

Operation Italy

Hopkins surgeon is world traveler, but the Amalfi Coast is where Dr. Ben Carson really unwinds

By Stephanie Citron, Special to The Baltimore Sun



It's no surprise that Dr. Ben Carson is a world-class traveler.

Being a world-renowned surgeon who has been named one of the nation's 20 foremost physicians and scientists by CNN and Time Magazine and one of 89 "Living Legends" by the Library of Congress, requires a great deal of coming and going.

Carson, director of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins Children's Center, also heads the Carson Scholars Foundation, providing scholarships to students for academic and humanitarian accomplishments in more than 30 states. Add to that, speaking engagements and demonstrations of his unprecedented surgical methods and you come up with a global itinerary that's both business and pleasure.

"We travel about once every 10 days, usually to destinations within the continental United States, but

there are several trips to other countries each year as well," says Carson. "Most of my trips are planned in conjunction with some activity I am participating in, but I do like to explore the destination on the Internet before I actually arrive."



We spoke with Carson recently about his favorite getaway and the one thing he doesn't like to travel without.

Where is your favorite travel destination?

The Amalfi Coast of Italy.

How did you discover it?

A very close friend of mine purchased and restored the region's premier villa — Villa Lilly [in Praiano]. It used to be owned by Napoleon's sister who was married to the king of Naples. We stay in the villa, which has a five-star rating. When we are not there and our friends are not there, it is rented [by the week].

We love that it is secluded and the vistas are breathtakingly beautiful, overlooking the Mediterranean, with views of Positano and Capri.

My wife accompanies me, and my sons and my mother have been there. I tell everybody about it, and some of my friends have been able to visit.

What inspires you most about this destination?

I love to walk around the property early in the morning when the birds are in full chorus because there are beautiful flower and vegetable gardens from which the chef picks our daily meals. There are about 200 steps down to the beach, and making that trek several times is not only beautiful, but invigorating.

The food is the most delicious I have ever tasted. The private chef, Jon Carlo, is a master at his craft, and it makes me hungry to even think about the eggplant parmesan with ingredients fresh from the garden. This is accompanied by a fresh garden salad and fresh-squeezed lemonade.

Can you share a magical memory from the trip?

Flying through the water at high speed on a private boat and arriving for the first time on the island of Capri and then on to Sorrento. Roaming through the streets with multiple stops with friends and family is an unbeatable experience.

Travel bag of choice?

My favorite is my Rollaboard because I can get almost everything I need for a trip into it even if I am going to be there for several days; the garment section, which will accommodate two or three suits, and the lower portion which will accommodate several changes of casual clothing.

What is the one item you will not travel without?

I hate traveling without my wife, but if it has to be an inanimate object, it would probably be my laptop because I like to know what is going on.

Do you have an all-time favorite travel read or author?

I always take my Bible with me because it is full of wisdom and comfort.

What are some of your other favorite destinations?

I have an opportunity to travel throughout the world. The number of absolutely gorgeous and peaceful places is almost too numerous to count, but I especially enjoy visiting Zion National Park in Utah. The scenery is breathtaking, and I love being out in nature.

If you go

Italy's Amalfi Coast

Dr. Ben Carson's beloved Praiano, Italy, is nestled in a cove between the Amalfi Coast's seaside towns of Positano and Amalfi. Acclaimed for its spectacular sunsets, Praiano's ancient name — Pelagium — means "open sea." Earliest records indicate that around A.D. 700 it was known for producing high-quality silk and linen. The discovery of coral centuries later brought economic prosperity, helping it become a vacation spot of royalty and doges. Its pristine beaches can only be reached on foot, by private footpaths or by hiking down steps from the town center.



Getting there

For an authentic local vibe, hop aboard the Circumvesuviana train from Naples. The 55-minute excursion snakes past the ancient ruins of Pompeii, Herculaneum and the majestic Mount Vesuvius before arriving in the stunning town of Sorrento. From there, you can take a public SITA bus along a loopy coastal route that will leave you gaping and gasping over hairpin turns alongside 500-foot drops from craggy cliffs dangling above the cerulean Mediterranean. A \$10 ticket will cover both fares. Go to vesuviana.it/web/en.

Have a time crunch? Take the Metro Del Mare high-speed boat (\$15) from Naples to Positano, where you can catch the SITA bus (\$2) <http://www.metrodelmare.net/> to Praiano.

Lodging

Villa Lilly, Via Masa, Praiano, costalandco.com/villalillyitaly.htm. Rates range from \$30,000 to \$50,000 per week, depending upon the season and the number of guests. The main house features five bedrooms and bathrooms and includes breakfast, a staff of three and unlimited use of the onsite masseuse. The property also offers two one-bedroom apartments. On the grounds are a hot tub, a wine cellar, and organic gardens where the chef grows ingredients used in his cuisine. Utilizing the private chef and the 40-foot yacht are additional. Celebrities who have stayed at Villa Lilly include Julia Roberts, Ben Stiller and Barbra Streisand.

Hotel Margherita, Via Umberto I, Praiano, hotelmargherita.info. This family-run lodging is a more reasonably-priced option. Guests declare that the hotel far surpasses its three-star rating, with beautifully appointed rooms, modern bathrooms and eternity pool overlooking the Mediterranean. Rates begin at \$145, including breakfast and beach shuttle service.

Attractions



The "Sentiero degli Dei" (Walk of the Gods) is a glorious hike beginning in Praiano and ending in Agerola. The path is still traveled by farmers and shepherds; it sidles ancient vineyards, small villages, historic caves, and vistas offering arguably the best views of the Amalfi Coast.

San Luca is a church dating back to the 12th century with its original maiolica tile dome and original paintings by Gigante, Lama and Montorio.
ondaverde.it/sentiero_deglidei.htm

Sample sfogliatella Santa Rosa, a delicious pastry invented in the 18th century by nuns living in the Conservatory of Santa Rosa da Lima. Though creative liberties are taken with the filling today, the nuns originally used sugar, milk, dried fruit and glace cherries

Take a day trip, via hydrofoil, to explore Positano and Isle of Capri.

Information

Go to amalficoastweb.com or <http://www.comune.praiano.sa.it/inglese/Default.htm>

—*Stephanie Citron*

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