

# Pompeii poised to give up even greater treasures

## Italy

Tom Kington Pompeii

Standing on a grassy hillock in the middle of Pompeii, the ancient site's top archaeologist took bets on what would be found a few feet below his feet when digging starts there this year.

"The city block beneath here appears to have just two entrances, so I would say we will find two large houses belonging to wealthy owners — wealthier than the homes we have just excavated, which means very interesting frescoes and mosaics," Massimo Osanna said.

The discoveries promise to continue a golden age for the Italian site, as wall paintings, skeletons and even a fast food joint emerge after almost two millennia under ash and pumice spewed out by Vesuvius in AD79.

"Wherever you dig at Pompeii, you find," Osanna, 57, the outgoing director at the site, said. The irony is that the present digging is more to do with maintenance than archaeology. Excavations that started under the King of Naples in 1748 and continued into the 20th century left a third of the city, 54 acres, untouched. Many excavated buildings backed into 8m high cliffs of earth and volcanic material.

When the pressure from one rain-swollen earth bank in 2010 caused the collapse of the frescoed House of Gladiators, EU funding arrived to dig back the sheer sides to a gentler, safer, 30 degree slope.

With 3km of earth bank cliffs now cambered back, the front rooms of undiscovered houses have appeared, including on Via del Vesuvio, where experts gazed upon frescoes of Narcissus staring at his own reflection, Priapus, the god of fertility, weighing his penis in a scale and an erotically-charged fresco of the encounter between the Spartan queen Leda and a swan.

The discoveries that grabbed headlines have been focused in the so-called Fifth section of the city, where a kilometre square undug section formed a narrow promontory jutting into excavated streets. Instead of cambering its three sheer sides, experts decided to dig out the whole section.

They stumbled on a street of balconied homes, a cache of 100 amulets and pendants, proving the influence of

magic rites in Pompeii, and a fast food counter containing an earthenware container that still smelt of wine when it was opened.

"We are very lucky archaeologists," said Teresa Virtuoso who was working at the 2,000-year-old cafe this week. The good news is that near by, just across Via di Nola, is a second narrow, square kilometre promontory of undug earth that will be removed. Osanna was studying the site this week.

Behind him, a lane stretched off through laurel bushes, meadows and pine trees sitting atop the northeast section of the city, which has never been excavated. Digging that section is not in their plans, he said.

"You need to be careful," Osanna said. "We should only dig what we can maintain. With the resources we have now we can excavate little pieces but not all of it, because it becomes a problem of conservation."

He was joined on the hillock by Gabriel Zuchtriegel, 39. The German archaeologist is taking over from Osanna, who is moving to a senior posting at Italy's culture ministry.

"Today we have different technologies for excavating to 50 and 200 years ago," Zuchtriegel said. "And in the future there will be different methods. We need to leave something for future generations."

But if the hidden acres at Pompeii must stay hidden for a while, that has not stopped Osanna digging just outside the city walls. He drives to Civita Giuliana, a patchwork of fields and scrappy farmhouses north of Pompeii, where a dig at a wealthy villa has turned up a magnificent ceremonial chariot decorated with bronze and tin medallions depicting satyrs, nymphs and cupids.

On arrival at the site, he climbs 6m down ladders into dug-out chambers, past the remains of horses to where the chariot sits, the wood in its frame still intact.

"That's beech, while the wood used in the wheels is ash, which was considered more flexible," Osanna said.

"This area was very rich, rather like a Roman Beverly Hills, and the people who lived here were the elite. We have only excavated about a third of the villa and there will be much more to find. Frescoes at the very least."

## Areas of interest



A vivid mosaic of Orion becoming a constellation was found in the ruins

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