

# A Trip to Paradise? Italian Island of Pantelleria

Where Celebs Like Giorgio Armani Relax And Enjoy Pantelleria's Delicious Passito Wine

Reporter's Notebook By PHOEBE NATANSON

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I fell in love with the Italian island of [Pantelleria](#) before I even saw it, just from the taste of the famous passito wine it produces.

Sipping it made me dream of Sicilian summers and everything about them: [sun, sea, salt, wind](#). And all that deliciously ripe fruit: oranges, peaches, figs and apricots, but most of all those tempting Sicilian deserts filled with almonds, pistachios, candied fruit, raisins, honey and fresh ricotta. Sweetness, lots of it, in abundance everywhere!

The island of Pantelleria is right in the [middle of the Mediterranean Sea](#). It's 58 miles from the Sicilian coast but only 45 miles from Tunisia, making it closer to Africa than Italy.

It's the largest of the Sicilian islands, unusually green with its low-lying vineyards, squat olive trees and wild scrub hugging the fertile dark-grey, volcanic soil as they seek protection from the wind.

If you are looking for an untamed island [to explore](#) and yearn for [rugged, simple island life](#), this is your paradise getaway! And wealthy Italians know it.

For years, celebrities like Giorgio Armani have hidden out here the better part of the baking summer, lolling in their damusi -- the typical local houses -- or on their boats, occasionally dipping into the clean blue water that laps at the island's rocky shores.

## Pantelleria Wine Harvest

Knowing that I am passionate about their passito wine, the wine-making Rallo family from Sicily invited me to discover Pantelleria during their annual wine harvest.

The family owns the Sicilian Donnafugata winery, which led the march of excellent bottled Sicilian wines into wine stores around the world. Its high-tech cellar and bottling plant are in the town of Marsala, on the northeastern coast of Sicily, while most of their perfectly kept vineyards lie inland at the Contessa Entellina estate.

When the family decided in 1992 to branch out and start producing their prize-winning passito wine, they purchased a mere 17 acres of vineyards on Pantelleria from 22 different owners. More intricate negotiations followed for yet more tiny land lots -- sometimes hashed out with heirs who had emigrated to far-flung parts of the world.

The Rallo family now owns a total of 160 acres scattered around 11 different areas of the island; the largest total acreage of vineyards farmed by one family on Pantelleria.

Passito wine is made from the large and splendidly juicy zibibbo (Moscato d'Alessandria) grape, which was originally introduced onto the island by the Arabs centuries ago and is the only variety of grape

cultivated on the island's steep terrain. There is no water for irrigation on the island, but zibibbo grapes manage to survive the wind and harsh sun, nonetheless, until they ripen to perfection.

Along with capers, which are ubiquitous not only in the landscape, but also in the shops and in local dishes, Pantelleria is famous for passito wine.

## **First Impressions of Pantelleria**

It's hard to get a quick first impression of Pantelleria upon arrival at the airport.

When I arrived, the island's one mountain was shrouded in the humidity, and the dark earth and low-lying hills seemed uninhabited. This is partly because the characteristic lava-stone houses with white-domed roofs -- damusi -- are so well camouflaged in the landscape. They used to give shelter to the farmers who wanted to stay close to their land, but many have now been turned into holiday homes.

The roads are few, and many are extremely narrow as they wind between the islanders' humble houses, grouped together in hamlets at intervals along the way. It takes some practice and maneuvering to get around the island in your rented Fiat or scooter, and often you are forced to stop and back up to let oncoming cars pass down the narrower roads.

The two ports on the island are not particularly charming, but that is where the ferries from Sicily dock daily and people eventually congregate for their coffees, shopping or "aperitivi," or just to people-gaze at some point during their day. This is where you can rent a fishing boat [to tour](#) the island and swim in the hidden coves, which are unreachable by land.

Many of the bays, however, can be reached by car and on foot, and people perch and nestle on the rock ledges to catch the sun near the water. Remember to bring your water shoes to help you clamber in and out of the water from the rocks. There are no beaches on the island, and don't forget your mask and snorkel. There is lots to explore and hike to: hot springs, lakes, jets of steam that issue from the volcanic rock, as well as ancient archaeological remains.

## **Pantelleria's Sweet Dessert Wine**

And everywhere you go, you see zibibbo grape vines growing on terraced land, dropping down to the sea and climbing up on the slopes of the island.

