



Taormina is a perfect introduction to eastern Sicily

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One-page article

Why Taormina?

Medieval Taormina makes the perfect introduction to eastern Sicily. Perched on a rocky promontory along the cliffs of Monte Tauro, with spectacular views of Mount Etna's perfect cone and the rugged Ionian coastline, it was the island's first resort.

Throughout history, it's been invaded by the Greeks, Romans, Syrians and Berbers, among others, who all left their mark. Socialites, artists, writers and celebrities soon followed - including Elizabeth Taylor, Cary Grant and Sophia Loren - drawn by the beautifully restored medieval buildings, breathtaking views at every turn and its warren of narrow streets.

Beyond the golden beaches and a coastline dotted with rocky coves, mysterious grottos and tiny islands, Mount Etna, one of Europe's tallest and most active volcanoes, dominates the landscape. On the cultural front, Taormina's Greco-Roman amphitheatre is home to an annual film festival in June and the Arte Festival of Music, Dance and Opera in July and August, showcasing everything from sopranos to soul.

A comfortable bed

Taormina's first hotel, the Grand Hotel Timeo (www.grandhoteltimeo.com; 0039 0942 627 0200; doubles from €520 [Dh2,556]), sits under the amphitheatre. Dating from 1873, the interior has a timeless elegance. The panoramic views have barely changed, and the beautiful, landscaped garden, which is filled with vibrant red geraniums, pink bougainvillea and banks of white roses, tumbles towards the sea.

The Timeo's sister hotel, Villa Sant'Andrea (www.hotelvillasantandrea.com; 0039 0942 627 1200; doubles from €370 [Dh1,828]), is an idyllic setting on the Bay of Mazzarò. Built in the early 19th century as the private residence of a distinguished English family, it's retained much of its original character and charm, and its large terrace, overlooking the sea, is the ideal place to spend a balmy Sicilian evening.

British painter Robert Kitson designed and built the historic Casa Cuseni (www.casacuseni.com; 0039 0942 28362; double from €90 [Dh442]) and its terraced garden in 1898. Today, it's an Italian national monument, a living museum filled with

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fascinating art and antiques and a B&B, where you can sleep in Greta Garbo's favourite room.

Find your feet

Taormina's main street, Corso Umberto I, reveals the town's rich history with its mix of Arab, Norman, Baroque and Gothic architecture. There are stunning views over the bay from the ancient Greco-Roman amphitheatre reached down Via Teatro Greco, which makes the perfect setting for concerts. Mount Etna is just over an hour's drive away, and for a closer look, you can hike among the seven, lunar-like craters and volcanic vents of the Sartorius Mounts, or take a more strenuous trek to the summit (www.continentesicilia.it; 0039 3454 523330; guided tours from €80 to €155 [Dh393 to Dh762]). The Bay of Lido Mazzarò, with its crystal-clear, calm water, is just a short cable-car ride from the town centre.

Meet the locals

Catania's noisy morning food market, a 40-minute drive away, will give you a real slice of Sicilian life. There are stalls piled high with cheeses, such as spicy pecorino, and other local goodies, while at the pescheria, or fish market, swordfish heads sit among slabs of tuna and glistening anchovies. Follow that up with a large platter of fritto misto at one of the nearby trattorias.

Book a table

The Grand Hotel Timeo's restaurant serves classic Sicilian dishes with a contemporary twist and a focus on seasonal ingredients, such as pasta alla' Norma - macaroni, eggplant, tomato and ricotta - and rack of lamb au gratin with sweet almonds (mains around €30 [Dh147]). On warm evenings, you can dine al fresco on the terrace, with Etna as a backdrop. At the Michelin-starred La Capinera (Via Nazionale 177; 0039 0942 626 247), Sicilian chef Piero D'Agostino focuses on the island's fish and seafood, such as black tagliolini pasta with sea bass ragout, sweet chard roasted tomatoes and basil cream sauce (mains from €28 [Dh138]). For local specialities, such as arancini con ragu - deep-fried risotto balls filled with meat, tomato sauce and mozzarella - head to Da Cristina (Piazza del Duomo; 0039 0942 21171), and Bam Bar (Via di Giovanni 45; 0030 0942 24355) has the best granita in town, both around €2 (Dh10).

Shopper's paradise

The Corso Umberto I is lined with lovely boutiques selling everything from high-end fashion to traditional Sicilian cakes. Pari (www.parisitaormina.com) opened in 1959 as a family run tailor's shop and now stocks the latest from Italian design giants, including Dolce & Gabbana, Prada and Gucci. Musumeci (www.musumecitaormina.com), set in a hidden courtyard, sells luxury accessories from the likes of Valentino and Bottega Veneta, and Kiseki Jewels (Corso Umberto 55) sells chic jewellers made from natural materials - shells, lava and semi-precious stones. Try the sweet marzipan fruit at Pasticceria Chemi (Corso Umberto 102), while Carlo Mirella Panarello's shop (Via Antonio Marziani) sells equally colourful, handmade ceramics.

What to avoid

Shopping between the hours of 1pm and 4pm, when most places close for the "Italian siesta".

Don't miss

Francis Ford Coppola filmed scenes from The Godfather in eastern Sicily, and you can follow in the Corleones' footsteps in an iconic, vintage Fiat 500 (www.500vintagetour.com; from €150 [Dh737] per car) up to the sleepy hilltop villages of Savoca and Forza D'Agro.

Go there

Etihad Airways (www.etihad.com) flies direct from Abu Dhabi to Rome from Dh3,295 return including taxes. The flight takes six and a half hours. Blu-Express (www.blu-express.com) flies direct from Rome to Catania from €70 (Dh343) return including taxes. The flight takes 75 minutes.

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