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The Complete Guide To: Sicily

Set where three seas converge, this much-invaded island offers visitors an exotic mix of culture, cuisine and catacombs - as well as Europe's largest active volcano, says Sarah Birke

JUST ANOTHER ISLAND IN THE MED?

Far from it. Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean - slightly bigger than Wales, and, like Wales, something of a land apart. Although politically part of Italy, Sicily is not typically Italian. This once-autonomous kingdom has been shaped by its strategic position at the southernmost tip of the country, close to Africa.

Sicily had been successively inhabited by the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines and Arabs, before the Norman conquest in 1060. A period of tumultuous European rule - French, Spanish, Austrian and even British - followed until Sicily became a semi-autonomous region after the Second World War.

The island's landscape and sights are as diverse as its people. The coastline alternates between sandy beaches and jagged outcrops, leading in towards the hills and plateaus of the interior. Sicily is dominated by Europe's largest active volcano, Etna, which soars 3,300m high in the blue cloudless skies; the geologically lively Aeolian Islands sit just north-east of the mainland. The land is scattered with ruins from every era of the island's history, and much of the terrain is turned to agriculture.

As a destination, Sicily offers a fascinating mix of cultures imbued with a southern-Italian passion for life. The variety of terrain - and the island's nature reserves - means a wealth of hiking and walking opportunities for people of all fitness levels. Add the spectre of the Mafia, and you have an alluring mix that is just that little bit rough around the edges.

WHERE SHOULD I START?

The capital Palermo, not least because it is relatively easy to reach. Situated on the north-west coast, the city was settled by Phoenician traders in the 8th century BC and was later the base for Arab and Norman rule. Magnificent in its heyday, it is still charming despite its crumbling decline since heavy bombing during the Second World War.

The sandy-coloured Duomo stands out against the blue sky and green palm trees. Built in the 12th century, it is a hotchpotch of Norman architecture with traces of Arabic design. The inside is less impressive than the outside, so save time and head instead for the Chiesa di Santa Cita and its art-filled Oratorio del Rosario. It is located in Via Valverde (close to Il Vucciria market) and is open Monday to Saturday, 9am-1pm.

Sicily boasts a couple of excellent museums, both in Palermo. The Museo Archeologico Regionale, at Piazza Olivella 24 (00 39 091 611 6805), is an archaeological treasure trove, including rare Phoenician art, as well as the Palermo Stone, dubbed the "Rosetta Stone of Sicily", which dates to 2700BC and is a source of information on the Egyptian pharaohs. The museum is open Saturday to Monday 8.30am-1.30pm, and Tuesday to Friday 8.30am-2pm and 2.30pm-6.30pm; admission €6 (£4.60). Unfortunately, the Galleria Regionale (Regional Gallery, Via Alloro 4, 00 39 091 623 0011) is temporarily closed for renovation and unlikely to be open to the public until 2010. However, you can still see the impressive doorway and façades of Palazzo Abatellis (built in 1490) that houses its collections.

The city's most ghoulish sight is the display at the Catacombe dei Cappuccini at the Convento dei Padri Cappuccini (00 39 091 212 117). Its subterranean labyrinth contains 8,000 mummified former residents of the city, some up to 400 years old.

GETTING THERE, STAYING THERE?

You can fly to Palermo daily from Stansted with Ryanair (0871 246 0000; www.ryanair.com). From Gatwick, easyJet (0871 244 2366; www.easyJet.com) starts flights in June. And Thomsonfly (0870 1900 737; www.thomsonfly.com) has flights from Gatwick and Manchester.

Palermo's grandest hotel is the stunning Art Nouveau-style Grand Hotel Villa Igiea (00 39 091 54 76 54; www.hotelvilla-igiea.com), overlooking the Gulf of Palermo, 3km north of the city. Doubles from €205 (£146), including breakfast. More economically, the Hotel Joli at via Michele Amari (00 39 091 6111 765; www.hoteljoli.com), is well placed for both old and new parts of town; doubles from €98 (£75) including breakfast.

ANOTHER URBAN THRILL?

Catania, a once elegant city, is now decaying. Yet for seeing a Sicilian city in action, there is nowhere better. The highlight is the fish market around Piazza Pardo, which opens 5.30-11am daily except Sunday, but there is also some stunning architecture. The majority of the palaces and churches are in the baroque style, not because the city was founded late but owing to an earthquake that rocked Catania in 1693.

You can fly to Catania from Gatwick on Air Malta (0845 607 3710; www.airmalta.com) or British Airways (0870 850 9 850; www.ba.com). Catania is also where you will arrive if travelling by train. The overnight service from Rome and Naples loads on to a ferry to cross the straits from Reggio di Calabria in mainland Italy - so you can sleep all the way (www.trenitalia.com).

CAN I HEAD FOR THE HILLS?

