

B&B and Beyond: Casa Cuseni, Taormina, Sicily

Garbo, Picasso and Bertrand Russell loved this magical villa. No wonder, it is a delight to the senses, writes Sarah Gilbert

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Sunday, 3 February 2013

With a sublime location, perched on a rocky promontory at the end of a mountain ridge overlooking the Ionian Sea, Taormina was invaded variously by the Greeks, Romans, French and Spanish, who all left their mark. Tourists, artists, writers and celebrities followed.

The impressive Casa Cuseni, located high above Taormina's rooftops, was built by the British painter Robert Kitson between 1905 and 1907. Now it's an Italian National Monument, B&B and living museum. Suspended in time, a rare Frank Brangwyn mural decorates the dining room, while the living room and library are filled with fascinating curios: a 15th-century Tibetan rug, dolls that belonged to King Ferdinand IV, ancient Islamic ceramics, a Picasso ink drawing, letters from Tennessee Williams.

Steep pathways lead through the villa's Italianate terraced gardens, which give views of Mount Etna's perfect cone and are a remarkable feat of design, filled with exotic trees, fountains, wisteria-draped pergolas and secret nooks.

The Bed

Daphne Phelps, Kitson's niece, took over the property when he died in 1947 and lived there until she died in 2005. The five bedrooms are named after some of the villa's famous visitors – Greta Garbo, Pablo Picasso, Bertrand Russell and Henry Faulkner.

All the rooms are furnished with 17th- and 18th-century Sicilian antiques and paintings and have captivating views from private balconies. We stayed in Daphne Phelps, which has always been the master bedroom but was given to Greta Garbo when she visited. It's en suite, along with the two-bedroom Pablo Picasso suite, while the other three rooms share two bathrooms.

The Breakfast

Breakfast is served in the small kitchen-diner or on the roof terrace, which has panoramic views over Taormina. We drank juice freshly squeezed from oranges from the garden, espresso and cappuccino, and delved into yoghurt, fruit, cold cuts – mortadella, salami, local ham – cheese and traditional Sicilian almond cake. In the afternoon, snacks, such as calorie-laden cannoli, sweet cassata (made with ricotta) and pignolata (chocolate-dipped pastries), are served on the terrace or in the wood-panelled dining room.

The Hosts

After Daphne died, the villa was taken over by Francesco Spadero and his wife, Mimma, who opened the B&B and museum last April. There's a strong connection: Mimma's father, Peppino, and her mother, Concetta, worked at Casa Cuseni for 50 years and she grew up there as part of the family.

The Weekend

Casa Cuseni is a five-minute walk from the magnificent buildings and chic boutiques of Corso Umberto, Taormina's main thoroughfare, which showcases the town's rich history with its mix of Arab, Norman, Baroque and Gothic architecture. And don't miss the Greek amphitheatre with stunning views over the bay.

Mount Etna is just over an hour's drive from Taormina and dominates the landscape. For a closer look, hike among the seven, lunar-like craters and volcanic vents of the Sartorius Mounts, or take a more strenuous trek to the summit (00 39 3454 523 330; continentesicilia.it; guided tours from €80/£68).

If you're feeling lazy, head to the beach at Lido Mazzaro, just minutes from town by cable car, or take a leisurely boat ride around the coast.

Scenes in *The Godfather* were filmed near Taormina and you can follow in Michael Corleone's footsteps in a vintage Fiat 500 (00 39 3497 234 906; 500vintagetour.com; from €150/£128 per car). Drive behind a tour leader or navigate yourself around the hair-raising hairpin bends up to the sleepy hilltop villages of Savoca and Forza D'Agro. Or follow Etna's wine roads, stopping off at vineyards and cellars for a tasting.

Catania's boisterous morning market is a 40-minute drive away. Wander around the pescheria (fish market), before picking up plump olives, rich pecorino and other Sicilian goodies.

The Pit-stop

In central Taormina, try Sicilian specialities arancini (deep-fried risotto balls) at Da Cristina on Piazza del Duomo (00 39 0942 21171) and almond-milk granita at Bam Bar, 45 Via Di Giovanni (00 39 0942 24355).

For something more sophisticated, the restaurant at the beautiful Grand Hotel Timeo (00 39 0942 23801; grandhoteltimeo.com), serves classic Sicilian dishes with a contemporary twist and a focus on seasonal produce, such as pasta alla Norma – aubergine, tomato and salted ricotta – and swordfish rolled with breadcrumbs, pine nuts and sultanas (main courses around €30/£26). The wine list is equally loyal. On balmy evenings you can dine on the terrace – and, if you're lucky, you'll be treated to a performance of Etna's lava pyrotechnics.

The Essentials

Casa Cuseni, Via Leonardo da Vinci 5, Taormina (00 39 0942 28362; casacuseni.com). Rooms start at €89 (£76), including breakfast.