

8. Underground Naples

Not many people know the stories and the mystery surrounding the **underground city** of Naples. The **underground city** originated at the same time as the one above ground and developed alongside it.

Naples grew up by the sea but it was also influenced by the volcano **Vesuvius**. The tuff, pozzolane, and rocks that the city stands on were the result of previous **eruptions**, and Naples always used the stone it found on its hillsides and valleys to help it grow in stature.

The underground city of Naples is one of the most fascinating and mysterious in the world. Right in the bowels of the city there is a series of underground passages, water storage tanks, catacombs and aqueducts covering an area of over **600 thousand square metres**.

One of the most famous entrances is via **Piazza San Gaetano**, where you walk down 130 steep steps and then find yourself immersed in another, quite unique, world which takes you back in time on a voyage of discovery of the “underworld” of Naples. We do not know who started digging out these areas. Oldest references date back to the times of the **Cimmeri**, famous miners from Caucasia who lived in the area during VIII B.C. The famous Roman Historian, **Pliny the Elder** and many other Roman writers say that the Cimmeri lived not far away from Naples in caves and underground dwellings known as **Argillae**, and they lived off the income from their mines.

All the underground chambers in Naples date back a long way. They were all man-made quarries for digging out the **Neapolitan yellow tuff** which is an excellent building stone.

We know for certain that in III century B.C., the first underground quarry opened to mine the tuff blocks necessary to build the city walls for **Neapolis**. Maybe the Greeks particularly liked the yellow stone of **Monte Echia**, an extinct volcano just behind where Piazza del Plebiscito is today. Many archaeologists believe that the stone used to build on the nearby island of Megaride came from this volcano.

However, the majority of the underground network dates back to the Roman period with the first significant changes in layout which led to the creation of the real underground city. The parts which had been created by the Greeks were used as cemeteries, tunnels, city walls, temples, housing and the wonderful **aqueduct**, with its numerous channels and cisterns to distribute the water from the Serino river. There were special workers responsible for the maintenance and cleaning of the aqueduct. They were called **pozzari** and wore a sort of cassock with a hood. It was a strange profession and the legend of the Neapolitan **Munaciello** may have had something to do with it.

Many of the underground water channels were later transformed into catacombs or pagan halls, and the larger underground caverns into rainwater reservoirs or grain stores. After the aqueduct closed down following a cholera epidemic, the underground city of Naples once again became a central part of city life during the second world war when it was successfully used as an **air-raid shelter**, complete with toilets and electric lighting. The undercity world of Naples has always formed part of daily life in the city, for better or for worse.

In **Via Sant’Anna di Palazzo**, there is another entrance to the underground city. You go down about 40 metres until you come to a large shelter measuring about 3,200 square metres which could hold up to 4,000 people. Some graffiti is still visible on the walls there; some of it refers to heads of State from Berlin, Rome and Tokyo, others to women of the period; there are pictures of soldiers, planes, football pitches and references to stories and anecdotes about real people. At the end of the war, there was a shortage of space for the rubble and so a lot was deposited in the underground chambers.

In the **Via Anticaglia** area, in the old part of the city, you can get to the remains of an ancient Roman theatre by going through one of the houses called a “**basso**”. You can still see the walls of the proscenium belonging to a theatre which dates back to the I century A.D. where it is said Emperor **Nero** used to go.