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FROM GRITTY PALERMO TO THE BAROQUE SOUTH-EAST, SICILY OFFERS A CLASSIC MEDITERRANEAN HIT. ERIN FLORIO RETURNS TO GO BEHIND THE CURTAIN ON AN ISLAND THAT NEVER FAILS TO DELIVER

In the main piazza, Peppe ushers me across the broad flagstones of the sloping old town, passing regal churches until we reach a door under a swinging wooden sign that says 'Rosso Cinabro'. It is the last remaining workshop of the Sicilian carrettieri, or cart makers. To step inside is to go back two centuries. The wood is whittled by hand, and the wagons, which were ubiquitous up until the 1950s, are painted in brilliant red, yellow and blue, in patterns as distinct as fingerprints.

On my last full day, I wake up in Taormina, on the east coast, and tiptoe into the sea as the sun rises and the town sleeps. A few fishermen have rowed out just beyond the rock line and the water is as clear as glass. On a good day, you can see mighty Etna, the smoking volcano that could destroy much of the area's centuries-old antiquities in minutes. By the grace of all the gods who have been worshipped on this island, Etna's destruction has so far been largely contained to the mountain-side. A bonus from the centuries of lava flows is the mineral-dense soil, which over the past few decades has captured the attention of some of Italy's top winemakers. Later that afternoon, I'm in a modern glass-and-timber tasting room at Cottanera Winery. Sipping Nerello Mascalese with views of the vineyards tumbling down the mountain slope, I see a different side of Sicily, the beginning of something new.

Yet change doesn't always mean an end to what was here before. In the crumbling hilltop village of Motta Camastra, which clings stubbornly like a mountain goat to the cliffs north of Etna, a group of women is taking preservation into their own hands. Urban migration

IN A HILLTOP VILLAGE APRON-CLAD MAMMAS ARE FRYING ARANCINI, MOLDING AUBERGINE PARMIGIANA AND STUFFING PASTRY WITH RICOTTA

and economic decline have hit the village hard. To create jobs and bring people back, Mariangela Curro and other local women launched Le Mamme del Borgo, which is creating a hyperlocal farmed food movement to help sustain the town agriculturally; and offering good old-fashioned cooking to travellers. Mariangela is a cheery and proud ambassador, guiding me to the museum where antique olive presses are displayed and to the town square, which looks over the valley and across to Etna. We climb a footpath and duck through a door that leads to a kitchen. Inside, apron-clad mammas are frying arancini, molding aubergine Parmigiana and stuffing crescent-shaped pastry with ricotta. Every tour ends at the table in the ivy-draped courtyard outside.

Between platters of pasta alla Norma, sausage and stewed greens, Mariangela explains their mission. Sicily is nothing if not a study in endurance and evolution, having inherited, fostered, grown and preserved influences from so many forces throughout history to create a place unlike anywhere else. But Sicily's magic is knowing when to let change in. For the mammas, change is intertwined with conservation. If done properly, their work will help to keep Motta Camastra ticking.

Mariangela clears the lunch dishes and offers coffee. Peppe and I should get going. But surrounded by these women, on top of a valley that's been inhabited for thousands of years, time seems to move at its own pace. We don't need to rush. So we stay a little longer. **T**

Authentic Explorations offers week-long Sicily itineraries from about £9,000 for two people (authentic-explorations.com)

Opposite, clockwise from top left: beach at Villa Sant'Andrea; fruit and vegetables for sale in Palermo; Fontes Episcopi bio resort in the south-west; Villa Sant'Andrea grounds; sunbathers at Scala dei Turchi

SICILY: A QUICK GUIDE

PALERMO

Sicily's grand, sinister capital is more than just a place to base yourself while exploring the island's western edge. It has some of the finest cathedrals in all of Europe, including gilded Monreale, as well as Italy's largest opera house, while the street scenes alone are worth a few days of your time. On that note, the best food is to be found in the markets. Skip Vucciria, which has the atmosphere but prices pegged for tourists, and instead head to Capo, for heaping plates of anelletti with Menabrea beers from any of the vendors on the flagstone passageways; and Ballarò to haggle with gruff chaps hawking baby sharks and mounds of olives, before tucking into traditional pannelle chickpea fritters from the courtyard stalls at the market's end. Another reason to stay a while? The 2021 opening of Rocco Forte's **Villa Igiea** (roccofortehotels.com) turned this unremarkable hotel town into a place you'd travel to for this resort alone, with its glamorous pool scene and cocktail terrace.

AGRIGENTO

The Valley of the Temples is the draw to this historic city in southern Sicily. You can breeze through its millennia-old monuments in an afternoon, but the delightful **Fontes Episcopi** (fontesepiscopi.it) provides a reason to stay for a few days. Located just beyond the ancient sites on a working farm, the seven-room, family-run inn has olive groves, a sweet pool and charming courtyard draped in ivy where a large wooden table draws guests to linger over wine into the night. But the selling point is the lovely farm kitchen with its bounty of produce grown on site, large cooking counters and ample space to bang out platters of local pastas with vegetables. However, should you feel like dressing up for dinner, the terrace at Michelin-starred Villa Athena has knockout views of the area's famed antiquities and serves incredible involtini di melanzane.

NOTO

One of a clutch of historic Baroque towns in Sicily's south-west which includes Modica and Ragusa, Noto is worth a few nights as the jumping-off point to explore the region. There is really only one place worth staying in town: **Seven Rooms Villadorata** (7roomsvilladorata.it), an old palace found through a discreet gate in the centre. The rooms channel old Sicily with their tiled floors and heavy curtains, and terraces peep out over domes and steeples. It's located right off the pedestrianised Corso Vittorio Emanuele, lined with churches and statues, a dream to stroll in the early evening as the aperitivo bars are setting up. Do dinner at Manna, which puts a contemporary spin on local flavours with dishes such as pasta with courgettes. If you're looking for something a little slower, chic **Il San Corrado di Noto** (ilsanccorradodinoto.com) recently opened in the countryside outside town with a pool and simple stone villas.

TAORMINA

If you're smart about it, you won't feel the crush of overtourism that has long pained Sicily's perennial resort town. This place is worth a visit, so check into Four Seasons' **San Domenico Palace** (fourseasons.com), which recently reopened with exquisitely large courtyards, cocktail terraces and a poolside bar as a nice counter to the hordes of travellers in the little town right outside the front door. It has fabulous views over the Mediterranean, but to be closer to the beach, **Villa Sant'Andrea** (belmond.com) is a gorgeous Belmond hotel on the Bay of Mazzarò. The town is also the entry point to Mount Etna, a favourite wine and outdoor-adventure destination with hiking in the summer and skiing once the weather turns.