

Much has been written about Sicily, its history, geography, and splendid cuisine. It is impossible to write about the island without resorting to worn out clichés, repeating stories about its many invaders, and bringing up the mafia. It has all been written ... most certainly better than I could possibly do.

Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea with a population of approximately six million people. Like a large battleship strategically located in the middle of the Mare Nostrum, it has been a coveted destination. Its closeness to the Africa continent has served as a bridge between different civilizations.

It has been estimated that there are another 15 million people of Sicilian descent dispersed throughout the wide world.

Sicilians are a hardy people with a tough and resilient character. They speak their own language, not a dialect, and they speak it proudly in spite of sustained attempts by the central government to extinguish it. Because of its many invaders, the Sicilian language has many words that can be traced to Arabs, Greeks, Turks, Germans, French, and Catalanian.



THE MINOR ISLANDS

Three archipelagoes surround Sicily, each with its own history and local customs. To the Northeast, there are eight volcanic islands -- the Aeolian Islands archipelago.

Homer in the Odyssey narrates that some of these islands were inhabited by Vulcan, the god of fire, Aeolos, the god of wind, and visited often by Neptune, the god of the seas, when he was in bad mood.



About 5,000 people live year around in these islands with thousands more coming during the summer months. Stromboli, made famous by the award-winning movie by the same name by Roberto Rossellini, is an active volcano. There are daily ferries that connect these islands to Milazzo, Messina, and other ports along the Tyrrhenian coastline. Residents will remind you that the Malvasia wine was first produced in these islands, and that the islands produces some of the best capers money can buy.

To the West, there are three islands comprising the Egadi archipelago, easily reachable on a daily basis from Marsala and Trapani by ferry. Two of the islands are quite pristine and free of unwanted development. The islands are well known for their seafood, especially the Mediterranean tuna. Favignana, the largest of the three, offers great accommodations to visitors wanting to linger longer.

In the South, three islands mark the Pelagie archipelago and extend Italy's borders close to the African continent. Lampedusa, the largest of the three, has been in the news in the past several years as the gateway of choice for migrant workers escaping famine and wars from sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. Daily flights and ferries connect these islands with Agrigento and Palermo. To the east of this archipelago is Malta, an independent nation.

Pantelleria, technically not part of the Pelagie archipelago, is smack in the middle of the Strait of Sicily, and is well known for its special wines (passito) and superior capers. The island is connected with the big island by ferry as well as with flights from and to Trapani.

Ustica, North of Palermo, is a solitary island. The island was uninhabited for centuries due to raids from pirates roaming the Mediterranean searching for booty and potential slaves. Today, the island is the destination of choice for divers. International competitions are often held in the island.

THE INTERIOR

Tourists typically visit the coastline of the island, and overlook the interior. The main autostrada links the interior via a number of secondary roads, some poorly maintained.

There are many archeological sites that dot the island: Syracuse, Taormina, Tyndaris, Agrigento, Selinunte, and Segesta are the best known. > > >



Palermo, Sicily's capital, has approximately 900,000 inhabitants and is home to landmark Norman structures and converted mosques. Palermo is recognized as the premier gastronomic center of Sicily. Two splendid Norman cathedrals are found in the nearby towns of Monreale and Cefalu'. Visitors to Palermo can enjoy the fusion of two extraordinary, architectural styles, the Gothic and the Arab. Italians call Palermo: The Poor Man's Rome. The city has many layers of history, a fabulous gastronomy, and several renowned structures.

Few tourists venture out toward the lesser-known interior. In my view, the interior is target rich in experiences. One can peruse life, as it was carried out hundreds of years ago in small villages that have remained pretty much isolated for centuries.

It is in the interior where the visitor can sample foods that cannot be found any place else, to attend unique festivals (sagra), and celebrations in honor of the local saint. The manna sagra of Castelbuono is famous. Local chefs prepare a variety of sweets using manna as the sweetener. Castelbuono is about 20 minutes from Cefalu' in the province of Palermo. You might find festivals by olive oil producing districts, by fishermen, and by fruit or vegetable producing localities.

