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ITALY

25 extraordinary Sicily escapes

Whether you want to hole up in a gorgeous villa with a pool, or snack your way through Palermo's street markets, this seductive island has a break to suit your every wish

La Rocca Hill in Cefalu, Sicily
ALAMY

Sean Newsom | Thursday March 14 2024, 12.01am, The Times

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Last April I drove 650 miles around Sicily, with the whole island flushed green with spring — and I'm still pinching myself in disbelief. The sun shone. Thunderclouds rumbled over the mountains. Rain poured intermittently — and on every day the island served up another slice of wonder that was every bit as varied as the weather.

Doric temples, towering sea cliffs, black-soiled vineyards, baroque piazzas, luxurious hotels, gritty suburbs, fresh snow on Mount Etna: did I really see them all on a single island? Or have I conflated every memory I have of Italy and squished them into a single week? Either way it's an experience I'll be feeding on for years to come — digging ever deeper into the island's layer cake of history, landscape, food and sunlight.

And now it's spring once more and I'm not the only one hearing Sicily's siren call. Freed from its mafia reputation the island is hot property these days — and a wave of farmhouse conversions, new-build villas and designer hotels has swept over its hilltops and along its coastlines, ready to make our holidays comfortable and indulgent as well as captivating. Never mind the hype that built last year around the Four Seasons hotel in Taormina, the star of the *White Lotus* TV series. Beyond its hallowed portals, one of Sicily's most welcome trends is the rebirth of its *baglios* — the hilltop farming complexes that are now wineries and olive oil presses as well as atmospheric, richly textured hotels. By no means are all of them expensive.

Alongside those you'll find agriturismo B&Bs and reconditioned farmhouses, as well as gorgeous villas, big and small. Add in all the escorted and self-guided tours on offer this year, and it seems the holiday scene is almost as multifarious as the island itself. Here, I've collected some of its most tempting elements.

But please bear one thing in mind if you're hatching a Sicilian plan. High season here can be fearsomely hot. Last July temperatures peaked at about 47C and wildfires raged around the capital, Palermo. So if extreme heat isn't your thing, and if you plan to be active in either thought or deed, make this an April-June or September-October destination. There are wondrous things to be seen. You don't want to miss them sheltering indoors with the air-con on.

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1. Villa La Giara 2, Mazzaforno

Villa la Giara

Rough-hewn seaside hideaway for two
There may be other villas dotted around on this stretch of the north coast, not far from Cefalu, but at this simple, rustic cottage you'll think you have the sea to yourselves. It perches on a low rocky promontory, looking straight down onto the beach, while a thick belt of macchia bushes provides shelter from both the sun and nosey neighbours. The terrace is cobbled and the interior colourfully tiled, while the sighing of the waves is an ever-present invitation to go for a swim.
Details Seven nights' self-catering for two from £1,030 (emmavillas.com). Fly to Palermo

2. Monaci delle Terre Nere, Zafferana Etnea

Monaci delle Terre Nere

Distinctive design meets delicious Etna wine

Coaxed back to life over the course of five years, this 62-acre Relais & Châteaux property is a lovely example of the island's new breed of luxury estates. In orbit around its 18th-century country-mansion hotel are a kitchen garden, 15 acres of vineyards, and barns and stables that have become chic villas. Expect a rich mix of knobbly walls and 21st-century furniture, as well as a distinct mineral tang to the wine — a product of Etna's volcanic soils. Both Taormina and Siracusa are within an hour's drive.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,901pp, including flights (expedia.com)

3. Ancient monuments and agrotourism

Ragusa Ibla in Sicily

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A grand tour of temples, baroque towns and wine estates

Slow Sicily is the theme of this new self-guided tour from Palermo, which wisely gives you 11 days to wiggle through the island, with plenty of time to put your feet up in wine estates and country hotels in between the driving. En route, you'll get a dazzling sense of the island's diversity — snacking through Palermo's street markets (the arancini are non-negotiable), swimming off the Egadi Islands, exploring Selinunte's temples and wandering baroque Ragusa. Once you're back home it'll take weeks to unpack all the memories.
Details Ten nights' B&B from £2,260pp, including flights and car hire (originalttravel.co.uk)

4. Relais Santa Anastasia, Castelbuono

The Relais Santa Anastasia
PUCCI SCAFIDI

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Cask whisky – today's safest investment?

