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Culture

Crypt currency: Meet the woman who has spent years trying to open up Naples' ancient Greek tombs to the public

Alessandra Calise, is a hotelier from the island of Ischia in the Bay of Naples, whose efforts to unveil ancient tombs have finally paid off



Alessandra Calise has spent the past four years raising money to open the ancient tombs to the public



By Julia Buckley

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Many people take on another person's past when they get married – but for Alessandra Calise, it went deeper than most. A hotelier from the island of Ischia in the Bay of Naples, Calise met Neapolitan engineer Giampietro Martuscelli in 1996. Shortly into their relationship, he revealed to her a deep, dark secret: four ancient Greek tombs beneath the house he inherited on the other side of the city.

Around a century earlier, his great-uncle, Baron Giovanni di Donato, had been digging for a water source in his garden when he hit the burial chambers, 12m underground. The 2,300-year-old tombs, belonging to elite families, were part of a necropolis built outside the city walls when Naples was a Greek settlement.

Inside the burial chambers, sarcophagi shaped like beds, complete with pillows, were sculpted from the soft tuff rock. Bright colours abounded, from scarlet floors and blue-and yellow-striped pillows to flaring candelabras frescoed on the walls.

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In one, a Gorgon with thrashing snakes for hair wards off enemies. The tombs are one of the most important sites in Naples, according to Luigi La Rocca, who oversees the city's archaeological heritage.

Now, 133 years after their discovery, they will finally be opened to the public – all thanks to Calise, 53, who has single-handedly mounted a herculean effort to share them with the world. It was around 20 years ago that her then-boyfriend first showed her the tombs.



The coastline of Ischia island, Italy (Photo: Alessio Paduano/Getty)

“He’s not the kind of person who tells you what he has, and he’d never told me,” she tells **i**. The site was closed, but the family would occasionally open up for academics or VIPs, from Isabella Rossellini to European royalty. One day, Calise went too.

“I’d never seen such a beautiful thing,” she says, comparing it to another fresco – Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* – in terms of the impression it made on her. “But that’s from the 15th century. Here we’re 1,000 years earlier,” she says.

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Her call to open the tombs was a slow-burner – after all, they weren’t hers, she is at pains to point out. “Little by little, I started to appreciate their beauty – but it was a complicated place.”

The Sanità district, where the tombs are located, was at that time one of the poorest parts of Naples, and organised crime had a strong presence. “If you got a taxi to the Sanità, it would leave you outside.”

Calise and Martuscelli were married in 2007, and as they built a family, Calise’s interest grew. Her Damascene moment came on taking her daughter to the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.

“The room was closed and I said, ‘Damn, Sara, I wanted to show you our things.’ I went to the front desk and said, ‘Ciao, I’m Alessandra Martuscelli, my husband owns the Ipogeo dei Cristallini [hypogeum of Cristallini Street],’ and...” She makes a whooshing noise.

“He grabbed the keys. Then every time I went back, the greetings got warmer. Once, an archaeologist told me, ‘Signora, I want to live in there.’ At a certain point it was clear that it was important to open the site.”

It wasn’t an easy ride. The authorities at the time wanted the hypogeum closed to

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protect it; then Calise and Martuscelli left Naples for northern Italy, where they spent a decade.

“I kept thinking of Naples – I said to Giampiero, my dream is to return and open the hypogeum.”



It was around 20 years ago that Calise's then-boyfriend first showed her the tombs (Photo: Mimmo Jodice)

Four years ago, they came home, and Calise swiftly got to work on that dream. She applied for regional EU funding and was awarded the maximum grant of €200,000. Adding another €100,000 herself, Calise persuaded Italy's Central Institute for Restoration to draw up plans for a possible opening.


In 2019, La Rocca, the new chief of Naples heritage, asked to visit the site. He said he thought it should finally be opened; she told him she'd already secured initial funding. “All the right doors opened,” she says.

The site is due to open in June, with tickets financing the restoration of the frescoes starting at the same time. Calise reckons it will cost around €500,000 (£420,000) more to complete the works, but is confident they will find it, either through regional and state funding, or through individual donations, which have been trickling in.

In the meantime, she wants to share the tombs with the world and draw more visitors to Sanità, where she volunteers with local children.

“Naples is a city that has suffered a lot – but Sanità is an area with extraordinary energy,” she says, adding that the neighbourhood “gives back” to her every day. In fact, she wants the tombs to become part of the local heritage, calling herself and her husband “custodians, not owners”.

Living in Milan, she had two dreams: to open the hypogeum, and to make a film about the life of her grandmother, another unstoppable woman who jump-started Ischia's tourism industry.

This year, she published a book about her. “People made fun of me, but now I've written a book and the hypogeum is about to open,” she says. “A project always starts from a dream, doesn't it?” 

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