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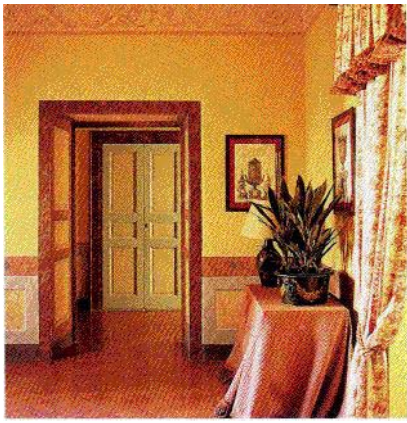
# palazzo belmonte

There are so many beautiful destinations along the Amalfi Coast that most visitors forget about the rest of Campania. In fact the entire south of Italy (with the exception of Capri and Amalfi) has tended in recent times to be dismissed as a combination of intense heat and hopeless poverty. Yet it has significant historical pedigree: long before the Roman era, the ancient Greeks had colonized this area and built cities like Neapolis (Naples)' Herakleion (Herculaneum) and Poseidonia (Paestum). These settlements were great centres of civilized life.

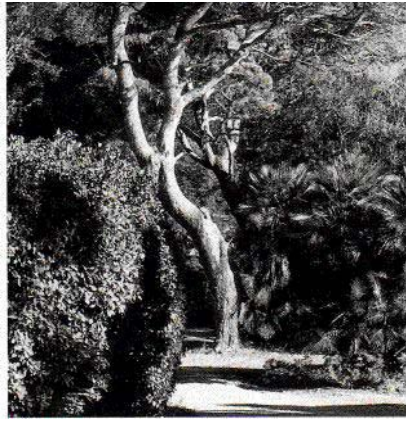
This anti-south prejudice, prevalent even among Italians (some would say especially among Italians)' has long helped to keep Palazzo Belmonte a secret. Built in the early 1600s by Parise 1, an ancestor of the present Prince of Belmonte, it was intended as a hunting lodge, and it remained so until the 1980s. The kings of Spain and Italy used to come here to hunt wild boar and shoot quail' particularly on a stretch of coastline called Punta Licosa, the private property of the Belmonte family (and still today as pristine as when it was used for royal hunting). The palazzo's only other function for it is in practice large just for hosting a hunt was as a safe house for

storing the produce of the surrounding lands. Corn' carobs, figs and fruits were hung from ropes attached to rings in the highvaulted ceilings to keep them away from scavenging animals.

Hunting palazzi are not so rare in Italy. What makes this one exceptional' however' is that it was built on the beach' in what is now the small seaside town of Santa Maria di Castellabate. That said, it didn't escape the fate of so many aristocratic estates in twentiethcentury Italy: after World War II Palazzo Belmonte went into a steep decline' and for almost twenty years was virtually abandoned. The present Prince of Belmonte began his career working in Milan as a broker for an American firm, then moved to London and finally settled in New York. Midcareer, however, the ancestral pull of his inheritance started to daini him more and more strongly. Eventually he made the bold decision to return to the palazzo bequeathed him by his great grandfather. It was a brave move: he found himself taking on a project of monumental proportions' in an area not exactly renowned for sympathetic historic restorations. Like many a palazzo proprietor, he decided to turn to tourism to make the project viable.



Here and there in the otherwise simple interiors of Palazzo Belmonte are touches of aristocratic extravagance

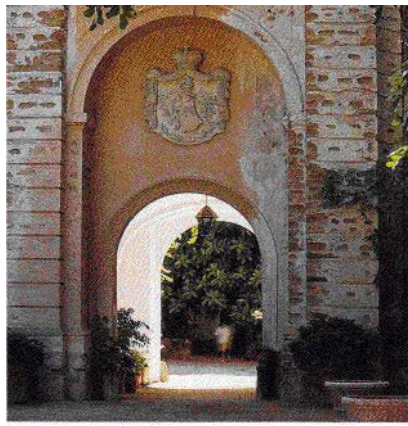


Belmonte's gardens, beside a fine crescent of beach, have a collection of ancient palm, plane and eucalyptus trees



**There's not a palazzo in Italy that (all match Belmonte location. It overlooks one of the Amalfi Coast finest beaches**