An affordable wine estate near Cefalu
This former abbey on the edge of the Madonie mountains offers a taste of Sicily's grandeur and tranquillity without the usual price tag. Yes, the bedrooms could do with an update, but long hours of slack-jawed gazing await from the poolside terrace, interspersed with cookery classes and tastings in the abbey's winery. Here, you're within sight of the sparkling Tyrrhenian Sea. Winding down the mountain roads to explore Cefalu's tightly packed coastal streets is a must.
Details Five nights' B&B from £837pp, including flights and transfers (citalia.com)

5. Zu Nillu, Favignana

Zu Nillu

A villa carved out of a Roman quarry
It's hard to know where to begin. Do you throw yourself into the plunge pool in your private Roman quarry? Its ochre-tinted walls were excavated 2,000 years ago. Or do you run though the private garden and out to the Cala Rossa, one of the loveliest bays here on the Egadian island of Favignana, off Sicily's western tip? Then again, you could just stay put in your extraordinary labyrinthine villa, decorated with antiques, majolica tiles and modern art. Its rooftop terraces are the perfect spot to toast the sunset while your wood-fired pizza oven warms up.
Details Seven nights' self-catering for eight from £7,069 (thethinkingtraveller.com). Fly to Trapani

6. Club Med, Cefalu

Club Med

Carefree seaside resort with sun-bleached style
Sprawled across a craggy headland a mile west of Cefalu's cathedral, this is one of Club Med's poshest resorts. Accommodation ranges from stone-faced doubles and suites, each with a terrace, to cute designer cabins, and the sun-bleached style perfectly mimics the coastal setting. But it's not the decor that defines the luxury here; it's the carefree sense of convenience. Almost everything is included in the price: endless buffets, all your drinks, watersports, tennis and kids' clubs (over-sevens only). All you need to do is waft about from swimming pool to sailing lesson, wondering what your next cocktail should be.
Details Seven nights' all-inclusive from £1,820pp, including flights (clubmed.co.uk)

7. Casameo, Marsala

Marsala cathedral

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Photographic retreat on the west coast

Towering sea cliffs, azure horizons, teeming markets: Sicily is full of eye-catching subjects, and on this one-week course from April 27 the photographers Andreea Elle Vas and Matt Arnold will help you to capture them. Talks and workshops will cover both people and places, while one-on-one tutorials will give guests the chance to discuss their work and tackle technical or thematic issues. Throughout, the small Casameo villa complex near Marsala will be your base, with Palermo and Trapani on the day-tripping menu.

Details Seven nights' full board from £2,900pp (responsibletravel.com). Fly to Trapani

8. A solo tour of western Sicily

The Doric temple at Segesta

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Doric temples, Marsala wineries and Palermo
Sicilian feasts await on these canny Snapshot of Western Sicily tours for single travellers, which stick to the quieter side of the island and avoid the scorching heat of high summer (there are departures in April, September and October). Options to choose from as you sortie from your seaside base at the Tonnara Di Bonagia resort include cheese-tasting near the Doric temple at Segesta, a culinary walking tour of Palermo and a visit to a Marsala winery. Expect a mix of guiding, socialising and time on your own — with no single supplements.
Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,645pp, including flights (newmarketholidays.co.uk)

9. Casa Victoria, Cefalu

Casa Victoria
DOMENICO PICCIONE

A north coast villa with sensational views
"Why on earth didn't they build a temple here?" You can't help but wonder, when you look west from this crisp, well-equipped villa just above Cefalu. The view from its hillside perch is straight across the Bay of Palermo towards the setting sun. Watching it from one of the terraces, with dinner on the table and everyone's hair still wet from the pool, is sure to be a daily ritual. Inland, horse riding at Ride Sicily's Casa Il Bosco base offers an exciting day-trip alternative to the beach (from £43pp; ridesicily.eu).
Details Seven nights' self-catering for eight from £4,084 (oliverstravels.com). Fly to Palermo

