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Design, travel and beyond

In Sicilian mode (Elle)

Milan may have the catwalks but Italy's deep south has the curves, cobbles and stray cats. Sicily and the mysterious islands surrounding it are a well of inspiration for the country's most influential designers; a world of volcanoes, high heels, lace and vivid purple bougainvillea blossom as rich and soft as Loro Piana cashmere.



It might have something to do with the landscape, as rugged as the mafia men who still drive around in pinstriped suits and shades with their identikit sons. Or it could be the architecture, a unique blend of Arabic and Norman. It's certainly the Catholicism. As Antonio Berardi, whose family hails from the area, says, 'the whole Madonna/whore complex is the most Sicilian thing of all. Hidden behind fragile veils of the finest black lace or a starched white collar, crisp as a communion

wafer, there is always a sense of brooding sensuality and a strong sexuality.'

No one can deny that Sicily has had a lawless past, but things are changing. Although the traffic in the capital, Palermo, seems to be made up of people who learnt to drive playing Grand Theft Auto drunk on Campari, it's a tamer metropolis than before. 'This is a city that's more alive and much younger than it was a decade ago,' says Countess Alwine Federico, who lives with her family in the grand, 12th century Palazzo Conte Federico. 'It's far safer and there's a strong anti-mafia movement. The owner of the Antica Focacceria San Francesco, where they serve ancient Sicilian dishes like spleen bread, started the Addiopizzo movement, refusing to pay protection money. Now the movement has thousands of supporters.'

Austrian by birth and a Countess by marriage, Alwine is passionate about her adopted city – she cuts an eccentric, glamorous blonde dash cycling around the old town, and rents rooms out at the Palazzo to privileged, enchanted guests. It's like stepping into the Visconti film of *The Leopard*, and a magical base for one of Italy's most intriguing cities. There are tourist musts, like the glistening mosaics at the Cappella Palatina and the lifelike stucco cherubs of the Oratory San Lorenzo, where a copy of a Caravaggio nativity scene hangs (the original was stolen by the mafia in 1969) – but there are darker attractions too. From the 16th century Capuchin Catacombs, its walls lined with 8,000 mummies in period clothes, to the hidden ruins of occultist Aleister Crowley's Temple of Thelema and the brutal but stylish Mussolini-era post office, Palermo is as endearingly weird as it is beautiful.

Big changes are taking place outside the main cities. It's not easy to get anything done here (corruption creates a farcical business environment), but there are impressive boutique hotels, bars and restaurants opening up, while the visual patina that's inspired 20 years of Dolce & Gabbana collections is still as strong as the Sicilian lemon notes in a bottle of their Light Blue fragrance.

The alleyways of baroque Scicli, the most beautiful town in the south-east, still have washing lines hanging over the gargoyles, and watchful grandmothers installed on every other balcony, but there's also the antique-filled Palazzo Hedone. This is the dream project of Axel Garrigue-Guyonnaud and Sylvain Pataut De Escarrega, who left Paris and their respective careers at Montblanc and Louis Vuitton to turn a pile of rubble next to the baroque-neoclassical Church of St Bartholomew into one of the loveliest and most luxe small hotels in Europe. Hedone has an open-air riad-style pool and a grassed rooftop where a wonderful mod-Sicilian dinner, overlooked by a dramatic clifftop convent reminiscent of Powell and Pressburger's *Black Narcissus*, begins with a bottle of Prosecco opened with the swipe of a sword.

Scicli's tiny costume museum gives a vivid insight into Sicily's last golden era, with an archive of nineteenth-century fashion including finely beaded black gowns and mantillas from a time when local women would change outfits five times a day, just to stay at home. The grand streets of Scicli, and nearby Ragusa and Modica, ache for these opulent gowns – although this part of the world is an inexhaustible well of inspiration for high fashion, the truly chic (like the Countess) only shop for fashion on weekend trips to Rome or Paris,

and there's nowhere else the length or breadth of the tricolor boot that demonstrates just how wrong Italians can get it: on seaside piazzas, button-down shirts are paired with Chanel-red Speedos that would make a priapic go-go dancer on steroids balk, while women go to town with home-bleaching, denim patches, crystal appliqué and metallic shoes. But it's all part of the gaudy, gutsy charm: in a reversal of England's north/south snobbery, northern Italians mock everyone south of them – while the Sicilians, as far south as you can get, don't give a monkey's.