Several of these villages are perched on hard to reach hilltops. Locals built these towns as defensive bastions from marauding pirates who meandered throughout the Mediterranean Basin in search of booty and to abduct people. They are now connected to the main highway system by narrow and serpentine roads. From hard to reach hills, locals had a 360-degree view and could easily spot intruders.



Church bells would then sound the alarm. These villages were mostly built during or immediately after the Dark Ages. They sport remnants of two entrances that were once closed at night to keep strangers out.

Residents of these hilltop towns earn their living primarily through agriculture and animal husbandry. The best olive oil comes from these villages. In the Southwest of the island, the main occupation is wine making. Marsala is well known for a wine that bears the town's name. In the Southeast, large farms grow oranges, lemons, and a variety of vegetables. In the center of the island, animal husbandry reigns supreme. Some of the best local cheeses and home made sausages come from this area.

AGRITURISMO

Many farmhouses offer a place to sleep and sample local delicacies produced right there by hard working farmers. These places are often referred to as Agriturismo (farm tourism) and are sanctioned by the government. It is in some of these places that the visitor can often see how fresh ricotta and local cheeses are made the old fashioned way. It is in some of these places that the visitor can partake of the local bounty of fresh fruits and homemade preserves. In some of these places, the visitor can find homemade sausages, salami, ham, homemade wines, and a variety of fresh and dry legumes. A 6-8 course meals will set you back \$ 25-30.

FAVORITES PLACES

One of my favorite places for a hearty lunch is in Kalsa, a tiny village with a population of 25. The restaurant



La Posada serves a six-course meal featuring black boar for a mere \$ 27 per person. And the weary traveler can rent a room for \$ 30. Karsa is about 30 minutes inland from the autostrada A19, about 20 miles east of Cefalu', in the province of Palermo.

My other favorite place, outside of Sinagra, is the Borello. There are two restaurants, each owned by two brothers who don't speak to each other. The smaller one has the best food. The larger one has the best views of the canyon. A 19-course meal including wine, spirits, and dessert will set you back about \$ 30 per person. Sinagra is approximately 30 minutes off autostrada A19 from Capo d' Orlando, in the province of Messina.

In Ficarra, a small mountain town about 30 minutes from Sant' Agata Militello, off autostrada A19, you can visit the Sannoto agriturismo. The famous Barone Milio extra-virgin olive oil is produced in a nearby farm. The baroness Milio is your hostess. This olive oil is distributed widely in the U.S. and is used not for cooking but mostly to dress bread or salads.

Scaflani Bagni, a small farming town, about 45 minutes from Palermo, is the home to Regaleali, one of the most beautiful wineries in Sicily. Next to the winery there is a cooking school, run by the granddaughter of the late Count Giuseppe Tasca d' Almerita. The winery dates back to the 1830's and produces 3 million bottles of high quality wine. The late countess Anna Tasca Lanza published several seminal books on Sicilian cookery.

ANOMALIES OF HISTORY

Sicily is much more than a great archeological find. It is a testament to man's ability to survive and grow in spite of insurmountable odds. Take for example the story of three small towns: Piana degli Albanesi, Santa Cristina Gela, and Contessa Entellina. These

towns are inhabited by the descendants of an ethnic Albanians community by people who emigrated to Sicily in the 15th century to escape the Ottomans' conquest of the Balkans. Locals today speak an old version of Albanian, and continue to carry on their local traditions including the Eastern Orthodox rites of worship. These three small villages are located in the province of Palermo, and can be reached by car.

Another interesting town is San Fratello, in the province of Messina. Adelaide del Vasto, the wife of Roger I, the Norman King who invaded Sicily, founded the town in the 11th century. She introduced the Gallic-Italic dialect, still spoken today.

