

## pliny –the laurentine villa

---

Book Two - Letter 17

To Gallus

You are surprised, it seems, that I am so fond of my Laurentinum, or (if you like the appellation better) my Laurens; but you will cease to wonder when I acquaint you with the charm of the villa, the advantages of its situation, and the extensive prospect of the seacoast. It is but seventeen miles distant from Rome; so that after I have finished my affairs in town, I can pass my nights here after completing a full working-day.

There are two different roads to it; if you go by that of Laurentum you must turn off at the fourteenth milestone; if by Ostia, at the eleventh. Both of them are in some parts sandy, which makes it somewhat tedious if you travel in a coach, but easy and pleasant to those who ride. The landscape on all sides is extremely diversified, the prospect in some places being confined by woods, in others extending over large meadows, where numberless flocks of sheep and herds of horses and cattle, which the severity of the winter has drove from the mountains, fatten in the vernal warmth of this rich pasturage.

My villa is large enough to afford all conveniences, without being expensive to maintain. The court-yard is plain, but not mean, through which you enter into a portico in the form of the letter D, which includes a small, but agreeable area. This affords a capital relief in bad weather, not only as it is enclosed with windows, but particularly as it is sheltered by a projecting roof. From the middle of this portico you pass into an inward court extremely pleasant, and from thence into a handsome dining-room which runs out towards the sea; so that when a south-west wind drives the sea shoreward it is gently washed with the waves, which spend themselves at the foot of it. On every side of this room are either folding doors or windows equally large, by which means you have a view from the front and the sides, as it were, of three different seas; from the back part you see the middle court, the

portico and the area; and by another view you look through the portico into the front court from whence the prospect is terminated by the woods and mountains which are seen at a distance.

On the left-hand of this room, somewhat farther back, lies a large drawing-room, and beyond that, a second of a smaller size, which has one window to the rising, and another to the setting sun. This has likewise a prospect of the sea, but being at a greater distance, is less incommoded by it. The angle which the projection of the hall forms with this drawing-room, retains and increases the warmth of the sun, and this forms a retreat in the winter and a family gymnasium; it is sheltered from all winds except those which are generally attended with clouds, so that nothing can render this place useless, but what at the same time destroys the fair weather.

Contiguous to this is a room forming the segment of a circle, the windows of which are so placed as to receive the sun the whole day; in the wall is contrived a cupboard like a bookcase, which contains a collection of such authors whose works can never be read too often. From hence you pass into a bedchamber through a passage, which having a floor supported on pillars over hot air pipes which run underneath, tempers the heat which it receives and conveys to all parts of this room. The remainder of this side of the house is appropriated to the use of my slaves and freedmen, but however most of the apartments in it are neat enough to entertain guests.

In the opposite wing is a room ornamented in very elegant taste; next to which lies another room, which though large enough for a parlor, makes but a moderate dining-room; it is exceedingly warmed and lighted not only by the direct rays of the sun, but by their reflection from the sea. Beyond this is a chamber, together with its ante-chamber, the height of which renders it cool in summer, as its being sheltered on

## pliny –the laurentine villa

---

all sides from the winds makes it warm in winter. To this apartment another of the same sort is joined by one common wall.

From thence you enter into the grand and spacious cooling-room belonging to the baths, from the opposite walls of which two curved basins are thrown out, so to speak; these are large enough, if you consider if the sea is close by. Contiguous to this is the anointing-room, then the sweating-room, and beyond that the furnace; adjoining are two other little bathing-rooms which are fitted up in an elegant rather than a costly manner. Annexed to this is a warm bath of extraordinary workmanship, wherein one may swim, and have a prospect at the same time of the sea.

Not far from hence stands the game-court, which lies open to the warmth of the afternoon sun. From thence you ascend a sort of turret, which contains two entire apartments below; there are the same number above, besides a dining-room which commands a very extensive prospect of the sea and coast, together with the beautiful villas which stand interspersed upon it. There is a second turret, containing a room which faces the rising and setting sun. Behind this is a storeroom and repository, and underneath a spacious dining-room where the sea even in a storm, is heard but faintly. It looks upon the garden and the allée, which surrounds the garden.

The allée is encompassed with a box-tree hedge, and where that is decayed, with rosemary; for the box in these parts which are sheltered by buildings preserves its verdure perfectly well; but where by an open situation it lies exposed to the winds and to the dashing of the sea-water, though at a great distance, it entirely withers. Between the garden and this allee runs a shady walk of vines, which is so soft that you may walk barefoot upon it without any injury. The garden is thickly planted with fig and mulberry trees, to which this soil is as favorable as it is averse to all others. In this place is a banqueting room which, though it stands remote from the sea, enjoys

however a prospect nothing inferior to that view. Two apartments run round the back part of it, whose windows look upon the entrance of the villa, and into a productive kitchen garden.

