**Herculaneum.** East of Naples, the first real point of any interest is the town of Ercolano, the modern offshoot of the ancient site of Herculameum, which was destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius on August 24, 79 AD, and is situated at the seaward end of Via IV Novembre straight ahead when exiting the Circumvesuviana station. In its heyday, Herculaneum was a residential town, much smaller than Pompeii, and as such it makes a more manageable site, less architecturally impressive but better preserved and more easily taken in on a single visit. Continue reading to find out more about...Herculaneum. Pompeii. **Discovering Herculaneum.** The site of Herculaneum was discovered in 1709, when a well-digger accidentally struck the stage of the buried theatre. Excavations were undertaken throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during which period much of the marble and bronze from the site was carted off to Naples to decorate the city’s palaces, and it wasn’t until 1927 that digging and preservation began in earnest. Archeologists held for a long time that unlike in Pompeii, on the other side of the volcano, most of the inhabitants of Herculaneum managed to escape. However, recent discoveries of entangled skeletons found at what was the shoreline of the town suggest otherwise, and it’s now believed that most of the population was buried by huge avalanches of volcanic mud, which later hardened into the tufa-type rock that preserved much of the town so well. In early 2000 the remains of another 48 people were found; they were carrying coins, which suggests they were attempting to flee the disaster. **Pompeii.** The other Roman town to be destroyed by Vesuvius – Pompeii – was a much larger affair than Herculaneum and one of Campania’s most important commercial centres – a moneyed resort for wealthy patricians and a trading town that exported wine and fish. In effect the eruption froze the town’s way of life as it stood at the time; indeed the excavations have probably yielded more information about the ordinary life of Roman citizens during the imperial era than anywhere else: their social conventions, class structure, domestic arrangements and (very high) standard of living. Some of the buildings are even covered with ancient graffiti, either referring to contemporary political events or simply to the romantic entanglements of the inhabitants; and the full horror of their way of death is apparent in plaster casts made from the shapes their bodies left in the volcanic ash – with faces tortured with agony, or shielding themselves from the dust and ashes. The first parts of ancient Pompeii were discovered in 1600, but it wasn’t until 1748 that excavations began, continuing more or less without interruption until the present day. Indeed, exciting discoveries are still being made. A privately funded excavation some years ago revealed a covered heated swimming pool, whose erotic wall paintings have been deemed by the Vatican to be unsuitable for children. And, in a further development, a luxury “hotel” complex was uncovered in 2000 during the widening of a motorway, slabs of stacked cut marble suggesting it was still under construction when Vesuvius erupted. Recently, a flood of new funds is being used to excavate a further twenty hectares of the site; it is hoped to resolve whether or not the survivors attempted, vainly, to resettle Pompeii after the eruption. **August 24, 79 AD: the day Pompeii died.** Vesuvius had been spouting smoke and ash for several days before the eruption on August 24. Fortunately most of Pompeii had already been evacuated when disaster struck: out of a total population of twenty thousand it’s thought that only two thousand actually perished, asphyxiated by the toxic fumes of the volcanic debris, their homes buried in several metres of volcanic ash and pumice. Pliny, the Roman naturalist, was one of the casualties – he died at nearby Stabiae (now Castellammare di Stabia) of a heart attack. But his nephew, Pliny the Younger, described the full horror of the scene in two vivid letters to the historian Tacitus, who was compiling a history of the disaster, writing that the sky turned dark like “a room when it is shut up, and the lamp put out”.