Yes. Sicily's hills are dotted with little towns and villages that are especially attractive at Easter, when many put on colourful parades. Monreale, a glorious hilltop town, is just 15km from Palermo and an easy day trip from the island's capital. (The number 389 bus takes around half an hour.) It draws the crowds to its Norman cathedral, which dates back to 1174. When built it was just the latest project in the long ecclesiastical history of Monreale, starting when the Bishop of Palermo moved his seat there when the Arabs conquered his city in 831. The cathedral was designed to trump the grandeur of Palermo, and succeeded. From Pisano's bas-relief doors with its biblical scenes to the gigantic mosaics of the interior, which number more than 2,000, it is stunning. Climb up to the terraces for great vistas and down to the cool respite of the Moorish cloisters. The cathedral is open daily from 8am-6pm.

Erice, further down the coast from Palermo, is perched on a hilltop, giving spectacular views as far as Tunisia. It's an enthralling place to spend an afternoon wandering along the medieval cobblestoned paths, ducking into churches or retiring to the Norman Giardino del Balio. Erice is a 50-minute bus ride from Trapani, or a two- to three-hour train journey depending on the service (€9.65/£7.40) from Palermo.

SOMETHING OLDER?

Several Sicilian settlements rivalled Athens and Rome in grandeur. The Valley of the Temples, just outside the southern town of Agrigento, consists of eight temples surrounded by olive groves and almond trees. They were built between 510BC and 430BC. Each is dedicated to a god or goddess, including Concordia (the most complete ruins) and Heracles (the oldest temple). Unfortunately, the once spotless view down to the sea has now been disturbed by building work, but the setting is impressive

nonetheless. The archaeological park is open from 8.30am to 7pm daily and costs €8 (£6.15) for the temples, or €10 (£7.70) in combination with the archaeological museum (www.valleyofthetemples.com).

Akragas, now modern Agrigento, was founded by Greeks from Rhodes and Crete, and was one of the most prominent cities in the Magna Grecia until it was sacked in 406BC. It was rebuilt by the Romans some 400 years later. It pales in comparison with the temples, but is a pleasant place to stay. The Grand Hotel Mose (00 39 922 608388; www.iashotels.com) is a simple but comfortable hotel with a pool. Bed and breakfast from €50 (£38.40) per person.

The French writer Guy de Maupassant described the ruins at Selinunte, west of Agrigento on the island's south-west corner, thus: "An immense heap of fallen columns, now aligned and placed side by side on the ground like dead soldiers."

The Greek settlement dates back to 7th century BC. Selinunte is tricky to reach without a car; head for Castelvetro on the southern coast, about 23km from the ruins, from which erratic bus services run (wait at the railway station). The temples are open from 9am to dusk; admission is €6/£4.60.

Syracuse, 250km east of Agrigento, has the remains of both Greek and Roman arenas. The Roman amphitheatre was used for gladiatorial battles, while the Greek Theatre, hewn into the rock, was used to stage plays by Euripides, something it still does in summer. The town feels neglected, but the little palm tree-sprinkled island of Ortygia (about 30 minutes' walk via the Ponte Nuova bridge) is a popular place to stay. The Grand Hotel (00 39 0931 464 600; www.grandhotelsr.it) is a four-star option on the waterfront, close to the bridge. B&B starts from €240 (£185).

A TOUCH OF CLASS?

Aim for Taormina, north of Catania. Goethe and D H Lawrence were besotted by this town, built on the cliff of Mount Tauro. It offers spectacular views of the coast, with its rugged rocks, sandy coves and crystal waters. Taormina's position is prime for panoramas of Mount Etna, and it is a good base for excursions to the volcano. It also has a pretty beach, accessible by cable car (8am-8.15pm daily, Sundays from 9am; €2.70/£2 return).

If you haven't had enough Greek and Roman history, Taormina also has its very own amphitheatre, but the real attraction is the quaint town itself. The main street, Corso Umberto I, and the pretty squares provide perfect passeggiata ground. During the day, you can explore the cool interiors of the churches or the gardens of one Lady Trevelyan, a Scottish woman who left for Europe after an inappropriate dalliance with the future Edward VII. The gardens are open from 8.30am until dusk.

There are plenty of hotels to suit all budgets, but those with money to spend should splash out and stay in Palazzo San Domenico (00 39 0942 613111; www.sandomenico.thi.it). Winston Churchill and François Mitterrand are among the illustrious guests who have sojourned at this glorious former monastery. Doubles from €300 (£231), including breakfast.

SOMEWHERE QUIETER?

Sicily has three distinct coastlines, with the Mediterranean Sea to the south, the Tyrrhenian Sea to the north, and the Ionian Sea to the east. The picturesque former fishing village of Cefalu lies on the northern coast between Palermo and Messina, and is a rival to Taormina in the beauty stakes. La Rocca (a craggy rock) rewards those who make the effort of climbing it with vistas to the north. Cefalu's prime attraction is its sandy beach, though it does get overcrowded in the peak months between April and October.

