

# SENSATIONAL SICILY

Natural and historical wonders on this memorable Italian island

By Eric Lucas

» **Observers often resort** to nature for words that describe the Mediterranean's distinctive color—cobalt, hyacinth, lapis, indigo, gentian. As I stand on a bluff above the Tyrrhenian Sea at Tindari, Sicily, it's easy to see all those hues, as the light and water shift ceaselessly. Lending height and scale to the scene is the southerly 10,900-foot cone of Mount Etna, one of the Western world's most active volcanoes.

All these dynamics provide memorable sights and meaningful metaphors for Sicily itself. The different aspects of civilization have washed over this island like an Abstract Expressionist version of history, and perhaps that's why my group's Sicilian guide pauses to craft her answer to my question about my ancestry. "My friend, if you have Sicilian blood, you have the blood of dozens of different peoples," Lita says as we tour the Tindari ruins west of Messina. "Phoenician, Norman, Arab, English, Roman, Greek, Egyptian, French, Jewish. And many others I can't bring to mind at this moment."

I am one-quarter Sicilian, and my sister, Kristin, and I are here on a family odyssey to find the tiny mountain village

our great-grandparents left at the dawn of the 20th century.

While the journey is personally meaningful to us, Sicily attracts 15 million travelers each year to a place whose delights range from tiny marzipan treats made fresh each day to Etna's immensity.

» **Clockwise: Catania's old town** features impressive statues and Baroque architecture. The Taormina coastline boasts brilliant blues. The Black Madonna is housed inside an ornate sanctuary. Visitors to Sicily can enjoy fresh seafood and gelato.



# NEAR & FAR»



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MARCO OSSINO / SHUTTERSTOCK; EMANUELE PASTORE / EYEEM / GETTY IMAGES; BIVALETTI / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM; TOROK-BOGNAR RENATA / STOCKS; IGOR MADJINCA / STOCKST

Visitors range from Brits on beach-blanket summer holidays to film buffs heading for *The Godfather* locales. Almost all those who travel here try Sicilian pizza, and, yes, it is the best—not that I am biased. Same for Sicilian olive oil.

Visitors hike or ride up Mount Etna, swim in aquamarine waters lapping limestone shores, and tour historic sites and museums that focus on the island's role as a key intersection in the panoply of Western civilization. But the essence of Sicily is its historical treasures, which include sites such as Agrigento's Valley of the Temples (actually a ridge, with a row of Doric monuments); Taormina, whose restored Greco-Roman amphitheater is still in use; and Syracuse, once one of the Greek world's most important cities.

"[Sicily's] strategic location at the

center of the Mediterranean has made the island a crossroads of history, a pawn of conquest and empire, and a melting pot for a dozen or more ethnic groups whose warriors or merchants sought its shores," says the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

A disparate variety of stones in the Tindari city wall ruins testifies to the multitudinous hands of history that have left their fingerprints in Sicily. I toe the dust by a thick-boled ancient olive tree, thinking about the simpler subjects of pizza and gelato, but more on that later.

Having completed the group tour, Kristin and I decide to hike up a bluff overlooking the sea to admire the *Black Madonna*, another exile to these shores: It's an icon of Mary, walnut-colored, which is believed to have been dropped off at Tindari in the ninth century by Byzantine



refugees fleeing religious strife in Constantinople. An imposing sanctuary was built to house the *Madonna*, and it is a popular site for Sicilians, who have traditionally come here to give thanks for protection from invading armies. Though the *Madonna* has been here for centuries, the shrine is relatively new, a 1979 structure whose presence signifies the importance of religion in Sicily to this day.

If you're here in early September, you can celebrate the feast days of the *Madonna*. Realistically, though, every day is feast day in Sicily. My sister and I make our way down the hill from the shrine to sample blood orange gelato and the famous marzipan treats, *frutta martorana*, which assume shapes ranging from strawberries to Easter lambs. Wonderful as those seem, I discover something even more alluring: *pignolata*, fried pastry balls soaked in lemon-honey syrup.

It's lunchtime, but we're having desert anyway. We're on vacation.

In the evening, back in Messina, we embark on a journey for pizza. It's not hard: We meander down the street in the harbor area, poke our heads into a few pizzerias, and pick the one with the most redolent aroma out the door. Then we make our

» **Frutta martorana (below) are quintessential Sicilian marzipan treats.**

**Some of Mount Etna's craters are dormant, and visitors can hike along them (bottom).**



↑ Taormina's Greek amphitheater.

#### AT A GLANCE

##### Must-do attractions:

Agrigento's Valley of the Temples. • Mount Etna, one of Europe's biggest volcanoes. • The Greek amphitheater at Taormina.

