



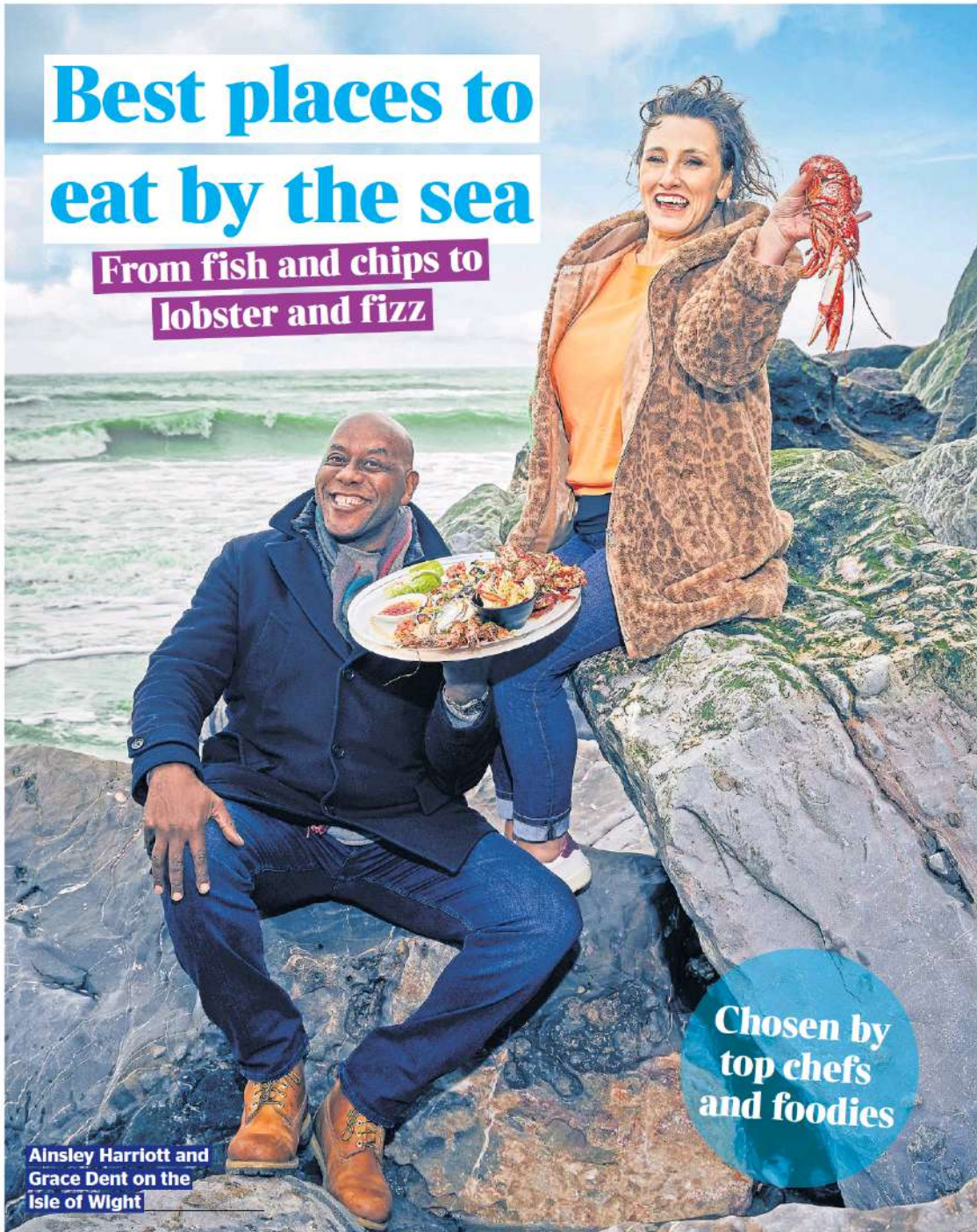
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Plus Freddie Flintoff on Shane Warne

Weekend

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Luxury Italy

Eat, swim, nap at Sicily's latest upmarket retreat

Jane McFarland discovers a sleek new hotel in a part of the island made famous by Netflix