During the Sicilian Vespers, Sicilians rose up against the French, who were ruling the island, and slaughtered their oppressors. San Fratello refused to join them. For centuries, neighboring towns ostracized the town and its inhabitants. Mussolini forced integration during the 1920's, following a devastating mudslide that killed many. Al Pacino, the famous Italian America actor's ancestors come from San Fratello.

Visiting these towns and observing their customs and way of life gives the visitor a glimpse of life buried by dusty centuries of time.

SUMMARY

There are many layers to this glorious island. I have just scratched the surface, hoping to tantalize you. I visit the island often, 2-3 times per year. I was born and raised there, yet there is much that I do not know about the island.

Sicily has managed to survive and absorb customs from the many invaders. It has been said that Sicily has been invaded 17 times, but it has never been conquered.

-- Article and photographs by Tony Tasca 🌀

Sicily



TRINACRIA THE SYMBOL OF SICILY

Sicily was known by the Romans as Trinacrium, meaning "star with three points"

CAPOTAORMINA



MARETTIMO



MOUNT ETNA



SPECTACULAR SEAFOOD



RAGUSA



CASSATA!!



Special Feature photos from various online sources

Sicily

TAORMINA AMPHITHEATER



CASTELLO DI VENERE



PAINTED CART



VIEW OF TAORMINA



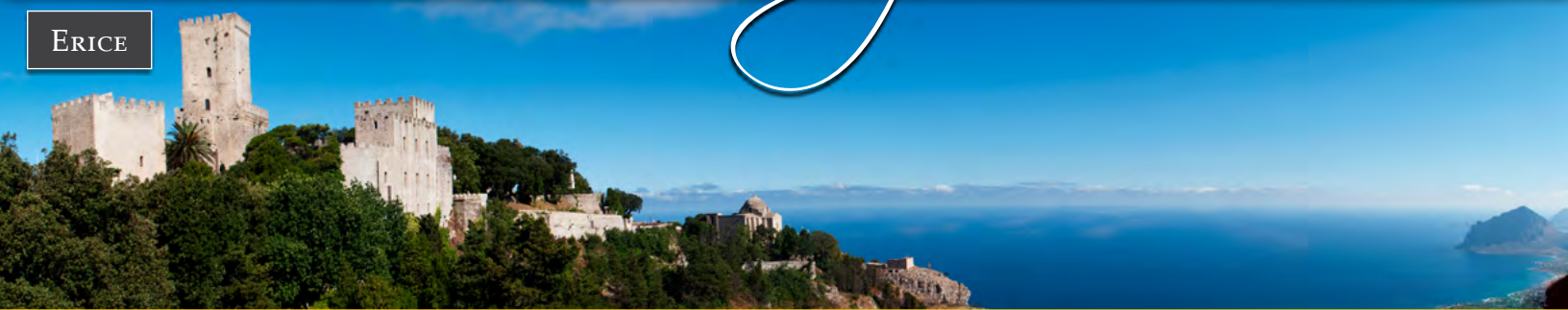
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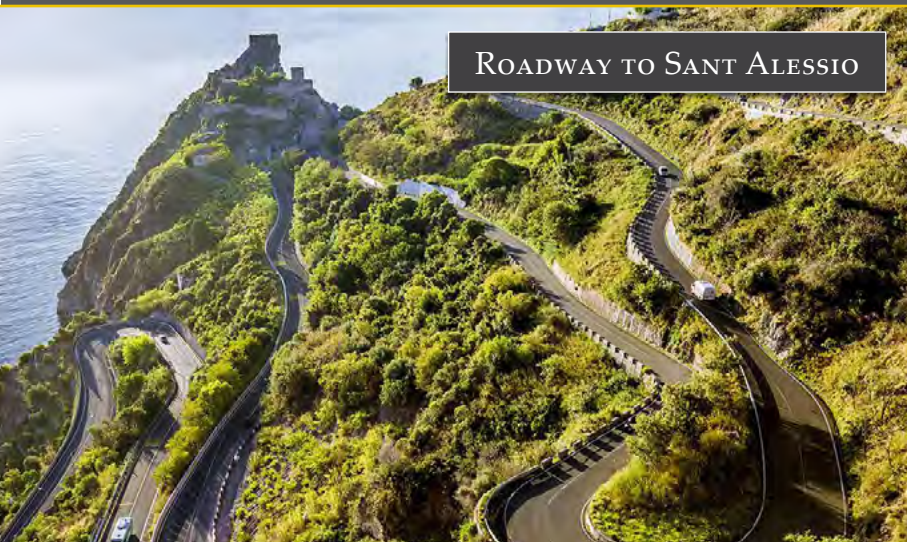
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Sicily