##### Lesser-known attractions:

Tindari. • A day trip to Stromboli, an island volcano. • The Norman Castle of Caccamo.

##### Where to go first if you're a ...

... Foodie: Any neighborhood pizzeria.

... Romantic: A Verdi opera at Teatro Massimo in Palermo.

... History buff: Syracuse, once a prominent Greek city.

... Family: Town-square puppet shows and small carnival rides.

... Lover of literature and pop culture: Savoca and Forza—near Taormina—where scenes from the movie series "The Godfather" were filmed.

##### Memorable scene:

In *The Godfather*, Michael (Al Pacino) asks Apollonia's father for permission to court his daughter at Bar Vitelli, in Savoca.

**Distinctive dish:** *Arancini al pistacchio*, fried rice balls stuffed with pistachios and cheese.

**Classic drink:** Marsala, Sicily's classic dessert wine.

##### Best local expression:

*Fregatene* in Italian is slang for "don't worry" or "forget about it."

##### Best time of year to visit:

October typically coincides with harvest season, and some of the best weather.

##### Best time of day:

The sight of Etna lit by the rising sun is matchless. Greet it with espresso and a pastry.

##### What to take home:

Sicilian olive oil.

##### Key history moments to know:

734 B.C.: Greek colonists found Syracuse.

• 212 B.C.: Rome conquers Syracuse, and thus Sicily.

• 1860: Garibaldi invades Sicily during his Italian unification campaign, and since then Sicily has been considered a part of Italy. —E.L.



GANDOLFO CANNATELLA / SHUTTERSTOCK

» The small, scenic village of Isnello is located high in the limestone Madonie Mountains.

way into the shop and choose from a half-dozen kinds, all being borne from the massive ovens every five minutes or so. Sicilian pizza boasts ultra-thick crust in a rectangular shape, like focaccia, with toppings that can include olives, onions, peppers, tomatoes, sausage and anchovies. Cheese is used sometimes, and options include a savory Sicilian fresh-curd

concoction called *toma*, which tastes like sea foam.

For once, I don't have to request extra anchovies. In fact, I can't request much of anything: Little English is spoken here, a rarity in modern Europe, that signifies Sicily's nonconformist nature.

Since 1953, the Italian government has been proposing a bridge to the mainland (a project that has been canceled multiple times), and connecting the island to the rest of Italy is an idea that dates back more than a thousand years. When I asked Lita about all that, she rolled her eyes and shrugged. "Sicily is Sicily. Let the mainland stay where it is."

It can be hard to conceive of Sicily as an island, however. At about 9,900 square miles, this is the Mediterranean's largest island. Sicily's bulk rides high from the sea with the mountains that peak at Etna.

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TRAVEL  
JUNEAU

The monumental proportions of the island can be experienced even more strongly if, as my fiancée, Nicole, once did, you take a horseback excursion up to Etna’s craters.

The mountain marks the collision of the African and Eurasian tectonic plates. On the craters, the landscape is as alien as you’d expect, with only crushed black lava beneath your feet, not a speck of green, nary a bird. Fog banks roll in like they are alive, though, and Nicole described her ride as a once-in-a-lifetime excursion. “I cannot imagine any other experience like riding a horse across those fields of lava,” she told me.

If horseback is not to your taste, a tram carries travelers to Etna’s base, from which you can hike on up, or take advantage of snowcats climbing the steep slope.

Etna’s impact is evident throughout the countryside around the volcano, as

millennia of eruptions have left fertile soil in which almost every semiflat parcel is planted with some crop and watered by Etna’s snowmelt.

My sister and I watch the countryside pass by on a day trip to Isnello, our ancestral village in the limestone palisades west of Tindari. We’ve hired a car and driver, and we proceed beside the Plain of Catania, past fields of wheat and barley; groves of olives, almonds and citrus; plots of tomatoes and eggplants; and vineyards of kiwis and grapes. Bougainvillea and jasmine spill across stucco walls like bridal bouquets, and the scents of thyme and rosemary—wild native vegetation here—drift through the morning sunshine.

It is a landscape so lush to marvel at that I can’t help but contrast it to the dry, dusty descriptions of Sicily I have often heard—even from my own grandmother,

who was conceived in Isnello and born in the States, and returned to Sicily in the 1950s as a visitor. When I mentioned our desire to visit Isnello, she exclaimed, “Why on earth would you do that?”

But here we are, 100 miles west of Messina, ascending to 1,740 feet elevation up an endless series of switchbacks beneath the ramparts of the Madonie Mountains, whose 6,493-foot Carbonara Peak is Sicily’s second-highest. The approach to Isnello takes us across a mountain flank, and the town itself is poised on a high pass, like a model village in a limestone saddle. We get out and wander about, looking for a specific landmark we’ve heard rumors of all our lives.