Are you one of the many who binged on Netflix's Emmy-nominated cult series *Chef's Table*? If so, you are probably familiar with Noto in southeast Sicily. Caffè Sicilia and its fourth-generation pastry chef, Corrado Assenza, whose mouthwatering almond granita has brought international tourists to the hilltop town in their droves. "The show has changed my life," Assenza tells me over a mouthful of his cassatina, the traditional Sicilian dessert of layered sponge cake, ricotta, marzipan and candied fruit. "My business and Noto itself — the visitors come from everywhere." The general manager at a nearby boutique hotel concurs: "Sicily is about to explode." Indeed, Sicily's recent hotel boom makes this one of Italy's — if not Europe's — most sought-after destinations. New openings by several heavyweight hoteliers (see panel) last year, plus a Dior event planned in Taormina for next month, mean the rustic Italian island has become rather... zhuzhy. Yet the less-seen south,

with its medieval towns and grove-lined valleys, remains relatively untouched.

Pointing down Noto's Corso Vittorio Emanuele, our vivacious tour guide Paolo Mortellaro says: "I work across all of Sicily, and this is it." Mortellaro runs private walking tours and a luxury vehicle service (handysicily.it). Noto's main street, where the honey-coloured late-baroque architecture is designed to catch the sunlight, gives off an apricot glow.

"It's like a film set!" he says. But Noto wasn't always this picturesque. On January 11, 1693, an earthquake flattened the region, including the original town and 54 others. Afterwards, three architects — Paolo Labisi, Vincenzo Sinatra and Rosario Gagliardi — were given free rein to rebuild Noto on a site nearby, designing churches and palaces with their own take on the baroque style seen across Sicily. We weave between locals sipping espresso and Aperol or slurping gelato and granita, enjoying a rare, off-season moment of calm.

Then to Caffè Sicilia itself, which Mortellaro tells me throngs with customers all year. A call to Signor Assenza is made, and he joins us from his basement "laboratory", where he spends up to 16 hours a day. Before long we're tucking into a selection of desserts, including the island's famous cannoli — tube-shaped shells of fried pastry dough overflowing with creamy ricotta filling — complemented by a glass of fresh almond milk.

If that has your stomach rumbling, there are direct flights to Catania from Gatwick. From there it's only an hour by car to Noto (quicker, perhaps, if you're at the mercy of an Italian driver). A car is a necessity. You won't want to miss the gloriously green countryside — all hills, vines and wildflowers — or the other baroque villages in the Unesco-listed heritage site of Val di Noto. These include Ispica, Scicli and Modica, a town that's world-renowned for its rare chocolate, which is still made using ancient Aztec techniques.

We visit Ragusa Ibla, a towering 18th-century town on the side of a gorge. At Gelati Divini flavours include liquorice and muscat. I test them all assiduously.

Off the central Piazza del Duomo is Cinabro Carrettieri. This charming workshop is run by Biagio Castilietti and Damiano Rotella — two of only a handful of master artisans still making traditional handpainted Sicilian carts, or *carretti siciliani*. Widely used on the island from the 19th to the mid-20th century, they're an integral part of Sicilian culture. Today the duo work on bespoke commissions and occasionally dabble in fashion — the designers Dolce & Gabbana, largely considered the global ambassadors for their native Sicily, tapped up Castilietti and Rotella for a collaboration with Smeg on their range of kitchen appliances.

The Sicilian way of life could rarely be described as bustling. But should you wish to retreat still further, then the place to

Pool at Il San Corrado di Noto



Bathroom at Il San Corrado di Noto



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ALFIO GAROZZO; GETTY IMAGES



3 more new luxury stays in Sicily

Villa Igiea, Palermo

Rocco Forte's 14th property, Villa Igiea was one of Sicily's most anticipated openings of last summer. A lavish palazzo overlooking the Gulf of Palermo, it was originally bought and developed in the early 1900s by the prominent Florio family, who hosted Hollywood elite, artists and royalty over the years, and restored by the architect Ernesto Basile as a luxury hotel with 100 rooms and suites. Despite the refurbishment the place hasn't lost any of its grandeur — you can dine in a mirrored salon and sip an aperitivo in the frescoed bar, painted by the Palermo artist Eugenio Morici. Did we mention it has its own private harbour?

