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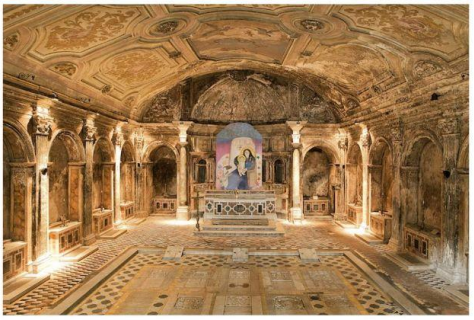

Beneath the streets of Naples, Italy, San Gaudioso's Catacombs hold remains of Christians from the fourth through 17th centuries A.D. The 2,000-year-old city is a fascinating mash-up of ancient sites, traditional food, and new energy.
PHOTOGRAPH BY MASSIMO SIRAGUSA, AGENCE VU/REDUX

TRAVEL

In Naples, what's 2,000 years old is new again

Recent archaeological excavations, artful restorations, and lots of pizza make now the time to visit this Southern Italian city.

BY JULIA BUCKLEY

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In Naples, Italy, the past and the present constantly intertwine. Yes, it's rowdy. Yes, it's chaotic. It's also electric and layered with intrigue. Some new discoveries here were last seen in antiquity: a cache of Greek tombs deep under the modern city; a graffitied Roman-era snack bar in nearby Pompeii.

A vista of Naples includes its skinny downtown streets as well as Vomero Hill, a high point that holds a medieval fortress and historic monastery.
PHOTOGRAPH BY SALVATORE LAPORTA, KONTROLAB/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES

This blend of past and future has always been the beauty of Naples: founded as Neapolis ("new city") by Greek settlers in around B.C. 600, it's a place that is constantly retelling its own story. Instead of turning their backs on pizza, young Neapolitans are reimagining it; galleries slip contemporary works amid Renaissance masterpieces; and artists find inspiration for their work from a 2,000-year history.

All this gives Naples an energy that few other cities have. Here's how to

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explore the southern Italian metropolis now.

Old neighborhood, new energy

Sanità is where that energy is currently pulsating. Once one of the poorest areas of Naples, today it's one of the most popular. But where in other cities gentrification gradually excludes locals, Sanità's emergence has been more of a reevaluation of what was already there.

Zoom in for more detail.

About this map

Not only is Sanità Naples in microcosm—Roman archaeological remains, elegantly peeling Renaissance palaces, motorbikes weaving between it all—it's another place where old and new enmesh. In the Santa Maria della Sanità church, modern art sits alongside ancient; in its bowels, youngsters of the *quartiere* (neighborhood) give tours of the San Gaudioso catacombs, frescoed with jaunty 17th-century skeletons.

At the center of the neighborhood's Piazza Sanità, there's a contemporary bronze statue of a young man in jeans and a T-shirt, his left arm draped over his knee as he looks shyly down. It's a portrait of Genny Cesarano, who was 17 when he was killed by the Camorra mafia in 2015—an innocent bystander caught in crossfire as he chatted with friends in the piazza. His death rocked the working-class neighborhood.

"Everyone flooded into the piazza to protest," says artist Paolo La Motta. Nobody wanted to forget, so the neighbors asked La Motta to make the sculpture to remember him by.

Yet the figure looks familiar, since the artist based its stance on that of a naked bronze of the Roman god Hermes, cast nearly 2,000 years ago for the lavish Villa dei Papiri in Pompeii. Only the ancient figure sits alone at the National Archaeological Museum of Naples and the bronze Genny occupies a busy gathering space, its neck hung with rosaries placed lovingly by the local community.

Left: Visitors walk along the Napoli Lungomare (seafront promenade), which offers bay views and a respite from the hectic city.
PHOTOGRAPH BY PABLO CASTAGNOLA, ANZENBERGER/REDUX

Right: Small restaurants line a narrow, centuries-old stone street in Naples, Italy.
PHOTOGRAPH BY LORENZO MOSCIA, ARCHIVOLATINO/REDUX

Down the road, Alessandra Calise is gearing up to open the 2,300-year-old tombs that lie beneath her chic B&B, Casa d'Anna. The Ipogeo dei Cristallini is an extraordinary clutch of four frescoed graves, once part of a larger necropolis for Greek Neapolis from the fourth century B.C. to the

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first century A.D.

Lost for almost two millennia, the tombs were discovered in 1889 when an ancestor of Calise's husband was digging for water in his garden. Starting in June, the family aims to open them to the public via small, guided tours. Forty feet below ground, the most notable tomb has names of the dead scrawled in Greek on the walls; sumptuous, bed-shaped sarcophagi painted in bright scarlets, turquoises, and yellows; and a snake-haired gorgon flashing the evil eye.

It's not just ancient history on display, here; next door, jewelry maker Vincenzo Oste has opened a tiny hotel-cum-gallery above his workshop and stuffed it full of art by his father, the late Neapolitan sculptor Annibale Oste.