ERICE



ROADWAY TO SANT ALESSIO



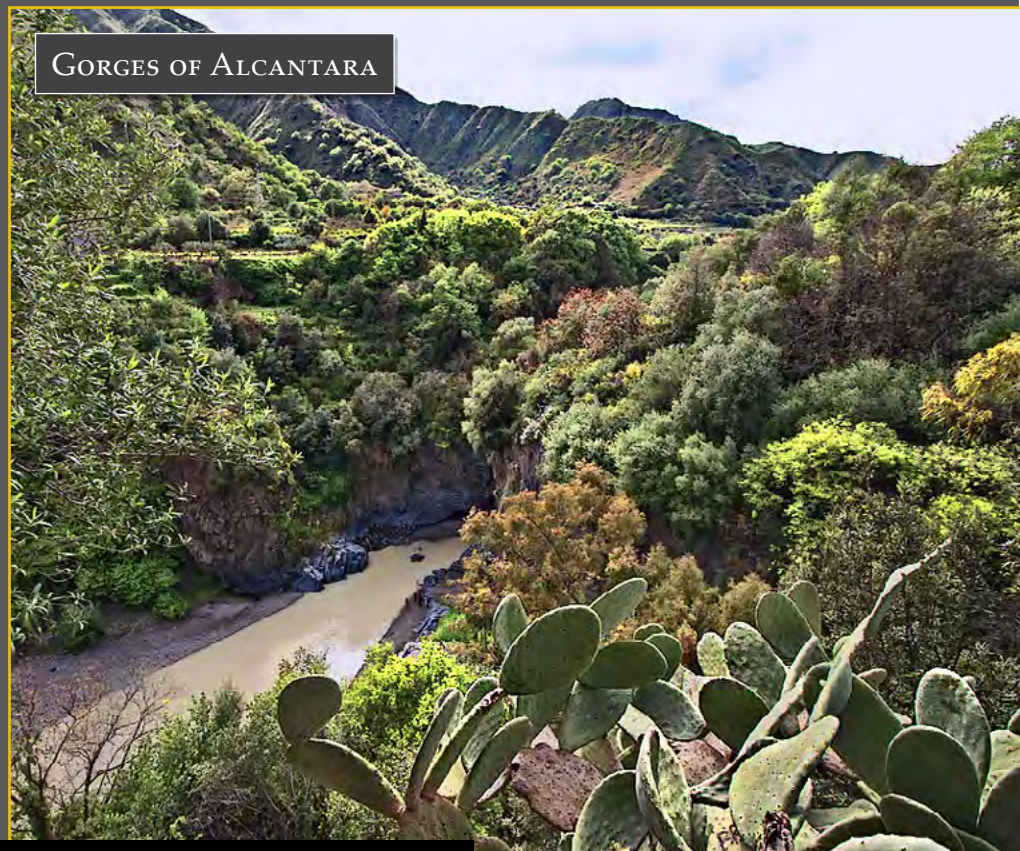
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TRAPANI



GORGES OF ALCANTARA



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