Details B&B doubles from €345 (roccofortehotels.com). Fly to Palermo

San Domenico Palace, Taormina

Frequented by Audrey Hepburn, Sophia Loren and Oscar Wilde to name but a few, this converted 14th-century monastery high on a cliff above the Ionian Sea is not a new hotel, but it reopened last year in the colours of the Four Seasons. Panoramic views across the bay towards Mount Etna are the hotel's trump card — book a terrace table for dinner at the fine-dining restaurant, Principe Cerami. Meanwhile Taormina is within easy reach. Make a beeline for the cobbled Corso Umberto I, a popular shopping street lined with cannoli vendors.

Details Room-only doubles from €650 (fourseasons.com). Fly to Catania

Seven Rooms Villadorata, Noto

This seven-bedroom boutique B&B in the heart of Noto occupies the former residence of an actual prince — Prince Giacomo Nicolaci, whose family was a key player in the region's baroque resurgence. Expect old-world glamour — gilded tiles, restored frescoes — overlooking a vast courtyard. There's the added bonus of easy parking, an otherwise impossible feat in the medieval town.

Details Room-only doubles from €335 (7roomsvilladorata.it). Fly to Catania

Junior pool suite at Il San Corrado di Noto



Palazzo Ducezio and San Nicolò Cathedral in Noto



make for is Relais & Châteaux's newest opening, Il San Corrado di Noto, an 18th-century former masseria located in the heart of Val di Noto.

Its selling point isn't panoramic sea views or ornate baroque decor. Rather, surrounded by acres of citrus and olive trees, there's an all-enveloping sense of sanctuary. With 26 suites and eight private villas and a well-curated library, it's a masterclass in old-school luxury; impeccable service and discretion is everything. After a three-year transformation headed by a local architect, Corrado Papa, many original features remain, including the 1836 chapel. Modica stone and Guatemalan marble dazzle in the sleek, minimalist rooms. (If you're after rustic charm, look elsewhere.) Our vast suite had his-and-hers walk-in closets and sinks, a four-poster super-king bed and a private terrace.

Eat, swim, nap, repeat will be the rhythm of your stay. During the summer season there's exclusive access to a private beach (in certain corners of Sicily finding space to sunbathe could be classified as an

Need to know

Jane McFarland was a guest of Scott Dunn, which has four nights' B&B at Il San Corrado di Noto (ilsanccorradodinoto.com) from £2,200pp, including flights and private transfers (scottdunn.com)

Olympic sport), via a free shuttle service.

Outdoor living is at the heart of the hotel: high-spec gym equipment is dotted throughout the grounds, set among the citrus trees and encouraging #workout with a view (there's an indoor gym too, plus treatment rooms). A grass tennis court offers a throwback vibe, while outdoor yoga and al fresco meditation are also on offer.

An enormous, glistening pool serves as the centrepiece of the property. The 100m, cobalt-blue expanse — surely one of the largest in Sicily — is one of a dozen pools in total: private ones for the eight villas and two of the suites, plus a square "green" pool (more inviting than it sounds) heated to a pleasant 26C.

Don't let all that swimming and wallowing get in the way of feasting. That's not the point of Sicily at all. Here two superb restaurants vie for your attention — the upmarket Principe di Belludria and the low-key Hostaria Casa Pasta. There's not a whole lot of traditional Sicily on the menu at the former; the fine-dining seven and nine-course tasting menus are

catering to the globe-trotting clientele. But a deftly served spoonful of black-truffle ice cream in between courses and the finest Sicilian wines and grape varieties, including nero d'avola, are a welcome reminder of the island's peerless credentials.

Dining at Casa Pasta is more on the hearty side — think delectable homemade breads and a tasting menu of local olive oils, beautifully crafted pasta and grilled fish. One word of warning: do pace yourself. The masterful breakfast — an exhaustive affair served in the resort's wine cellar, Cantina, featuring everything from eggs Benedict and waffles to the customary Sicilian offering of brioche with granita — can leave you utterly sated before your day has even started.

With masks for the enthusiastic staff now dropped, beaming smiles greet you throughout your stay at Il San Corrado di Noto. The message is clear: Sicily is open for visitors, and ready to pamper and indulge you. And if you can't wait till summer, download series 4, episode 2 of *Chef's Table* to whet your appetite further.

Junior suite at Seven Rooms Villadorata

