

A risqué road trip: Stephen Bayley discovers erotic delights in Sicily

Even the cakes are a bit risqué on this sumptuous Italian island, says Stephen Bayley, so take command of your vintage Fiat 500 and prepare yourself for some excitement.

Stephen Bayley

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Taormina is "a polite synonym for Sodom" according to the aesthete Harold Acton. He later, on what tragically disappointed grounds we do not know, moderated his views to call it "as boring as Bournemouth". The truth, I think, is somewhere between these dismissive extremes and kind to neither the City of the Plain nor the Dorset coast. Certainly, its culture swings between the eroticised and the predictable. Inevitably, the looming presence of Europe's tallest and most active volcano dominates the genius loci with a continuous threat, or promise, of violent eruption.

Precariously perched 200m above the sea on Sicily's dramatic eastern coast, Taormina has been attracting invaders, military and touristic, with deadly weapons and even deadlier wheeled suitcases, since it was founded as Tauromenium in the fourth century BC. It has some claim to being one of the originating sacred sites of modern tourism: self-conscious visitors with high expectations, Goethe among them, made it a feature of the Grand Tour in the 18th century. Modern literary heroes followed. A quick roll call of celebrity ghosts includes Nietzsche and DH Lawrence. Also Sprach Zarathustra and Lady Chatterley's Lover were both written here, rather confirming a local inclination towards the magnificent and the sexual.

To the ancients, Sicily was a part of Magna Graecia, the greater dispensation of Greece, the backyard of Periclean Athens. Indeed, Taormina's most spectacular monument is the Teatro Greco, a magnificent amphitheatre that makes all of brooding Piranesi appear a hesitant understatement, a mere sketch. You doubt the gods exist? Sit among the ruins of the Greek theatre and be disabused, even as you are stepped over by a shrieking crocodile of spotty French schoolchildren. Evelyn Waugh harrumphed that "the word tourist seems naturally to suggest haste and compulsion". Yes, I am afraid nowadays it does.

The Grand Hotel Timeo, named after the Greek city's founder, is a fine remedy for these poisons, since it offers an extraordinary mixture of understated luxury, unobtrusive efficiency, relaxed charm and ... one of the world's most astonishing locations. Only the dullest person would not be agreeably stupefied by the view of Mount Etna and the Gulf of Naxos achieved from its vast terrace. I am writing these notes here, a glass of Etna's Petra Lava Bianco to hand and an aggressive pigeon, maddened perhaps by volcanic dust, pecking at my salted almonds.

Since it was established as a rooming house in 1873, the Timeo has grown organically with Taormina itself. When the art historian Bernard Berenson visited in 1883, it was still the only hotel. In the Twenties, Lawrence actually lived here and some say the Lady Chatterley character was inspired by an Englishwoman he met in the lounge. Successive enlargements made Timeo the town's dominating modern feature: vast, but polite, stately and dignified, mature. Queens of Hollywood and kings of nations were regulars. In 2010, it was taken over by Orient Express and tactfully modernised.

It's a 54km drive from Catania airport and I went straight to the pool to doze. Then there came this noise. Could it be thunder? Not on a clear day. Or was it someone dragging a reluctant wardrobe across the floor above? Of course, it was Etna. The noise lasted perhaps 40 minutes, giving the pool boy ample chance eagerly to show me spectacular digital images of a recent night-time eruption with Grand Tourist orange starbursts and cowering onlookers. It was not frightening, more exciting: a keen reminder of the vastness of natural forces and one's own trivial and ephemeral place in the scheme of things. Vulcan is good for psychological health, especially poolside.

Returning to my room to enjoy the strange light after the eruption, ash filtering the sun, turning the townscape almost monochrome, I confronted another psychological reality of life in Taormina. Food. A bottle of Duca di Salaparuta spumante was chilling in a bucket and with it a range of the distinctive local cakes. Sicilian sweets are as much a part of the culture as Christian saints and delicate Moorish architectural details: cassata cake gets its name from qas'ah, Arabic for a terracotta mould. Just as Lampedusa's decadent trionfo di gola (triumph of the palate) has the status of a character in his great novel, *The Leopard*, many of the pastries have a none-too-occult sexual character.

Mary Taylor Simeti, the great authority on Sicilian food, does not understand exactly why nuns played such a role in the evolution of bakery, but even trainee Freudians suspect that sexual repression may have played its part. Long before Seventies Manhattan discovered marzipan dildos, Sicily's tradition of erotic bakery was encouraged in nunneries.

Famous cakes include bocconetti di mandorla (almond kisses) and minne di Sant' Agata (breasts of Saint Agatha), almond paste with a cherry nipple representing the body parts the martyr lost in persecution. There is another speciality, less attractively known as chancellor's buttocks.

Ever since Daedalus flew to Sicily and gave Aphrodite a golden honeycomb as thanks for a safe landing, honey has been an island staple. "Sold by converts, devoured at dances," Lampedusa wrote of the cakes, nicely capturing the sacred and profane contest in local character. You can buy them at Pasticceria a Chemi in the centre of Taormina.