Neapolitans often rely on motorbikes like Vespas to dash around the city's narrow lanes.
PHOTOGRAPH BY PABLO CASTAGNOLA, ANZENBERGER/REDUX

Again, past and present swirl into each other—the rooms at Atelier Inès (named after Vincenzo Oste's wife, a fellow jeweler) are a generational mash-up: Annibale Oste's lamps and sculptures teamed with Vincenzo and Inés' fixtures and fittings. The doors are modeled on vases found in those ancient Greek tombs; even the toilet brushes were designed downstairs and smelted in Oste's nearby foundry.

"Artists have always brought our history forward," he says, adding that Naples' location, beside an active volcano and open to attack from the sea, has instilled a need to keep history close to hand. "Naples is a high-risk place—we know everything can change from one second to the next," he says. "So we try to drag things from the past into the present before they disappear. And because of that uncertainty from Vesuvius, we renew, renew, renew."

Art through the ages

The art scene is where this weaving together of past and present is most obvious. The church of Pio Monte della Misericordia in the historic center is known for its Caravaggio altarpiece, "The Seven Works of Mercy." It's an enormous, excoriating painting of swooping angels and spotlit people in varying degrees of need, but I'm struck by the surrounding coral sculptures by contemporary artist Jan Fabre and the soothing Anish Kapoor sculpture in the gallery upstairs. Nearby, a Banksy has taken up residence by one of the historic center's most traditional pizzerias.

The Pio Monte della Misericordia church in the center of Naples holds an altarpiece painted by Caravaggio, featuring airborne angels and people in need.
PHOTOGRAPH BY MARIO LAPORTA, KONTROLAB/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY

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IMAGES

Then there's the Museo di Capodimonte, in a sprawling 18th-century royal palace. Inside, modern artworks are sprinkled between the Titians and Caravaggios, energizing the Old Masters, while the top floor is dedicated to contemporary artists. Alongside Andy Warhol and Louise Bourgeois is Sanità's Paolo La Motta, whose Renaissance-inspired polyptych of Genny Cesarano blazes out, its mustard background glowing like the sun. That, La Motta says, is down to the Pompeii-inspired ochers he used.

Because even the city's ancient remains have that same frenetic Neapolitan energy. Near the cathedral, authorities have recently opened the Carminiello ai Mannesi archaeological area. A 1943 bomb here destroyed a medieval church, revealing a Roman bathing complex underneath. Visitors can see the brick arches below, marble tubs above—and the laundry dangling from the apartment blocks squeezing round it. Nearby Naples' only Roman theater is currently being renovated for a 2023 opening.

Even lifeless Pompeii is throwing up surprises, thanks to excavations at Regio V, a previously unexplored section of the city. Vesuvius looms menacingly in the background as I walk the original basalt-paved street to the *thermopolium*, a Roman fast-food joint, revealed in 2021.

(*What did Julius Caesar really look like?*)

Here, archaeologists found remnants of food in amphorae slotted into a buffet counter, smelling wine as they excavated. The counter is painted La Motta's brassy ocher and frescoed with images of chickens and birds (the menu). Outside, electoral slogans—"He's a man of honor! Vote for him!"—cover the walls.

Left: Tourists visit the ruins of Herculaneum, one of two ancient Roman cities near Naples that were preserved in ash when Mount Vesuvius erupted in A.D. 79.
PHOTOGRAPH BY IVAN ROMANO, GETTY IMAGES

Right: A worker scrubs the floor of the thermopolium (an ancient snack bar of sorts), which was unearthed in 2021 in Pompeii and recently opened to tourism.
PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELE AMORUSO, AGF/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES

Nearby, in the Casa del Giardino, which was being renovated at the time of the eruption, is an inscription that changes history: "The stuff must be delivered before November." Previously, it was thought Pompeii was destroyed in August A.D. 79, but this, scrawled on a wall by builders, moved the date back to October. There goes Naples again, I think, rewriting its history, 2,000 years on.

Traditional pizza with a twist

Of course, Naples' modern equivalents of that *thermopolium* are the pizzerias. At Le Figlie di Iorio, Teresa Iorio flings ingredients—meatballs, corn, even cream—onto the dough, as her sister yells out the orders. She specializes in fried pizza, she tells me— what women made for centuries while the men were twirling dough discs.

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Gino Sorbillo, one of around 3,000 pizzaiuoli (pizza makers) in Naples, stretches dough at his eponymous restaurant. The pizza makers are recognized as a part of Italy's heritage by UNESCO.
PHOTOGRAPH BY GIANNI CIPRIANO, THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

Tradition is important to her. "We have to remember our roots," she says. "If a pizza becomes gourmet, it's not pizza anymore." Yet her creation, which won her the accolade of world's best fried pizza in 2017—Femmena e Fritta, or "Female and Fried"—seems anything but traditional: ricotta, lemon, pistachios, mortadella, and provolone.

(*Dig into the twisty, delicious history of Neapolitan pasta.*)

That's where I'm wrong, Teresa tells me. For starters, she grew up eating mortadella because prosciutto was expensive. Plus, ricotta-stuffed rolls were popular when she was a child. "So in my pizza, I associated lots of things that I was brought up with," she explains. "You have to keep innovating but you have to find a way to keep the tradition going at the same time."

Frenetic, inventive, and forever sloughing off one skin to reveal the one underneath: few cities are as thrilling as Naples.

Julia Buckley is a Venice, Italy-based writer. Follow her on Twitter.

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