

BELLISSIMA SICILIA



*Villa Sant'Andrea
and the Bay of Mazzaro*

EXPLORING, LIVING, LOVING (and Eating!)

THE VERY BEST OF SICILY

BY PAMELA JACOBS

The best way to describe Sicily is in terms of the five senses: the sight of a dramatic, rocky coastline silhouetted with palm trees and kissed by an azure sea, above which towers a smoking volcano and rolling green hills; the smell of freshly baked breads, savory pasta dishes, impossibly fresh seafood, and sweet ricotta-filled cannoli's; the taste of all of the best Italian food imaginable, so delicious, it's almost hard to believe; the sound of Sicilian music played and sung so passionately, you can understand every word, even if you don't speak Italian; and the feel of it all, the way it touches you on every level and makes you feel as if you've come home.

I decided to go to Sicily because, even more than wanting to see this beautiful Italian island, I wanted to experience its two best hotels, known to be among the greatest in the world. The Villa Sant'Andrea and Grand Hotel Timeo in Taormina had become something of legends in my imagination, and ever since Orient-Express purchased them in winter 2010, I had them on my must-see list. I knew Sicily itself would be gorgeous, and figured the same about the hotels—but I wasn't prepared for the magnificence that truly had to be seen to be believed.

It was on my final evening, at a candlelit, food-filled table at the Grand Hotel Timeo, where I sat laughing, drinking wine, and reminiscing with old friends and new ones, as two musicians serenaded us with traditional Sicilian love songs, that I thought, "I could live here, and die happy."

My journey began in a fantastically comfortable business class seat on British Airways, where I had a quick stop in Milan, and enough time to enjoy a cappuccino at a Milanese café near the Duomo. A short flight brought me to Catania, Sicily, where a driver from Villa Sant'Andrea was waiting for my friends and me. We arrived at the seaside hotel when it was dark out, and when I was shown to my glorious room, I stepped out onto my balcony, feeling the breeze of the sea and seeing the sparkling

lights of the coastline, looking forward to the view of Mazzaro Bay that awaited me come morning. Tired, but not too tired to eat, I enjoyed an amazing dinner at their Oliviero Restaurant of artichoke salad in a bread basket, green tagliolini with porcini mushrooms and Sicilian ham, a "Mupo" local fish roll, and roasted peaches with almond gelato, all while the piano player entertained us, and then went back to enjoy the luxurious comfort of my room.

The Villa Sant'Andrea is located on a private beach in Taormina Mare, with



The gardens of Villa Sant'Andrea

one of the most spectacular, breathtaking views I have ever seen. The glistening sea is dotted with bold, dramatic rocks and brightly painted fishing boats, and the sound of the crashing blue waves acts as a lullaby for guests sleeping in its 60 rooms, all of which are different and unique, and most of which face the sea, with private balconies. My balcony sat right on sea level, and I felt as if I could jump off, right into the water. I didn't—but instead enjoyed my balcony with a cappuccino every morning and a wine every evening.

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The hotel used to be the private villa of an English couple, dating back to the late 1800's, and in the 1950's it became a hotel. Orient-Express bought it in January 2010, and after extensive renovations including enlarging the rooms and adding more balconies, it reopened, offering a way of life that is in many ways, completely incomparable. There's the private beach, the new infinity pool overlooking the water, the English garden overflowing with white roses and palm trees, the classically elegant rooms that are simply stunning, the wedding facilities (which host weddings almost daily in the high season), the phenomenal seaside restaurant and terrace lounge that serve the best hotel cuisine I've ever experienced (matched only by the sister property, Grand Hotel Timeo), the complimentary daily sailboat ride in the summer season (available for guests of both hotels), and the unparalleled level of service that's the signature of Orient-Express. Guests want for nothing. It was even better than I could have possibly imagined.

While the hotel is truly one of the most beautiful in the world, and offers enough to never have to leave the property, it happens to be situated in a location that is also one of the most beautiful in the world, and they realize that. Therefore, both Villa Sant'Andrea and Grand Hotel Timeo encourage exploration of Sicily, and take all of the work out of it for guests—they can plan anything for guests, based on what they want to see and do. I wanted to see and do a lot, so they had set up for me a host of experiences, all of which I had been looking forward to immensely. Though it was difficult to tear myself away from the stunning view that greeted me on my first morning, following the most delicious breakfast I've ever eaten I was on my way

for my first activity.