Sicily's most glamorous region is the vertiginous coastline around the seaside town of Taormina, home to the ancient Teatro Greco, site of the annual film festival, and where convertible Lamborghinis pull up outside some of the grandest hotels in the world. The beachfront Villa Sant'Andrea and the Hotel Timeo were recently taken over by Orient Express, and a cocktail on the terrace of the Timeo at sundown, gazing at the silhouette of Mt Etna, is as romantic as waking up in one of its lush golden suites to the peels of bells from the nearby church.

The south west of the island is fast becoming the new Taormina. The Kempinski Hotel Giardino di Costanza is pristinely landscaped, classic and deeply plush, with a pianist serenading diners beside a sweeping water feature, while Rocco Forte's Verdura golf and spa resort looks more like a Palm Springs futurist collection of fall-out bunkers, but in a really delightful way: sleek, straight, low lines frame trees, hills, a dazzling infinity pool and killer restaurants. It's so perfect, contemporary and serene that sitting with a cocktail on the terrace makes you feel like a tiny model in an architect's rendering.

While Antonio Berardi takes time out at Verdura on weekends from Milan, Giorgio Armani heads further south for the whole of August, offshore to the wild and rugged black rock of Pantelleria. He doesn't stay in a hotel, he jets in to stay at his own discreetly fenced dammuso – a typical single-storey, white, rustic, Tattooine-style domed villa. 'Pantelleria is the only place I can truly relax,' says Armani, whose dammuso is flanked by a forest of palm trees overlooking the tiny fishing port of Gadir. It's easy to see why: when the morning mist shrouds the coast, and drifts over your pool and through your living room, this feels like another planet. And when Giorgio heads across the island for couscous and involtini at La Nicchia, he gets shown to the secret walled garden in the back of the restaurant where no-one bothers him. Pantelleria is a beautiful but extreme refuge – during the daily siesta it seems like no one, apart from a few curious men with mullet hairdos in the sushi bar in Tracino, is on the island. And like so much of the deep south, it's a reluctant beauty. Driving through its hills, navigating via sun-cracked barely visible road signs, a hairpin turn reveals the tropical-blue, breathtaking Lake of the Mirror of the Venus, where locals (like Armani) and visitors (including Madonna) swim and daub themselves with volcanic mud before drying out on the white sand. Beauty therapy aside, it's primal and sexy. And if you can't make it to Pantelleria, you can still buy the line of Crema Nera beauty creams that Armani created in tribute.



WHERE TO STAY

Palazzo Hedone, Via Loreto 51, Scicli, enq 039 0932 841187, www.palazzohedone.it, doubles from £108

Verdura Golf & Spa Resort, Contrada Verdura, Sciacca, enq 0039 0925 998001, www.verduraresort.co, doubles from £270

Villa Sant Andrea, Via Nazionale 137, Taormina, enq 0039 0942 627 1200, www.hotelvillasantandrea.com, doubles from £280

Palazzo Conte Federico, Via dei Biscottari 4, Palermo, enq 0039 091 6511881, www.contefederico.com, doubles from £125

Think Sicily have the chicest dommusi to rent on the island of Pantelleria, including Dommuso Levante (which sleeps four) and Dammuso Roccavento (which sleeps nine), from £430 a day. Enq, 020 7377 8518, <http://www.thinksicily.com>