The naturally sweet dessert wine that the Rallo family produces, Donnafugata's Ben Rye' passito -- the name means "son of the wind" in Arabic -- comes from this grape. Its particular flavor is made by adding batches of sun-dried grapes -- raisins! -- at different stages during the fermentation of the fresh grape must.

It is 14.5 percent proof, like a good bottle of strong Sicilian wine, and its amber-color nectar is meant to be sipped chilled after dinner, preferably after one of those wonderful Sicilian dinners made from fresh local ingredients.

The Donnafugata wine harvest on Pantelleria starts in late July, when the grapes that grow closer to the sea ripen first, and continues through September as each vineyard ripens in turn depending on its differing micro-climate.

Determined to preserve the island's natural beauty and traditions, the family continues to grow the vines on terraced land and make the wine as it has been done naturally for centuries on this island. Wine experts now call this method "heroic viticulture," but it used to be the only kind of vine growing that existed in many regions of Italy.

## Taking a Wine Tour in Pantelleria

Working the low shrub-like vines and sun-drying the grapes takes a great deal of manual labor (three times the amount used in normal wine-making), prompting many of the locals to flee the island for mainland Italy or to emigrate further afield.

In the 1950s more than 12,350 acres of vineyards were farmed; now just 1,235 acres are still being cared for. In addition to being labor-intensive to produce, passito wine requires a large quantity -- nine pounds -- of grapes to produce a one-liter bottle of the precious liquid.

As part of a wine tour, our group was escorted up a slope to get a close look at the ground level shrub vines dug into land basins on the terraced land to protect them from the strong winds. Some of the vines are believed to be more than 100 years old.

We strolled along the land terraces until we reached the Rollo family's own Pantelleria garden: a circular enclosure with high dry stone walls where a solitary, but immense, citrus tree grows, protected by the wind. Each family on the island used to have one -- some of the trees even grafted to grow different fruits on the same tree -- as a vital supply of fresh citrus on the island.

After walking back to the cellar where the grapes were being crushed, we were rewarded with delicious, newly pressed sweet fresh white wine must that we drank as the full moon came up over the island.

What gives Donnafugata's passito wine its remarkable flavor are the 154 pounds of raisins that are added to every 26 gallons of fresh grape juice once fermentation is underway. The bunches of grapes are lovingly hand-picked in the fields, and after an initial selection, the most perfect bunches are placed on wire mesh trays to be air dried by the hot sun and dry wind for about three weeks, during which they lose about 25 percent of their juice while their aroma and sweetness intensifies.

Once the grapes have turned a dark red-brown color, each individual grape is picked off its bunch, and the most perfect ones selected to be added to the zibibbo wine must. You can taste all the loving care.

If you can't quite clear your desk and sail off to Pantelleria right now to take all this in for yourself, uncork a chilled bottle of this special wine and let its finely crafted flavor carry you to the island. Meditate while you sip about all those good things in life it brings to mind -- and when you can go there.

### Details: Visiting Pantelleria

**How to get there:** The fastest way to get to Pantelleria is by air from mainland Italy -- Rome and Milan -- during the summer months, or from the Sicilian towns of Trapani and Palermo daily. Those with more time can take the overnight ferries from Trapani.

**When to go:** The winters are mild and dry; summers hot with balmy winds. Best to go anytime from early spring to October.

**Donnafugata wine tour on Pantelleria:** Available daily except Mondays from early July through end of September each year at 10:30 a.m., 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. The tour lasts about 90 minutes and includes a visit to the cellar, the vineyards, the typical Pantelleria garden, containing only one tree, and wine tasting of the Donnafugata wines produced on the island.

Book by calling Italy +39-0923-915649. Other wine tours of their Contessa Entellina vineyard and cellars can be booked via the [Donnafugata Web site](#).

**Where to stay:** There are a variety of lodgings available on Pantelleria. Many vacationers rent the local style damusi homes, which are bookable online. For those who want a more luxurious stay, the [Dream Hotel](#) has local style bungalows with sea views nestled in a Mediterranean garden splashed with bright

pink color from the bougainvilleas. They include restaurants, bar and swimming pools.

**Restaurants:** There are a number of excellent simple trattorias and fashionable restaurants to choose from, most with tables outside for evening dining. Many of the fancier restaurants only open at night, from spring through September.

At La Nicchia on the hill's ridge above the Scauri port, one can dine under the pergola or in their Pantelleria garden, with tables placed around an ancient orange tree in its walled courtyard. La Vela at Scauri is where you can eat the day's sea catch right on the seashore.

*Phoebe Natanson was a guest of the Donnafugata winery during her trip to Pantelleria.*

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