

BLISS IN SICILY

A trip to Italy would be incomplete without a stopover in the Mediterranean's largest island

Writer Danielle Parla



SCILLA, CASTLE ON THE ROCK IN CALABRIA, ITALY/IMMAGINE



Italy has long captivated the hearts and hunger of travellers, and now Sicily is coming into its own. With 3,000 years of rule by the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs and Normans – Sicily is a melting pot of cultures, and a rich, vast living museum. The Mediterranean climate makes for a bounty of delectable dishes and home to more grape varieties than any other region in Italy. Here one can enjoy sweet and dry Marsala and wines of enhanced complexity and richness thanks to the volcanic mineral content. The wellness industry is gaining momentum and some excellent spas are emerging. Catania is the stepping-off point for exploring the east coast and travel by car

is essential to discover the treasures of Sicily, from its mountains to aquamarine shores.

TAORMINA

Situated on craggy cliffs of the island's east coast, Taormina seduced Goethe more than 200 years ago and continues to enchant visitors today. One of Sicily's most popular destinations, the little town of Taormina charms with its gardens, ancient ruins and breathtaking views of Etna.

BELMOND VILLA SANT'ANDREA

At the base of the Taormina cliffs, the Belmond Villa Sant'Andrea was originally built as a private residence that has expanded

over the past century to welcome guests to its sun-drenched location on the Bay of Mazzarò. With 64 rooms and suites, many with sea views and balconies, the villa has a luxurious yet relaxed elegance with cream marble and accents of traditional Sicilian art and ceramics throughout. Descending through lush tropical gardens, a private sandy beach with loungers, private cabanas, beach bar and warm aquamarine waters await. To see the property and surrounding bays from the water, guests can enjoy a complimentary boat excursion during the summer months.

Stay fit and pampered with a fitness centre, Turkish steam bath and Wellness

THE ASHBEE

To stay in Taormina is to be swept into the heart and imagination of travellers who for centuries have come to savour *la dolce vita*. Minutes from Porto Messina are the shops of Corso Umberto I and a spectacular ancient Greco-Roman amphitheatre where a Sicilian villa has been transformed into a luxury boutique hotel.

Named after English architect Charles Robert Ashbee who designed the villa in 1908, The Ashbee celebrates its English heritage in Sicily with interiors that elegantly marry traditions from both worlds. Each of the 25 rooms and suites in the three adjacent villas celebrate distinctive and hand-selected design elements and luxurious fabrics. The spa suite offers comfort and luxury with a cosy living room, a hammam and chromotherapy Jacuzzi tub.

The main villa, terraced garden and infinity pool face the eastern coastline and the Calabrian mainland inviting hours of relaxation. The terrace bar is the perfect

spot to lounge in the evening with a cocktail before dinner in the intimate and elegant Restaurant St. George. Foodies will be charmed by the thoughtful and inspired twist given to classical Sicilian and Mediterranean dishes, which the sommelier will pair with the finest of Sicilian wines. www.theashbeehotel.com

AEOLIAN ISLANDS THERASIA RESORT SEA & SPA

Step off the mainland at Milazzo and island hop through the beautiful Aeolian archipelago whose unique geology, topography and history have earned them a place on UNESCO's World Heritage list. Comprising eight islands, Lipari is the largest and most lively, with many quaint restaurants and boat tours to surrounding islands – including a spectacular night tour to the active volcanic island of Stromboli.

The neighbouring island of Vulcano is popular for the healing sulphurous mud pools that are said to help skin and rheumatic conditions – if you can brave



THIS PAGE: Elegant guest room with sea views at the Belmond Villa Sant'Andrea. OPPOSITE PAGE: The Ashbee is housed in a Sicilian villa with interiors that celebrate its English heritage



THIS PAGE: Lounge poolside at Villa Neri. OPPOSITE PAGE: Shalai Resort's rooms marry contemporary style and history with angelic ceiling murals and intimate retro design; Therasia Resort boasts exceptional vistas

the aroma. From the cliff of Vulcanello the sea breeze and exceptional island views from Therasia Resort sets the mood for utter relaxation. The 94-room resort offers rooms with terrace or balcony, three restaurants and three outdoor seawater pools with the same extraordinary vista. The white adobe exterior, light blue palette and ocean-inspired decor bring the best of seaside living indoors.

The Wellness Centre has four treatment rooms and a child-free pool and sauna area that is small but cleverly designed. The dim steam and dry sauna area leads to a naturally lit pool area with loungers, a refreshment station and a pool with various water jet stations targeting the legs and back. Within the pool is a cold-water Kneipp walk that descends into a pathway within the heated pool. The spa menu focuses on scrubs using sea salt, volcanic grains and their own line of products. www.therasiareSORT.it

ETNA

The presence of Europe's largest and most active volcano is undoubtedly an

Fontane Restaurant is excellent and proudly showcases regional wines to complement the expertly curated menu with dishes like cauliflower crème brûlée with Ragusano cheese bon bons. The knowledgeable, attentive staff provide service that matches the fine dining experience.

The Petra Spa covers it all with massage, finishing touches and facials by new Italian line Dermophysiologique. Lounge poolside surrounded by olive trees, or book the indoor Wellness Path where a small Jacuzzi pool, steam bath, dry sauna and ice fountain can be found. www.hotelvillanerietna.com

SHALAI RESORT

In the small town of Linguaglossa on the slopes of Etna, the Shalai Resort is a hidden

gem whose contemporary and intimate retro design could easily be transplanted to SoHo. Discreet and peaceful, the 13-room resort beautifully marries contemporary style and history with thoughtfully restored exterior, angelic ceiling murals and a small central patio area.

