paved roads among Bernini's sculptures and Fellini's films, I'd driven three hours south to Sorrento. There, I'd spend four days hiking to hidden beaches and grottos, eating fresh seafood dishes<sup>1</sup>, and discovering just how prominent lemons can be. It was an ideal balance between ancient history and intrinsic beauty. As I took it all in, I knew that though

<sup>1</sup> And almost committing sacrilege by putting Parmesan on seafood.

Sorrento would be a more relaxing time than Rome, I had one mission while I was there: I needed to find my nieces—Harper (8) and Reilly (6)—a gift. What I ended up finding wasn't simply just any gift. What I found was the *perfect* gift.

I walked along Corso Italia, the road that took me from my hotel directly to Piazza Tasso, the heart of downtown Sorrento. A web of several narrow roads—Via S. Cesareo, Via Luigi de Maio, Via Sant'Antonio—spread from the piazza, some heading south to the bay, some continuing parallel to Corso Italia. Restaurants and stores lined each road.

I strolled down one of the roads, peering in the shops to see if anything struck me as potential gifts for the two little girls. What did strike me, however, were Sorrento's lemons.

Ones that ranged from the size of racketballs to the size of softballs. Ones painted on the bottles of limoncello. Ones on prints and postcards and magnets and bottle openers and shot glasses and just about any knick-knack you could think of. Everywhere I looked—lemons, lemons, lemons. But I didn't want to get these girls lemons. Besides, they were far too young for a bottle of limoncello<sup>2</sup>.

I walked in a jewelry store thinking that maybe I'd find a bracelet or a necklace, nothing expensive or ornate, just something that a little girl might enjoy wearing. I found a couple I thought they might like, but I decided to wait—maybe I'd find something better than jewelry. I walked out of the store and headed down Via S. Cesareo, past a street artist with paint-

<sup>2</sup> Which I got for my mom, who then used it to bake sweet limoncello cakes.



ings of Sorrento's striking coast. The paintings were quite well done, but at \$45, I vacillated between this and a simple print.

Later, as I walked along Corso Italia back toward the hotel, I thought about the Italian artist. I imagined

some of his artwork, the ones of Sorrento's coast, and a thought sprouted: *Maybe I could commission him to paint what I wanted.*

*What if, I thought, I asked him for one with two little girls standing in front of that coast?* I turned and walked straight back to Via S. Cesareo, back to the street artist.

When I tried asking him if he'd paint two little girls with Sorrento in the background, he couldn't understand me. His English was as limited as my Italian.

*Due ragazze*, I said. *Due ragazze in Sorrento.* I got out my phone and showed him a picture of the two girls. We used Google Translator to type in the very basic things we wanted to say. "Could you paint two little girls with Sorrento in the background?" I asked.

We agreed on a price: \$70. Though this was much more than I'd planned on spending, I knew there was something special about this gift. I handed a down payment—twenty dollars—to the lady in the store across from where the artist set-up every day.

He asked to see the picture of the



**Eight-year-old Harper (left) and six-year-old Reilly on the beaches of Alabama.**

two girls again—he wanted to take a picture of it as a point of reference. This way, I thought, at least the girls in the painting will appear as young as Harper and Reilly. I held my phone steady as he took a picture of the picture with his own phone.

Since I had only three days left in Sorrento, we arranged for me to pick up the painting in two days. Then I'd be driving to Naples Municipal Airport and flying home.

The following day, he wasn't on the street at all.



**A lemon orchard in Sorrento, where lemons grow as large as softballs. (neirfy)**




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On the day I was to pick it up, after a long morning of driving to the small town of Nerano and hiking to a hidden beach on the Bay of Ieranto, I walked into town and saw the artist on Via S. Cesareo. His paintings were propped up, lining the stone wall along the narrow road. He was talking with someone, so I searched the paintings, thinking that the one he'd painted might be on display. I skimmed the wall for a painting with figures that resembled two little girls, just outlines of what could be any little girls.

Then my eyes stopped. It took a moment for me to realize that



**Anthony Bosa's rendering of Harper and Reilly in Sorrento.**



**The author with Sorrento street artist, Anthony Bosa, who holds his artwork proudly.**

who I was looking at weren't just *any* little girls—who I saw were *my nieces*. Harper and Reilly. Painted with precision. Their likenesses reflecting the picture I'd shown to him, the one he then worked from to paint not just two girls, but *those exact* girls, all the way down to their poses, their expressions, even their accessories (including Harper's bracelet).

He hadn't simply painted two girls *in* Sorrento, he *brought* Harper

and Reilly *to* Sorrento, placing them among the pastel houses, the Tyrrhenian Sea, the softball-size lemons. I looked at the bottom right corner of the painting, where he'd signed his name. *Anthony Bosa*. This whole time, we hadn't even known each other's names—the agreement done on a handshake.

I thanked him for work that captured the essence of Italian craftsmanship. He typed into his Google Translator to tell me, 'This was very challenging.' He pointed to the curves of their faces that formed their expressions. "Very, very difficult," he said.

As difficult and challenging as he found it to be, he had accomplished something far greater than painting their likenesses. He showed them what they looked like in a faraway land, a land that their uncle had set

foot on, a land they could one day set foot on as well.

With this in mind, I thought about the message I'd write to them on the back of the painting, a little inscription they could read for years to come. I contemplated it for weeks before finally turning the painting over and writing my message to them.

*Because I wanted to see what the two most beautiful girls look like in one of the most beautiful places in the world.*

When they first saw the painting, it took them a moment—the same time it had taken me—to realize that *they* are the girls in the painting. They brought it home to Boston, where it now hangs by their bedroom. They see it when they wake up. They see it when they go to bed. And I suppose that one day when they're older, they might read this inscription back to me and say, "If you *really* want to see what we look like in Sorrento ..."

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