10. From Stromboli to Mount Etna

Aeolian Islands
GETTY IMAGES

A lava-lover's walking tour
Never mind the wine or the history or the Mediterranean; Sicily's mind-bending sense of otherness rests on the vast, looming cones of its volcanoes. This self-guided Volcanoes of Sicily walking holiday knits together three of them, with hydrofoils and taxi transfers bridging the considerable gaps in between. You'll fly into Catania, before being whisked to the magnificent Aeolian islands of Stromboli, Lipari and Vulcano, and then back to Mount Etna. Expect friendly and characterful three-star hotels, and a shuddering sense of what lies boiling beneath us.
Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,859pp, including flights (headwater.com)

11. Adler Spa Resort, Siculiana

Adler Spa Resort
MONTEFUSCO FRANCESCO

A sense of sanctuary on the southwest coast

On a blissfully underdeveloped stretch of coast, southeast of Sciacca on the western side, the Adler Spa Resort offers a green-tinged modernist aesthetic that's rare in Sicily. Here, many of the low-slung bedrooms are built into the bluffs, Mediterranean plants sprout on restaurant roofs and unbaked clay walls help to regulate room temperatures. The emphasis throughout is on healthy living. So don't spend too long gazing out to sea from one of the infinity pools. You'll miss out on all the yoga, mountain biking and sea kayaking. Or maybe a hot-stone massage in the high-tech spa.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £2,089pp, including flights (expedia.co. uk)

12. Palazzo Previtera, Linguaglossa

Palazzo Previtera

A wild food and wine workshop

If you're wondering why the slopes of Mount Etna have become a gastronomic hotspot, let the British restaurateur and food writer Ben Tish enlighten you. From May 23, the author of *Sicilia: A Love Letter to the Food of Sicily* is leading a five-day workshop that will include a guided chefs' tour of Catania's food markets, as well as vineyard and farm visits, olive oil tastings and foraging walks. Accommodation will be in the Palazzo Previtera in Linguaglossa, a town on the north side of Etna, inland from Taormina. Painstakingly restored, it blazes with unexpected colour and eye-catching contemporary art.

Details Four nights' full board from £2,950pp, including workshop and tours (emotionalsicily.com). Fly to Catania

13. Casa Ortigia, Siracusa

Casa Ortigia Siracusa

The ultimate seaside city break

Could there be a cooler self-catering perch than this high-ceilinged apartment that's been stripped back to its plaster walls? When you open the French windows you can look straight down on Siracusa's open-air food market and decide what fruit you fancy for breakfast. It's the perfect overture to a day wandering this ancient city — clenched tight as a fist on its little island and brimming with history. Sieges, tyrants, Archimedes, Caravaggio — in the past 2,750 years it's seen them all, as well as stunning sunsets almost every night across the Porto Grande.

Details Three nights' self-catering for four from £664 (welcomebeyond.com). Fly to Catania

14. Villa Montalbano, Scicli

Villa Montalbano

Rustic escape in the south

As the name suggests, this rustic countryside villa sits in the region popularised by everyone's favourite Sicilian policeman — BBC4's *Inspector Montalbano*. Here in the deep south, life moves at an unhurried pace, as you will, after a couple of days lounging by the pool and stretching your alfresco dinners long into the night. The interiors mix exposed stone walls with big, slouchy sofas and a modern kitchen. But you won't be spending much time indoors. The nearest sandy beach is only four miles away. The baroque town of Scicli, wedged into a narrow canyon, isn't much further.

Details Seven nights' self-catering for six from £1,837 (theluxurytravelbook.com). Fly to Catania

15. Bastione Spasimo, Palermo

Palermo

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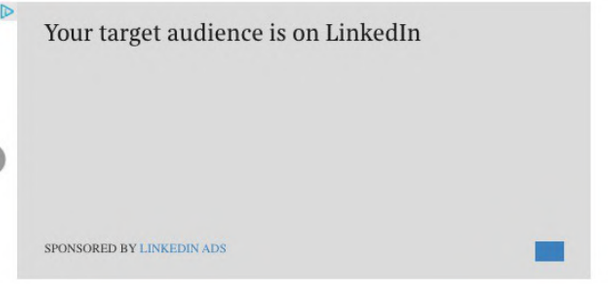


A soothing base in Sicily's buzzing capital

Central Palermo has become a wonder of the modern Mediterranean. At night, its long pedestrianised streets seethe with sauntering Sicilians — who seem as dazzled by the nightlife as the tourists are, piling into piazzas to drink beer and Aperols. Then, during the day, its street markets, churches and museums encourage yet more walking. What a relief then, to be able to cool your feet in the plunge pool at the Bastione Spasimo. The cute, richly textured hotel occupies a former 15th-century bastion in the fashionable district of Kalsa — and is handy for the tiny bars of the Via Alessandro Paternostro. It's so busy down there after dark everyone ends up sitting on the kerb.