Despite the name, you'll hardly miss having a pool and garden space with the Jacuzzi, steam bath, dry sauna and beanbag loungers in the cocoon-like space. The wellness menu is small but comprehensive with massages, facials and rituals from Italian spa line Comfort Zone. After a day exploring local wineries and Etna, enjoy the immediate relief of the signature Shalai Massage given on a chromotherapy waterbed.





THIS PAGE: Savour delectable treats at Villa Neri's Le Dodici Fontane Restaurant; Eremo della Giubiliana is a place of simplicity and respite. OPPOSITE PAGE: Enjoy dining al fresco with views overlooking the pool at Masseria della Volpe

A highlight to your stay is the refined one-Michelin-starred restaurant headed by Chef Giovanni Santoro. The quiet atmosphere and delicate white decor provides a canvas for the colourful and evocative dishes that do Sicily and Etna region proud with enticing ingredients from land and sea. www.shalai.it

SYRACUSA

As you travel south on the coast, it is essential to take the time to get lost in the narrow streets and beauty of baroque in Ortigia, the historical city centre of Syracuse. At the beginning of a chain of Sicilian UNESCO World Heritage Sites, history mingles with contemporary art and culture on the small island accessible by footbridge. A gastronomic institution since 1985, Chef Giovanni Guarneri's restaurant

Don Camillo has celebrated the regional traditions and seasonal offerings of Sicily with tasting menus that have earned the family-run restaurant Michelin stars and high acclaim. Minutes from the Piazza Archimede, make sure to book ahead.

VAL DI NOTO

South of Syracuse is a region that was completely destroyed by the 1693 earthquake and rebuilt to represent "the culmination and final flowering of Baroque art in Europe" according to UNESCO. Maintaining old-world charm, the region is rich in history, festivals, ceramic art and citrus groves and to leisurely meander the cobbled streets of the towns of Modica, Noto, Caltagirone, Palazzolo Acreide, Ragusa, and Scicli, which are nothing short of delightful.

MASSERIA DELLA VOLPE

The restored 19th-century olive and citrus farm forms an oasis of tranquillity from its hilltop vantage in the region of Noto. With modern rooms and suites you will feel far from the bustle of daily life relaxing poolside surrounded by spacious lawns dotted with large hammocks and canopied lounge beds.

The small but chic wellness centre has a treatment room and a covered outdoor Jacuzzi, ice fountain and steam room that is available for an hour each day. The wholesome spa menu focuses on various styles of massage as well as beauty treatments.

Enjoy dining inside or outdoors with views overlooking the pool and the rolling hills of the surrounding farmland. The restaurant offers a delicious breakfast of bread, fruit, cheeses and meats, as well as

the typical Sicilian fruit flans and cakes, providing plenty of energy for your day exploring Noto township.

www.masseriadellavolpe.it

EREMO DELLA GIUBILIANA

A place of simplicity and respite, the Eremo della Giubiliana is a restored luxury

hermitage situated between Modica and Ragusa. Once a place of contemplation, the 17-room Eremo is no longer inhabited by friars, but guests, who can choose to stay in one of the 15 unique rooms, or two of the grand suites.

The Eremo's cream stone structure is accented by pink bougainvillea where archways reveal a hidden terraced garden with prickly pear, almond trees, sun-speckled tables and an outdoor pool. Guests can book a massage with experienced therapists in a dedicated treatment room that opens to an ancient necropolis dating between the 5th and 3rd century BC.

Inside, rich red rugs and dark wooden decor speak to the history of the Eremo, as does the original kitchen which displays cooking antiquities like reeds for making ricotta and ceramic moulds for marmalades and such. The ancient refectory used by the Knights of the Order of Saint John is now Don Eusebio – a restaurant that caters to traditional tastes using many ingredients from the Eremo's own farm and garden. Guests have the opportunity to bring a part of the home back with them thanks to a limited production of fruit jams, pasta and olive soaps made from the gardens.

www.eremodellagiubiliana.com





AGRIGENTO

The landscape opens up the south-west province famed for its ancient temples and sandy beaches, Agrigento. Don't miss typical Sicilian favourites like granita with brioche and ricotta-based cassata and cannolo Siciliano as you pass seaside towns heading west.

VERDURA RESORT

Spanning 230 hectares, the Rocco Forte Hotel resort sets the bar high for spa and golf in Sicily. Close to the famous Valley of Temples, all 203 rooms and suites have views of the ocean and were designed using local materials such as stone, sand and wood. Despite its size, the resort is tastefully infused into the landscape in hues of Latin terracotta

and ochre. Striving for sustainability, the resort uses grey and rainwater harvest to assist in watering the extensive golf green, solar energy and photovoltaic panels and bike depots throughout the car-free property to make it easy to get around.

In addition to the large pool with ocean view, the 4,000sqm spa pavilion has Sebastian Kneipp-inspired thalassotherapy pools which incorporate water jets and varied temperatures to boost circulation. With something for everyone, the extensive spa menu offers rituals and treatments from Rocco Forte, Sepai and Pevonia. When not swinging your club, check out the excellent yoga and fitness classes that are complemented with a well-equipped cardio and weights facility.

One of four restaurants, the elegant and lively Zagara Restaurant offers local catches and seasonal dishes that incorporate herbs and produce from the resort's own organic gardens. www.roccofortehotels.com

THIS PAGE: Verdura Resort blends tastefully into the landscape; Verdura Resort's Presidential Suite has its own private terrace and pool. OPPOSITE PAGE: Rich red rugs and dark wooden decor speak to the history of Eremo della Giubiliana