Besides the view and the gracious service, the Timeo offers another delicious escape from haste: the use of a classic 500cc Fiat Cinquecento. The great designer Dante Giacosa's 1957 compromise between a car and a horse and cart, the little Fiat is perfect in its landscape; you see one and everything seems aligned, although not perhaps, I mused, the steering on my 83,980km Positano Yellow example.

You prime a classic Cinquecento with a choke that is a lever on the floor. Then you spark the engine into life with a parallel lever. The effect is volcanic in sound, if not in potency. It's a cheerful little machine, but you have to thrash it to move. Old cars are hard work, and it was too far to drive to the Targa Florio circuit in the Madonie mountains where Nino Vaccarella, a local headmaster, used to throw his Ferrari 275SP around mountain bends without barriers.

Instead, I did the Godfather trail to the villages of Savoca and Forza d'Agro, about 20km away, where you find the rustic Bar Vitelli and the church where Coppola had Michael and Apollonia get married. I should add, pedal to the metal, that there are mountain bends without barriers on this excursion, too. "Well into the 19th century," the food historian Simeti says, "Sicily lacked roads suitable for wheeled traffic." This, you suspect, was one of them. "I'm not asking for help, Mike, just take off the handcuffs," I muttered as I rattled down the mountain to Taormina for dinner.

Eating out in Taormina is pleasure and pain. The Timeo restaurant has the efficiency and character of a chauffeured limo: comfortable, slick, luxurious and mostly dissociated from the essential peasant traditions of island cookery. Pasta con le sarde (pasta with sardines) might be street food, but petto di piccione e scaloppa di fegato grasso al marsala e uva passolina (sautéed breast of pigeon and foie gras in Marsala with sultanas) is an international invention.

The town itself has one famous restaurant and one very good one. Wunderbar, with its arcades, panoramic views and embarrassing nostalgic piano, was a celebrity petting zoo for the Fifties and Sixties party crowd, but today has the joyless feel of a sanitised necropolis.

Rather different is the Osteria Nero d'Avola, an official advocate of Slow Food. Typical dishes are bruschetta ai ricci di mare (sea urchin on toast), exquisitely elegant and decadent at €20; russuliddu fritto, a shoal of deep-fried sea creatures with lemon dressing at €20; and chef Turi Siligato's trademark insalata leone (artichokes with the thick-skinned "Interdonato" lemon). All very good, but most days I ate at the simplest pizzeria I could find. This was Vecchia Taormina, in the Traversa degli Ebrei (Jewish Crossroads), where they serve a robust caponata (an aubergine dish) and a splendidly austere pizza biancaneve with mozzarella and oregano. Alternatively, take the exciting three-minute cable-car ride down to Mazzaro and eat decent spaghetti con la bottarga (pasta with dried tuna roe) at Da Giovanni, on the beach. You do this and stare at the magical Isola Bella.

Taormina is not a simple town, but an elaborated artefact, like the Grand Hotel Timeo itself: places which perpetuate their cultures. Just when the original rooming houses were taking in guests, the pallid Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden arrived out of the gothic north in the 1870s with his plate camera and began bribing local youths to pose naked for salacious photographs as fauns, satyrs, amphora-carriers and, rather less often, given his tastes, nymphs. This homoerotic culture endured. Incongruously, it endured rather well in the Casa Cuseni, a stronghold of English lady gardeners and amateur water-colourists with a fine room decorated by Frank Brangwyn: an allegorical wall painting shows two young omosessuali in togas parenting a baby.

Tennessee Williams visited often and was joined by Truman Capote when they both called on the splendidly named Gayelord Hauser, who lived nearby. Hauser was a self-promoting self-improver, a nutritionist inspired by yoghurt and molasses, who moved to Taormina in 1950, flush on the success of his books *Better Eyes Without Glasses* and *Look Younger, Live Longer*. Greta Garbo and Pablo Picasso were at Casa Cuseni. So too was Bertrand Russell, philosopher and advocate of free love. A splendid photograph there shows him looking glumly philosophical in a sun hat, the very picture of thoughtful hedonism.

So that's Taormina. Not Bournemouth, but not Sodom either. Un riarso altrove, a sunburnt elsewhere.

Travel essentials

Getting there

Stephen Bayley travelled with Citalia (0844 415 1956; citalia.com). A three-night break at the five-star Grand Hotel Timeo starts at £969 per person in May, including flights from Gatwick, transfers and breakfast.

The only non-stop flights from the UK to Catania are from Gatwick on easyJet (0843 104 5000; easyJet.com) and British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com).

Staying there

Grand Hotel Timeo, via Teatro Greco 59, Taormina, Sicily (00 39 0942 627 0200; grandhoteltimeo.com). The Fiat 500 can be rented through the hotel. Half a day costs from €297.

More information

Sicily Tourist Office: 00 39 91 707 8100; regione.sicilia.it