WHERE AND WHAT TO EAT

This is a decadent island: Granita with brioche is as typical a lunch as spaghetti al nero di sepia. Wonderful fresh seafood abounds – marinated raw prawns, swordfish with capers, octopus and sea urchins. There is also radically recherché fare. Supper at the Michelin-starred Principe Cerami (Piazza San Domenico, 5, enq 0039 0942 613111) within the ravishing San Domenico Palace – a dramatic 14th century monastery that’s now a member of the Leading Hotels of the World – is spendy but spectacular, from the water menu (arranged by

minerality and complete with Gaultier-designed editions) to the refined versions of Sicilian primi pasta dishes. It's a standout experience in a touristy part of the island plagued by £20 airline salads. As is Locanda Don Serafino in Ragusa (Via Avv G.Ottaviano, enq 0039 09322 48778) where chef Vincenzo Candiano serves up pasta with veal shin and scallops with strawberry in a grotto furnished with transparent Kartell Louis Ghost chairs. The wine cave is a marvel. Finally, Osteria Dei Vespri (Piazza Croce dei Vespri, 6, enq 0039 0916 171631) is Palermo's big, overblown, romantic night out – an elaborate, exciting tasting menu served to ladies with collagen pouts cooling themselves with black lace fans. British visitors will smile at the Aneletti pasta with poached octopus in Nero d'Avola wine – effectively very posh Spaghetti Hoops. Wherever you are, a glass of Murgo Spumante from Mt Etna is an irresistible apéritif.

NIGHTLIFE

Don't expect much in the way of nightlife on the smaller islands, while Sicily itself is geared up more for aperitivo than all nighters. The coolest and posiest terrace bar in Taormina is Shatulle (Piazza Paladini 5, enq 0039 094 262 6175), allegedly a gay bar but not so you'd notice, apart from some homoerotic art on the walls. One of the nicest bars in Palermo is Martin's Ristolounge (Via Calascibetta, 25, enq 0039 091 611 6543), which is as much as a contemporary art gallery as it is a local's watering hole. For a more energetic, but still elegant evening, head 20 minutes out of Catania to Mercati Generali (Strada Statale 417, enq 0039 095 571 1458) and dance to house and jazz on its candlelit terraces.

WHERE TO SHOP AND WHAT TO BUY

Pick up breezy, colourful, boho-hippie fashion and accessories at Rossella Carrara in Palermo (Piazzetta Bagnasco, 5, enq 0039 091 325587) and then head to the artisanal leather specialists at Vallone (Via Calascibetta, 22) for one-off handbags designed by local artists, and some wonderful black-crochet sandals adorned with crystals. Although the candies at Confetteria Veniero (Piazza Cassa di Risparmio, 14) are intended to fill the handmade wedding and graduation purses that they hand sew behind the counter, you can be forgiven for buying a bag of ricotta and pear bonbons and keeping them all to yourself – they're amongst the most delicious things you'll ever taste.

HOW TO GET AROUND

Coaches between the main cities are fast and frequent, trains less so. For the most romantic and quirky way to experience the coastline around Taormina and Catania, hire a dinky, orange or white vintage 1960s Fiat 500 for the weekend, from £245, or go on organised convoy tour, from £125 (www.500vintagetour.com, enq 0039 349 7234906). For intercity driving, rent a car with Holiday Autos, from £255 for ten days (www.holidayautos.co.uk, enq 0871 472 5229).

BEST TIME OF YEAR TO GO

Sicily is warm all year around, although tends towards the stormy and cool between November-February. The summer months can be roasting, so spring and autumn are recommended. Many of the Taormina resorts close over the winter until March or April.

HOW TO GET THERE

Palermo is a three hour flight from London. Easyjet (www.easyjet.com) fly direct, seasonally, prices from £40 each way. British Airways fly direct to Catania (enq 0844 493 0 787, www.britishairways.com), prices from £60 each way. High speed ferries run from Mazara del Vallo to Pantelleria, with a journey time of two hours, during the summer months (enq 0039 0923 873813, www.usticalines.it) from £30 each way. An overnight ferry runs year round from Trapani (enq 0039 02263 02803, <http://www.tirrenia.it>) from £30 each way.

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