Details Three nights' room-only from £434pp, including flights (expedia.co.uk)

16. Cycling the Val di Noto

cycling in southern Sicily

RACHEL KEENAN

A freewheeling tour of Sicily's southeast

Starting in the baroque town of Palazzolo Acreide and finishing on Siracusa's ravishing island of Ortigia, this easygoing cycle tour loops down to the Isola delle Correnti at Sicily's southern tip. The terrain is undemanding and the longest leg of the journey is only 36 miles, with plenty of opportunities to wander baroque towns and swim in the sea. But even so, you won't want to be cycling through the heat of high summer. April or May are best, when the island is still flushed with its spring greenery.

Details Six nights' B&B from £935pp (macsadventure.com). Fly to Catania

17. Feudi del Pisciotto, Niscemi

Feudi del Pisciotto

Hilltop winery with amazing views

When the sun's out, breakfast at this rambling hilltop winery is served on a terrace overlooking a 7,000-acre nature reserve. It's the perfect prelude to a visit to the Villa Romana del Casale, less than an hour's drive north, where a vast mosaic depicts la dolce vita as lived by a Roman bigwig. Back at base, the 21st-century equivalent awaits on your return: wine tasting, swimming in the outdoor pool and soaking up the magnificent views.

Details B&B doubles from £140 (feudidelpisciotto.it). Fly to Catania

18. A Sicilian painting holiday, Modica

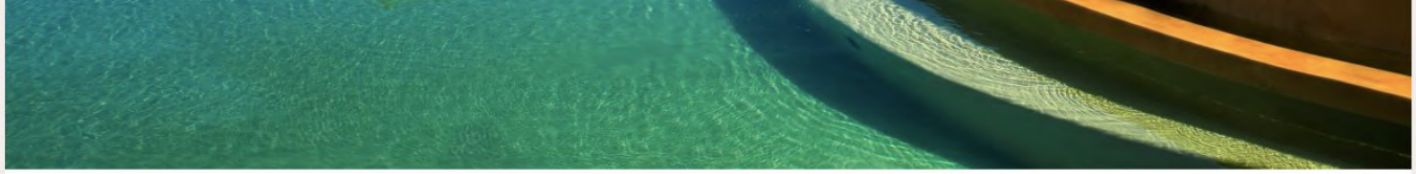
A Sicily painting retreat

Bring Sicily to life with paint

It's a tough gig for a Briton, capturing Sicilian light on canvas or paper. How do you evoke its intensity, even in spring and autumn? And what colours do you use to make the shadows sing? After just a week of tutored experimentation on one of 12 Painting Holidays in Sicily courses you might not have succeeded, but the chances are you'll have had a ball trying, based in a restored watchtower near Modica, surrounded by like-minded people and day-tripping to Siracusa in search of new subjects.

Details Seven nights' full board from £1,799pp (flavoursholidays.co.uk). Fly to Catania

19. Verdura Resort, Sciacca



Verdura Resort Sicily

Sweat it out in a sporty mega-resort

Yes, this is one of Sicily's swankiest seaside resorts, complete with supersized bedrooms, a giant spa and four restaurants. But what's most exciting about its 570-acre spread are its sports facilities and the teachers they attract. Over Easter Erik Galloni will be leading hip-hop dance classes. In August the Olympic gold medallist Elisa Di Francisca can teach you how to fence. And in between, young footballers can hone their skills on a Juventus-designed training programme while mum and dad improve their golf swing and tennis strokes. Chances are, the entire family will be busy from dawn to dusk.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,182, including flights (britishairways.com)

20. Villa Val di Noto, Cassibile

Villa Val di Noto

Canyons, waterfalls and a private cinema under the stars

This small but sleek villa has a video projection screen, so your terrace can become an outdoor cinema after dark. There are other reasons to celebrate too. Just south of the villa lie the waterfalls and archaeological remains at the Cavagrande del Cassibile nature reserve, while the wild beach at Marchesa di Cassibile, at the end of the canyon, is one of the best in the area. Then, back at base, you can take a final swim in the villa's pool before cooking pizzas and making the day's biggest call: which movie shall we watch tonight?