Our great-grandparents emigrated to the U.S. at the dawn of the 20th century, bringing with them our grandmother and our great-uncle. The latter, Vincent Impel-

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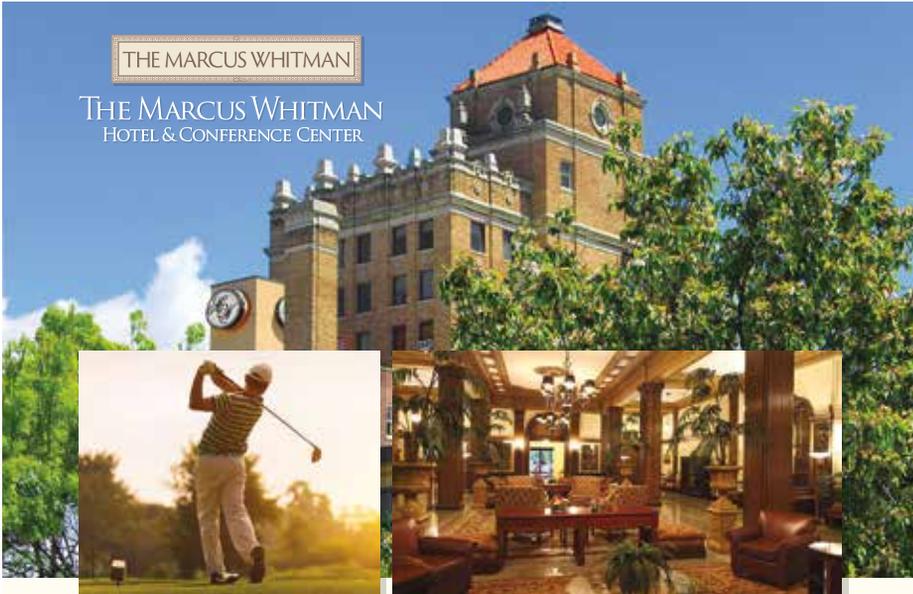
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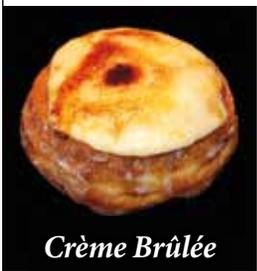
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## » NEAR & FAR SICILY

litteri, worked his way up the ladder of American life to win election, in 1950, as mayor of New York. Once ensconced in Archibald Gracie Mansion, he returned in triumph to visit Isnello, where they named a street after him. But Kristin and I search in vain, and despondently return to our car and driver.

“Wait. Stop!” Kristin cries, as we head outbound from the main square. We’ve been driving on the very street we were searching for, signified by a tile plaque in a stucco wall: *Viale Impellitteri*. Our driver takes a portrait of us by the sign.

On our last day in Sicily we head to old town Catania, where we sit down for a farewell lunch at a pleasant seafood bistro’s sidewalk tables.

I ask my sister if she realizes that people have been enjoying seafood here for thousands of years. She nods, too busy with calamari to engage in philosophical chitchat. Our waitress comes by to inquire if our scraped-bare platter needs to be replaced. We indicate in the universal sign language of gustation that we’re full—more than full—and she laughs knowingly.

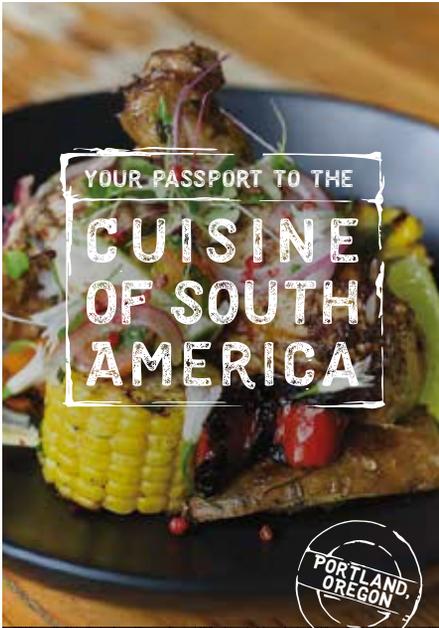
“What is there more kindly than the feeling between host and guest?” said Aeschylus, who came from Athens in the fifth century B.C. for extended stays in Sicily. No doubt he enjoyed calamari, too.

Aeschylus also said that great wisdom is based on deep memory. In Sicily, memory runs deep, indeed. ✎

*Eric Lucas lives in Washington state’s San Juan Islands.*

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