

CHARMING SICILY

Soaking up the sun, sand and savory delights of Italy's
southernmost shores

photographs and text by Jenny Peters



bask beyond

Sicily. In America, the word often evokes thoughts of Francis Ford Coppola-directed flicks about the Corleone family and the mafia. But Sicily also is where many Americans trace their lineage, from the likes of Joe DiMaggio, Frank Sinatra and Lady Gaga to countless other Italians of specifically Sicilian descent.

Whatever one’s perception is of Sicily, once you visit the lovely island of many influences and civilizations, you’ll never think of it in quite the same way. Yes, Sicily is part of Italy (since 1861), but from the time the first humans stepped onto the island around 10,000 BC, Sicily has been a cultural melting pot. Siculi, Phonecians, Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Moors, Normans, Spaniards and Bourbons have all been here, each for an extended period of time, which may be why islanders are so welcoming to visitors. They’re probably somehow related, after all.

And welcoming they are, from big cities to rural countryside, with nary a glimpse of La Cosa Nostra (or mafia, in more familiar terms)—at least not on my recent visit. Instead, I see beautiful beaches, visit gorgeous wineries, eat in wonderful restaurants and drink in fascinating ancient historical sites while roaming the island and beyond, to little-known gem Pantelleria.

After the quick flight from Rome to Palermo, it’s grab a rental car and go. Be forewarned, however, that once you are off the highway, street signs in Sicily are not the best. And because of the hilly nature of the island, you see bucolic landscapes with sheep grazing in vineyards, and your GPS may not work. So arm yourself with a good map and be willing to ask for directions as you go. It’s a big island, so if possible, plan to spend at least a week (or more) here.

Check out the mysterious mummies in Capuchin Catacombs in Palermo, hit famed Mondello Beach to dip your toes in the Mediterranean, then head to the countryside and spend the night in one of Sicily’s lovely

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“agriturismo” lodgings, rural estates and farms that offer a homelike experience to tourists and are often located at or near the island’s numerous wineries.

At Baglio Di Pianetto Agrirelais and Winery, for example, stay in the heart of the vineyards owned by Count Marzotto in a classic, upper-class Italian country house, and enjoy a typical Sicilian meal of fried seafood, arancini and cannoli, all paired with the nearby winery’s distinctive offerings, like Ficilingno, Agnus and Cembali wines, made with indigenous Sicilian grapes—Insolia, Catarratto, Frappato, Nero d’Avola.

Continue on for more tastings at some of the other beautiful wineries dotting the nearby landscape. Visit Principe de Corleone—yes, Corleone is the name of the town where the Pollara family has been making fine wine since 1892—and sample Quercus reserve wines while gazing across rolling hills covered in vines. Climb even higher to Dei Principi di Spadafora, in Camporeale, for gorgeous vistas and the crispy white Grillo, which is another indigenous Sicilian grape. Then stop into Tenuta Rapitala to watch the sun set over the hills while experiencing the winery’s wonderful Nuhar red blend.

To try the most famous wine from Sicily, Marsala is a must-stop. This always-important western port city, settled in the 8th century BC, remains a key area known for its wines, impressive Baroque architecture and famed salt flats, with their striking windmills. Choose Hotel Carmine for a home base, an antique-filled luxury offering located in a 16th century building.

From here, walk the old city, looking into Mother Church (circa 1176) and eventually wandering into Carlo Pellegrino, one of the top producers of Marsala wine since 1880. Take a guided tour and tasting—there’s a cooking school, too. Choosing dinner at SLO (Osteria San Lorenzo) rather than my own cooking, I discover an exceptional restaurant dedicated to pairing sophisticated seasonal sea- or farm-to-table dishes with the area’s best wines.

Donnafugata is one of Sicily’s finest wine producers, a family business since 1851. A visit to their massive winery in Marsala evokes the past, but don’t expect to taste Marsala wine here. Instead, join the welcoming Rallo family and try their full line of award-winning wines, from Grillo and Chardonnays to Nero d’Avola, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and more.

To experience Donnafugata’s most famous wine, the uniquely wonderful and sweet Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria, hop on a plane for an hour flight to Pantelleria. Ideal for a day trip, it’s a place like no other—literally, as it’s the only location on this tiny, special island that grows Zibibbo grapes found in Ben Ryé. Just 37 miles east of Africa and a popular summer vacation spot—Giorgio Armani has a home here and luminaries like Madonna, Sting and Isabella Rossellini visit often—it is a truly exotic place to behold. Where else will you see stunted grapevines actually growing in the sand, olive trees that look like bushes, or foggy, terraced hillsides that reflect a centuries-old way of living and cultivating?

Back on Sicily, roam down the southern coast to Agrigento and drink in the spectacular Valley of the Temples, a UNESCO World Heritage site featuring the remains of seven ancient Greek temples, including massive Temple of Concordia. Then meander across the center of Sicily toward that other must-see sight, Mt. Etna, located on the northeastern edge of the island. It’s likely to be smoking, for it’s an active volcano; and in winter, you may spot skiers schussing down the snow-covered peak. In summer, visit some of the wineries that dot the eastern side, with vines that flourish in volcanic soil, like Wiegner, where you’ll feel as if you just stepped into a rustic time machine from the moment you enter its old-fashioned tasting room.

Make Sicily’s most elegant city, Taormina, your jumping-off point for eastern side exploration. Stay at sea level at the elegant Grand Hotel Atlantis Bay for easy ranging, or live at the very top of this hillside city at luxe Belmond Hotel Grand Timeo; either way, see ancient Greek Teatro Antico, with its spellbinding coastal views, shop for Furla, Valentino and other Italian haute brands, or just wander the streets. Don’t miss the Clock Tower, built in 1679, or the lovely public gardens.

Complete your Sicilian adventure by sliding down the coast to Syracuse, the UNESCO World Heritage metropolis that was originally one of Ancient Greece’s most beautiful cities. Be sure to see the Duomo, the vast Baroque cathedral there, which was born in the 5th century as the Temple of Athena, as well as the Roman amphitheater, the citadel known as Maniace Castle and the Greek Acropolis, still near the center of town. It’s the perfect way to complete your visit to this gorgeous island, whose vibrant history and culture are a true revelation.



(clockwise from top right) The massive Duomo in Syracuse, Sicily. Taormina is a heady mix of sophisticated modernity and Old-World charm. Don’t be surprised to encounter sheep meandering down the road as you roam the incredibly scenic wine areas of Sicily. Remains of the ancient Greek Acropolis, located in the center of Syracuse.



previous page The fantastic landscapes of Pantelleria island off Sicily, where the Donnafugata winery grows their Ben Ryé grapes. this page (clockwise from top right) The scenic windmills and salt flats in Marsala, Sicily. Donnafugata’s breathtaking barrel room, where the family has been storing their world-class wine in Marsala since 1851.