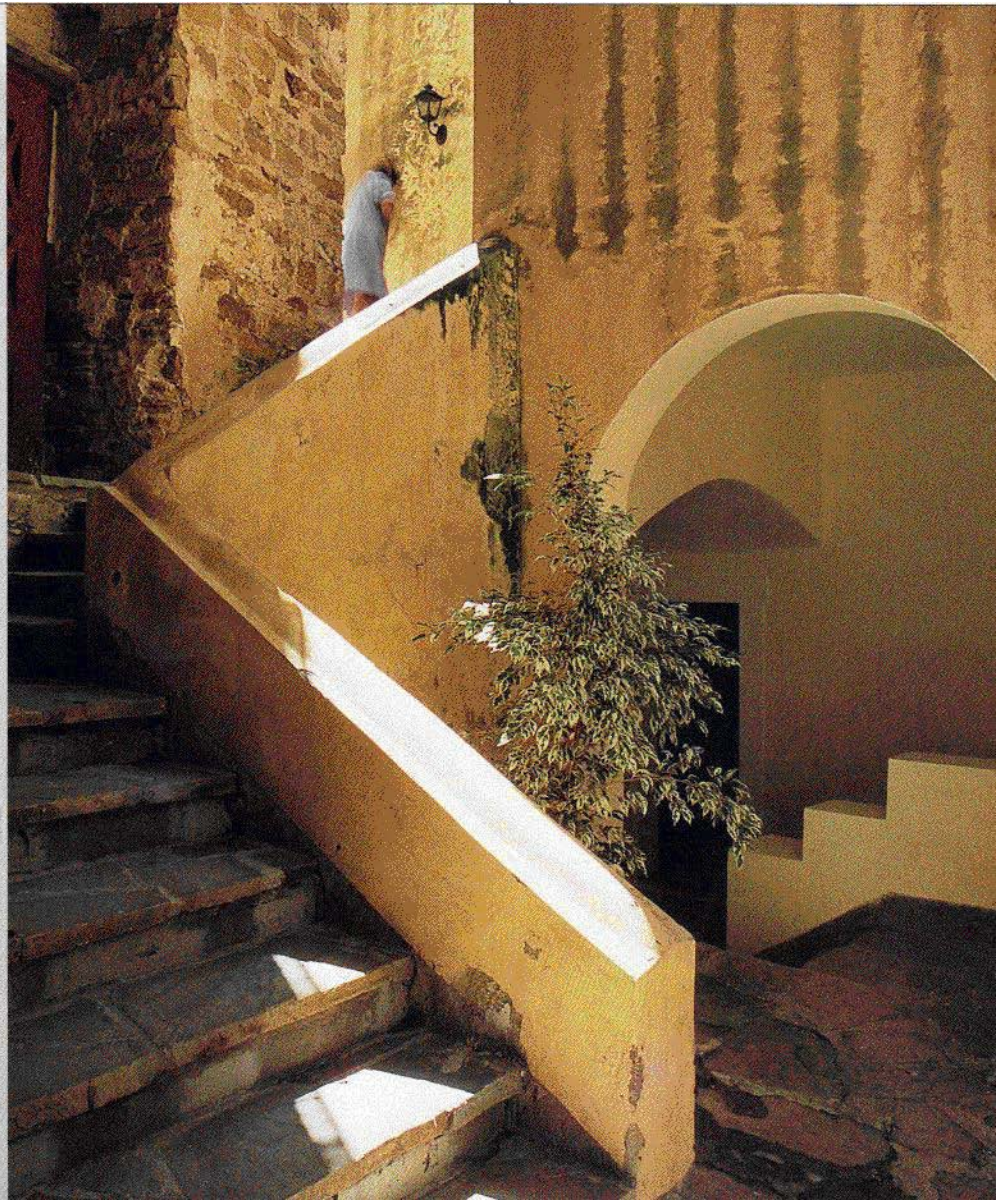
in the arches and courtyards of Palazzo Belmonte, the influence of Spanish Bourbon rule is readily discernible



Approaching via the tree-lined drive, you cannot fail to be impressed by the huge scale of this hacienda-like palazzo



Whitewashed and plain, the decorative signature is perfect for the barefoot, beachfront setting



Trouble was' Santa Maria di Castellabate. although blessed with a white sand beach and perfect summer weather, was in those days not exactly on the tourist map. But the prince was lucky, for discount airlines soon began to change all that. Cheap, regular flights to Naples have lifted the taboo that used to hang over southern Italy. Most travellers seeking sea and sun would far prefer an unspoilt spot to a mass tourist destination: Palazzo Belmonte, and the charming little town of Santa Maria di Castellabate, fit the bill perfectly.

But beware: you should not mistake this for a palazzo hotel in the north of Italy such as Posta Vecchia or Relais la Suvera. Belmonte's guest rooms are not jampacked with antiques; its public spaces are not showcases of exquisitely refined taste. The walls are whitewashed, the floors are tiled: the furnishings are simple and solid. There's nothing flashy here. This is, after all, a beachside location, where decorative simplicity makes total sense. It's all perfectly appropriate for the sandtraipsing,

wetbathingsuit beach life. So casual is the approach at Palazzo Belmonte that the historic hunting lodge has become very popular with parents and children. What's more, back when the Prince of Belmonte first embarked on the conversion of the palazzo he opted to create guest apartments rather than guest rooms, recognizing that the new traveller enjoys a greater degree of independence. This was in any case the only way because in those days they had no restaurant.

Today they do' and its remarkable view easily rivals that of Hotel Raya on Panarea. Set on a raised section of the palazzo's substantial and impressive garden' it takes in a panorama of the entire Amalfi Coast and the isle of Capri. The evening sun sets directly behind these two landmarks, creating a brightly coloured evening spectacle. Shaded by giant plane trees' dusty palms, the odd cypress, and purple bougainvillea, Belmonte is Italy's only barefoot palazzo the perfect venue for grownnp beach bums.

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room rates from Euro 142