Some of Sicily's best walks are to be found in the Parco delle Madonie. Just south of Cefalu, the park has six mountains over 1,500m high, and boasts over 2,600 species of flora. There are also several towns and villages in the park's enclosures.

Headwater (01606 720199; www.headwater.com) offers several itineraries for walking, as well as a coastal cycling holiday. The eight-day Highlights of Sicily walk is based in the countryside around Mount Etna, with coastal walks and trips to Taormina and Syracuse. Prices start at £1,047, including flights.

HOW SAFE WILL I BE?

Many equate Sicily with the lawlessness of the Mafia, yet Sicily is certainly not a dangerous place to visit. The collective Libera Terra (Free Land) has been putting confiscated Mafia territory to good use,

including investment in an agriturismo near Monreale. Prices for a stay at Portella della Ginestra, near Monreale, start at €31 (£23.80) per person per night for bed and breakfast (00 39 091 857 4810; www.liberaterra.it).

So, relax and enjoy your stay. As Fabrizio in *The Godfather* says, it's not the Mafia you have to watch out for in Sicily: "Women are more dangerous than shotguns."

WHAT SHALL I EAT?

Sicily has a distinctly flavoursome cuisine, often based on Arab cooking, with spices, apricots and a lot of fish. Citrus fruits grow around the island, there are almond and olive trees in abundance, and wine is produced in Marsala. Sicily is proud of its arancini (fried rice balls), gelato (ice cream), granita (grown-up Slush Puppy), and range of sweets including the cannolo siciliano and cassata siciliana.

To take the gastronomical experience a step further, www.cookingholidays.co.uk serves up a range of excellent Sicilian holidays based on preparing and, more importantly, tasting the island's food and wine. The eight-day Gourmet Sicily tour includes three cooking lessons as well as wine tasting in Marsala and Etna, and sightseeing.

WHEN SHOULD I GO?

April to June and September and October are the best months to visit: the temperatures are moderate and the crowds thin.

Avoid August: as in the rest of the country, Italians shut up shop and go on holiday.

Easter is the most exciting time to go, as festivals abound. Highlights are the procession of the Misteri (religious statues) in Trapani on the west coast, near Erice; and the Dance of the Devils, representing the battle between good and evil, in Prizzi, south of Palermo.

HOW WILL I GET AROUND?

Sicily covers a large area, but cheap, well-connected transport makes it easy to see a good deal in a relatively small space of time. Trains connect all the main towns and cities. Catania to Palermo, for example, takes under four hours, for a one-way fare of €11.60 (£9); Catania to Agrigento takes around four hours and costs €12.65 (£9.70).

The usual car-rental suspects, including Budget (0844 581 9998; www.budget.co.uk) and easyCar (08710 500 444; www.easycar.com) have desks at the airports. For a week's hire from Palermo airport, expect to pay from around £150.

MORE INFORMATION

Contact the Italian State Tourist Board (020-7408 1254; www.italiantouristboard.co.uk). Think Sicily (www.thinksicily.com) and Open Sicily (www.opensicily.com) are good resources for accommodation and ideas.

Lonely Planet's latest Sicily guide is due out in May; and for history buffs, the Blue Guide's version is a good place to start.

Finally, if your travels are taking you east, not south, then a new exhibition in Bonn will transport you to Sicily. The Art and Exhibition Hall (00 49 228 91710; www.kah-bonn) features sculptures, crafts and fine art that trace the island's fortunes through the millennia. The exhibition runs to 25 May 2008.

Additional research By Aoife O'Riordain and Fae Tabel

Aeolian idylls

For the best beaches and most relaxing getaways, fashionable yet still unspoilt, head for the Aeolian islands. Each has an individual character and there is something for everyone: swimming, sunbathing, diving and snorkelling (Lipari or Panarea); mud baths and thermal spas (Vulcano); vineyards (Salina); walks and volcanic visits (Stromboli); or just windswept isolation (Filocudi and Alicudi).

Legend has it that the islands were home to Aeolus, the god of wind who helped Odysseus on his epic voyage. Lipari is the largest island and has the most developed tourist infrastructure; there's a popular beach at Canneto, a few kilometres north of the town of Lipari. Another good beach is the Spiaggia Sabia Nera (Black Sand Beach) on Vulcano, the closest of the islands to the mainland. Also known for its thermal spas and hot springs, the island - home to three volcanoes - is perfect for a romantic break. The active volcano on Stromboli is also popular, and its lava is captivating in the evening.

For luxurious Aeolian accommodation, the Hotel Raya (00 39 09 0 983013; www.hotelraya.it) on Panarea and Hotel Signum(00 39 090 9844 222; www.hotelsignum.it) on Salina are hard to beat. Rooms at the former start at €180 (£138); at the latter €110 (£85), including breakfast.

The islands are reached from Milazzo by hydrofoil (00 39 0923 873813) see www.usticalines.it [<http://www.usticalines.it>] for details and online reservations.

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