From here a corridor extends itself, which by its size you might take for a public one. It has a range of windows on each side, but on that which looks towards the sea they are double the number of those next to the garden. When the weather is fair and serene these are all thrown wide open; but if it blows, those on the side the wind sits are shut, while others remain unclosed without any inconvenience. Before this corridor lies a terrace perfumed with violets, and warmed by the reflection of the sun from the corridor, which as it retains the rays, so it keeps off the northeast wind; and it is as warm on this side as it is cool on the opposite.

In the same manner it is a defense against the southwest, and thus in short, by means of its several sides, breaks the force of the winds from whatever point they blow. These are some of its winter advantages, which however are still more considerable in the summer; for at that season it throws a shade upon the terrace during all the forenoon, as it defends the nearest part of the allée and garden from the afternoon sun, and casts a greater or less shade either way as the day either increases or decreases; but the portico itself is then shadiest when the sun is most scorching; that is, when its rays fall directly upon the roof. To these advantages I must not forget to add, that by setting open the windows the western breezes have a free draught, and by that means the enclosed air is prevented from stagnating.

On the upper end of the terrace and portico stands a detached building in the garden, which I call my favorite; and in truth I am extremely fond of it, as I erected it myself. It contains a very warm winter-room, one side of which looks upon the terrace, the other has a view of the sea, and both lie exposed to the sun; also an apartment, which looks

## pliny –the laurentine villa

---

on the portico through folding doors and through a window on the sea. Against the middle wall stands an elegant little retired closet, which by means of glass doors and a curtain, is either laid into the adjoining room, or separated from it. It contains a couch and two chairs. As you lie upon this couch, from the feet you have a prospect of the sea; if you look behind, you see the neighboring villas; and from the head you have a view of the woods. These three views may be seen either distinctly from so many different windows in the room, or blended together in one confused prospect.

Adjoining this is a bedchamber which neither the voice of the servants, the murmur of the sea, nor even the roaring of a tempest can reach; not lightning nor the day itself can penetrate it, unless you open the windows. This profound tranquility is occasioned by a passage, which divides the wall of this chamber from that of the garden, and thus by means of that void intervening space, every noise is drowned. Annexed is a small stove-room, which, by opening a little window, warms the bedchamber to the degree of heat required. Beyond this lie a chamber and antechamber which enjoy the rising sun, though obliquely indeed, from the time it rises till the afternoon. When I retire to this garden-apartment I fancy myself a hundred miles away from my house, and take particular pleasure in it at the feast of the Saturnalia, when by the license of that season of joy, every other part of my villa resounds with the mirth of my domestics. Thus I neither interrupt their diversions, nor they my studies.

Among the pleasures and conveniences of this situation there is one disadvantage, and that is the want of a running stream; but this defect is in a great measure supplied by wells; or rather I should call them springs, for they rise very near the surface. And indeed the quality of this coast is pretty remarkable; for in whatever part you dig you meet, upon the first turning up of the ground, with a spring of pure water,

not in the least salt, though so near the sea.

The neighboring forests afford an abundant supply of fuel; every other convenience of life can be had from Ostia; to a moderate man indeed even the next village (between which and my house there is only one village) would furnish all common necessaries. In that little place there are no less than three public baths; which is a great convenience if one happens to arrive home unexpectedly, or make too short a stay to allow time for preparing my own.

The whole coast is beautifully diversified by the joining or detached villas that are spread upon it, which, whether you look at them from the sea or the shore, have the effect of a series of towns. The sand on the shore is sometimes loosened by a long spell of calm weather, though in general by the winds driving the waves upon it, it is hard. I cannot boast that our sea produces any extraordinary fish; however it supplies us with exceeding fine soles and prawns; but as to provisions of other kinds my villa pretends to equal even inland countries, particularly in milk; for thither the cattle come from the meadows in great numbers whenever they seek shade or water.

Tell me now, have I not just cause to bestow my time and my affection upon this agreeable retreat? Surely you are unreasonably attached to the pleasures of the town if you have no inclination to take a view of it; as I much wish you had, that to so many charms with which my favorite villa abounds, it might have the very considerable addition of your presence to recommend it.

Farewell.