The hotel had set up a tour around the island in style—each of my friends and I would be driven around in a vintage 500 Fiat. We circled the coastline and climbed the Sicilian hills, stopping in Savoca, a small village where scenes from "The Godfather" had been filmed. Stopping for a cappuccino and a granita at Bar Vitelli, a charming bar which was also featured in the movie, was like stepping directly into the film. Remarkably, there were very few tourists, and the scene was delightful. We then drove to Forza d'Agra, another setting from the movie, and visited this tourist-free town and marveled at its beauty. Driving back in the vintage car, circling Sicily's winding roads and stopping to take in the beauty of the sea, I was in total awe of the unique and marvelous island.

Sicily is, in many ways, like no other place on earth. Imagine small, picturesque Italian villages, palm-tree-studded beaches, cactus-covered mountains, and the smoking Mt. Etna, an active volcano, in the backdrop. Picture a pristine landscape of

awe-inspiring natural beauty coupled with quaint, charming old towns, sprawling vineyards, and ancient Greek ruins. It's enough to make an atheist feel spiritual.

We arrived back at the hotel ready to eat, and on the seaside terrace enjoyed a Sicilian feast: various breads and olive oil, cheeses, traditional eggplant parmigiana, melon and prosciutto, caponata, olives, fried calamari, fresh sardines, and three kinds of pizza. It would become the first of many meals that I would proclaim to be the best I'd ever had.

Guests at Villa Sant'Andrea enjoy the pleasures of the sea and of the property as much as they enjoy off-property activities, and the afternoon brought relaxation in the form of sunbathing, swimming, and pure indulgence at the spectacular Wellness Centre—a true delight for the senses.

That evening we explored Taormina, the gorgeous, charming city situated at the top of a hill, and accessed from Villa Sant'Andrea via funicular or free shuttle service. Strolling around Taormina, stopping at an outdoor café for a glass of prosecco, we all agreed: Sicily was even more than we had hoped for.



A lunch feast at Villa Sant'Andrea



A guest room at the Grand Hotel Timeo



Taormina's ancient Greek Theater with Mt. Etna in the distance

We then went for dinner at Nero d'Avola (named after the most famous Sicilian wine), where the passionate, lively owner showered us with attention and presented food and wine that seemed to be an extension of his soul. I enjoyed a delicious sea urchin pasta and whitefish served in lemon leaves, a traditional method, followed by both cannoli and cassata, Sicily's two most traditional desserts, both made with ricotta cheese, and both extraordinary. Being a bit of a cannoli addict, this would begin my personal mission to choose the best cannoli in Sicily, a mission I took seriously.

After a perfect night's sleep I awakened to the sound of the waves and the sight of that view which never got old, and enjoyed another delectable seaside breakfast. We were then off for another activity arranged by the hotel: exploration of Mt. Etna, Sicily's active volcano which has had as much impact on the island's history as have the various people and cultures who have helped form the land. We drove up Etna's side and then got out and hiked further up, stopping for multiple photo opportunities and moments of reflection.

The landscape was like nothing I'd ever seen, with large lava rocks and formations, and the smoking volcano's peak showing itself from every vantage point.

We then drove along the "wine road," passing several charming, sleepy villages, and stopped at Etna Wines, a working vineyard. Here we enjoyed another feast, lovingly prepared just for us, consisting of various antipasti (olives, roasted peppers, several cheeses, salami, and more), two pastas (homemade macaroni with ragu and penne with pistachio pesto), sausages and meat cooked in lemon leaves, and two desserts (a traditional jelly made from the juice of the wine grapes and a semifreddo). We also tasted all of the vineyard's spectacular wines, grown in the fertile volcanic soil. Following lunch we toured the stunning property, and were lucky enough to have the opportunity to take part in the wine harvest, cutting grapes from the stems that were ready to be made into wine. It was another first for me, and a pleasure. Had I not stayed at these Orient-Express properties, I probably would not have had the opportunity to partake in

such a unique experience.

That evening I said goodbye to my waterfront home, the spectacular Villa Sant'Andrea, as I was headed to the sister property, Grand Hotel Timeo, wanting to be an equal opportunity traveler.

What's so wonderful about Sicily's two Orient-Express properties—beyond the actual perfection of each one—is that visitors to Sicily can choose to stay at each of the hotels, as I did, or stay at the one that suits them best and still visit the other. They have completely different feels; Villa Sant'Andrea is on the water, has a seaside resort feel, and offers a bit more of a social atmosphere, particularly in the summer. Grand Hotel Timeo is located right in the heart of Taormina, directly next to the ancient Greek Theater, and is a grand, classic, elegant hotel featuring spectacular views of the sea from above and Mt. Etna in the distance. Whichever hotel suits you best, you can still visit the other and dine, enjoy the property's features, and experience the best of both worlds.

