

IN THE COUNTRY



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SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Touring Sicily in a classic orange Fiat 500, Mark C. O'Flaherty discovers roads flanked by olive groves, green woodland and the shadow of the *Godfather*

As I parked outside the San Domenico Palace Hotel in Taormina — Sicily's grandest hotel, in one of Italy's glitziest seaside resorts — its two doormen beamed and gave me a synchronised thumbs-up. "Cinquecento!" they bellowed. "Number one car in the world!" Then they looked aghast in silence at the amount of luggage I'd managed to fit, Tetris-like, into the back of my tiny 1968 bright orange Fiat 500.

I'd hired one of nine vintage Fiats that two Sicilian brothers and their cousin (Antonio, Sergio and Danilo) have refurbished. They have no air conditioning, no seatbelts, and at times it can feel like you're driving a child's drawing of a car that's come to life. But what they do have is style. Away from Taormina's chaotic one-way system that necessitated impossibly long loops around the town just to get a few metres in the other direction, the beauty of the first Fiat 500 — pop icon as much as an automobile — became clear. As with cycling, I felt a part of the landscape I was driving through. I was connected with the road and everything around me. I was really here... in Sicily.

As the sun sets at *aperitivo* time in Taormina, everyone's attention turns from the sea to the slumbering mounds of Mt Etna in the distance. It's an omnipresent force on the island, from the views from the top of the third-century BC Greek amphitheatre to the flute of delicious extra brut Spumante from the Murgo winery at the foot of the volcano that starts every supper.

It was only natural to want to get closer to it, so I set off one morning and headed towards Catania along the coast and then inland. I twisted through small villages, great expanses of green, pine woodlands and dusty, silver olive groves. With no better ultimate destination in mind, I drove to the Murgo vineyards close to Santa Venerina and stopped for lunch. It seemed churlish to visit without

Left: A vintage Fiat 500 in Sicily.

Above: Herding goats along a country road in Sicily; The Piazza IX Aprile, Taormina's main square, with San Giuseppe Church



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a wine tasting, so I checked in for a night at the elegant old stone farmhouse that the vineyard runs as a B&B.

The next day I joined one of the organised tours that Antonio, Sergio and Danilo run with their fleet of mini motors. With five Fiats in convoy — each driver equipped with a walkie talkie relaying information from a guide leading the way in the first car — we toured a variety of locations from the opulent Castello degli Schiavi ('castle of the slaves'), its balcony immediately recognisable from its part in the movies, even without Al Pacino raging on it.

Here I relished the role of shameless tourist, having my picture taken in Pacino's spot, and then repeatedly beside my cute orange automobile beneath the castle's turrets. Novelty factor aside, that car looked so much cooler, and so much more Italian in every shot than anything I could ever have picked up at your average car rental.

■ **How to do it:** 500 Vintage Tour convoy tours from €129 (£111) per car; rental from €299 (£259) for a weekend. British Airways flies daily to Catania from London from £98 return. Quintessentially Travel offers four nights at the San Domenico Palace Hotel, including BA flights and a weekend's hire of a vintage Fiat 500 car, from £850 per person. www.500vintagetour.com www.britishairways.com www.quintessentiallytravel.com >>