Details Seven nights' self-catering for four from £1,099 (sawdays.co.uk). Fly to Catania

21. Unahotels Capotaormina, Capotaormina

Isola Bella off Taormina

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Beachy escape with views of Etna

You don't have to be an American gazillionaire to enjoy Taormina. Unahotels Capotaormina is a world away from the excesses of the *White Lotus* TV series, but less than a mile southeast of its setting. And if anything the location is more dramatic — perched all on its own on a rocky headland, looking up at Etna. So what if the bedroom decor is a bit tired? You'll be too busy swimming from the edge of the sea cave that serves as its private beach, or spinning out dinner in the cliffside restaurant.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £998pp, including flights (tui.co.uk)

22. Il San Corrado di Noto, Noto

Il San Corrado di Noto

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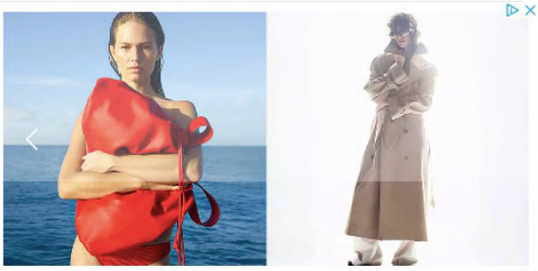

Country hotel with a private beach club
Sicily's country-estate hotels come in many forms. This one is as sleek as an ocean-going liner and twice as luxurious. All the accommodation is in suites and villas and even the entry-level rooms are palatial. Think gleaming marble bathrooms, walk-in closets and a private terrace that leads inexorably to the soothing water of the pool. Banana trees, palms and cypresses provide plenty of shade and the baroque streets of Noto nearby offer a magnificent change of architectural scene. There's even a private beach club, served by the hotel's shuttle bus.
Details Five nights' B&B from £2,375pp, including flights and car hire (scottdunn.com)

- 17 of the best hotels in Sicily
- Sardinia v Sicily: which is better?

23. A rural tour of the south

The Valley Of The Temples
GETTY IMAGES

Cute countryside hotels close to key sights
To get a proper sense of Sicily's splendour, you need to do some touring. This rural, self-drive circuit comes from an island specialist and knits together three pretty and highly rated small hotels. They're all well clear of the tourist honeypots, but close enough to make day-tripping a cinch. The chic Relais San Giuliano is handy for Etna's vineyards; at the Masseria Agnello you'll find an atmospheric mix of rough stone walls and country-house furnishings ten miles from the Valley of the Temples; and the Hotel Borgo Pantano puts Sircausa on your doorstep.
Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,010pp, including flights and car hire (justsicily.co.uk)

24. Opera in southern Sicily

Noto Tina di Lorenzo Theatre

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An exclusive opera festival

Opera lovers, lend me your ears. From October 18-24, with the sunshine still balmy and the crowds long gone, you can join an exclusive opera festival that takes in the theatres at Modica, Noto and Ragusa, and works by Vivaldi, Handel and Monteverdi. Make no mistake, this is a big-ticket item, but with magical Siracusa as your base and daily interpretive discussions with John Allison, the editor of Opera magazine, you may think it unmissable. The arias will be echoing through your memory for months to come.

Details Six nights' B&B from £4,380pp, including flights (martinrandall.com)

25. Villa Camilla, Noto

House-party heaven near the sea

You might pray for rain when you step inside this two-building beauty, set between Noto and the Vendicari nature reserve. That way, you'll have more time to appreciate the interiors, hung with interesting paintings, festooned with arty lights and floored with crazy diamond and chevron tiling that sometimes spreads up the walls. The outside's not too shabby either. Take your pick of perches, from a shady loggia, a sunken rock garden and several terraces. The swimming pool is long enough for an impromptu gala.

Details Seven nights' self-catering for 12 from £6,270 (stayone.com). Fly to Catania

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