The Grand Hotel Timeo was Taormina's first hotel, built in 1873, and it simply oozes elegance and refinement. Huge, sprawling terraces give way to jaw-dropping views, while the show-stopping restaurants offer food that is almost more beautiful than the views. There is a full-service salon, an amazing spa (utilizing fresh produce from the island), a pool, several conference rooms, stunning gardens, wedding facilities, and even a private passage to the Greek Theater. Each of the 70 rooms, like the Villa Sant'Andrea, is unique, and all are nothing short of divine. Celebrities such as Elton John and Robert DeNiro have enjoyed the hotel's sprawling Presidential Suite, with the largest, most beautiful terrace I have ever seen, complete with gazebo and jacuzzi.



Villa Sant'Andrea junior suite

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My suite was phenomenal and I simply never wanted to leave. I had a huge private terrace with views of the water and Mt. Etna, a gorgeous marble bathroom with these same views, and two stunning, elegant rooms that were perfect in every way, with classic furnishings, arched doorways, and artistic architectural details. While the hotel underwent major renovations after it was acquired by Orient-Express, they plan to renovate further this winter, during the time period that they close each year for upkeep and maintenance of such high standards, making a glorious, magnificent hotel that much more perfect (a good excuse for me to return).

Time at the hotel was spent relaxing on the terraces, strolling through the gardens, and enjoying fresh Bellini's in the evenings at the Bar Terrazza, or terrace bar. I dined at the Grand Hotel Timeo Restaurant and had a difficult time choosing from the menu which offered too many good choices, including fresh crudo, hearty soups, multiple fresh pasta dishes, risotto with truffles, seafood entrees, and more. It was here I had another cannoli, the one that I would later declare my favorite in Sicily.

I also enjoyed exploring Taormina's winding, cobblestoned streets, shopping for ceramics, wine, and souvenirs, stopping for

gelato, and taking in the sights, smells, and sounds. One morning I ventured the ten steps from the hotel to the Teatro Greco, the ruins of the ancient Greek Theater dating back to the third century, B.C. Stunning in its archeology and history, with the same awe-inspiring views that the hotel has, it's something everyone should see.

The hotel had organized a tour of Catania for us, and I enjoyed visiting this Sicilian city that is so very different from Taormina, with a grittier, less touristy feel. I walked through the fish market (completely devoid of tourists), which was alive and vibrant, and wished I could bring back all of the spoils of the sea that were on offer. That I couldn't do, so instead I dined at a restaurant in the middle of the market and enjoyed the freshest seafood imaginable, realizing what truly fresh fish should taste like. After this I visited Sicily's last family-run puppet makers, the Napoli brothers' workshop where they hand-make these treasures and showed me the magic of their craft. It was another unique experience made possible by the hotel.

My final night in Sicily was spent at the Grand Hotel Timeo, where I enjoyed a Sicilian feast which was truly one of the most delicious, most fun, most delightful and enjoyable meals I've ever had. Here

all of the five senses that are so embraced by Sicily were on full display. We started with giant prawns and traditional (and delectable) caponata, followed by fresh pasta with sardines and wild fennel, pasta alla "Norma," a traditional Sicilian dish with tomato sauce, eggplant, and fresh ricotta, swordfish in a delicate orange sauce, and a trio of Sicilian desserts, granita, cassata, and my beloved cannoli (I ate three). We also enjoyed truly excellent Sicilian wines, but the highlight might have been the two musicians serenading us with their beautiful music and songs, which made me fall even more in love with Sicily. I couldn't have dreamed up a more perfect evening, and a better last meal in this divine place.

To say I loved Sicily is an understatement. To say the two hotels were perfect and sublime is not saying enough. This is where my job as a writer fails—for no words can express what I saw, ate, and experienced at two of the loveliest hotels in one of the most beautiful places I've ever been—and I've been to many places. To visit Sicily is to know what life should be, an enjoyment and appreciation of its greatest pleasures, exemplified by its most spectacular hotels. To have spent time in Sicily is to have truly lived.

For more information or to book your stay,
visit: www.hotelvillasantandrea.com & www.grandhoteltimeo.com



Villa Sant'Andrea's Oliviero Restaurant



*Vintage 500 Fiats
for island touring*



Grand Hotel Timeo's terraces

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